

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/president-obama-bans-solitary-for-juveniles-in-federal-prisons/>

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Yesterday, President Obama announced a ban on solitary confinement for juveniles in the federal prison system, a practice he said is increasingly overused . . . with heartbreaking results.

In a [Washington Post op-ed](#), the president wrote that solitary confinement can have devastating, lasting psychological consequences, including an increased risk of suicide, especially for juveniles and people with mental illnesses.

The op-ed begins with the story of Kalief Browder, a 22-year-old who committed suicide in June after spending years in solitary confinement as a teenager at Rikers Island for allegedly stealing a backpack. Last summer, Justice Kennedy cited Browders suicide in a [decision](#) condemning the widespread use of solitary confinement.

The ban on solitary confinement for juveniles like Browder came on the same day that the Supreme Court [declared](#) that states must retroactively apply the ban on mandatory death-in-prison sentences for juveniles. Writing for the Court, Justice Kennedy emphasized that children who commit even heinous crimes are capable of change.

The presidents op-ed expanded on that theme. The United States is a nation of second chances, he wrote, but the experience of solitary confinement too often undercuts that second chance. Being subjected to isolation makes it harder for people to become productive members of society after they are released, he continued. It doesnt make us safer. Its an affront to our common humanity.

Last summer, President Obama ordered the Justice Department to review the use of isolation in the federal prison system. It [concluded](#) that solitary confinement should be used rarely, applied fairly, and subjected to reasonable constraints. The president adopted the departments recommendations in an executive order that bans solitary confinement for juveniles and as a response to low-level infractions, expands treatment for mental illness, and reduces the maximum time in solitary confinement for a first offense from 365 days to 60 days. The changes will affect about 10,000 federal prisoners currently in solitary.

These changes are part of a larger effort to pass criminal justice reforms, now [pending in Congress](#), that would change sentencing laws and expand re-entry programs. The president called on lawmakers to send him legislation as soon as possible that makes our criminal justice system smarter, fairer, less expensive and more effective.

In America, we believe in redemption, Mr. Obama concluded. Quoting Pope Franciss conviction that society can only benefit from the rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes, he wrote that giving people in prison the hope of a better future, and a way to get back on their feet will make our country safer, stronger and worthy of our highest ideals.

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