

# 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](#) | October 19, 2020

The *New York Times* [reported](#) that the number of people held in solitary confinement in New York City jails has remained largely the same since 2017, despite a steady decrease in the jails overall population. Mayor Bill de Blasio has pushed for a reduction in the use of solitary confinement, since the death of transgender woman Layleen Polanco from an epileptic seizure in solitary on Rikers Island in 2019. And after Kalief Browder committed suicide following years of solitary on Rikers in his teens, de Blasio banned solitary for detained youth. Still, in the first half of 2020, thirteen percent of the 7,200 people held on Rikers Island were put in solitary confinement. Correctional officers blame the use of solitary on an increase in violence, but a report by the New York City Jails Action Coalition suggested separating people for hours instead of days or months would defuse conflict effectively, while avoiding the harmful and lasting effects of prolonged solitary confinement.

A recent [study](#) from the University of North Carolina, Emory University, and the North Carolina Departments of Public Safety and Public Health found that people released from prison in North Carolina had double the risk of death in the first year if they had spent time in solitary confinement. According to the [Prison Policy Initiatives analysis](#), people who had been sent to solitary confinement were over twice as likely to die after release than those who were sent to solitary confinement once. Those who were sent to solitary once were 55 percent more likely to die by suicide after release, and people who were sent to solitary more than once were 129 percent more likely to die by suicide. Prison Policy Initiative pointed out the overrepresentation of Black men and women in solitary confinement. Until solitary is prohibited, the authors of the study recommended that solitary be considered a health risk factor in re-entry plans and public health treatment.

*Babygaga* reported that [Broward County Sheriff Gregory Tony has fired two jail employees](#) one month after 28-year-old Stephanie Bretas gave birth alone in solitary confinement at the Broward County jail in Florida. In Bretas account of the incident, she said, They just wanted to see how much pain I could endure. Bretas said that the babys head had already emerged by the time any help arrived. The Public Defenders Office alleged that the mentally ill Bretas was intentionally denied care during the birth. Regarding the two employees Colonel Gary Palmer and Lieutenant Colonel Angela Neely Sheriff Tony said, They grossly failed this agency and this inmate. Maryland was the first state in April 2019 to ban the placement of pregnant women in solitary confinement. And still, there are no national standards for the treatment of pregnant women in jails or prisons.

*Westword* [reported](#) that previously restricted documents recently became unrestricted in the class action lawsuit *Menocal v. GEO Group*, filed in 2014 by a group of immigrants detained at the Aurora Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Detention Facility in Colorado. The lawsuit claims that immigrants have been thrown in solitary confinement at the Aurora facility for refusing to participate in the voluntary work program to clean common areas. While GEO Group, the private company operating the facility, claims it follows all ICE standards, the newly revealed documents show disciplinary reports punishing people with solitary for refusing to work, a violation of ICEs Performance-Based National Detention Standards. In some cases, Aurora has been reported to pay workers only \$1 per day. Attorneys for the plaintiffs argue that these conditions violate forced labor laws under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

Anthony Gay, a man who spent 22 years in solitary confinement in Illinois state prisons, spoke alongside attorneys from the MacArthur Justice Center at a Northwestern Prison Education Program panel last week, [reported](#) the *Daily Northwestern*. Gay was first sent to solitary at twelve years old, after he was arrested and accused of stealing \$1 and a hat. On the panel, Gay recalled the only social stimulation being the sporadic interactions with nurses and correctional officers. I lost my social identity. I had no one to say Anthony, youre a person, Gay said. Solitary deeply worsened his mental illness, and Gay was prosecuted for his behavior in isolation, which added years onto his sentence. Now, a bill has been introduced in Gays name. House Bill 182, called the Anthony Gay Isolated Confinement Restriction Act, would restrict the use of solitary to ten consecutive days in Illinois.

In response to Governor Andrew Cuomos upcoming book *American Crisis: Leadership Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic*, advocates released a [report](#) called *The Missing Chapter*, detailing the governors failure to stop the spread of the virus within state prisons. [According](#) to New Yorks *Amsterdam News*, people in prison have been unable to access masks, hand sanitizer, basic sanitation equipment, medical care, and testing. Incarcerated people have also reported that COVID-19 symptoms can get someone sent to solitary confinement, where they often suffer without medical care. Jose Saldana of the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign said, Elders

and immunocompromised people are still in prisons that don't offer adequate access to PPE and social distancing. Women were forced to give birth behind bars during the height of the crisis. Countless lives are at risk if the governor continues to ignore this problem.

Valerie Kiebala 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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