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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](#) | January 18, 2021

The *Associated Press* [reported](#) that all federal prisons have been locked down in anticipation of the potentially violent protests that could erupt across the country on the inauguration day of Joe Biden. The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has reportedly begun to move some of its Special Operations Response Team (SORT) from federal prisons to Washington D.C., following the insurrection carried out by Trump supporters at the U.S. Capitol on January 6. According to a BOP spokesman, about 100 officers were sent to the Department of Justice and given special legal powers to enforce federal criminal statutes and protect federal property and personnel. The last federal lockdown was in April allegedly to combat the spread of the coronavirus, and so far, 190 people held in federal custody as well as three staff members have died from the virus.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* [reported](#) that people held in the Philadelphia jail have been locked in their cells for all but fifteen minutes a day, after the city's Department of Prisons enforced a stricter lockdown due to the pandemic. Federal judge Berle Schiller ordered the department to ease the lockdown. The current shelter-in-place policy keeps incarcerated people in their cells for nearly 24 hours a day, and such prolonged confinement is harmful to the mental and physical health of incarcerated individuals, Schiller wrote. The court filings reported people not allowed out of their cells for days at a time and going five days without a shower or phone call. The lockdown has also worsened access to mental health care. One person in the jail died by suicide in December and between March to August 2020, there were 32 suicide attempts.

NBC [reported](#) that people held in the Santa Clara County jails have engaged in a hunger strike to demand better treatment under the spread of the coronavirus. Silicon Valley De-Bug published a [report](#) detailing the dangerous conditions in the jail and featuring personal accounts from incarcerated people. One *San Jose Spotlight* [story](#) in September called the jail a hellhole, reporting sick people being housed in cells with rodent feces and forced to bathe with a sock and shared bucket of water. The mother of a man held in a 26-day quarantine at the jail said, Those inside who test positive are subject to being placed in unsanitary conditions or solitary confinement, and also subject to not having any contact with their families or friends for a lengthy period of time, which is perceived as punishment.

In an *Albuquerque Journal* [article](#), social worker Thelonika McCollum shared her testimony about working at the Santa Fe State Penitentiary in New Mexico, where it was her responsibility to conduct mental health examinations for people in solitary. McCollum said, Were going around, basically, with (evaluations) pre-filled out. And you just get the inmate to sign it. You dont actually spend time with them, or be like, Oh, hows your mental health right now? McCollum said people were not provided adequate mental health resources, despite some facing severe crises of delusions and self-mutilation. McCollum believes putting a person with mental illness in solitary is torture and supports the Corrections Restricted Housing Act, a 2019 state bill that bans the placement of children, pregnant women, and psychiatrically disabled people in solitary. But McCollum ultimately quit her job because of the unethical practices at the prison.

Shadowproof published an [article](#) about the reported use of solitary confinement as retaliation against politically active people held at the Toledo Correctional Institution in Ohio. Curry, an alleged leader of the Lucasville uprising, now spends 23 hours a day in his cell during the week and 24 hours a day during the weekend. He was told he would remain there for two years. Mustafa, who has spent the last 18 months in solitary, was forced to live in the dark for five days in a cell the size of a bathroom. He expects to stay in solitary for the remainder of his prison sentence, ending in 2030. Mustafa said, Its pure torture and over a period of time it has the ability to diminish the things inside an individual that makes him a human being. Guys begin to act like animals locked in a cage, only knowing how to communicate through loud noises, only knowing how to express themselves by throwing feces and urine and doing things that a normal human being would never do.

Florida Politics [reported](#) that on January 12, Broward Senator Perry Thurston introduced SB 570, or the Youth in Solitary Confinement Bill, which would limit the placement of children in solitary. The bill would still allow officials to place youth in emergency cell confinement in extreme cases, but the child would not be held there for more than 24 hours and a mental health clinician would have to certify the decision. Under the bill, youth could still be placed in disciplinary cell confinement if they commit a major violation but Thurston is introducing another bill that would ban the use of disciplinary cell confinement completely. Even so, SB 570 mandates that youth held in disciplinary cell confinement must be allowed two hours outside, a daily shower, access to resources, monitored every

fifteen minutes, and released from solitary after 72 hours. If Governor Ron DeSantis signs the bill, it would take effect July 1.

The *Tampa Bay Times* [reported](#) that the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has threatened potential legal consequences for the Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC) if they do not satisfactorily address the systemic sexual abuse against incarcerated women at Lowell Correctional Institution within 49 days. In a report last month, the DOJ found that women at Lowell were raped, sodomized, beaten, and humiliated in exchange for essentials such as toilet paper. FDOC Secretary Mark Inch denied the validity of the report and said that no action has been taken to address the issue. Incarcerated women at Lowell have complained about this abuse for over a decade. If they report the misconduct, the women say they are subjected to solitary and other retaliation. Activist Debra Bennett said, Our punishment was to be removed from society for our crimes not to be raped or groped or beaten, crippled and killed.

Source Weekly [reported](#) that prison staff and incarcerated people in Oregon have been placed on the states second priority group to receive the vaccination, in line with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations. So far, all the 400 vaccines delivered to the Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC) have been administered to staff members. As of January 10, 27 people in custody have died after contracting the virus. While the DOC claims that incarcerated people can get tested upon request and promptly transferred to an institution with 24/7 medical care, Juan Chavez of the Oregon Justice Resource Center said, That just isnt what weve heard from people. Chavez said, Its no secret that [incarcerated people] dont want to be tested. They dont want to be put in solitary confinement. Theres a lot thats bad about prison[but] nothing compares to solitary confinement.

Valerie Kiebala 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.

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October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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