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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | April 19, 2020

The Appeal [reported](#) that the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola has reopened the notorious solitary confinement unit Camp J to house incarcerated people infected with COVID-19. The unit was known as the dungeon for its starkly inhumane conditions. Fate Winslow, held at the Angola prison, said, We are still packed in like sardines. The prison doesn't supply anything for us. No sanitizer, no masks, no hand soap, nothing. Albert Woodfox, who spent over 44 years in solitary, lived in Camp J for nine months. Woodfox told *Democracy Now!* that he has maintained contact with people held at Angola and said, The prisoners are actually scared to death, because, as is the case in most prisons, the medical care in prisons is almost nonexistent. Already five people at a federal prison in Louisiana, FCI Oakdale, have died from COVID-19. While African Americans make up 32 percent of the states population, they consist of 70 percent of the 652 deaths Louisiana has seen from the virus statewide, and are vastly overrepresented in the prison population.

The *Houston Chronicle* [reported](#) that the public defenders office filed a lawsuit against the Harris County juvenile detention center, alleging that teenagers have been subjected to solitary confinement for all but thirty minutes per day. While a county spokesperson claimed that the youth receive an hour and a half out of their cells per day and that the facility is following all of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations, two children at the facility have tested positive for COVID-19. The lawsuit calls the isolation cruel and unusual punishment and a violation of due process rights. Texas state law mandates that children held in custody must receive at least two hours outside of their cell every day, except in cases that the resident poses a threat to himself or others.

The *Baltimore Sun* [reported](#) that the Maryland Public Defender Service filed a second petition calling for the release of children held in the state juvenile system and to relocate the children to a safe and healthy place. The Maryland Court of Appeals denied the motion last week, claiming an administrative order is in the works. The petition comes as six people three detained children and three staff members have tested positive in the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. The public defenders office said, No event in the past half-century has upended daily life and court operations in Maryland and across the country to the extent that the COVID-19 pandemic has. The children who were exposed to the infected staff are now spending 24 hours per day in solitary confinement. The petition says that children as young as ten years old are now held in solitary.

[According](#) to the *New York Post*, 43-year-old Miesha Diggs, held at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in New Jersey, said that she was left basically for dead in solitary confinement when she showed symptoms of COVID-19. Diggs characterized the conditions in the special isolation ward, with no running water for days, as torture. Diggs said she was never tested but was later released back into general population. [Prison officials] are playing Russian roulette with a lot of peoples lives, she said. While the New Jersey Department of Corrections declared that no one at Edna Mahan has tested positive for the virus, *NJ.com* reported that only ten people at the prison have been tested, with seven still awaiting results.

Vox [reported](#) that immigrants detained at Bristol County Correctional Center, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility in Massachusetts, filed a class action lawsuit, calling for the release of all immigrants held at the facility. While ICE has released 60 immigrants nationwide amid the pandemic, this leaves about 38,000 immigrants detained across the U.S. At Bristol, one health care worker has tested positive and two correctional officers reportedly showed symptoms of the virus while at work. The beds at Bristol are three feet apart and dining tables only inches apart, making impossible the social distancing recommendations. Detained immigrants showing symptoms have been placed in solitary confinement, as well as a lead organizer protesting the dangerous conditions. The Bristol County Sheriff argued against releasing the immigrants claiming it would increase the risk for both the immigrants and the public, though most of those held at Bristol have never been convicted of a violent crime or any crime at all.

Keri Blakinger, a formerly incarcerated journalist, wrote an [op-ed](#) in the *New York Times* describing the psychological effects she is experiencing under shelter-in-place restrictions, as someone who suffered through solitary confinement behind bars. Blakinger describes panic, anxiety, rocking back and forth to go to sleep. Psychiatrist and professor Terry Kupers said the uncertainty of COVID-19 is a throwback to the total lack of control you feel in prison [self-isolation is] a form of retraumatization. People feel hemmed in, and it reminds them all too gruesomely of their time in solitary confinement. Blakinger made it clear that sheltering-in-place is not nearly equivalent to solitary, yet she has found herself using many of the same survival tactics she used to get through her time in solitary.

CTPost [reported](#) that over 100 protestors lined their cars in front of Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont's house, calling for more people to be released from state prisons immediately. As of April 6, the state had released 700 people since COVID-19 reached Connecticut, and 21 incarcerated people in the state had tested positive for the virus. Last week, after a fight broke out at Carl Robinson Correctional Institution amid virus-related tensions, more than 100 incarcerated people were transferred out of the prison. This included 19 men who had been accused of organizing hunger strikes and labor strikes to protest the Department of Corrections response to the virus; they were sent to Northern, the state's supermax prison. They say they are separating the infected population in quarantine but right now, they're actually putting people in solitary confinement, said Rahisha Bivens, an advocate with Stop Solitary CT and sister of a man incarcerated in the state system. Days later, the *Harford Courant* [reported](#) that people who tested positive for the virus were also being transferred to Northern.

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 [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 26, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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