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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | April 29, 2020

The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists [released](#) the conclusion of a study, finding that African and Caribbean immigrants are held in solitary confinement six times more often than their non-Black counterparts in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities. Black immigrants represent four percent of all ICE detainees but make up 24 percent of stays in solitary confinement. The treatment of black immigrants in detention mirrors that of black individuals in jails and prisons, said Keramet Reiter, a professor at University of California, Irvine and co-author of the study. Based on incident reports from thousands of detained immigrants in solitary, people from African nations are 22 percent more likely to receive a disciplinary infraction as the reason for their placement in solitary, and people from the Middle East spent five days longer in isolation than the overall population.

The Appeal published an [article](#) written by Victoria Law about the transfer of incarcerated people held in Louisiana jails and prisons who tested positive for COVID-19 to the notorious and previously shuttered Camp J solitary unit at Louisiana State Penitentiary (LSP) at Angola. The executive director of the Promise of Justice Initiative, Mercedes Montagnes, expressed concerns with moving people from the jails where there is better medical equipment and ventilators to Angola where there are no ventilators and no hospitals for 25 miles. By April 11, at least 40 people were transferred to Camp J from various facilities across the state. Jerome Morgan, who was held in Camp J four times during his 20 years of incarceration, said, It's a terrible idea. Montagnes said, What we're facing right now is a slow-moving disaster.

Mother Jones [reported](#) that immigrants held at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Richwood Correctional Center in Louisiana have been sent to solitary confinement for testing positive for COVID-19 or showing symptoms. One man from Guatemala was sent to solitary for three weeks after showing a fever, but said he received no medical attention. They put you in [solitary], he said, and you live or you die. Only one percent of the 32,000 people in ICE custody have been tested for the virus, according to the agency. A Johns Hopkins University public health professor, Chris Beyrer, said placing people with symptoms in solitary confinement is cruel and unusual punishment. That level of anxiety, that level of stress is a form of torture, you might say. A new form of torture. You could call it COVID-19 torture.

The *Chicago Tribune* [reported](#) that Anthony Gay, who spent 20 years in solitary confinement after being convicted of stealing one dollar and a hat, has launched a blog directed towards people struggling with sheltering-in-place. Gay said, I endured isolation in the extreme, so I understand how people feel right now. You've got to zone in on the good aspects of life to survive. Gay suffered the psychological effects of sitting alone for 23 hours a day in solitary confinement, turning to severe self-mutilation and aggressive behavior. The Anthony Gay Isolated Confinement Restriction Act was introduced in Gay's name and would prohibit people incarcerated in Illinois from being placed in solitary for longer than ten days within a six-month period. With the state legislative session suspended, the bill remains in limbo.

The *Gotham Gazette* published an [opinion piece](#) by Victor Pate, survivor of solitary confinement and organizer for the #HALTSolitary Campaign, that responds to Governor Andrew Cuomo's statement that the legislative session is effectively over already. Some legislators pushed back, and Pate emphasized the urgency of passing the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act before the session ends. He wrote, Every day that the Legislature fails to enact HALT means thousands of people overwhelmingly Black and Latino people suffering, deteriorating, and too often dying in solitary confinement. In a related [commentary](#) published by the *Buffalo News*, Jerome Wright, who also spent time in solitary and organizes for the #HALTSolitary Campaign, said, The Legislature must reconvene remotely, as per their original schedule, and must bring HALT to a vote immediately, and the governor must sign it. HALT will save lives.

CBS published an [article](#) discussing the effects of the coronavirus on incarcerated people across the country, calling places like Rikers Island jail in New York a toxic breeding ground for COVID-19. Adnan Khan, who served time at San Quentin State Prison in California, told CBS, When viruses hit, the culture of prisons, at least in my experience, has been punitive. Meaning that when someone gets sick, they get punished by being sent to solitary confinement. Khan said he had found that no matter the reason for a person's placement in solitary confinement, the same rules and conditions apply.

Following up on an earlier investigation into abuses in Illinois schools, *ProPublica* [reported](#) that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) had analyzed the data submitted by Illinois school districts reporting their use of restraints and seclusion. The latter involves locking students in isolation rooms, sometimes for hours at a time, and is most often used on children with developmental, cognitive, and psychological disabilities. The GAO determined that the U.S. Department of Education had failed to properly examine the data, overlooking trends of high seclusion rates or districts misreporting. Jacqueline Nowicki, a GAO director, said that the Education Department is lacking information that could really help them determine whether certain schools and districts use of these practices could be excessive or discriminatory or both. Those are some serious effects of choosing not to analyze your data. Based on the GAO's own analysis of the data, Illinois has five of the 36 schools across the country with the highest reported rates of seclusion, putting it at the top of the list nationally.

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.

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