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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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close

Search

close

close

Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | April 10, 2020

The *Huffington Post* [reported](#) that Juan Mosquero, a 58-year-old law library clerk held at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, became the first person to die of COVID-19 in a New York State prison. The man held in the cell above Mosqueros sent an email saying, He was in isolation for a couple of weeks complaining about loss of breath, all they gave him was general Tylenol. Taveria Norman, a man incarcerated at Franklin Correctional Facility in New York, said that groups of men are forced into communal spaces without enough room to distance themselves. The men have been getting into fights, he said, over coughing in the enclosed space. The director of Release Aging People in Prison, Jose Saldana, said, These men and women have not been sentenced to death, but if they get the COVID-19 virus, the likelihood is they will die from it. [Cuomo] would then have transformed the New York state prisons into death camps.

The City [reported](#) that two people incarcerated in the custody of the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) faced disciplinary action for wearing masks in an attempt to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at their prison. One woman, held at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, received a ticket for wearing a mask when delivering food trays. A man held at Shawangunk Correctional Facility was thrown in keeplock, a form of solitary confinement, for wearing a mask, while he experienced flu-like symptoms. The punishments come as the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene recommended all people in New York cover their face to minimize the spread of the virus. As of last Friday, over 200 DOCCS staff members and over 35 incarcerated people in New York had tested positive for the virus.

Politico [reported](#) that the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) began a lockdown on Wednesday, April 1, of all its facilities, which currently hold 167,000 people, including 10,000 people over 60 years old. The BOP [ordered](#) the lockdown for at least fourteen days, but stated that it could be extended, and during this time all incarcerated people will be confined full-time to their cells in what effectively is a form of solitary confinement. According to the BOP, 29 incarcerated people in the federal system and 30 staff working in the federal system have tested positive for COVID-19, but union groups say the numbers are higher. [According](#) to NPR, three people incarcerated in the federal system have died from the virus. Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerry Nadler and Representative Karen Bass called on the BOP to institute universal testing in BOP facilities and to release all elderly, pregnant, and medically compromised people. Attorney General William Barr has thus far released more than 500 individuals to home confinement. However, as the Marshall Project [documented](#), the risk assessment tool Barr is apparently using to select candidates for release strongly favors people convicted of white collar crimes and therefore white people while leaving many of the most vulnerable individuals behind.

[According](#) to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the Juvenile Law Center, the Youth Sentencing Project, and DLA Piper have filed an emergency petition, calling on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to release all 2,000 children held in correctional facilities in the state. One 16-year-old held at the George W. Hill Correctional Facility said he was placed in a quarantine that mirrored solitary confinement, allowing him out of his cell only one hour a day. The boy, who still awaits his trial, says that he was exposed to a staff member who may have COVID-19, and there is not enough soap or sanitizer at the jail. Last Tuesday, a staff member at the Juvenile Justice Services Center tested positive for COVID-19, and the Philadelphia public defenders office has since secured the release of only half of the medically vulnerable children held at the facility.

Beacon [reported](#) that advocates and families of children held in the Maine state prison system have called on the department to provide updates about COVID-19 in their facilities. Jan Collins, whose son is held in the Maine State Prison, said, What is distressing to me as a parent is the Department of Corrections lack of communication with loved ones. If an inmate became sick there is no protocol for contacting next of kin. They could become dangerously ill and we might not know except for the goodwill of other inmates. If the facility goes into lockdown, even that might be out of the question. Collins found out through another incarcerated person that her son has been placed in the Special Management Unit, a form of solitary confinement. Placing kids in solitary, she said, is particularly cruel for those with mental health issues. As almost everyone in prison is a victim of childhood trauma, this is problematic.

My Edmonds News [reported](#) that Washington State Governor Jay Inslee signed into law a bill that prohibits the placement of children in solitary confinement, except in extraordinary circumstances. Senator Claire Wilson, the sponsor of the Senate version of the bill, said, Studies show that using solitary confinement to improve behavior accomplishes exactly the opposite. Instead of reducing violence and assaults on staff and youth, solitary confinement makes things worse. It is an outdated and misguided practice that inflicts serious, lasting

harm. Ten other states have already passed similar legislation restricting the isolation of juveniles.

The Hill published a [commentary](#) written by Amy Zeidan, an ER physician at an Atlanta hospital, calling for the release of all detained immigrants, especially asylum seekers, as well as the use of proper hygienic supplies in the facilities. This is not only the moral and compassionate thing to do, it is a medical necessity, Zeidan writes. With the already-documented unsanitary conditions, lack of adequate food, and use of solitary confinement in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities, such as the Stewart Detention Center in Georgia, Zeidan says the virus has a higher likelihood of spreading. The placement of a sick immigrant in any form of solitary confinement, is not only inhumane, it is shockingly unsafe, Zeidan says. Placing an individual with significant medical needs in isolation exacerbates underlying medical conditions and places them at additional risk of being unable to call for help.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* published an [opinion piece](#) written by Dr. Craig Haney, professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Haney writes about the impact of social deprivation, based on his renowned studies of the psychological effects of solitary confinement on humans. While, most of us retain personal and civil liberties and access to material comforts and possessions that prisoners can only dream of, Haney writes, yet the common core of the experiencesocial isolationis similar enough that we can borrow strategies to reduce the pain and distress many are likely to experience. Learning from the creativity of incarcerated people who have faced severe social deprivation, Haney describes some of the methods to overcome or minimize the detrimental effects people may be experiencing during the shelter-in-place regulations.

The *Washington Post* published an [interview](#) with Albert Woodfox, a Black Panther who spent about 44 years in solitary confinement at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. Woodfox spoke about the political and educational organizing that he and the other Angola Three membersRobert King and Herman Wallaceled throughout the prison, which Woodfox believes ultimately led prison officials to frame them for the murder of a guard and place them in permanent solitary. But Woodfox says the Angola Three pushed back. Our cells were meant to be death chambers. We turned them into high schools, universities, debate halls, law schoolswe used those cells for everything other than what they were designed to be, he said. Since his release, Woodfox has published a memoir called *Solitary* and has spoken around the country about his experiences and beliefs.

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*.

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