

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | June 8, 2020

The *New York Daily News* [reported](#) that prosecutors for the Bronx District Attorney will not pursue criminal charges related to the death of Layleen Polanco, a 27-year-old Afro-Latinx, transgender woman, last June. Polanco died from an epileptic seizure while being held in punitive segregation, or solitary confinement, at Rikers Island jail in New York City. While protocols demand officers to check on people in punitive segregation every fifteen minutes, records show that officers did not check on Polanco for 47 minutes on the day of her death. Polanco's mother has filed a federal lawsuit against city officials for leaving her daughter unsupervised, despite her medical condition. The Polanco family attorney said, Layleen's death was foreseeable, avoidable, and, yes, criminal. We have known for quite some time that the District Attorney had no intention of pursuing criminal charges.

*USA Today* [reported](#) that the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) instituted a system-wide lockdown, beginning June 1, in light of extensive protest activity around the country, referring to the protests following the death of George Floyd. The lockdown has applied the most restrictive conditions across the federal system since 1995, when the BOP locked down its prisons after a series of uprisings. This time, officials say the lockdown is not related to any action of incarcerated people. As of June 2, the BOP reported that 1,650 incarcerated people have tested positive for COVID-19 and 171 staff members have caught the virus. While 3,000 people have been released from the federal system since the pandemic hit, Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) says racial disparities underlie the process for evaluating a person's release, as only seven percent of Black incarcerated people were deemed a minimal risk, while 30 percent of white people fit the criteria.

*Politico* [reported](#) that the Attorney General William Barr deployed federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Special Operations Response Team (SORT) agents to the streets of Washington DC on June 3 in the standoff against Black Lives Matter protestors and police. The riot gear-equipped officers, wearing unmarked uniforms with no badges or visible identification, are known by many in prison as the Turtle Squads, and have a history of conducting violent [cell extractions](#). These cell extractions are carried out against people deemed a threat to themselves or others, but often target people with mental illness, experiencing psychotic or suicidal episodes, or people protesting through methods such as hunger strikes. Washington DC Mayor Muriel Bowser ultimately called for the unmarked BOP officers to leave the city.

The *Illinois Times* published an [article](#) about the 2017 death of 27-year-old Tiffany Rusher at the Sangamon County Jail in Illinois. Rusher, whose mother has filed lawsuits against the county and the state, was held in solitary for several months at a time, despite being diagnosed with several severe mental illnesses. Rusher had a documented history of critical self-harm, which only worsened with time in isolation. In one eighteen-month period at the jail, Rusher attempted suicide at least ten times. Yet, officials continued to hold her in a suicide watch cell, with no mental health care, no clothes, and no social interaction. According to the lawsuit, Instead of providing her with the treatment she desperately needed, defendants chose to keep her in isolation and monitor her condition, carefully documenting her descent into madness. Ultimately, Rusher killed herself with strips of a towel, a method of self-strangulation she had used before.

The *New York Daily News* [reported](#) that the year of 2019 brought New York State prison system the highest suicide rate in over a decade. Throughout the year, eighteen incarcerated people died by suicide, at a rate of 39 per 100,000 incarcerated people. In 2019, 33 percent of the suicides occurred in solitary confinement, at an alarming rate of 201 per 100,000 incarcerated people. Rates of suicide attempts and serious self-harm were also far higher in solitary. The figures cited by the Daily News comes from a newly released report from the #HALTSolitary Campaign, which analyzed data going back more than a decade. The advocates called on the New York legislature and Governor Cuomo to save lives by passing the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act, which would ban the use of solitary for longer than fifteen days and enact alternatives to solitary.

The *Crime Report* published an [article](#) written by Mark Soler, the director of the Center for Children's Law and Policy, and Marc Schindler, the director of the Justice Policy Institute, explaining the Catch-22 youth face behind bars during the coronavirus pandemic. On one hand, high rates of youth incarceration nationwide make it nearly impossible for facilities to comply with social distancing protocols, and allowing group programming and socializing risks exposing youth and staff to the virus. On the other hand, confining youth in their cells for 23 hours a day the approach most juvenile facilities have enacted in response to the pandemic has been proven to deeply damage the mental and physical health of youth. The authors provide recommendations for juvenile correctional systems to follow in order to mitigate the harm youth face during COVID-19, including an end to unnecessary youth incarceration, re-entry services

for those released, and medical care for youth who remain incarcerated.

*Slate* published an [interview](#) with solitary survivor Erick Williams, attorney and social worker Lisa Newman-Polk, and Senator Jamie Eldridge about the use of solitary confinement, namely the Department Disciplinary Unit (DDU), by the Massachusetts Department of Corrections (MDOC). Similar to other jurisdictions, solitary sentences are doled out by correctional officers, not judges. And, according to Williams, an incarcerated person speaking up against the ticket that landed them in solitary could result in criminal charges and an extension of their time in prison. Eldridge highlighted that the MDOC has complete power to end the use of solitary confinement. While legislators have passed policy restricting the use of solitary confinement, Eldridge says the laws have not been implemented. When Eldridge asked the MDOC to stay in solitary confinement for a night, the department rejected the request, claiming, It was not safe.

The *Portland Mercury* [reported](#) that the security manager of the Columbia River Correctional Institute (CRCI) in Portland, Amanda van Arcken, has opened an investigation into an incident of alleged retaliation against two incarcerated men. In late May, Steven Stroud testified in federal court that the Oregon Department of Corrections had neglected to protect people in its custody from the coronavirus. Stroud, and another plaintiff in the lawsuit, had been vocal about the inadequate sanitary measures at the facility. Days after testifying in court, Stroud and the other man confronted an officer who refused to wear a mask in a unit full of medically vulnerable people. Instead of putting on a mask, the officer called in other officers, who sent the two men to solitary confinement for inciting a riot. Van Arcken was set to leave her position on June 5.

The *Brownsville Herald* [reported](#) that the Port Isabel Detention Center, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility in Texas, has counted its fourth case of the coronavirus. Advocates estimate about 216 individuals are currently quarantined at the facility. On June 1, two detained immigrants from Cuba began a hunger strike, calling for ICE to release people, in light of the confirmed cases and the inevitable spread of the virus. The two men were subsequently placed in solitary confinement, or administrative segregation. While the latest numbers report 25,421 people detained in ICE facilities, only about 3,000 detained immigrants have been tested nationwide. Of those tested, 818 have been confirmed positive.

The *Boston Globe* published an [article](#) on the Massachusetts statewide lockdown in response to COVID-19 and its effect on incarcerated people. One woman held at MCI-Framingham who tested positive for the coronavirus, Patricia Olsen, said, Now its like prison within prison. Olsen had previously worked as a digitizer in the prison and recalled spending time at church or cooking on the weekends. Now, people in prison across Massachusetts are forced to remain in their cells for 23 hours a day. Formerly incarcerated Leslie Creedle described the inadequacy of health care at MCI-Framingham even before the pandemic hit. Creedle said when women needed medical attention previously, nurses would take so long that women would bang their heads on the floor or bite their tongues in pain. Now, on top of that, she said, Its like youre in solitary confinement.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* published an [article](#) telling the story of Paul Redd, a man arrested at 19 years old who spent over 30 years in solitary confinement, 25 of which he spent at Pelican Bay State Prison in California. While in solitary, Redd acted as a representative in the 2013 California hunger strike that ultimately resulted in a landmark settlement, aimed at banning the use of indefinite solitary confinement in the states prisons. Once Redd was moved out of solitary and into the general population in 2014, he co-founded an antiviolence group, helped start a cancer support group, and worked in the hospice unit in the prison. Redds participation in these programs, which are prohibited for people in solitary, ultimately contributed to Redds re-sentencing under a bill reforming the excessive sentences doled out to youth. Redd has since been released from prison and now works for the social justice organization American Friends Service Committee in Oakland.

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.

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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