

# 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](#) | September 9, 2019

[According](#) to the Associated Press, NBC news anchor Lester Holt spent two nights in a cell at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, to report on criminal justice reform. Holt stayed in the prisons death row unit, where people are isolated in their cells for 23 hours a day. The man housed next to Holt had not been outside in four years. Holt commented on the stark racial dynamics at the former slave plantation, where the predominantly black incarcerated people work in fields overseen by white officers on horseback. This past June, Solitary Watch, in collaboration with the ACLU of Louisiana and Loyola Universitys Jesuit Social Research Institute, released the report [Louisiana on Lockdown](#), documenting the use of solitary confinement in Louisiana and featuring the experiences of over 700 incarcerated people surveyed in Louisiana state prisons. Holts segment was aired Friday on Dateline NBC and again on MSNBC on Sunday night.

[The Atlantic](#), along with The *New York Times*, the Project on Government Oversight, the ACLU, and the National Immigration Justice Center, obtained internal documents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that revealed more details about the widespread use of solitary confinement on detained immigrants during both the Obama and Trump administrations. The documents, dating from 2014 to 2018, showed that while solitary confinement was used all along, reasons such as hunger striking, suicide risk, LGBTQ identity, and mental illness were much more likely to land an immigrant in solitary confinement under Trump than under Obama. While an ICE spokesperson claims the agency complies with federal policy on solitary confinement, neurologist Altaf Saadi said that under Trump, Things have gotten far worse, regarding the treatment of detained immigrants.

[Shadowproof reported](#) that people incarcerated at the Correctional Training Facility (CTF) in Soledad, California were locked down for twelve days following a violent incident on August 14, after members of rival Latinx gangs were placed in the yard at the same time. The incident follows a tradition of gladiator fights, which incarcerated people and advocates claim is an intentionally divisive strategy employed by California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) officials to incite hostility. Prison staff deployed chemical agents, non-lethal weapons and discharged nine rounds, according to CDCR, and the incident resulted in 50 incarcerated people injured and eight hospitalized. After the lockdown, 50 people were moved to administrative segregation, or solitary confinement, housing. The department says they are investigating the incident.

The *Tampa Bay Times* [reported](#) that the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), Florida Legal Services, and the Florida Justice Institute filed a class action lawsuit against the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), calling for a statewide ban on solitary confinement for youth. In a twelve-month period last year, a shocking 4,300 children faced time in solitary confinement across 21 Florida juvenile detention centers. The DJJ did not provide comment, but an SPLC attorney said, DJJ officials know the damaging effects of isolation but have failed to address the situation. One 16-year-old girl was put in solitary confinement for not attending school, despite the fact that she was pregnant. Another 13-year-old boy was put in solitary confinement for play-fighting even after he attempted suicide. While 20 states have banned or restricted solitary confinement for children, Florida continues to isolate thousands of children.

The *Washington Post* [reported](#) that Catholic Bishops in Texas are advocating for a reduction in the sentence of Victor Hugo Saldao, a man from Argentina sentenced to death in a murder case in Texas. Pope Francis recently revised the Catholic Churchs position on the death penalty, which previously accepted execution in rare cases and now states that capital punishment violates the dignity of the person and is never acceptable. Due to racial bias due to racial bias in the penalty phase of his original trial, Saldao faced resentencing after spending four years in solitary confinement at the notorious Polunsky Unit. The bishops argue that Saldaos time in isolation had caused his mental state to deteriorate so severely that it caused him to once again receive the death penalty at his resentencing trial. Saldao attempted suicide while isolated, masturbated at the trial, and spoke incoherently to the jury. An attorney for the Argentinian government, Jonathan Miller, asked, How do you evaluate someone for future dangerousness if theyve been in severe isolation for many years and theyre no longer the same person anymore?

The *Daily Press* published an [article](#) about the case of 37-year-old Justin Marshall Evans, who has cycled between jails and psychiatric hospitals in Virginia since he was a teenager. Evans, a man diagnosed with bipolar disorder, PTSD, borderline personality disorder, and ADHD, has been awaiting trial for the past ten months for forging an \$850 check. Evans is often held in solitary confinement or

restraints at Hampton Roads Regional Jail (HRRJ) or the Virginia Peninsula Regional Jail allegedly to keep from hurting himself, but he continues to find ways to swallow razors, paper clips, batteries, and other items requiring several surgeries and sometimes threatening his life. While state officials have claimed Evans fakes his self-harm and suicidal tendencies, Evans said, Its like Im in a nightmare and called the conditions torture. Since 2015, HRRJ has seen 22 people die in its custody.

The *CT Mirror* published an [article](#) about the declining population at the maximum security Northern Correctional Institution in Connecticut. At its peak, Northern held 584 people, but after two housing units were shut down this year, the facility held 76 people as of August 23. But for those who remain, conditions are grim. Many of those still held at Northern had previously been sentenced to death, but were resentenced to spend life in prison after Connecticut abolished the death penalty in 2012. While the state mandates people with death sentences to be kept in an isolated, monitored cell with no more than two hours of recreation a day, these conditions were recently ruled to be cruel and unusual punishment by a federal judge. ACLU of Connecticut attorney Dan Barrett said of Northern, The place is like a tomb Northern reflects that [punitive] philosophy, and really is a monument to the failure of that thinking. I see Northern as the apex of a failed model. A DOC spokesperson said the department has no plans to close the facility.

Binghamton Universitys *Pipe Dream* [covered](#) a demonstration outside of the Broome County Jail in New York, where ten incarcerated people have died since 2001. The demonstrators called for jail administrators to be held accountable for what they said was medical negligence, abusive treatment, and the use of solitary confinement at their facility. Talon Thomas, a formerly incarcerated 27-year-old from Binghamton, spoke about a man named Salladin Barton, celled near him, who died in solitary confinement at the jail. Thomas said Barton should have received mental health treatment, but instead was physically abuse, deprived of medical attention, and left alone restrained in a straitjacket for hours. Last month, U.S. District Judge David Hurd dismissed claims of excessive force and emotional abuse at the jail, but ordered the allegations of medical neglect to be reviewed.

[According](#) to *South Bend Tribune*, a tentative agreement has been drawn up in a 2017 lawsuit claiming the St. Joseph County Juvenile Justice Center in Indiana held children with psychiatric disabilities in solitary confinement. The parents of Z.W., an 11-year-old with learning and emotional disabilities, originally filed the lawsuit after Z.W. was held in solitary confinement several times up to a week, denied special education services, and prevented from contacting his family. The lawsuit, now elevated to class-action status, claims the facility has violated the constitution and disability rights laws in its use of solitary confinement on between 600 and 800 children since 2016. The court pushed back the deadline to September 16 for the agreement to be approved.

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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