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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](#) | July 6, 2020

NPR's Joseph Shapiro produced [a piece](#) that ran on All Things Considered about the use of lockdowns and solitary confinement around the country in response to the coronavirus pandemic. The piece focused on a recent report from the national Unlock the Box campaign, which is based on research and analysis by Solitary Watch, and found that the number of people in solitary rose from 60,000 to 300,000 after the onset of COVID-19. Jessica Sandoval from the Unlock the Box campaign said, We believe that this is the start of a trend to continue to institutionalize the practice of solitary confinement. Brie Williams, a physician and professor at the University of California San Francisco, said that the use of medical quarantine makes sense but placing people in solitary for medical issues or mental health issues is wrong. She said, There is really a long legacy of many prisons not all but many prisons turning to solitary confinement, turning to lockdown in the face of other public health problems. [A Reason article](#) by C.J. Ciaramella also featured the report, and included quote included in the report from a man held in solitary in a Texas prison for 21 years. Society is in an uproar over having to isolate themselves in their homes for [a few weeks or months], he wrote. I wonder, after this is all over with, will they take into consideration that inmates have been in administrative segregation (isolation) for years, if not decades, in rooms the size of their closets? Will they cry for change?

The Appeal published an [article](#) by incarcerated journalist Juan Haines about the use of solitary confinement at San Quentin State Prison to house people sick with COVID-19. While San Quentin had only seen one case of the coronavirus for months, a number of people held at the California Institution for Men were transferred to San Quentin and the virus spread quickly at the prison. Now, more than 300 incarcerated people at San Quentin have tested positive. Haines described the reluctance to reporting symptoms when people know they will be sent to solitary, or The Hole, simply for being sick. When 52-year-old Edward Scott was sent there after suffering a stroke, The cell was filthy, he said, The showers looked like they were never cleaned, so I took bird baths in my cell. The way I was treated made me feel like I did something wrong. Since he wrote the piece, Haines himself has tested positive for the virus and been transferred to the solitary confinement Badger Unit.

Commonwealth [reported](#) that 36-year-old Carlos Colon committed suicide in his cell at MCI-Cedar Junction in Massachusetts on June 23, after living in solitary confinement since the pandemic hit. Massachusetts locked down its entire prison system in response to the coronavirus, keeping everyone in their cells for at least 23 hours a day. Colon struggled with mental illness and had expressed concern about being transferred back to MCI-Souza Baranowski, where he said he had been assaulted by an officer. Attorney Bonita Tenneriello of Prisoners Legal Services said, Somebody with serious mental illness shouldn't be in the Department Disciplinary Unit or in the Department of Corrections 23-hour COVID lockdown. Another lawyer said, Many of the [states] prisons are still in some version of a lockdown. I don't see things going back to normal for the foreseeable future.

ABC7 television [reported](#) that seventeen correctional officers have been disciplined for the death of 27-year-old transgender woman Layleen Polanco in solitary confinement at Rikers Island last year. Three officers and one captain will be suspended immediately, but no charges have been filed against the officers. The Polanco family lawyer said, As important as individual accountability is, we must focus even more on institutional accountability. Suspending or even firing individual employees will not save the next Layleen from dying. We need to treat trans women as women. We need to stop abusing solitary confinement. We need to treat people in jail as humans who deserve safety and dignity. The New York City Board of Correction released a report with recommendations to prevent future deaths in jail custody, including housing transgender women in general population units with cisgender women, [according](#) to TIME. New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio has since announced a ban on the use of solitary confinement across the city's jails for people with underlying medical conditions or disabilities, [reported](#) *Politico*, and says his plan is to eventually ban solitary completely.

KTVU [reported](#) on the release of body camera footage of the time leading up to the 2019 death of 20-year-old Christian Madrigal, who committed suicide in an isolation cell at the Santa Rita Jail in Alameda County (Oakland), California. The video shows officers handcuffing Madrigal to the door of a solitary cell in the jail, locking the door, and leaving him there for several hours. The video counters the narrative of Sheriff Greg Ahern that the 132-pound Madrigal needed to be restrained due to his violent behavior. Madrigal ultimately strangled himself using the chains that the deputies had secured to the door. The Madrigal family attorney said, If a person left their dog chained to a fence and that dog strangled itself and that person just turned their back and allowed it to happen, there would be public outcry and that person would never be allowed to have a dog. That person would be brought up on charges of animal cruelty.

Whats the difference here? No officers have faced charges for Madrigals death. Forty-seven people have died at the Santa Rita Jail since 2014.

FloridaPolitics [reported](#) that Governor Ron DeSantis signed a bill to restrict the use of solitary confinement for incarcerated pregnant women across the state. Known as the Tammy Jackson Act, after a woman who gave birth alone in solitary confinement last year in a Florida jail, HB 1259 prohibits the placement of pregnant women in solitary confinement unless officials provide a reason and a report, and in those cases requires that the woman be seen by a health care professional at least once every 24 hours. The bill also requires pregnant women placed in the infirmary to be provided the same access to outdoor recreation, visitation, mail, telephone calls, and other privileges and classes available to the general population.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* published an [opinion piece](#) written by Amy Fetting, the director of the Sentencing Project, and David Fathi, the director of the ACLU National Prison Project. They applauded Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenneys move to implement thirteen reforms to the citys police force, but highlighted the need to reform the states correctional system as well. The pervasive use of solitary confinement, in Pennsylvania prisons and prisons across the country, is an abuse of power that amounts to torture, disproportionately inflicted on Black people, the authors wrote. Most often, people are placed in solitary confinement for trivial or arbitrary reasons. Fetting and Fathi called for an end to the practice entirely, declaring it the hallmark of a system that dehumanizes and degrades the people it is supposed to rehabilitate and protect.

City Limits published an [opinion piece](#) by public advocate Jumaane Williams, calling for the New York legislature to pass the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act. While Governor Andrew Cuomo encouraged people sheltering-in-place by acknowledging the pain of isolation, he has yet to take meaningful action to ban the widespread use of isolation in New York prisons. Five years ago, on June 6, Kalief Browder committed suicide after spending three years in solitary confinement on Rikers Island. And last year, on June 7, Layleen Polanco died in a solitary cell on Rikers. Especially during COVID-19, Williams pointed out, The physical and emotional toll of solitary weakens peoples immune systems, making them more susceptible to the virus. The HALT Solitary Act would prohibit the use of solitary for longer than fifteen days and create more humane alternatives.

WTF told the [story](#) of Kimberly Stringer, a woman with borderline personality disorder and bipolar disorder who ended up in the Bucks County Correctional Facility in Pennsylvania. Despite the county commissioner reassuring Stringers mother that her daughter was safe, other incarcerated women reported that Stringer had been placed completely naked in a bare solitary confinement cell with only a suicide smock. The women reported Stringer urinating and defecating on herself without being able to shower for weeks. The women recounted Stringer harming herself, hitting her head or punching herself, as well as officers macing her and forcing her into a restraint chair, while Stringer yelled, Why are you torturing me? Shortly after the incarcerated women spoke out about her mistreatment, Stringer was transferred to the state psychiatric hospital.

KUOW [reported](#) that Joaquin Uribe, a 19-year-old who volunteered as a street medic during the recent Seattle protests against police brutality, was placed in solitary confinement upon his arrival at the King County Jail because he is transgender. According to Uribe, while he was using liquid to treat a woman who had been tear gassed, a police officer hit him with his bike, causing the liquid to splash into the officers face. Uribe was later informed that he would remain in administrative segregation in the womens section of the jail until the Transgender Review Committee reviewed his case, which can take up to 72 hours. I couldnt sleep the whole first night in isolation, and I just kind of like cried. I think I had a couple panic attacks, he said.

Democracy Now! [reported](#) that over 100 immigrants held at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility La Palma Correctional Center in Arizona have signed a petition against the conditions at the facility. They say that they are threatened with solitary confinement if they refuse to clean the jail, though they are not provided personal protective equipment to do so. Immigrants at Eloy Detention Center, also in Arizona, wrote a similar letter, condemning the lack of precautions taken in response to COVID-19. We are certain that staff are the ones getting everyone else sick, the letter read. Days ago a sergeant was a new victim of COVID-19. He collapsed on the job here in Eloy.

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

Males do not belong in womens prisons. All transwomen are male thats what the trans part means. Give them a trans unit on the male estate but do not try to use vulnerable female prisoners as human shields. If you can accept that certain kinds of males might need to be kept apart then you can accept that females also require that courtesy. Transgender women have already committed at least 12 sexual assaults against female prisoners in womens prisons and theyre just the ones we know about. Women dont want to be raped any more than transwomen do. Give the males a third space. Let everyone have a chance to be safe.

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