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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Annalena Wolcke](#) | June 14, 2021

It's hard to escape the conclusion that this isn't just a place where people do time; it's a place where people go to be broken. A blog post on the website of Arnold Ventures provides an [in-depth look at solitary confinement](#), the way it affects incarcerated people, their families, and correctional officers, and recent reforms to the practice. According to the post, 32 states introduced 75 pieces of legislation this year alone that would limit the use of solitary. For us to take human beings and lock them up in this way and heap on more and more punishment that drives them to madness, it doesn't make any sense, said Lois Pullano, whose son suffered from a mental health condition and was punished with solitary confinement.

The Israel-based publication [Haaretz interviewed](#) several Americans who shared their experiences of surviving solitary confinement. Ian Manuel, who was sent to prison as a teenager, said he was re-sentenced to solitary every six months for 18 years in a row, and had to learn how to survive. Regular people live their lives; I imagined mine, he told *Haaretz*. Jermaine Manley said he spent a total of 12 years in solitary, always as punishment for minor infractions: One time I was put in solitary because my shoelaces weren't tied. Pamela Winn, who told of having a miscarriage during her year in solitary, said, When you're cut off from the world for such a long time, you're afraid of forgetting who you are.

In an election on May 18, Pittsburgh voters approved a ballot measure placing restrictions on the use of solitary confinement. [Trib Live reported](#) that solitary will be banned for people incarcerated at Allegheny County Jail except in cases of lockdowns, medical or safety emergencies, and protective separation requests. In a letter published in [Pittsburgh Current](#), James Byrd thanked voters for approving the ballot measures. Byrd has been held in solitary confinement for more than three years and said he is suffering from PTSD and other mental health conditions common among people held in prolonged isolation. Pretrial detainees who are incarcerated at the ACJ are human beings first and foremost, he wrote. Thank you for giving us hope in an otherwise hopeless situation.

Florida House Bill 377 would have prohibited the state's Department of Corrections from placing incarcerated juveniles in solitary confinement. But the bill failed, [reports the Florida-based NPR station WUFT](#), even though there is abundant evidence that solitary confinement is even more harmful to children than to adults, excludes children from educational programming, and disproportionately targets Black children.

In a [letter to the editor](#) in the Auburn, New York, publication *The Citizen*, Tyrrell Muhammad defends the HALT Solitary Confinement Act recently passed by the New York State legislature. A lawsuit filed recently by the union representing correctional officers and sergeants argues that solitary confinement keeps prisons safe, that new reforms will endanger staff, he writes. This action is nothing more than a reflection of the union's commitment to the oppression of Black and Brown people.

The [Rikers Public Memory Project](#) recently launched a YouTube channel to build an oral history archive. It contains short films about people's experiences of solitary confinement, juvenile incarceration, and COVID-19 behind bars.

Lawyers representing about 12,000 incarcerated people suffering from mental illness have petitioned a federal judge to order the Illinois Department of Corrections to end Covid-19 lockdowns, [reports public radio station WGLT](#). According to the article, people incarcerated in several state facilities started setting fire to their cells and harming themselves after living in solitary confinement conditions for more than a year. The state reportedly argued that the lockdowns are needed to stop the transmission of the virus between staff and the incarcerated population, as 70 percent of the staff are reluctant to receive a vaccine.

Last year, an investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice found that the Massachusetts Department of Corrections was failing to provide adequate mental health care for incarcerated people at risk of suicide. Now, Massachusetts is testing a new surveillance technology it believes can prevent suicides without having to place individuals in isolation on suicide watch. Incarcerated people are provided with a bracelet that can track their breathing and heart rate to predict when someone is in distress, [reports VICE](#). James Kilgore, a formerly incarcerated writer and advocate who is a fellow at Media Justice, called the devices a fundamentally wrong approach to a really serious problem. We have so many incarcerated people with mental health issues who are getting no treatment, and now [prisons] want a quick fix. Which is what this technology is.

[NBC News reports](#) that Democrats plan to introduce the Keeping All Students Safe Act, which would ban schools from placing students

in isolation in seclusion rooms or using life-threatening restraints on them. The data tells us that seclusion and restraint practices in school are dangerous, ineffective and predominately used against kids of color and students with disabilities, Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) said in a statement obtained by *NBC*. These practices leave traumatic, and sometimes fatal, fingerprints on those affected, and we need to stop them. More information on the use of seclusion tactics and restraints on American schoolchildren can be found on the site [Women in and Beyond the Global](#).

A project launched several years ago by artist Jackie Sumell in New Orleans brings together volunteers with people held in solitary to create gardens. The incarcerated member of the team chooses the herbs and flowers, and the volunteer on the outside plants them in a garden-bed the size of a solitary confinement cell. The solitary beds are eventually overrun with plant life, a visual representation of a world without prisons, an idea which forms the projects core mission, [writes journalist Roshan Abraham in Next City](#).

In an opinion published in the [New Haven Independent](#), Kezlyn Mendez writes in support of Senate Bill 1059, which would end long-term solitary confinement in Connecticut. Mendez, a survivor of solitary, remembers living in conditions that he says amounted to torture. There was feces on the walls, doors, floor. Blood as well, from people who had been locked in there before me, some of them chained up while still bleeding from self-harm or officer assaults.

According to an article in [The Appeal](#), pregnant women are reporting abuse in Texas jails. Jane (who chose not to share her real name), was placed in solitary confinement in the Brazoria County jail while pregnant. They took my food, she wrote to her mother from solitary. Im going to starve. So is the baby. A month later, Jane told *The Appeal*, she lost the baby. Even as such abuses continue, Texas lawmakers are considering incarcerating more people in pre-trial detention. New legislation would considerably limit the conditions under which a person can leave jail on a personal bond before their trial.

Three New York Democratic candidates running for the position of Erie County Sheriff (Buffalo) revealed plans to reform the Sheriffs office, according to [Spectrum News 1](#). In a recent discussion, Myles Carter, Kimberly Beaty, and Brian Gould all said that they are against the use of solitary confinement. At least [32 people have died](#) in the countys jail since 2005 during the administration of current sheriff Tim Howard, who announced earlier this year that he would not be running for re-election.

Annalena Wolke Anna interned with Solitary Watch before beginning a masters degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice at Oxford, where her research focuses on ethnicity in German prisons.

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