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What It Feels Like to Be a Teen in Solitary Confinement

Ending the practice is a big deal for juvenile justice reform

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Jaki Murillo was 12 years old when she first entered the juvenile justice system in California. When she was 9, she tells *Teen Vogue*, she was arrested for making “terrorist threats” after telling a teacher that she was going to send her uncles to hurt the teacher; she was then put on probation. A few years later, Jaki started running away from home and skipping school, a violation of her probation. At 16, she was sent to a juvenile detention hall in Los Angeles.

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keep her safe from older youth in general population. But the true effect she remembers was that she was isolated, largely barred from interacting with others.



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ious reasons, Jaki stayed in the juvenile hall longer than she had anticipated, and because of her age, that meant more time in SHU. “I was supposed to be there for three months and it ended up being over a year,” Jaki tells *Teen Vogue*.



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Jaki recalls how alone she felt, isolated in her cell without contact. There were times she would scream for hours on end out of anger or frustration. There were times she would throw her food or just bang on her cell door over and over and over again, for lack of anything else to do. She had hardly anyone to talk to.

Eventually, she says, “I was in there for so long that I got used to it.”

Spokespeople for the LA County Probation Department and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation told *Teen Vogue* that a lot has changed since the time Jaki was in the system. The LA County Board of Supervisors **passed a motion** in 2016 to restrict how solitary confinement is used in the county’s juvenile detention facilities, like where Jaki was, and the state has enacted reforms based on a 2016 **state law** and also as part of a **legal settlement**, a spokesperson said.

However, justice advocates say more needs to be done on the issue. “As long as there is one child in one facility who is being unnecessarily isolated, we can do better,” Cheryl Bonacci, director of communications and program director for the **Anti-Recidivism Coalition** (ARC) and a former Catholic chaplain in the juvenile system, tells *Teen Vogue*. “We must continue to evolve the way we see and treat our children in the criminal justice system, listen to how they got to where they are, and work together as a community to help them heal in order to be able to move forward productively.”

The effort to end solitary confinement — the practice of isolating people in a closed cell for 22 to 24 hours a day — for minors is growing around the country. The <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-it-feels-like-to-be-a-teen-in-solitary-confinement>

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There are a number of reasons that a young person in custody might be placed into solitary confinement. While solitary is sometimes used to isolate and punish those who are fighting, causing disturbances, or otherwise acting out in detention facilities, minors can also find themselves in solitary confinement as a means of protecting them from other children in a detention center, during initial processing until a facility determines how best to manage a seemingly disruptive child, or for other reasons, such as having a mental health condition, contagious disease or having expressed suicidal ideation.



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A 2003 survey by the Department of Justice (DOJ) found that one-third of all youth in custody had been held in solitary at some point. And 87% of those children were held in solitary for more than two hours, with 55% of those children being held for longer than 24 hours. A 2009 DOJ report found that 62% of minors in juvenile detention centers who died by suicide had a history of room confinement.

Advocating for Change From the Top Down

This year, both chambers of Congress have introduced bills to reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJJPA), a law that expired almost 10 years ago. Back in May, the House of Representatives passed the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2017 with broad bipartisan support, including the 14 Democrats and nine Republicans who co-sponsored the bill alongside its original sponsor, Rep. Jason Lewis, a Republican from Minnesota. The bill includes measures aimed at reforming the juvenile justice system. Proposed initiatives include community-based gang prevention programs and new measures to ensure that kids can't be detained in the system for "status offenses," which are behaviors like skipping school or running away from home that are against the law for minors but not adults.

A few months after the House's bill passed, the Senate passed its own version in August. Because each chamber of Congress passed slightly different bills, it is now up to a conference committee, comprising representatives from both the House and Senate, to agree on a final version of the bill before it goes to President Trump for his signature.

"Reform on this issue is past overdue. I'm pleased that we were able to pass this thoughtful legislation in a bipartisan way to help ensure a better future for our children," Rep. Tony Cárdenas (D-Calif.), one of the most vocal champions for juvenile justice reform in Congress, said in a statement after the bill's passage in the House in May. "We cannot lose another generation of children to failed criminal justice policies."

This is just one of several bills that Cárdenas introduced this spring aimed at reforming the juvenile justice system in the U.S. Another, the Protecting Youth from Solitary Confinement Act (H.R. 1926), aims to ban the use of solitary confinement in federal prisons for minors. It would not only make permanent at the federal level the work done by President Obama's presidential memorandum, but help model and inspire states and local municipalities to ban the practice in their own systems.

"All the studies show that young minds are still developing and still impressionable. Solitary is one of the worst things we can do to any human being and it has really negative effects for juveniles," Cárdenas tells *Teen Vogue*. "We need to stop being the only [member country of the United Nations] that does solitary for minors."

"We're not good at listening to best practices and learning from other countries," Cárdenas adds. "Rehabilitative processes have been studied here in the U.S., but we don't implement them. Solitary for juveniles is one of the worst things you can do to a young person's brain, psyche, and abilities, [and] to their ability to feel that eventually, they are going to be cared for. When you do that to a young human being, you're increasing the chance that they won't be very well-suited when they get back out in society. It's just a glaring example of what's wrong with our criminal justice system."

The Long-Term Effects of Solitary Confinement

It's certainly true for Jaki, now 26. She says that today, she is too comfortable being alone, inside, in the dark. She's reluctant to leave the house, even to do seemingly fun things like take her children to the park. Solitary ended up providing its own dangerous sense of comfort. The effects of having spent time in solitary, and in the system, have a lasting impact on her to this day.

"I don't want anyone to ever think that's OK to just be in a room by yourself," Jaki says of her hope for seeing the practice banned everywhere in the U.S. "I do not believe [juveniles] should be in a room for the endless amount of hours and [be] treated like they're nothing."

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 Instead of being put into solitary confinement, she would have had access to family system-based counseling and therapy. Without therapy for both children and families, she says, no one is able to learn how to change behaviors and improve relationships.

“Sometimes It Was Unbearable”

Jesse De La Cruz was first arrested at the age of 14 for possession and sales of drugs, he tells *Teen Vogue*. At the age of 15, a more serious juvenile conviction got him sentenced to a state juvenile detention facility in California. He was in custody for four and a half years. During that time, he experienced room confinement multiple times. His longest stretch in room confinement lasted three months, he says, and had him alone in his cell for **23 hours a day** (a spokesperson for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation told *Teen Vogue* that the state’s juvenile justice system has since changed its policy on room confinement). For one hour a day he was allowed to either be outside or could shower. The outside area was fenced in — “like a cage,” Jesse remembers — and both outdoor time and showers were monitored by staff.

According to Jesse, he was being targeted while in general population by gang members, so placing him in solitary was the facility’s way of protecting him.

“Sometimes it was unbearable,” Jesse, now 26, says of his time in room confinement. He describes it as being placed in a “tiny” cell with a concrete slab and a small toilet. The little window in his cell had been blurred out, leaving him without any way to see the outside world.

His experience made it difficult for him to transition into more social situations afterward, both when he was introduced back into general population in the prison and when he exited the system and re-entered life on the outside. He says solitary left him uneasy around authority figures in particular. Even now, he says, “before I approach someone to talk to [them], I have to feed myself thoughts like, This is normal and this is regular.”

He says he wishes the practice of solitary for minors was banned everywhere. For those who experience it, he says, “you start building up negative thoughts about yourself, others, the world.”

The nonpartisan American Bar Association itself has published several pieces on its website coming out against the practice of solitary confinement for minors, including a recent piece that **points** to the developmental impact that solitary, even for short periods of time, can have on the still-maturing adolescent brain. According to the article, it is because of this that solitary does more damage to a juvenile brain than an adult brain, as teens’ brains are developmentally less able to cope with the psychological effects of isolation.

How Federal Laws Can Inspire States to Change

Cárdenas’s legislation might just signal some kind of tide shift on the practice. The congressman says his office has been receiving calls since he introduced the bill to ban solitary for minors on the federal level from those wondering how it would look at the state and local level.

“My team is always ready to help coach through to anyone who wants to make an argument for why this is something both Republicans and Democrats need to listen to and do something about in their own environment,” he says. “It’s encouraging that we’re getting these inquiries.”

When it comes to seeing juvenile criminal justice reform taken up on a broader level in the U.S., however, one thing that concerns Cárdenas is the actions and policies of the Trump administration. A member of Cárdenas’s office tells *Teen Vogue* that while Rep. Cárdenas has not asked to meet with President Trump on this issue yet — the congressman met with both Senator Bernie Sanders and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton about the issue during their respective campaigns for the presidency — he hopes that President Trump will assemble members of Congress most actively involved in juvenile justice reform to discuss how to best implement policies. The congressman says he would certainly be open to attending such a gathering, should Trump call for one.

“I hope Trump does not change the executive order Barack Obama signed,” Cárdenas says. “I hope that someone on his team brings this issue to his attention that

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justice reform with several senators in March, he was **vocal** about the need to address what he called “American carnage” and “the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential” in his Inaugural Address back in January. The regression to this “tough on crime” language of the 1990s has only been bolstered by Trump’s pick of Jeff Sessions, the former Alabama senator, to lead the Department of Justice as attorney general. Sessions himself was not actively supportive of the JJRA reauthorization while in the Senate, and has already **reintroduced** the old sentencing regulations that have been abandoned by the Justice Department in recent years.



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Teaching Change

What minors in the system need is the same as any other child — not to be locked away without any context, but to have someone to talk to, to help them understand themselves and their situation, ARC’s Cheryl says.

“Our approach to incarcerating children could look more like parenting to me,” Cheryl says. “If we don’t listen to our children and help them develop tools along with learning consequences, we miss the opportunity to truly teach.” She emphasizes that only isolating a child, for instance, is meaningless if a parent doesn’t also sit down with that child and teach them how to deal with difficult situations and emotions.

That’s why Cheryl insists that if a child is put into solitary, the system fails when “we just say, ‘You’re a bad kid.’ Why don’t we say, ‘What’s going on?’”

Jesse, who currently works and attends school full-time and hopes to get involved with community development or the foreign service some day, echoes Cheryl’s sentiment: “I feel that solitary confinement, if you spend enough time in there or all your time in there, there’s no positive. You’re not learning [anything].”

Jesse adds that a young person can’t be expected to grow or learn while in custody if you spend all of your time in complete isolation. Solitary confinement, he says, is an experience that denies young people the opportunity to make any kind of change in their behavior by restricting a person’s ability to interact with others and learn for the better.

While it remains to be seen whether Congress will pass the bill to ban solitary for minors on the federal level and whether state legislatures will follow suit with similar bans of their own if they haven’t already, Jaki says there is one big thing that can be done in the interim: talk to people like her about their experiences, give space for their stories, and allow them to be told in their own words.

Solitary confinement, Jaki says, “only changes you for the worse, but no one even wants to ask you about it. I don’t ever hear people having a conversation about what it is.”

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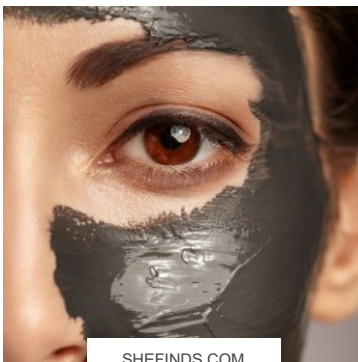


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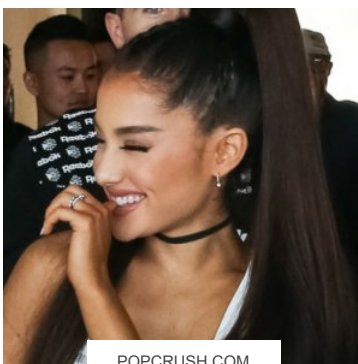
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