

What happened to prison inmate Christopher Rios?

"COVID, harmed, dead — all within a few days," his mother said.

Prison officials said Rios hanged himself in prison.

But his family and others say there were reasons to suspect that was not the case.

Des Moines Register reporters Eric Ferkenhoff and Andrea Sahouri spent four months working with Rios' family and friends, Iowa Department of Corrections officials and national prison experts and inmate sources to learn what happened.

The result was a deeply reported piece that shed light not only the troubled young man's life and death but inside the dark secrecy of prison walls. Prisons are always just beyond the public eye and became even more hidden as they locked down during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rios was due for a parole hearing and was making plans to live and work with his father.

No one administered CPR for 30 minutes or more, according to hospital records the reporters obtained. He suffered severe brain damage, according to hospital and autopsy records they discovered.

A fellow inmate, who was near the phone room, told the Register that Rios was calling for help and lashing out, before he was found dead.

"I was gone for about 10 minutes, and I came back and sat next to his door for about 30 more minutes," the inmate said. "The whole time, the guards were just standing about 20 feet away."

His family struggled to find answers from officials in the often prison system.

But Rios' family provided the Register with dozens of documents, including a letter denying his parole that he had ripped up.

The reporters conducted dozens of interviews, including with inmates, experts, family members and others, and reviewed hundreds of pages of medical and autopsy records, disciplinary records, lawsuits and letters in their reporting.

As data-digging and documents showed, the prison was overcrowded, despite early pledges to ease capacity inside correctional facilities to stave off the spread of the coronavirus.

On the day Rios allegedly hung himself, Clarinda's inmate population was at 905, well above the capacity of 750. The reporting showed that was not unusual. At the time, all of Iowa's prisons except one were overcrowded.

The piece of Rios and his fate begat more sources from inside and outside of prison walls and more journalism exposing the little seen segment of our society.

The reporting readers they would never wish to go – inside an Iowa prison – but one they need to see. It forced prison officials to disclose information they are rarely asked to disclose and held them accountable for their actions. It shed light on the underrepresented, but significant, Iowa population of prisoners and their families.