

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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close

Search

close

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Katie Rose Quandt](#) | August 13, 2019

Reports this week on the suicide of high-profile detainee Jeffrey Epstein at the federal Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC) in Manhattan have been full of questions and speculation about how such a thing could have been allowed to happen. Epstein had reportedly been on [suicide watch](#), but was taken off and was in a cell alone at the time of his death. In *The New Republic*, Andrew Cohen [points out](#) that Epstein's suicide in solitary confinement shouldn't come as a surprise: Suicides behind bars are an epidemic. Pick a state, any state, and similar stories abound, he writes. Inmates are able to commit suicide because their guards have dehumanized them to the point where they don't care enough whether they live or die. (For more on the particular history of isolation and abuse at MCC, [see this exposé](#) by Aviva Stahl that appeared on *Gothamist* last year.)

Since 2016, 46 people have committed suicide in Georgia state prisons, a sharp increase from the state's 20 prison suicides between 2014 and 2016, [reports](#) *The Telegraph*. Despite the fact that Georgia's prison suicide rate is nearly double the national prison average, and that some of those who killed themselves had spent time in isolation, *The Telegraph* reports that missing from the corrections department's response is a shift away from housing people in segregation and solitary confinement.

In Aurora, Colorado, an ICE detention facility privately run by GEO Group houses some people in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day for up to nine, [reports](#) the *Colorado Independent*. One man interviewed for the article, who formerly moonlighted as an Elvis impersonator, said he was put in solitary confinement for singing. The piece also documents how GEO Group continued to hold people in solitary who exhibited obvious symptoms of mental illness, while denying that they were ill. One detainee who had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder said of his time in solitary at Aurora: It was actually bringing up thoughts of, like, ending things. I'm talking about suicide. I've faced challenges and struggles in my life before, but nothing like that. Nothing. (This article, by Susan Greene, was reported with funds from the [Solitary Confinement Reporting Project](#), managed by Solitary Watch with funding from the Vital Projects Fund.)

The Minnesota Department of Corrections has increased the maximum length of time that people can spend in solitary confinement from 90 days to 360 days, [reports](#) the *Bemidji Pioneer*. The harsh rule change, which was a reaction to two officer deaths last year, came just one week after the state legislature passed the state's first law regulating solitary confinement. The new law requires a review after four months in solitary, mandates solitary mental health checks, and states that people with acute mental illness should be moved to an alternative housing program. Last year, Minnesota placed people in solitary confinement a [record-high](#) 8,281 times.

A *New York Amsterdam News* [op-ed](#) calls upon New York City Council members to withhold support from Gov. Andrew Cuomo's plan to replace Rikers with four smaller jails, unless solitary is banned at the new facilities. The need to shutter Rikers is not in question, writes Dr. Ron Daniels, President of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century. But building modern facilities with redesigned cells and recreational spaces will do absolutely nothing to address the human rights abuses that led to this crisis in the first place. Solitary confinement should be banned for all inmates, period.

At Medium, high school journalist Tigerlily Theo Hopson [examines the use of solitary confinement](#) for children. Solitary is now banned for those under 18 in the federal prison system, but thousands of youth remain in isolation in state and local prisons and jails.

Katie Rose Quandt is a senior contributing writer/editor at Solitary Watch and freelance journalist based in the Bronx. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, *The Nation*, *The Guardian*, and *Mother Jones*. She is also a senior editor at the Prison Policy Initiative, and was an Alicia Patterson Foundation Fellow and Soros Justice Media Fellow. Find her [@katierosequandt](#) and at [katierosequandt.com](#).

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