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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | February 11, 2018

The new film [Cruel and Unusual](#) is the story of the Angola 3 Robert King, Herman Wallace, and Albert Woodfox, who collectively endured more than 100 years in solitary confinement in the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola (and whose story helped inspire us to launch Solitary Watch eight years ago). The feature-length documentary tells a story of horrific injustice and inhumanity. In 1972 the three men were convicted on manufactured evidence of committing murders in prison, after they had begun to organize a chapter of the Black Panthers at Angola to fight back against the brutality of the place. They were then held in continuous solitary confinement for decades, victims of the racism of Angolas warden and Louisianas attorney general. Woodfox, the last member of the Angola 3 to be released after his conviction was overturned, walked out of prison in 2016 after 43 years in solitary the longest period on known record. Directed by Vadim Jean and released in theater earlier this year, *Cruel and Unusual* is now available for sale and rental on Amazon Video, iTunes, and Vudu.

NPR [reported](#) on new developments in a lawsuit filed by nine individuals held at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Aurora Detention Center in Colorado, operated by private prison company GEO Group, against the alleged forced labor practices at the facility. The lawsuit claims that the GEO Group employs a Housing Unit Sanitation Policy, which mandates individuals to clean without pay under the threat of solitary confinement as punishment for any refusal to work, in violation of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. A federal appeals court in Colorado ruled that the plaintiffs represent a class of 60,000 individuals who have been detained at the Aurora facility.

[According](#) to the *Press Democrat*, William Cordoba, a man serving a life sentence at San Quentin State Prison in California, has been awarded \$65,000 in damages after being used as a sex slave by a female vocational instructor in the prison, who promised to get him a lawyer to get him out of prison. When Cordoba attempted to end the relations, the woman accused him of violations that got him placed in solitary confinement for nine months. Cordoba claimed his experience in solitary confinement constituted cruel and unusual punishment, leaving him in need of mental health care.

The *San Diego Union Tribune* [reported](#) that Angelita Garcia, a 48-year-old grandmother from Tijuana, Mexico, has been held in solitary confinement for three months at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Otay Mesa Detention Center in San Diego, California. Garcia has been held in solitary confinement since November 6, despite her severe mental illness and despite documented incidents of her self-harm. After a guard teased her about her mental condition and a judge denied her request for bond, Garcia attempted suicide. Garcia claimed the guards influenced her suicidal behavior, saying, They made me do it. They torture you psychologically. They dont hit you, but its worse. ICE has denied the request of Garcias lawyer that she be released to prevent further mental deterioration.

The *Santa Fe New Mexican* [reported](#) that five individuals held in the Penitentiary of New Mexico have filed a lawsuit, claiming that the Predatory Behavior Management Program at the facility, which ostensibly aims to reduce violence in the prison, provides no actual therapy, and instead subjects the individuals to solitary confinement along with other abusive conditions. While the New Mexico Corrections Department claims to provide health care to each offender in the program, the lawsuit states that the facility has two mental health employees that may check on residents once every couple of months. The plaintiffs claim that without providing real treatment, they will never learn how to function in a prison general population or in society. The lawsuit calls for \$50,000 in damages to each plaintiff and a court mandate for the Corrections Department to actually supply the mental health services they are already claiming to provide.

The American Bar Association (ABA) House of Delegates approved a resolution, [according](#) to the *ABA Journal*, calling for a drastic reduction in the use of solitary confinement, so that it is allowed as a last resort and for periods not to exceed 15 consecutive days. Additionally, the resolution suggested solitary confinement be prohibited for individuals with intellectual disability or serious mental illness; the elderly; women who are pregnant, are postpartum, or recently had a miscarriage or a terminated pregnancy; and individuals whose medical conditions will be exacerbated by such confinement. A Cincinnati judge who spoke in support of the resolution pointed to the case of Kalief Browder, who committed suicide after being held in solitary confinement for two years at Rikers Island as a teenager awaiting trial. The judge said, We need to recognize that that is torture.

The *Miami New Times* [covered](#) an incident in which Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deported 92 Somali immigrants, forcing them onto a plane back to Somalia, which ultimately returned to Miami without any reasoning given. The men were shackled for 48 hours in the air and allege that the guards harassed and beat them, as well as denied them access to the restroom. The men have since been transferred to various ICE detention centers, with 52 of the men now housed at Glades Detention Center in Florida. Lawyers for the group of men filed a complaint last month against the mistreatment of their clients and use of solitary confinement at the facility, stating: "The instances of verbal and physical abuse that our clients are having to endure, excessive force including beatings and pepper-spraying detainees who are already in segregation cells, racial epithets including nigger and boy, the misuse of disciplinary segregation, are all unconscionable and intolerable in a civilized society."

The Flagler College Gargoyle [reported](#) on the case of Luis Villatoro, a man who was placed in solitary confinement for one year and nine months at Northwest Detention Center (NWDC) in Tacoma, Washington, operated by private prison contractor GEO Group. He interpreted his isolation as retaliation for his anonymous reporting of gang-related violence, which may have influenced the firing of a corrections officer involved with one of the gangs. Villatoro has since been released from NWDC, but described his continued struggle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): "Sometimes I start cutting my arms just to release the frustration that I have. What I went through, I consider torture." Alex Friedmann of Prison Legal News connected the privatization of the facility to its corruption, telling *NBC News*, "Literally, you can put a dollar figure on each inmate that is held in a private prison. They are treated as commodities. And that's very dangerous and troubling when a company sees the people it incarcerated as nothing more than a money system."

Boston University Today [posted](#) an opinion piece arguing for against the use of long-term solitary confinement in Massachusetts, and points to new hope offered by two bills in the state legislature. The Massachusetts House recently passed H.4043, prohibiting solitary confinement longer than 15 consecutive days or 120 days within the span of a year, while the Senate has also passed S.220, requiring improved programs for those in solitary and providing protection for vulnerable populations, such as LGBTQ individuals and individuals with mental health diagnoses. Lawmakers are in the process of creating a compromise bill to bring to Governor Charlie Baker for signature.

Valerie Kiebal was a contributing writer and editorial and project manager for Solitary Watch, and is now the media director of Straight Ahead, which is building a decarceration movement throughout Pennsylvania. Her work has also appeared in *The Root*, *Truthout*, the *Chicago Reporter*, and *Shadowproof*.

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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