

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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close

Search

close

close

Our Weekly Roundup of New and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | May 6, 2018

The Vera Institute of Justices Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative released a new [report](#) called Rethinking Restrictive Housing, which studied the use of solitary confinement in prisons and jails across five states. The report found that young men, people with mental illnesses, and people of color were disproportionately subjected to solitary confinement. The reports recommendations included making solitary confinement less restrictive and reserving for last resort situations, since the projects researchalso found that low-level nonviolent offenses accounted for many of the reasons behind placement in solitary.

[According](#) to *Creative Loafing*, members of the Mecklenburg County community in North Carolina, including clergy members and formerly incarcerated individuals, spoke out against the use of solitary confinement in the local jail. Contrary to the Sheriffs claim that solitary is reserved for only cases of violence against guards, one woman described being locked in solitary for failing to stop singing gospel songs. She said, People shouldnt be thrown in there for *any* reason, I believe, but [especially not] just for any little reason, like singing or whatever excuse they give to lock up a person in a cage within a cage with no human contact. Its really crazy. A rabbi declared, No matter what you call it, and our sheriffs office has many names for it, it is inhumane, it is psychologically damaging.

*Syracuse.com* [reported](#) that Onondaga County and the Syracuse City School District in New York settled a lawsuit this week, agreeing to pay \$270,000 and \$30,000 respectively for their use of solitary confinement on pre-trial juveniles and educational negligence. The New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) filed the lawsuit, which claimed that solitary confinement put the teens as risk of serious physical and mental harm, causing effects such as suicidal behavior and post-traumatic stress disorder. The lawsuit additionally faulted the school district for neglecting to provide educational resources to the children held in solitary. The agreement states that the county may only use solitary confinement in extraordinary cases and that the children must have access to educational resources.

The Harris County Jail in Houston, Texas, [according](#) to *The Daily Journal*, has been successful in reducing its use of solitary confinement by half since 2015 and simultaneously implementing rehabilitative mental health units focused on behavioral therapy, communication, mental health medication, and anger management. A spokesperson for the sheriffs office explained the reasoning behind their countys changing mentality: There is an understanding even among strong conservatives that people who are in jail or in prison are going to be back out and be in society at some point, and were better off if weve treated them like human beings and armed them with skills and strategies for becoming productive members of our community.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that solitary confinement causes developmental harm for children, the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC) in Illinois has increased its usage of punitive solitary, having placed children in solitary over 55,000 times in the past two-and-a-half years. [According](#) to *The Chicago Reporter*, JTDC staff has often isolated children for ten days a time, violating the state regulation of a 36-hour maximum stay in solitary for juveniles, though the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice has no power to enforce the regulations. While the jails superintendent, Leonard Dixon, is reportedly known for his compassionate approach and implementation of programs, he continues to support the use of solitary confinement, mostly for violations such as unauthorized movement. One young person said solitary makes them want to give up sometimes on doing good here and causes kids to act out more often. The Center for Childrens Law and Policy has already called on JTDC twice to reduce its use of solitary confinement and believes change must happen from outside legislative or legal action.

*Al-Jazeera* [published](#) a glimpse into the experience of Sami Al-Hajj, a journalist from Sudan, who was held for six years at Guantanamo Bay as an enemy combatant falsely accused of terrorist acts. Al-Hajj described the most harmful period as his time in solitary confinement with the temperature below freezing and the air conditioning blasting. He recalled, They actually told us: We will torture you until death. But we wont let you die. You will live in the space between life and death. Al-Hajj conducted a hunger strike for 480 days against the conditions of confinement at Guantanamo and was ultimately released in May 2008. Guantanamo Bay remains open, holding over 40 individuals.

Valerie Kiebala 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.

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by [Caitlin Konya](#)

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