

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2020/05/05/as-covid-19-spreads-through-prisons-officials-use-solitary-confinement-to-suppress-and-silence-protests/>

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by [Valerie Kieba and Katie Rose Quandt](#) | May 5, 2020

In early April, as reports of deaths from COVID-19 began to emerge from U.S. prisons and jails, Aaron Campbell posted a desperate [20-minute Facebook Live video](#) shot using a contraband cell phone. The video showed sick people gasping and coughing on his unit in the low-security federal FCI Elkton in Ohio, and one of the small bottles of soap that was supposed to last each person two weeks.

Campbell said that three people he knew had died in the facility, and that a prison nurse told them to prepare for more deaths on the unit. He claimed that people who met the criteria for home confinement, including himself, were being refused release. Staring into the camera, he said, Were people. People shouldnt have to die like this.

Yall might not see me again, Campbell said, telling family members he loved them and asking his viewers to pray. But most of all, he asked them to share the video. They might try to put me in the hole or something, he said. But do what yall got to do. Spread the word on whats going on to people in prison. Because this shits serious.

The video went viral. Four days later, Campbells brother Adrian heard from another incarcerated persons family that Aaron had been sent to solitary confinement as punishment for using the contraband phone, where he is locked down 23 hours a day with no access to the facility phones. Nearly a month later, Adrian said in an interview, Aaron is still in solitary, with no end date.

In prisons, jails, and ICE detention facilities around the country, incarcerated people who express their fears to the public, refuse to follow rules that put them at risk, or protest unsafe conditions are being silenced and retaliated against, often by being thrown in solitary confinement. Typically, the official reason for punishment is breaking rules such as possessing a contraband phone that exist to limit outside interaction in the first place.

A growing number of people behind bars appear willing to risk retaliatory punishments because they are rightfully terrified for their lives. The coronavirus infection rate in prisons is nearly [three times higher](#) than in the population at large, and cases exploded threefold over a recent one-week period in April. As the situation worsened, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine dispatched the Ohio National Guard on a medical mission to Campbells facility on April 7. On April 13, the ACLU of Ohio and the Ohio Justice and Policy Center filed a class-action lawsuit, demanding the transfer of 837 medically vulnerable people out of the prison, and in early May, a [federal court denied](#) the federal Bureau of Prisons request to delay the transfer. By that point, [137 people had tested positive](#) in the facility and seven had died. Desperate to call attention to their plight, many across the country are turning to protests and forbidden forms of communication. Perilous, a project that tracks demonstrations in American and Canadian prisons going back to 2010, has [documented more than 90 protests](#) during the coronavirus crisis.

That phone is their lifeline to the outside, said Adrian Campbell. They share that phone to contact their girlfriends, to message people through Whatsapp, call family members, because its so expensive to use the regular phone. So when he actually used that and got it taken? That phone is worth like a million dollars in there. So it was a desperate situation at that point. He said contraband is taken seriously, but Aarons swift and severe punishment seems disproportionate. Thats why you know its a punishment for what he was *doing* on the phone versus actually being caught with the phone.

Nine days after Campbell posted his video, the *San Diego Union-Tribune* ran an article discussing the county jails response to coronavirus. One woman quoted in the story, whose brother is in the jail, provided the newspaper with a photograph of three men hoisting a bedsheet painted with the words, We dont deserve 2 die. Soon after the article was published, the womans brother and another man were [sent to solitary confinement](#) for four days for breaking facility rules, including misusing a bed sheet. A family member of another person in one of the countys seven jails said deputies cut out the photo before distributing the newspapers to incarcerated people: They were censoring the news so the inmates wouldnt see it.

In early April, VICE published a cell phone [video](#) of a man in a California state prison describing the protocols for preventing the spread of the virus. With his face blurred out and his name withheld, the man explained that the policies looked good on paper but thats not the reality in here. He said a nurse visited every day, but that most people would be afraid to report [virus symptoms] because it

automatically is going to result in them being isolated in the hole. Pointing the camera at men gathering in the dayroom, he said, Were sitting ducks in here.

Officials at Solano State Prison accused Ivan Kilgore of being the whistleblower and locked down his entire unit following the videos release. Though officials did not find a contraband cell phone when they raided Kilgores cell, he now faces disciplinary action and the threat of transfer to Pelican Bay State Prison, the notorious supermax. A [petition](#) published by Kilgores supporters characterizes the potential transfer as a threat to bury Ivan deeper into the system, essentially making him disappear to his loved ones, and restrict him from being heard. The authors note, It is not uncommon for people in prison to be shipped from prison to prison or put in solitary confinement as a method of silencing.

This concern rings especially true amid the high stakes of the current pandemic. Stephen Wilson, held at Pennsylvanias SCI-Fayette, was [sent to the hole for 30 days](#) after officials intercepted a message he sent through the prisons electronic messaging service, which contained a draft of a [blog post](#) in support of hunger strikers at New York Citys Rikers Island and their demands for basic protection from the virus. During his first five days in solitary, Wilson reportedly had no access to the shower, clean clothes, or a blanket. A supporter who called the facility said they were told by an officer that Wilson would die in the hole. Wilson is now hunger striking to demand his release from solitary.

Mendy Forbes faced similar retaliation when she [was thrown in administrative segregation](#), a form of solitary confinement, after she spoke with KERA News about the dire conditions at the Federal Medical Center Carswell in Texas. I dont see why shes being punished for trying to help herself and other people, her father told the news station. In the original interview, Forbes, who has a chronic medical condition, told KERA: We have run out of toilet paper, we have run out of pads. Weve had no soap for our bathrooms. It is crazy. We get out one time a day for ten minutesThe conditions are really bad for us, were all really scared and they arent telling us anything.

Around the country, people also face solitary for protesting unsafe policies. In March, a man in Floridas Martin Correctional Institution was handcuffed and [put in restrictive housing](#) while awaiting a disciplinary hearing for refusing to take off a mask. Supervisors across Florida also prohibited officers from wearing masks in early April, according to an anonymous state Department of Corrections staff member. By April 27, the Florida state prison system had counted 126 positive COVID-19 test results.

Protests have erupted across the immigration detention system as well, and the response of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) staff has mirrored the retaliatory response in prisons and jails. Detainees went on hunger strike at Otay Mesa Detention Center in San Diego, which is privately operated by CoreCivic and reported the highest number of confirmed cases of any ICE facility in the country in mid-April. Youre talking about one hundred people passing through common areas, using the same facilities, phones, tables, microwaves. Nothing is cleaned after each use, said Joyce Noche, a director at Immigrant Defenders. Ive heard stories about people not using PPE when theyre preparing their food. Its just ridiculous. Noche said her client at the facility was prohibited from making legal calls while he participated in the hunger strike. When he finally called after more than a week of silence, he told Noche, I broke my fast so that they would let me call you.

Several other hunger strikers at Otay Mesa were [sent to solitary confinement](#). And human rights organization Pueblo Sin Fronteras released audio of a woman at the facility screaming while officers [shot pepper spray](#) into her cell and those around her. She and a group of other women had refused to sign a contract that would potentially absolve CoreCivic of responsibility for their health, in exchange for masks. After demanding to receive masks without conditions, at least one womanan asylum seeker from Mexicowas [placed in solitary confinement](#). Noche said, based on the lag time of ICE reports, she estimates there are now more than 100 positive cases at Otay Mesa. These people are essentially being sentenced to death, in some cases.

In March, more than 300 detained immigrants [engaged in a hunger strike](#) at Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, Washington, demanding that ICE follow necessary health protocols. The participants were isolated in solitary confinement, and some were even deported. Although the strike lasted nearly a month, Maru Mora-Villalpando, an organizer with La Resistencia immigrants rights group, told the *Spokesman Review*, The number of detainees participating in the hunger strike in March declined quickly because there was immediate retaliation.

At Southern Texas Processing Center, an ICE facility operated by GEO Group, [60 detained kitchen and janitorial workers went on strike](#) after new immigrants transferred to the facility in March were not tested or screened for the virus. When the workers refused to go back to their cells until they were all released from custody, officers responded with pepper spray. Nine of the labor strikers were sent to restricted housing and now face disciplinary charges.

Physical intimidation and abuse, as well as solitary confinement, are visited upon incarcerated people when they protest or even seek medical help. On Rikers Island, correctional officers [pepper sprayed eight people](#) without warning in March after they asked to have their temperatures checked at a jail clinic, which was considered defiance of a lock in order. At the Broward County Jail in Fort Lauderdale, when individuals tried to get medical attention by covering their windows or flooding their cells, they were [threatened with tasers](#).

In FCI Oakdale in Louisiana, where the first federal prison deaths from the coronavirus took place, incarcerated individuals were [handcuffed and pepper sprayed](#) for protesting when officials returned formerly sick people to general population. And when people at Oakland County Jail in Michigan complained about unsafe conditions, the facility [threatened to transfer](#) them to a building holding people infected with coronavirus, according to an ACLU attorney who represented them in a lawsuit.

At Washingtons Monroe Correctional Complex, more than 100 men protested after finding out that six fellow incarcerated people had tested positive for coronavirus, demonstrating in the yard and setting off fire extinguishers. Officers [shot rubber bullets](#) and pepper spray into the crowd. A man incarcerated at the facility told Tomas Keene, an [incarcerated journalist writing for the Crime Report](#), that even though its the officers that carry in the virus, staff look at us as if were the ones infectedas if were the untouchables. Keene noted that society already acts as if certain people are dangerous vectors of disruption that need to be sequestered Its not surprising therefore that many correctional officers come to think of inmates as hosts of a contagion, as a threat.

Of course, the majority of incarcerated people living in isolation as a result of the coronavirus pandemic are not facing retaliation, but

experiencing quarantine or medical segregation behind bars. Many facilities have failed to take steps to distinguish medically necessary separation from punitive solitary confinement, although [clear guidelines](#) for doing so have been developed. Some prisons are operating on [total lockdown for extended periods](#), and others are quarantining sick people in solitary confinement cells, state supermaxes, or formerly shuttered units with histories of torturous conditions.

Putting people in solitary confinement for speaking out, on the other hand, is not an unintended side effect, but a deliberate act of silencing and retaliation. Solitary has long been a tool used by prisons and jails to squash protests and punish those who speak out to the public. It [happened in 2017](#), after people in 17 states participated in a strike organized by the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee. It happened again the following year, in retaliation for a strike [protesting prison labor conditions](#) organized by Jailhouse Lawyers Speak. And in early 2019, when people in Brooklyn's federal Metropolitan Detention Center suffered for a week without heat or electricity in the dead of winter, officials yet again retaliated against those who protested by putting them [in solitary](#).

Even during normal times, prisons and jails routinely enforce policies that silence incarcerated people and limit their communications with the outside world. People behind bars are prohibited from accessing the internet, and their letters, phone calls, and electronic communications are constantly monitored. Most prison systems limit the ability of journalists to enter facilities or communicate with incarcerated people. In fact, The Intercept recently reported that jails and prisons in at least three states are [using software to flag messages that mention coronavirus](#). While the software company and correctional officials claim this will help identify sick people, advocates worry it will be used to increasingly surveil and censor what incarcerated people tell the world outside prison walls.

Solitary confinement in the United States has always essentially been a control measure that correctional systems employ at will with little or no due process or oversight. It is no surprise, then, that at a time when the public's eyes have been drawn toward prisons, jails, and detention centers, solitary is being used to strike back at those who stand up for their own health and the lives of those around them, and to hide from public view the fatal threat that COVID-19 poses for incarcerated people.

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. 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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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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Just to add to this.. the inmates tablets were taken up and all content erased after the men inside of Cummins (with nearly 1,000 positive cases) protested and tried to reach out to family and the media as a cry for help. There is some major covering up taking place and someone needs to get to the bottom of this.

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