

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebal](#) | May 4, 2020

The Project on Government Oversight (POGO) published an [article](#) highlighting the impending danger posed by severe negligence at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities, where deaths caused by indifference to medical conditions have been documented from before the COVID-19 outbreak. Roger Rayson, a 47-year-old from Jamaica, was the first immigrant to die in ICE custody under Trump in 2017. Instead of receiving medical care for his advanced cancer and despite his reports of constant, knife-like pain, Rayson was placed in solitary for nine days at the LaSalle Processing Center in Louisiana, during which he never once saw a doctor and his condition brutally worsened. Two ICE facilities—the Hudson County Correctional Facility in New Jersey and the LaSalle facility—each saw a death due to negligence prior to the pandemic and both now suffer from an outbreak of the virus. Hudson County has been locking people down for almost 24 hours a day since March 22, but four employees have already died from the virus. According to ICE, as of April 27, 425 detained immigrants have tested positive for the virus, but the true number is most certainly higher, since only 705 people have been tested of the 30,700 people in ICE detention.

*Courthouse News Service* [reported](#) that the ACLU, Human Rights Watch, and National Immigrant Justice Center released a [report](#), called, Justice-Free Zones: U.S. Immigration Detention Under the Trump Administration. Based on interviews from 150 detained immigrants, the report details physical and verbal abuses, medical negligence, lack of sanitation, forced labor, and use of solitary confinement across the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention system. The report notes that between September 2013 and May 2018, ICE had reported holding immigrants in solitary confinement over 11,000 times. Since 2017, 39 people have died in ICE custody, including some deaths in solitary confinement. Over 40 percent of reported solitary stays in ICE detention had nothing to do with a threat to security or a disciplinary violation. The report found people often placed in solitary confinement for hunger striking or having a mental illness.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* [reported](#) that the Juvenile Detention Center in St. Louis, Missouri has been hit with an outbreak of COVID-19. The facility has been placed on medical lockdown, as a result. Sarah Johnson of the public defenders office condemned officials handling of the situation, which she said effectively places all the children in solitary. We have to remember that first and foremost these are children who are simply waiting for their day in court. The stress and the toll on the children's mental health are exacerbated by being in what essentially amounts to solitary confinement. Jail employees spoke to the *Post-Dispatch* anonymously, expressing their frustration at the lack of transparency and failure to prevent the unnecessary spread of the virus. Now six of the nineteen youth at the jail, most of whom are African American, have tested positive for COVID-19.

The Juvenile Justice Information Exchange (JJIE) [reported](#) that a group of six medically vulnerable youth under 18 years old have yet to be released from Connecticut's Manson Youth Institution (MYI), and advocates and lawyers suspect more children to be high risk at the facility. While the state prohibited the use of solitary confinement on juveniles in 2017, the Office of the Child Advocate released a report last year, finding that MYI continues to use solitary on youth. And now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, MYI is holding all of its youth in conditions tantamount to solitary, according to JJIE. Christina Quaranta, the director of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, said, It seems that they feel that maybe restricting movement, increasing solitary confinement, things like that are going to solve the problem. And it's not.

New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy signed into law in 2019 a ban on solitary confinement for longer than fifteen days across the state prison system and county jails, including limitations on placing youth in solitary. The law is set to take effect on August 1, but the COVID-19 pandemic has threatened the implementation of the legislation, [according](#) to the Juvenile Justice Information Exchange (JJIE). Additionally, a 2015 law banned placement in solitary for longer than five days for youth held in the custody of the Juvenile Justice Commission (JJC). But Retha Onitiri with the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice said that advocates have been denied access to see how youth are being treated. A spokeswoman for the JJC described the process for placing youth in medical isolation but did not describe the conditions. As of the article's publication, 29 people held in the state's custody had died from the virus.

The *Associated Press* published an [article](#) rounding up information about how the coronavirus is affecting youth held in correctional facilities across the country. With parents unable to visit their children, concerns continue to heighten with the lack of transparency surrounding the treatment of youth in state custody. While some jurisdictions have released limited numbers of children, those who

remain detained and show symptoms are typically being thrown into isolation for 23 hours a day, in what amounts to solitary confinement, say relatives and advocates. Youth held in juvenile facilities in Louisiana, New York, and Oregon have rioted against the current conditions and their continued confinement. According to Josh Rovner at the Sentencing Project, as of April 26, 150 detained youth and 283 staff at juvenile facilities nationwide had tested positive for the virus, though Rovner believes the real number is likely much higher.

WUWM [reported](#) that work release programs in the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC) have continued amid the coronavirus pandemic, despite a public DOC statement in early April claiming the programs would be suspended. Forcing people to continue to go into the community to earn money exposes the rest of the facility to a greater risk of catching the virus. But one incarcerated man said, If I refused work, I was told I'd be taken to MSDF, Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility and was threatened with solitary confinement. So again, he said, were being threatened with punishment. That's what [inmates] call it, [DOC] might say it's not, but it is. People incarcerated at the facility have been manufacturing medical masks, but masks distributed to the incarcerated people appear to be made from prison-issued underwear.

Valerie Kiebal was a contributing writer and editorial and project manager for Solitary Watch, and is now the media director of Straight Ahead, which is building a decarceration movement throughout Pennsylvania. Her work has also appeared in The Root, Truthout, the Chicago Reporter, and Shadowproof.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 26, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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