

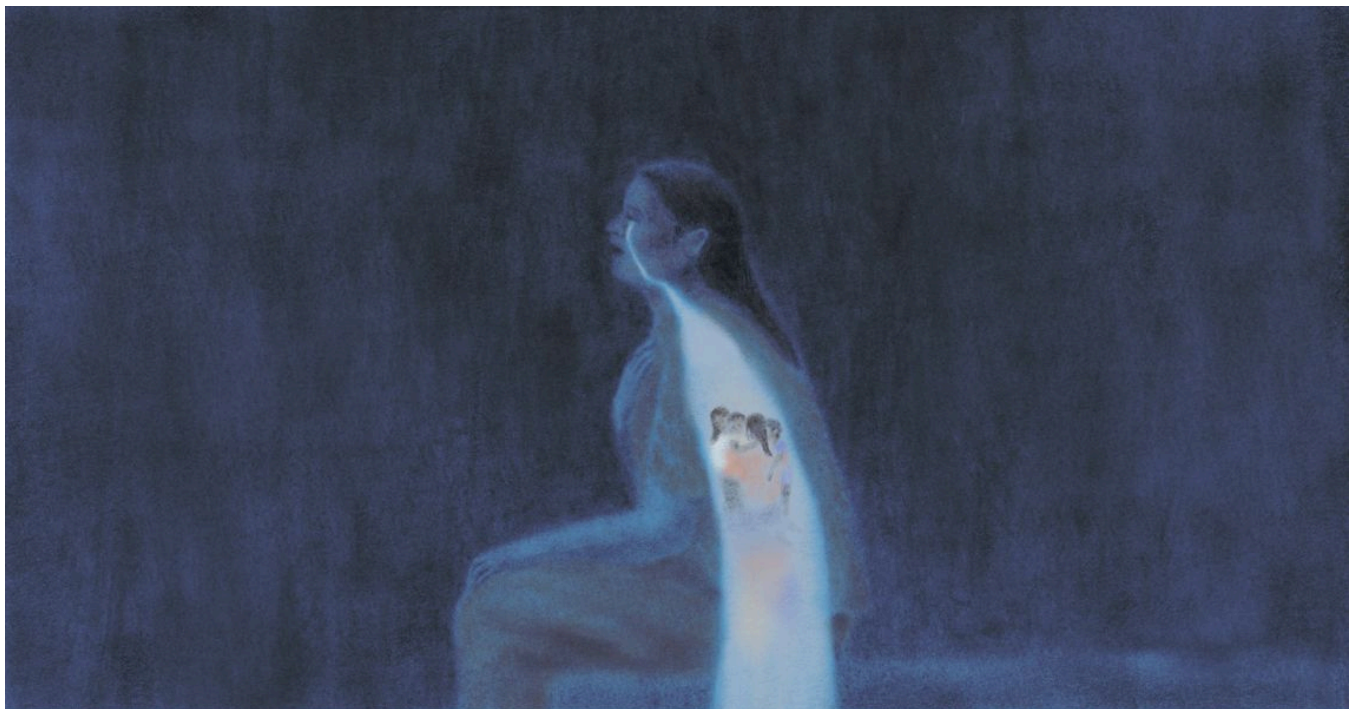
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FEATURE

‘Unbearable’: How ICE Is Locking More Immigrants in Solitary Under Trump

A mother of three said she hallucinated after weeks in an ICE segregation cell in Louisiana. She’s one of thousands now facing the psychological toll of isolation.



SOPHIA DENG FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

By **CHRISTIE THOMPSON**, The Marshall Project, and **PATRICIA CLAREMBAUX**, Univision Noticias

Additional reporting contributed by **FEDERICA NARANCIO**, Univision Noticias; graphics and data analysis by **GEOFF HING**, **ANNA FLAGG**, **JILL CASTELLANO** and **DAVID EADS**, The Marshall Project

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It's been a month since Faviola Salinas Zaraté was deported from the U.S., but she still has nightmares about the Louisiana detention center where she said she was locked in a windowless isolation cell with a broken toilet for almost two months. In her dreams, the lights go out and no one saves her, even as she screams "Help!"

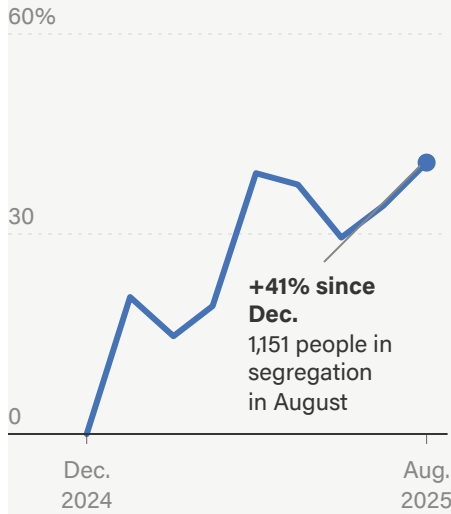
Salinas, a mother of three, said she was suffering from postpartum depression when she was detained in February, three months after the birth of her youngest child. Her depression worsened as she moved through detention centers before arriving at the South Louisiana ICE Processing Center in Basile. She felt like everyone wanted to hurt her. Basile medical staff told her she was placed in solitary confinement for her own safety and to prevent her from harming other detainees, she said.

"I cried a lot, and sometimes, from the depression, I urinated in my clothes," she said in Spanish in a phone call from Oaxaca, Mexico, where she lives now. "I don't know why they didn't give me the care I needed."

As the Trump administration locks up people en masse in immigration detention, officials are also sending more people to solitary confinement, Immigration and Customs Enforcement data shows — raising alarms about the mental health consequences for thousands of detainees. From December 2024 to the end of August, the number of people who spent at least a day in solitary increased by 41%, according to an analysis by The Marshall Project and Univision. August was the peak, with over 1,100 placements in segregation that month.

ICE placements in solitary are rising ...

A new policy in December 2024 required reporting all solitary placements. By the following August, the number of people reported in segregation for at least one day during the month had risen 41%.

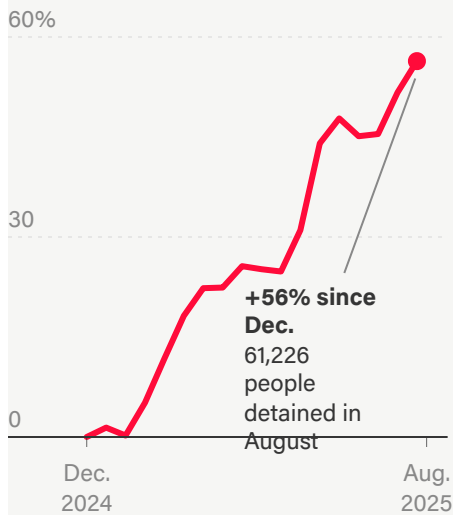


Percent change in people who spent at least one day in segregation during each month, since December 2024

Source: [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#)

... but not as much as overall detention.

Between late December 2024 and late August 2025, the number of people in detention on ICE snapshot dates had increased by 56%.



Percent change in the number of people in immigration detention since December 29, 2024

The Marshall Project and Univision spoke with 10 people held in solitary confinement in ICE centers in Florida, Louisiana, Arizona and Washington, or their relatives and others representing them. Some people said they were held in isolation for protesting against their detention, arguing with officers or refusing to have their blood drawn. They also included a person recovering from surgery who was taken to solitary instead of a medical unit for hours on a weekly basis. One was detained with a second person in the segregation cell.

This article was published in partnership with [Univision](#).

ICE, in a statement, said it could not comment on individual cases, and denied using segregation as retaliation or based solely on some characteristics, like whether a person is transgender. The agency said it may use isolation for people suffering a mental health crisis, but only if there's no other appropriate space and under medical supervision.

The number of people ICE is holding in solitary is not growing as quickly as the population in detention overall, data shows. And the use of segregation had also increased under the Biden

Administration. But the uptick in solitary is concerning, experts said, as more people are now exposed to its harms.

“Solitary confinement is perhaps the most punitive practice that exists in carceral settings, and it’s being used in immigration detention in very similar ways,” said Caitlin Patler, a professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley who has studied ICE’s use of isolation. “Now you’re getting more and more people who we would not have previously seen detained, [who are] experiencing these conditions. It’s a traumatic experience for anyone.”

Psychologists say any time in isolation can be damaging, especially for immigrants who have experienced trauma. Prolonged stints in solitary — which the United Nations defines as 15 days or more — can lead to reduced cognitive abilities, difficulty sleeping, and even thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

Salinas described her isolation cell as a roughly 20-square-foot space with no windows. The bed — a metal slab with a mattress — sat next to a stainless steel toilet and sink. The toilet didn’t work, Salinas said, so her waste piled up in the bowl. She began urinating into a drain in the floor. When that filled up, she would use her uniform to mop the floor, then rinse it in the sink.

The temperature inside the cell also wore her down. “Sometimes they gave me blankets, sometimes they didn’t,” she said. “It was so cold I tore open the mattress and crawled inside it like a blanket.” After that, Salinas said guards took the mattress away. For the next week, she slept on the bare metal slab.

Her only conversations were with another detainee, who was placed briefly in the adjoining isolation cell; they could hear each other through the wall. Salinas said at some point she started to hallucinate that the few items in her cell were moving.

“It was unbearable,” she said. “I felt anxious, helpless. I saw others being let out, and I was the only one left behind.”

I CE’s rising use of solitary comes as the Trump administration slashes what little oversight there was of conditions inside detention centers. Officials have made significant cuts to the Office of the Immigration Detention Ombudsman, as well as the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. The department has also tried to restrict visits from members of Congress.

Some lawmakers are trying to push for more oversight of the use of isolation in federal immigration custody. Georgia Sen. Jon Ossoff published an investigation this summer into the treatment of pregnant women and children in immigration detention, finding that some detainees who reported physical and sexual abuse said they were placed in solitary in retaliation. (A spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security said Ossoff's findings were "garbage.") A group of Congress members has also reintroduced a bill that would end solitary across all federal facilities, including immigration detention, with some exceptions.

"What's really scary right now is there's no third-party witnesses to what's happening inside," said Amanda Diaz, organizing director of Freedom for Immigrants, which advocates on behalf of people in detention. While the watchdog agencies already had little enforcement power, she said, "they at least documented the abuse and had statutory rights to ask for information and data, and interview people. Now there's no accountability."

DHS policies allow ICE to use segregation for a number of reasons, including to separate a person who is considered a threat to others, for medical reasons or while someone is investigated for violating facility rules. The agency can also use segregation as punishment when a person violates certain rules — but only after a review panel issues such an order.

According to DHS policy, segregation "must never be used as an act of retaliation against a detainee," but some people said they were punished for speaking out. Freedom for Immigrants runs a national immigration detention hotline that has received numerous calls about the use of solitary, including from people saying they were put in segregation after filing a civil rights complaint, or asking a guard for their name.

Daniel López, a Mexican immigrant, said he was punished with a month in segregation, including about 20 days with a cellmate, at the Northwest ICE Processing Center in Tacoma, Washington — for speaking out against his and other detainees' detention and submitting petitions on their behalf. López said he and others were calling for ICE to release them to continue their immigration cases outside detention, and for the agency to address the prolonged detention of some people awaiting deportation.

"It's not right to punish people just because we're immigrants, and we raised our voices," López said in Spanish during an August phone call from the detention center.

In December, the Department of Homeland Security issued a new policy outlining who could be placed in isolation, and why. The change was based on recommendations made by DHS' Office of the Inspector General in 2021, according to an ICE statement. The agency did not make the policy public until the ACLU sued for the records earlier this year. The rules include stricter protections for pregnant people, and for people with serious mental illness and health conditions. They also require ICE officers to inform someone why they are held in solitary "in a language or manner they can understand."

That new policy also changed the reporting requirements for ICE's use of isolation. Previously, only people who were in segregation for 14 days or longer, or who had a "special vulnerability" such as a mental illness or serious health condition, had to be reported to the agency's internal database. Now, facilities must record when anyone is isolated for any period of time, and ICE publishes counts of people held at least one day. That policy change likely explains a significant jump in the numbers in December 2024, experts say.

The published segregation data only goes back to April 2024. Advocates for detainees say that the overuse of solitary began long before Trump took office. Last year, a group of Democrats in Congress wrote to then-Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, calling for an end to the misuse of solitary in detention centers. Their letter followed a report by Physicians for Human Rights and researchers from Harvard Law School and Medical School, which found that ICE was failing to follow its own policies and that the use of solitary had increased under the Biden administration.

People in detention and their advocates said ICE employees are still flouting their own policies on segregation use.



A photo of Faviola Salinas Zaraté. COURTESY OF FAVIOLA SALINAS ZARATÉ

Salinas said she was spoken to in English — which she doesn't understand well — about why she was being held alone. She pieced together what little she could from the few words she recognized. She also doesn't recall ever being given a document explaining why she was placed in solitary.

According to ICE data, there were 131 placements of people with serious medical or mental health conditions in solitary confinement in the third quarter of this fiscal year, from April to June — up from 90 the previous quarter.

While serious mental illness is supposed to be a reason to keep people out of solitary, experts say it is the reason many end up there. Detainees have reported being held in segregation after experiencing a mental health crisis or expressing suicidal thoughts. And research shows that immigrants with mental illness are more likely to experience isolation inside.

“We know that sometimes staff use solitary confinement to manage psychiatric emergencies,” said Dr. Altaf Saadi, an associate professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School who studies immigrant health. “I've spoken with numerous individuals who, because of the threat of solitary, don't tell their medical providers about their symptoms.”

Saadi noted that solitary can cause PTSD and self-harm, even in people with no pre-existing mental illness. People who already struggle with mental health can suffer lifelong consequences.

“These are people who are being held in small cells with little or no contact with other people, for days or weeks and in some cases, even years,” she said. “They might experience hallucinations or confusion. We have to think about the consequences of that once they get out of solitary and are asked to participate in legal proceedings.”

As her condition deteriorated over her six weeks in solitary, Salinas said she was transferred to a hospital, where she received psychiatric care. A month later, she returned to Basile, where she was placed among the general population. Worn down by her experience in solitary and the months of detention, she said she accepted her deportation — even as that meant leaving her children behind in the U.S. ICE bused her to Mexico in late August.

She described the pain of not being able to attend her children’s school graduations or their birthdays. She wants to return to the U.S., she said, but fears being detained and placed in solitary again.

“No human being deserves that,” Salinas said. “I lost a lot of time with my children, and I’m still losing time, because now I’m here.”

This story was updated to cite from a statement sent by ICE days after publication. 

Christie Thompson
Staff Writer

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