

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Report Shows Ventilation Systems Make Solitary Confinement Useless in Preventing Contagion and Decarceration Is the Most Effective Strategy

by [Annalena Wolcke](#) | June 15, 2021

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When the pandemic started, many prisons and jails throughout the country responded by locking people down in their cells for 22 to 24 hours a day, and using [solitary confinement cells](#) as quarantine units.

In some ways, these lockdown measures seemed like an intuitive response to the virus: Since prisons aren't built for social distancing, the intent was to limit contact with other incarcerated people and the outside world.

But the lockdowns did little to stop transmission of Covid-19.

By September, [more than 40 of the 50 largest clustered outbreaks](#) of the virus had occurred behind bars. The National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice found that case rates among incarcerated people were more than [four times as high](#) as those of the general public, and the death rate was twice as high.

Despite spotty reporting and underestimates, [more than 397,000 Covid cases](#) have been reported in prisons nationwide, and more than 2,600 people have died as of May. (An additional 113,000 cases and 200 deaths were reported among prison staff.)

A [new report by CalPROTECT](#) (California Prison Roadmap for Targeting Efforts to Address the Ecosystem of COVID Transmission) explains why prison-wide lockdowns failed so drastically at protecting incarcerated people from Covid-19.

Even when people are physically separated from one another in solitary confinement conditions, prison ventilation and air filtration systems are simply not built for stopping a deadly virus.

Were pouring millions, billions of dollars into ensuring proper ventilation for schools to ensure that children are safe (), and [prisons are] the same exact thing. Its people indoors, in close proximity, except they dont get recess, they dont get to go out, said one of the researchers behind the report, Dr. Rachel Sklar of the School of Public Health at UC Berkeley, in an interview. So why are we not applying the same strategies that we are for all parts of civic life to prisons?

According to CalPROTECT's report, the most effective measure to slow the spread of the virus inside prisons is clear: Immediate decarceration.

### Lockdowns Fail to Stop the Virus

The CalPROTECT report is based on a December 2020 site visit at the Substance Abuse and Treatment Facility (SATF) Corcoran in California, which was experiencing [a large outbreak of the virus](#).

Researchers had noticed that COVID cases were increasingly coming out of single cells instead of open dorms, countering the common belief that lockdowns and solitary confinement could keep the virus from spreading.

Some of the cases could be traced back to prison staff moving back and forth between quarantine areas of the prison and unaffected housing units. Even during lockdowns, correctional officers and nurses constantly go in and out of prisons, bringing the virus to incarcerated populations and back to their communities outside. But other cases, the report found, were simply due to how the prison is built.

The problems were clear: Window-less cells. Ventilation filters below minimum efficiency ratings. Pressure imbalances. Low air exchange rates. Lack of routine maintenance. Missing toilet lids. All contributed to infected aerosols spreading, from the cells to a common area, from the common area to another tier, and from one prison building to another.

Corcoran is far from the only prison built that way.

The prison where I reside was built over 100 years ago and has very poor ventilation, wrote Christopher Blackwell, a freelance journalist incarcerated in Monroe Correctional Complex in Washington State, in an email to Solitary Watch. If you look up at the ceiling you'll see coats of dust on the vents so thick it seems impossible for air to even pass through them.

The more time you spend indoors, the higher the risk of transmission, period, said Dr. Sklar. And in prison, you're spending 24 hours a day indoors. So you do the math.

### **A Pit of Hell From Which No Escape is Possible**

It is not news that the indoors is dangerous during a pandemic.

[Multiple studies](#) have found that [proper ventilation is essential](#) to [keeping the virus from spreading](#) quickly. The CDC recommends frequently opening windows for better air circulation indoors. But many prison cells across the U.S. don't have windows.

Prisons are designed as these gigantic sealed cages () and a pit of hell from which no escape is possible from a virus, wrote John Hovey, an author incarcerated at the same prison as Blackwell, in an email. Once the virus is in the facility, it is extremely difficult for it NOT to spread, simply because of how prisons are built and operated.

Indeed, researchers at Stanford and Yale University found that the [virus spreads faster in U.S. jails and prisons](#) than it did on the now infamous cruise ship Diamond Princess, where [more than 700 people](#) became infected within a month.

California's San Quentin State Prison, for instance, had [inadequate sanitation and a ventilation system](#) that was simply too poor to prevent the spread. Last year, the facility saw one of the worst outbreaks of the virus in the nation, in which more than 2,500 people became infected with Covid-19 and [28 died](#). Instead of releasing people from its [overcrowded tiers](#), San Quentin put everyone on lockdown.

I am now on day 388 of cell confinement, Kevin D. Sawyer, an author and journalist incarcerated in San Quentin, wrote in an April 2021 letter to Solitary Watch. I've spent 22 to 24 hours a day in a 5x9 cell with a cellmate. Other than having access to personal property and some privileges like telephone use, he said cell confinement is the equivalent of being in solitary confinement.

Many prisons across the U.S. repurposed solitary confinement cells into quarantine spaces. In Washington, Blackwell was placed in solitary confinement as a precaution after the virus broke out in his unit. It did nothing to slow the transmission of the virus. What it did was allo[w] prisoners to be bullied and mistreated by prison staff, he said. I didn't feel safe in solitary.

From the beginning of the pandemic, [experts](#) and [incarcerated people](#) alike warned that the increased use of solitary confinement as a measure to stop the virus [might backfire](#). Yet prisons were quick to initiate lockdowns: The Unlock the Box campaign found that between January and April 2020, the number of people held in solitary confinement conditions increased by [500 percent](#), from an estimated 60,000 to at least 300,000.

Solitary confinement is completely ineffective in stopping the spread of the virus and worse, it discourages people from self-reporting that they're having symptoms, said David Fathi, director of the ACLU National Prison Project, in an interview. And so it's not only not helpful, it's affirmatively harmful.

### **Solution: Decarceration**

So what can be done to protect incarcerated people, prison staff, and the surrounding communities from a virus that continues to [kill more than 600 Americans every day](#)? The [CalPROTECT report](#) is clear: Occupancy reduction is the single most effective method to prevent and reduce Covid-19 transmission. In other words, prisons need to let people go in order to save lives.

After prisons and jails reduce the number of people they house, CalPROTECT recommends additional strategies to further slow the spread of the virus. These measures include rebalancing the ventilation system, introducing better filters, and even installing lids on toilets to reduce the transmission of infected fecal aerosols.

For a moment, it looked as if there was a push in the direction of population reduction. Between March and May of last year, a large subset of U.S. jails analyzed by the Prison Policy Initiative (PPI) [reduced their populations](#) by an average of 30 percent.

But state prisons were much slower at reducing their numbers. And by July 2020, more than 70 percent of the jails PPI was tracking saw their [numbers increase again](#). By March 2021, New York City [jails were housing more people](#) than they had at the time of the outbreak last year.

This failure to depopulate exacerbates the severe overcrowding in many prisons and jails around the country. [Researchers recently found](#) that between 26 and 44 percent of people incarcerated were held in an overcrowded jurisdiction in 2018.

San Quentin, where Kevin Sawyer is incarcerated, was [dangerously overcrowded](#) when the virus broke out inside its walls. I've never felt safe from the coronavirus under these conditions, Sawyer wrote in his letter.

And whenever COVID cases inside prisons and jails are on the rise, the surrounding communities quickly see their cases rising as well. I think the most important thing to realize is that the Covid-19 virus doesn't recognize prison walls, said Fathi. If the prisoners have it today, the staff will have it tomorrow and the staff's family members and other people in the community will have it the day after that.

The Prison Policy Initiative estimates that [mass incarceration was linked to more than 560,000 additional COVID cases](#) between May and August last year. A study conducted at [Chicago's Cook County Jail](#) found that people cycling through the jail was associated with more than 15 percent of all COVID cases in Illinois as of April 2020.

We all have an interest in effectively dealing with Covid-19 in the prison and jail context, said Fathi.

### **Solitary Confinement Breaks People**

There are other reasons to choose decarceration over prolonged lockdowns and quarantines in solitary confinement.

Solitary confinement is pretty fundamentally averse to public health, said Keramet Reiter, a Criminologist at the School of Law at the University of California, in an interview.

When we have this growing body of evidence of the psychological and the physical harms associated with solitary confinement and how long-term they are, it's really ironic to think about it being a so-called public health intervention.

Experts warn that people subjected to solitary confinement [show symptoms usually seen in torture victims](#). Symptoms can include anxiety, paranoia, personality changes, and substance abuse, and can last long after a person has been released from solitary.

In fact, the United Nations stipulates that any use of solitary confinement for longer than 15 days at a time is considered torture and [cruel and degrading punishment](#). The Department of Justice [recommended restricting its use](#) in 2016.

[Studies have found](#) that between 50 and 69 percent of all [suicides in prisons](#) occur in solitary confinement cells. Last year, [Dylan Richardson](#), a 31-year old father who struggled with mental health issues, was placed in precautionary isolation during a COVID-19 outbreak in Wells County Jail in Indiana.

On September 20, 2020, a few days after being placed in solitary, Richardson died by suicide.

The evidence is now overwhelming that [solitary confinement] is harmful, it is counterproductive, it breaks people, it makes them incapable of leading a productive and positive life after release, said Fathi of the ACLU. And so we need to turn away from solitary confinement.

### **Typhus, Cholera, COVID No End in Sight**

With incarcerated people [starting to get vaccinated](#), one might assume that the pandemic might soon be contained in jails and prisons, even without decarceration efforts. But a recent article in *The New England Journal of Medicine* warned that [vaccinations need to be coupled with further decarceration](#).

Because of high population densities behind bars, high turnover in jails, and vaccine hesitancy among staff and incarcerated people, vaccines alone cannot stop the virus.

And COVID-19 is far from the only disease found in prisons and jails. Incarcerated people have historically contended with [typhus](#), [cholera](#), [influenza](#), and other fatal outbreaks. As the *New England Journal of Medicine* article points out, overcrowding, as well as the normalized systematic neglect of the welfare of incarcerated people turn correctional facilities into breeding grounds for disease. Without decarceration, prisons and jails might soon face a new deadly crisis.

These are human beings, these are our neighbors and their health and safety and lives are just as important as anybody else's, said Fathi. Solitary confinement is exactly the wrong response to Covid-19 or any other outbreak of contagious disease.

*Banner photo: San Quentin State Prison, North Block Segregation Unit*

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