

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/05/10/children-spend-months-in-solitary-confinement-in-texas-jails/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | May 10, 2012

A [new report](#) produced by researchers at the University of Texas [Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs](#) describes conditions faced by children who are certified for transfer to adult criminal justice system. Many of these juveniles are housed in adult jails in Texas while they await trial. The report finds that the majority of youth placed in adult jails are housed in solitary confinement, most with just one hour of out-of-cell time per day. While they are placed in isolation for their own protection, they live in conditions that mirror punitive segregation, and often remain there for months or even years.

When making housing decisions, the report states, jails are forced to choose between protecting the mental health or physical safety of a juvenile. If they are placed among adult prisoners, they are at high risk of physical and sexual assault. If they are instead placed in solitary, it is their mental health that's most at risk and the damage may be permanent.

The report, titled *Conditions for Certified Juveniles in Texas County Jails*, surveyed 41 jails, which in the course of 2010 housed well over a hundred juveniles who had been accused of a crime, but not yet convicted. Given the broad range of physical risks to youth who are commingled with adult offenders, the report found, the majority of jails surveyed chose to house juveniles in isolation cells. Although these jails are making efforts to protect the physical safety of the juveniles in their custody, this isolation has its own risks.

It can have a detrimental impact on the juveniles' mental health, aggravating existing mental illness and augmenting suicidal ideation. Segregation may hurt adolescents' chance for proper socialization and damage their ability to develop a healthy adult identity. This reduction in socialization and impairment to identity formation may limit the possibility for future mental health recovery.

Even short periods of isolation can produce symptoms of paranoia, anxiety, and depression. In fact, even a few days of solitary confinement will predictably shift the electroencephalogram (EEG) pattern toward an abnormal pattern characteristic of stupor and delirium. The harm caused by isolation does not end at release; prolonged or permanent psychiatric disability may occur, including impairments that seriously reduce the inmates' capacity to reintegrate into the broader community upon release from detention. Amnesty International has condemned the practice of placing youths in isolation, finding that it both violates international law and is particularly damaging to children and adolescents, who are not yet fully developed physically and emotionally and are less equipped to tolerate the effects of isolation.

It is worth noting that certified youth in county jails have not been convicted of any crime, and are merely awaiting hearings or trials on their charges. They must be presumed innocent. Some of these youth will have their cases dismissed; some will be given probation; and others will be given time-served or short sentences. Despite the speed with which these youth may re-enter the community, the effects of detention may be severe. For example, the impact of prolonged isolation may have mental health consequences that will make it difficult for these youth to reintegrate, and may increase the likelihood that they will recidivate.

National research indicates that juveniles held in adult jails have by far the highest suicide rate of any age group in adult jails. Additionally, national data shows that juveniles in adult facilities are 36 times more likely to commit suicide than their counterparts in a juvenile detention facility. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that for every suicide committed by young adults (not specifically incarcerated youths) between the ages of 15 and 24, there were between 100-200 attempts. This is significant, as the likelihood a youth will harm himself or herself in adult jail is exponentially increased from the already heightened suicide rates for juveniles in adult facilities. Given the significantly increased risk of suicide, self-harm, and aggravation of mental health issues, the choice to separate juveniles from adults only trades physical safety for mental health risks.

There is no good option for the jail administrators who are confronting this challenge. In contrast, juvenile detention centers do not have to make this choice between a youth's physical safety and mental health, because they have the capacity to house youth with other youth.

For personal stories of children in solitary in adult jails in Texas, see the award-winning article [For Their Own Good](#), which appeared in the *Houston Press* in 2010.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the *Village Voice* and *Mother Jones*, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics

to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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 [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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i think its crazy im 15 an i was in solitary confinement for along time

We need to start sending mass petitions, discover what polititions and bankers or other companies are in on this plan to imprison all that they can and boycott them all. Do Not Vote for any of them. It is incredible that our lawyers can set up petitions to save others in other countries when inhumane atrocities are being committed right here in the United States against our own citizens as more and more are incarcerated. PRAY For OUR COUNTRY that GOD Himself will step in and stop this madness! They are buying and selling the souls of men, woman and now, even children.

Its all insane!

This practice of confining young people[like, or worse than, animals, should outrage many people. We we all need to take action,

This country is so messed up. when the bankers can take everything, when corporations control everything including government and education, we are doomed. I hope people will rise up this is not normal nor is it indicative of a healthy advanced society and civilization we are more barbaric than ever before! When will the people who profit from prison as a big BUSINESS ARE UNCOVERED MAYBE THEN WE WILL SEE SOME REAL REFORM RIGHT NOW PEOPLE IN THIS US ARE MORE STUPID THAN EVER BEFORE!

The problem of making everyone a criminal from childhood on in the United States has been growing steadily. Many of these children have been labeled and put on pharmaceutical drugs from 1st grade on. Obviously the drugs are raising the crime rates, as we now have more people in prisons than ever and any country in the world per capita. Children do not belong in adult prisons, or in segregation that allows no human contact for days on end. 23 hours alone in a small cell is destroying the mentality of adults, let alone children. and any child under the age of 16 should never be tried as an adult. If their crimes are so bad that they are deemed adults for trial, they probably need long term Mental help, due to Mental illness, induced by the piles of drugs that the Schools, Drs. and Councillors so happily demand and advocate.. It is sad to see what the United States has become in the past decade. As Prison becomes a great capitalistic investment, and more and more are built, they will most certainly have to be filled with We, the People, and for those that advocate all that, they should keep in mind, it could be Their son or daughter next, or maybe even Them. We, the Land of the Free are now known for being the Prison Country of the World. It begins more and more in Childhood. Prophecy does come true.

Also from UT's LBJ School for Public Affairs:

<http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/news/story/856/>

First-Ever Comprehensive Policy Study on Trying and Sentencing Children as Adults, From Time-Out to Hard Time: Young Children in the Adult Criminal Justice System

Every year, nearly 80 children age 13 and younger are judicially transferred to adult court. Between 1985 and 2004, 703 children age 12 and under, and 961 children age 13 were judicially transferred to adult court. The total number of young children in adult criminal court actually is much higher than this, as the data does not include the number of children sent to the adult system through automatic transfer laws or laws allowing prosecutors to file cases directly in adult court.

Many of these young children are being treated as adults for relatively minor offenses. On a single day in 2008, 7,703 children under age 18 were held in adult local jails and 3,650 in adult state prisons. In these adult facilities, the youth face vastly higher risks of physical and sexual assault and suicide than they would face in juvenile facilities. The youngest children are at particular risk.

The United States is severely out of step with international law and practice. Most countries including those Western nations most similar to the United States, countries in the developing world, Islamic nations, and even countries often considered to be human rights violators repudiate the practice of trying young children as adults and giving them long sentences.

Children as young as 7 could receive a mandatory sentence of life without parole in Florida and Pennsylvania.

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