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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | March 31, 2020

Dozens of national articles have covered the dangerous effect COVID-19 has had and threatens to have on prisons, jails, and detention centers in the U.S., as well as the measures some jurisdictions are taking to deal with that danger. The Prison Policy Initiative has [tracked](#) some of the responses from state and local correctional facilities and compiled a list of resources with important information about COVID-19 in the U.S. criminal justice system. Both [The Appeal](#) and [The Marshall Project](#) are devoting most of their coverage to the pandemic, and the latter is also publishing a [running list](#) of the best stories from other media.

CT Mirror published a [commentary](#), calling for Governor Ned Lamont and the Connecticut Department of Corrections (CDOC) to immediately implement a plan to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in state prisons. The article notes that the current CDOC policy of question-based monitoring for delivery personnel at the facility fails to adequately prevent the spread of the virus, as people can transmit the virus without showing symptoms. Solitary confinement is not the answer, according to the commentary. Facility-wide lockdown would simply substitute one public health crisis, COVID-19, with another, the prolonged use of solitary confinement, the article reads. Advocates, family members, lawyers, and medical professionals across the country from [California](#) to [Texas](#) to [Pennsylvania](#) have similarly called on political leaders to immediately implement sweeping changes to limit the deadly impact of the virus on prisons, jail, and detention centers including releasing significant numbers of people.

The *Marshall Project* [published](#) two firsthand accounts from men held at Monroe Correctional Complex in Washington State, describing the meager precautions being taken against the spread of the coronavirus at the facility. According to the authors, the cleaning solutions provided did not have any alcohol, let alone enough to kill the virus. Officers ordered incarcerated people to use socks over the phone receiver in order to avoid spreading germs, though they were not provided clean socks. And the prison instituted a lockdown as response to the virus, only allowing ten people out at a time for 20 to 30 minutes. Staff is not quarantined, though they are the main potential source for the virus to enter the prison. Yesterday, Arthur Longworth wrote, the staff person removed the plastic thermometer sleeve that was in my mouth and, with the same gloves, slid a new sleeve in place for the next person.

Mother Jones published an [article](#) dictated by Keith LaMar, who has spent 27 years in solitary in an Ohio supermax prison after being convicted of killing five people in the Lucasville Uprising. LaMar has been incarcerated since his teenage years and maintains he did not kill anyone during the uprising, but he now faces a death sentence. LaMar spoke about the lack of medical care and his fear of the visitation suspension getting extended beyond the pandemic. I had a strict rule with my family that if anyone is sick please don't come visit, because once you get the flu [here] it's just torture, he said. They don't give you any medications, beyond ibuprofen, so you pretty much have to suffer through. LaMar says shelter-in-place is different than solitary. Being in solitary confinement, it's a punishment. But people out in society, it's an opportunity for your kids to get more in tune with themselves.

Leonard Peltier, an indigenous rights activist, wrote an [update](#) published in *Counterpunch* about the response to the virus at the federal United States Penitentiary Coleman in Florida. According to Peltier, the whole prison has gone on lockdown for at least 30 days, with an increased allotment of phone time. He wrote, I keep getting conflicting info, but we were allowed to go outside for this evening. Maybe it is just visiting that has been cancelled. And there is no contact with outside people we or most of us anyway agree this needs to be done, because no one it seems knows if they have contacted the virus or not. Peltier calls on people to look out for the people in the Native Nations, if you know our history in these sorts of pandemics, Native people are the last to get help.

The New Republic published an [account](#) by a man from the Dominican Republic held in the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Hudson County Correctional Center in New York. The man described, Today, out of nowhere, they actually got everybody from the dorms and put them back in cells, where were locked in a small space with another person. They said we had to leave the dorms so they could fix the bathrooms. I guess they knew that if they had told us the truth it would have caused chaos. The man said they are now locked down for all but three hours a day with barely any soap or toilet paper. It's at a point where we are about to have a riot in here right now, he said. Officers allegedly are not being ordered to wash their hands upon arrival at the facility. The man has since reported that officers said someone detained at Hudson tested positive for the coronavirus, but ICE denies any confirmed case.

The City [reported](#) that correctional officers at Rikers Island Jail in New York City pepper sprayed eight people waiting to get their

temperatures checked, after a detained worker with flu-like symptoms handled food in their unit. Forty-three-year-old Angel Barbosa said he was waiting in line when he was sprayed several times in the face. There was no riot, he said. It was just a couple of inmates asking to go to the clinic. An internal report says the men were violating an order to lock in by waiting to see a doctor. People held at the jail face sentences of a year or less for technical parole violations or misdemeanors such as drug possession, petit larceny, or turnstile jumping. Barbosa said, There are a lot of elderly inmates in here, theres a 65-year old man who had surgery a week ago. Hes still here. People are gonna die.

WMHT [reported](#) that the restrictions on solitary confinement announced by New York Governor Andrew Cuomo last June have yet to be implemented. Cuomo passed the regulations shortly after rejecting the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act, which would have mandated the state to follow the United Nations recommended ban on solitary for longer than fifteen days. New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) Commissioner Anthony Annucci said last month, DOCCS issued regulations for public comment that are currently under review. Currently there is not limit on the amount of time someone can be sent to solitary confinement, and it is not clear when the regulations will be implemented. A *Queens Daily Eagle* opinion piece [reported](#), The total number of sentences to solitary has only increased, with over 38,000 sentences to solitary in 2018 alone.

KWQC [reported](#) that Representative Shawn Ford and a private law firm have announced a solitary confinement reform proposal for the Illinois Department of Corrections called the Anthony Gay Isolated Confinement Restriction Act. The proposal gets its name from formerly incarcerated Anthony Gay, who spent 22 years in solitary confinement. Gay was originally incarcerated for stealing one dollar and a hat, but he ended up getting fifteen additional years tacked on to his sentence for behavioral problems in prison, stemming from his mental health conditions. His time in solitary confinement severely exacerbated his mental illness to the point that Gay said, I didnt want to die, but at times I felt like, if I die, it would be better than being in here. Being in solitary confinement for decades psychologically rocked me to the core. No one should be subjected to such torture. We must act now to stop it.

Marc Levin from Right on Crime [interviewed](#) former Colorado Department of Corrections Director Rick Raemisch about his prohibition on the use of solitary confinement for longer than fifteen days across Colorado prisons. In the previous supermax cells, where incarcerated people were held in solitary confinement conditions, Raemisch says, incarcerated people are now participating in vocational programs and being connected with jobs before they are released. Raemisch mentioned that with the end of the use of solitary confinement came a reduction in violence across prisons.

The Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) [filed](#) a lawsuit, along with the American Historical Association (AHA) and the Society of Historians and American Foreign Relations (SHAFR), against the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) for approving the decision to destroy Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) records in December of last year. The records contained documents detailing deaths in custody, the use of solitary confinement, civil rights violations, and sexual abuse, among other violations of ICE standards. Despite 23,000 public comments objecting to the decision, NARA still approved the destruction of the documents.

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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