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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 [Vaidya Gullapalli](#) | June 21, 2021

Northern Correctional Institution, the maximum-security prison that once housed Connecticut's death row, is now closed, reports the [Associated Press](#). It is the first of three prisons the administration of Gov. Ned Lamont plans to close, amid declining crime rates and falling numbers of incarcerated people. The number of people in prison in Connecticut fell by more than a third over the past 15 months. Northern was opened in 1995 and designed for isolation with people held in individual pods. It follows the notorious Tamms supermax in Illinois as only the second supermax prison closed nationwide.

My days were nights and my nights were my days, and after a while it all blended together and I was living inside my head, wrote Tunc Uraz after being placed in solitary. I just remember thinking, I'm going to die. I'm stuck here in this animal cage and I am going to die. Rolling Stone looks at [Silenced: Voices from Solitary in Michigan](#), the online archive of letters from and art by incarcerated people experiencing extreme isolation. Tana Geneva writes that the site, which features nearly 100 letters, is searchable by the category of terrors experienced by people, from hallucinations to suicide attempts. There are 3,200 people in isolation in Michigan for more than 20 hours a day and some have been in solitary for decades, according to a recent [report](#). According to the corrections departments' own numbers, which are much lower, more than 70 percent of people in prolonged isolation are Black. Jacqueline Jacq Williams, who compiled the letters, tells Geneva: I want legislators to visit these prisons in July or August, to step inside of a segregation cell and close the door when it's over 100 degrees and see how long they last.

[On Last Week Tonight](#), host John Oliver looks at the failure to address a crisis of extreme heat in prisons. In some of the hottest areas of the country, Oliver points out, over half the prisons lack air conditioning in their housing areas, and this is the case for nearly 75 percent of prisons in Texas, where the heat index can reach 150 degrees. While this endangers everyone, it is especially dangerous for the growing numbers of elderly people in prison, those with chronic medical conditions that place them at high risk for heat stroke, and people with mental health conditions whose prescribed medications can compromise the body's ability to regulate temperature, forcing them to choose between surviving the heat and taking their psychiatric medication. In Texas, authorities have refused to spend the \$4 million estimated necessary to air condition the state's prisons but have spent \$7 million on litigation fighting the requirement and \$700,000 on air conditioning, not for prisons but for the prisons' in-house pig farms.

Over 150 organizations urged President Biden and Vice President Harris to live up to their campaign pledges to end solitary confinement, reports [NBC News](#), and a Federal Anti-Solitary Taskforce (FAST) released a [Blueprint](#) with detailed recommendations for how the administration and Congress can fulfill that promise. Among other changes, the Blueprint calls for all federal prisons and detention centers to end all forms of solitary, other than lock-ins measured at most in hours, and use alternatives that involve access to at least 14 hours out-of-cell per day and at least 7 hours of congregate programming and activities. The Blueprint also calls on the federal government to create incentives for states and localities to end solitary. Johnny Perez, director of the U.S. Prison Program at the National Religious Campaign Against Torture told [Al Jazeera](#), It is time for the federal government to lead by ending the practice once and for all and incentivizing states to do so. We are hopeful the Biden-Harris administration will follow through with their campaign promise to end solitary by any name and in all forms.

June 7th saw a call to action by advocates who say a recent policy change fails to actually end solitary confinement in New York City jails, despite claims that it does, reports [AM New York](#). Melania Brown, the sister of Layleen Polanco, and Akeem Browder, brother of Kalief Browder, spoke at a memorial for their loved ones. It was the second anniversary of Polanco's death, who was placed in solitary despite having a seizure disorder and who died of an epileptic seizure in her cell. Kalief Browder, who died of suicide on June 4, 2015 after his release from Rikers, spent two of his three years in jail in solitary. The marchers decried de Blasio's proposed modifications to punitive segregation, saying it simply changes the name rather than end solitary. They called for an immediate and complete end to the practice, with a minimum of 14 hours of out of cell time for incarcerated people that includes meaningful socialization and programming.

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