

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | January 27, 2020

The *Texas Observer* published a [piece](#) telling the story of solitary confinement in Texas prisons, through various firsthand accounts from people who spent significant time in severe isolation. According to its own numbers, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) holds over 4,400 people in solitary, including 1,300 people held in isolation for six or more years. Eighteen people have been isolated for over 30 years. Many people are held in solitary indefinitely in Texas prisons under the justification of gang affiliation or escape attempts. One man on death row, similar to many others, abandoned his appeals and asked the judge for an execution date to end the misery of living in solitary confinement. [T]hese walls 24/7 have broken me, Justen Hall said. It is taking every last ounce of will to even make it from day to day. While TDCJ officials claim to have reduced the isolated population recently, deeper investigation has revealed much of the change is only in classification, while the actual conditions remain identical to solitary.

The Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC) [reported](#) that sixteen men held at the Central Prison in Raleigh, North Carolina, reached their fifth day of hunger strike on Friday. The protest is unusual in that the men are on hunger strike not against their own conditions, but rather in a solidarity protest against the abuse and isolation they say people with mental illness face in the prisons Unit One. Incarcerated writer Lyle May described Unit One as, the most notorious solitary confinement unit in the state. The conditions were akin to any dungeonmentally ill prisoners lived in their own filth, swallowing batteries and mutilating their genitals just to receive medical attention and time out of their cell. Central Prison has seen an increase of prisoners with mental illness being sent to solitary at higher rates, according to IWOC, which also notes that the hunger strikers have not stopped yet, and do not plan to.

The *Honolulu Civil Beat* [reported](#) that the daughter of a man who died in 2017 at the Kulani Correctional Facility in Hilo, Hawaii has filed a wrongful death lawsuit. The lawsuit claims that officers found Wesley Chong bleeding profusely in the bathroom with deep cuts on his arms, but instead of calling for medical help, the officers ordered another incarcerated man to pull him out and handcuff him. An attorney for the plaintiff said, They didnt render any medical aid. Instead they just waited and they just put him into solitary confinement, where he later died. Even when the incarcerated man tried to wrap Chongs arms, he said, the officers ordered him to stop and retaliated against him for filing a complaint about the situation. The attorney said, We dont think that its an incident thats isolated at DPS [Department of Public Safety].

*Massive Science* [reported](#) on a new [study](#) conducted by Dr. Brie Williams, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, and her colleagues, which examined the effect of solitary confinement on cardiovascular health. Analyzing data from both men held in the supermax unit of a prison and men held in less restrictive high security conditions, the study found 31 percent higher rates of hypertension with the people held in solitary confinement over those held in less-isolated housing. They study also found that the people in solitary confinement faced a significantly higher likelihood of experiencing heart attacks and strokes, as well as loneliness. The study concluded that health care costs are increased \$155 million for the 25,000 people held in supermax units alone, not counting others held in solitary confinement.

Keramet Reiter, a professor of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California, Irvine, led a [study](#) published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, identifying the prevalence of psychological distress among people held in prolonged solitary confinement. The study assesses people held in solitary in the Washington State Department of Corrections (WADOC) in 2017, finding that as many as half of those examined had at least one significant symptom on a widely used psychiatric rating scale. Ultimately, the study found an affirmative answer to the question of whether solitary confinement is associated with more and worse psychopathology than general population confinement. Specifically, people in solitary suffered from more severe anxiety, depression, sensory hypersensitivity, self-harming behavior, and a perceived loss of identity.

The *Hartford Courant* [reported](#) that a group of advocates, family members of incarcerated people, lawyers, and community members gathered for a news briefing outside of the Connecticut State Capitol last week to call for an end to solitary confinement and the closure of the supermax Northern Correctional Institute. The group Stop Solitary CT called for a daily minimum of sixteen hours out-of-cell, except in specific cases of serious danger. One woman, Colleen Lord, spoke about her sons death in solitary confinement, after being pepper sprayed, restrained, and isolated. His death is currently being investigated by the state. The Senate chairman of the legislatures judiciary committee Gary Winfield, said he is in full support of the coalitions work to end extreme isolation.

[According](#) to the *Auburn Examiner*, Washington State Senator Claire Wilson has introduced Bill 6112 to limit the use of solitary confinement on teenagers across the state. Rather than discouraging violence and assaults on staff and youth, solitary confinement actually increases it, Wilson said. The bill would also require facilities to document the use of solitary confinement and establish a process for using less restrictive alternatives or enforcing restrictions for when the use of isolation is necessary. Wilson pointed to a study that showed half of suicides in juvenile facilities occur in solitary confinement and 62 percent had previously been in solitary. Currently ten states have passed legislation to ban or limit the use of solitary on children.

The *Texas Observer* [reported](#) that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) made changes last month to the National Detention Standards (NDS) that regulate the operation of about 140 ICE facilities, including eighteen in Texas. The changes include an expansion of reasons for immigrants to be held in solitary confinement as well as a removal of the prohibition on the use of hog-tying, fetal restraints, [and] tight restraints. The modifications also affected protocols for staff in cases of serious injury, sickness, or death of an immigrant. Eunice Cho, an attorney with the ACLU National Prison Project, said, ICEs [revised] standards for these detention facilities have weakened protections for immigrant detainees across the board. Several facilities have already been reported to violate the current standards and rights of immigrants. Cho says the standards decrease transparency and oversight for these facilities [which] should give us all great concern.

The *Times Union* published a [commentary](#) written by Jerome Wright, a formerly incarcerated organizer with the #HALTsolitary Campaign, calling for the passage of the Humane Alternatives to Long Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act. The bill would limit the use of solitary to fifteen consecutive days across New York State correctional facilities. Wright, who spent over seven years in solitary, points to two successful alternatives to solitary confinement that New York can use as models. Wright participated in one of the models: the since-shuttered Merle Cooper program at Clinton Correctional Facility in New York. The program, functioning through meaningful opportunities for both empowerment and accountability, allowed participants to live outside of the cell all day, even with the ability to earn unlocked cells.

The *Guardian* [reported](#) that Delbert Orr Africa, a member of the Philadelphia black liberation group MOVE was released on parole from a Pennsylvania prison after 42 years of imprisonment. He was convicted, along with other MOVE members, for the 1978 death of a police officer during a shootout following a police siege on MOVEs communal house. Delbert, who maintains his innocence, is the eighth of nine members of the group to be released or to have died in prison. He was kept in a solitary confinement dungeon for six years of his incarceration because he refused to cut his dreadlocks, a principle of the MOVE group. In order to survive his time in solitary, Delbert says he communicated with people in the adjacent cells by tapping messages to play black history trivia.

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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