

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Roxanne Barnes](#) | August 25, 2021

An [opinion piece](#) in USA Today reports that low rates of vaccination among prison staff nationally are driving COVID outbreaks in prisons. The authors of the piece work with the UCLA Law COVID Behind Bars Data Project, which found that fewer than half of prison staff had been vaccinated, despite the fact that the rate of infection for corrections staff was at least three times greater than the national average. Most facilities main strategy to prevent the spread of COVID are lockdowns, which are equivalent to solitary confinement. Considering that COVID still caused more than 2,700 incarcerated deaths in federal and state prisons, the authors urge governors to mandate staff be vaccinated to prevent further deaths without subjecting people to the torture of solitary.

On August 16, New York City corrections officers held a rally on the bridge leading to Rikers Island, [reports the Queens Daily Eagle](#). Officers at the rally chanted bring back the box, referencing efforts to limit the use of solitary confinement in the citys jails. A shortage of staff the result of thousands of officers taking sick leave or simply not showing up for work has effectively led to more solitary as people incarcerated on Rikers are left locked down in their cells. Across from the protesting officers stood prisoners rights activists, including Darren Mack, co-director of the organization Freedom Agenda, who argued that the corrections officers unions leadership has convinced themselves that officers should not be held accountable for failing to report to work or demonstrating callous neglect for incarcerated people while there, and the mayor has shamefully let them act accordingly. Mack added that the union, has also taken every opportunity to argue for more incarceration.

The [Bangor Daily News describes](#) the case of Zachary Swain, a young man who has spent most of his six years in the Maine prison system in solitary confinement a rare case in a state that has some of the lowest rates of solitary use nationally. Swain has been diagnosed with multiple psychiatric disorders that make him difficult to control in prison. But each time he is placed in solitary, he reports that his mental state worsens, and he engages in suicide attempts and self-harm behaviors that have put him in the hospital for weeks at a time recovering from infections and internal scarring. Swains mother, who has had trouble staying in consistent contact with her son as a result of his long stints in solitary, said, He really needs the proper medication and psychological treatment rather than isolation. Despite his obvious deterioration, Swains lawyer is currently fighting prosecutors who want to charge Swain with additional crimes based on his behavior in prison, which could lead to years more in solitary confinement.

[The Oregonian reports](#) that a 14-year-old boy who tested positive for COVID in juvenile detention has been held in solitary confinement since August 13. Several young people at the detention facility are being held in solitary as a result of an outbreak at the Donald E. Long Detention Center. The boys lawyer pleaded with the judge, saying that for a boy who has just gotten out of middle school its pretty scary having COVID and not really [having] anybody thats around.

The Aspen art exhibit ArtCrush 2021 features a work by formerly incarcerated artist Jesse Krimes, who says his artistic career was born of a desire to process his experience in solitary confinement, [reports the Aspen Daily news](#). Krimes donated one of his Elegy Quilts to the exhibit, pieces he makes out of the clothes of incarcerated people, in an effort to help people better connect with the impersonal statistic that 2.2 million people are in U.S. prisons and jails. Krimes stated of his work, When you put an actual human experience to that number, when you show people visible, tangible art and say, This is Jemal, whos incarcerated, and this is his house and this is his clothing and this is him, it has the ability to connect on a much more personal level. Inspiring Krimes work is his commitment to ending racist mass-incarceration and the way art can heal the damaging effect of solitary.

The Beachwood Reporter [published a statement](#) put out by the Uptown Peoples Law Center (UPLC) in Chicago on the state of mental health care in Illinois prisons. Five years after settlement of a class-action lawsuit, and two years after a federal court ordered the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) to make improvements, mental health care still violates incarcerated individuals constitutional rights. A report by a court-appointed monitor found that IDOC had failed to undertake five legally required changes to improve the system: IDOC is still understaffed, has an insufficient crisis watch system, does not allow people in solitary confinement sufficient out-of-cell time, does not properly manage or distribute medication, and fails to create individual treatment plans for people with mental health care needs. IDOC says that 42 percent of people in Illinois have had issues with mental health, although the UPLC conjectures that stigma and poor screening have kept that figure artificially low. Alan Mills of UPLC stated, It is long past time for Illinois to comply with the courts orders, and the United States Constitution.

Roxanne Barnes is an educator and writer based in Los Angeles and a contributing writer to Solitary Watch.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 26, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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