

Solitary confinement breaks kids. Maryland can end it with HB 921.



By Laura Nicks

A child alone in a locked room is not “behavior management.” It is a crisis we created.

I know this because I’ve lived it and I know what isolation does to a human being. As a child, I was sent to prison and spent time in solitary confinement. I remember the sound of people banging their heads against walls. I remember the despair that thickens when you’re cut off from human contact. Isolation didn’t make anyone safer. It made people sicker, more traumatized and more likely to break.

Maryland lawmakers have an opportunity right now to take a clear stand for children’s safety, dignity and human rights. House Bill 921 by Delegate Moreno would sharply limit when the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) can place a minor in “room confinement” or “restrictive housing.”

This bill matters because the public deserves to understand the truth that our systems often hide behind euphemisms: restrictive housing and room confinement for kids is solitary confinement by another name.

Trauma is the backdrop for most justice-involved youth

Most young people who enter confinement aren’t arriving as blank slates. They’re arriving with histories of abuse, neglect, domestic violence, parental incarceration, and substance use in the home. Those experiences are called Adverse Childhood Experiences(ACEs), and

the [CDC](#) has been clear that toxic stress from ACEs can change brain development and affect how the body responds to stress.

Human Rights for Kids' [research](#) underscores what that looks like in practice. In a survey of people incarcerated for acts committed as children, Maryland respondents had an average ACES score of 6.4 out of 10, with researchers noting that nearly 70% experienced six or more adverse experiences before incarceration.

So when a traumatized child acts out in custody - when they yell, refuse, fight, shut down - we should recognize what it often is: a nervous system in survival mode.

But no, then we do the worst possible thing: we isolate them.

Maryland has seen where isolation leads

We don't have to guess at the results. Children placed in solitary confinement can experience profound negative physical, emotional and psychological effects, including but not limited to psychosis, depression, increased aggression and increased risk of suicide. The use of solitary confinement on children can also lead to their failure to develop positive social skills, limit their access to developmental and educational resources, and can cause stunted physical growth due to inadequate diet and exercise.

That's not rehabilitation. That's a deterioration on schedule.

And in Maryland's juvenile facilities, the pressure points are real. The Banner recently [reported](#) on serious problems in DJS centers including poor conditions and gaps in care. In systems under strain, isolation becomes the shortcut.

But children should never pay for adult failures in staffing, training or resources.

HB 921 sets a basic, lifesaving standard

HB 921 doesn't pretend facilities never face emergencies. It draws a firm boundary around when isolation can be used and when it can't.

Under the bill, a minor cannot be placed in isolation solely for discipline, punishment, administrative convenience, retaliation, or staffing shortages.

If isolation is used at all, it must be a truly temporary response to an immediate and substantial safety risk, with strict safeguards - including:

- A requirement that the facility justify the placement and use the least restrictive conditions practicable
- A mental health screening within half an hour, and access to needed services

This is what accountability looks like in a system that claims it believes children can change.

Ending youth isolation isn't only a moral issue; it's a health and safety imperative. The American Psychiatric Association advises avoiding solitary confinement for adolescents because it can cause serious harm, including risk of death.

In 2016, President Barack Obama instituted a ban on solitary confinement for juvenile offenders in the federal prison system, citing its overuse and "potential for devastating psychological consequences." Two years later, Congress codified this prohibition for youth at the federal level through the passage of the First Step Act in 2018 (S. 756) which was signed into law by President Trump.

In the eight years since, the silence from Annapolis on moving a similar prohibition forward for children in DJS custody is deafening.

HB 921 pushes Maryland toward real safety: support, de-escalation, and step-down care so kids heal, not break.

About Lara Nicks

Lara Nicks is a juvenile justice reform advocate based in Arkansas and a survivor-leader of extreme youth sentencing, and she is currently a fellow with Human Rights for Kids.