



COVID-19 AND SOLITARY CONFINEMENT IN NEW YORK STATE: SOLITARY CONFINEMENT IS NOT MEDICAL ISOLATION & QUARANTINE

“Outbreaks often stir a desire to lock people away in cells, with the notion that germs won’t spread if people are sealed in individual cells. Nothing could be farther from the truth.” - [Dr. Homer Venters](#)

COVID-19 is ravaging New York’s prisons and jails. According to data from the [Department of Corrections and Community Supervision](#), thousands of staff and incarcerated people are confirmed to have COVID-19 in close to half of the New York State prisons. Solitary confinement is not a solution. Solitary causes immense suffering and worsens the spread of the virus. To save lives and stem the spread of COVID-19 in the New York State prison system, New York must follow the recommendations of health experts and release thousands of people from prisons and jails, end the use of solitary confinement, and provide access to testing, quality medical care, soap, sanitizer, hot water, protective equipment, free phone calls and emails, and outside hospitals. [True quarantine and medical isolation](#) are designed to help protect people and help people get well. Solitary is just torture.

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT VERSUS MEDICAL ISOLATION



Source: Amend at UCSF

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT MAKES *MORE PEOPLE MORE* AT RISK OF COVID-19

- During this pandemic, the physical and mental health harms of solitary confinement weaken people's immune systems, making them especially vulnerable to COVID-19.
- Solitary confinement involves close physical contact between people in solitary and correction officers. In many solitary units, going to a shower, recreation, medical appointment, or other movement involves being shackled and escorted by an officer.
- The use of solitary confinement as a response to COVID-19 [discourages](#) people from reporting symptoms, at a time when such reporting is essential to stop the spread.

NEW YORK HAS DOUBLED DOWN ON SOLITARY DURING THE PANDEMIC

- New York continues to lock thousands of people each day in solitary, with many in solitary for months, years, and even decades.
- New York continues to send more people to solitary as purported discipline, including for absurd reasons like trying to wear a mask or refusing to wear a mask. New York also places people in solitary if they report symptoms, and has placed entire units on lockdown.
- Example: A person at Sing Sing reportedly was placed in solitary for 23-24 hrs/day rather than given proper medical care or properly quarantined after reporting symptoms of diarrhea, headache, loss of senses, excessive coughing, and fever.

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT ITSELF IS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

- In ordinary times, solitary itself is a public health crisis, inflicts grave suffering, and far too often leads to heart disease, psychosis, self-mutilation, and death. The anxiety and ill health caused by COVID-19 exacerbate the harms of solitary and increase the risks of deterioration and self-harm.
- A [study](#) by correctional health experts found people in solitary were nearly 7x more likely to harm themselves and more than 6x more likely to commit potentially fatal self-harm, after controlling for length of jail stay, serious mental illness, age, and race/ethnicity.
- New [Cornell research](#) found even a few days in solitary had significantly heightened risks of death by accident, suicide, and violence. A 2019 study also found solitary led to [increased rates of death after release](#), including by suicide and overdose.
- A 2019 study in the Journal of General Internal Medicine found that solitary is associated with a [31% increase in hypertension](#) and heightened risk of heart attacks, strokes, and higher degrees of loneliness, which also contributes to heart disease.

PUBLIC HEALTH REQUIRES ENDING SOLITARY & RELEASING THOUSANDS

- New York prisons and jails must release people from solitary confinement, stop placing people in solitary confinement for any reason, and stop using solitary as a response to the virus.
- Anyone quarantined or medically isolated must be separated for [as limited a time as medically necessary in units overseen by medical staff with all amenities, free phone calls and emails, programming, and meaningful human engagement](#).
- Governor Cuomo must release thousands of people from prison in order to save lives, and protect people behind prison walls and in the community from the spread of COVID-19.
- New York must immediately enact the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, along with Elder Parole and Fair and Timely Parole, as these bills will reduce the number of people in prison who are vulnerable to COVID-19, protect people from the torture of prolonged solitary confinement, and reduce the spread of COVID-19. True medical isolation and quarantine would continue to be permitted under HALT.