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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](#) | December 2, 2019

[KTVU Fox 2 TV](#) in the Bay Area reported on the death of 29-year-old Edwin Villalta, who committed suicide at the Santa Rita Jail in Alameda County in 2017 after being held in Administrative Isolation for seventeen days. Villalta's family said he suffered from PTSD after his time in the Marines, which they say was not taken into account in his isolation and lack of mental health treatment at the jail. Since 2014, 44 people have died at Santa Rita Jail. Villalta was one of 16 who committed suicide, and 12 of those 16 were held in isolation. Like a majority of states, California has no laws limiting the amount of time people can be held in solitary confinement and does not specify the criteria necessary for placement in isolation. The only regulation is Title 15, which mandates people get three hours out of their cells a week, though interaction during that time is not mandated. California's state prison system and a few local jail systems have instituted some limits on solitary, but only as a result of legal settlements. Last year, a federal class action lawsuit was filed against Alameda County, arguing that Santa Rita Jail has inadequate policies and procedures for monitoring prisoners in administrative isolation units, including prisoners with psychiatric disabilities, and that deputies failed to conduct meaningful safety checks at frequent and unpredictable times.

In another story on the Santa Rita Jail in Alameda County, [The Appeal reported](#) that a class action lawsuit claims that the county violates the 13th Amendment by forcing people detained pretrial, as well as immigrants detained at the jail, to do work for the company Aramark Correctional Services. While California law mandates incarcerated people must be paid at least twenty percent of their wages, people held at Santa Rita Jail clean the kitchen, prepare food for fellow inmates, and make meals for other jails for no payment, often under the threat of solitary confinement. According to the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, more than 400 people went on hunger strike at the jail this past October in protest of the conditions.

NBC4 New York [reported](#) that Christopher Johnson, formerly incarcerated at Elmira Correctional Facility, recounted his experience in the contraband watch room, or as people in prison call it, the defecation room, designed for people suspected of swallowing drugs or other contraband. Johnson, who was serving time for murder but was later acquitted on retrial, claims he was held alone in the room for 61 days with no running water. If I had to use the bathroom, he said, they'd give me a funnel through this little opening and I would pee in it. If I had to defecate, they would open the door and watch me defecate. As soon as I finish, they have to take the bucket for me to wipe myself. There are no showers. No brushing your teeth. Nothing. Department guidelines limit the amount of time to 48 hours, which can be extended up to seven days if the contraband has not been produced. But Johnson says that the razor officials accused him of hiding did not exist and never showed up on X-rays. The state has yet to release the X-rays.

The Santa Fe *New Mexican* [reported](#) that the family of Michael Mattis, who committed suicide in 2014 in solitary confinement at the Guadalupe County Correctional Facility in Santa Rosa, has settled a lawsuit with psychiatrist Andrew Kowalkowski for \$500,000. Mattis had been diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and psychotic disorder, and Kowalkowski allegedly knew Mattis's history of mental illness but neglected to prescribe medication, follow up properly, or notify staff of the severity of his case. After being transferred twice, Mattis was placed in solitary confinement for several months in a location inaccessible for close monitoring, and, according to the lawsuit, his mental illness worsened during this time. Attorney Matt Coyte claims Kowalkowski had subcontracted for two different correctional health care companies and billed for telepsychiatry sessions that he never completed.

Project Q [reported](#) that the family of Jenna Mitchell, a transgender woman who committed suicide in a solitary confinement cell at Valdosta State Prison in Georgia, filed a lawsuit against prison officials. The lawsuit, filed by the ACLU of Georgia on behalf of Mitchell's parents, alleges that officials were aware of Mitchell's suicidal ideation, past suicide attempts, and history of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and gender dysphoria, but still placed Mitchell in solitary confinement off and on for nine months. It claims that after Mitchell's mother requested to have her placed on suicide watch because she had threatened suicide, staff placed her in solitary confinement instead. According to the lawsuit, after a staff member taunted Mitchell and encouraged her to commit suicide, which she did in December 2017.

Undark published an [article](#) discussing the trajectory for poor people with mental illness, often people of color, from incarceration to solitary confinement, in a cycle that only deepens mental illness. A quoted *Harvard Law Review* article explained that many of these people are isolated because the symptoms of their mental illness such as self-mutilation, tearing bed sheets to make nooses, smearing

feces, or screaming at voices they hear are treated as disciplinary violations. In the case of 23-year-old Colby Crawford, his schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and substance use worsened with his placement in disciplinary segregation at the Orleans Justice Center (formerly Orleans Parish Prison) in Louisiana. Without the mental health care he needed, Crawford overdosed on cocaine and died. While Crawford's mother filed a wrongful death lawsuit, the sheriff's office laid the blame on a man they charged with distributing the cocaine, not the guards with access to security camera footage who allegedly failed to intervene.

The San Francisco *Bay View* published a [firsthand account](#) from Jason Renard Walker, a prison writer currently held in the Allred Unit in Texas. Walker reports that in the close custody unit at Allred, people are held in their cells for at least 22 hours a day, sometimes longer, often in cells shared by two people. Walker alleges that the conditions and staff conduct have led to the deaths of at least two people. According to Walker, despite the severely restrictive conditions in the unit, people with mental illness are often placed there, and their nonviolent acts can lead to a violent cell extraction, denial of meals, or tear gas. Ultimately, self-mutilation, suicide attempts, medication overdosing, and weapon-making are some of the extremes close custody prisoners go to escape or survive it, Walker writes.

WHIO [reported](#) that Ohio State Senator Peggy Lehner has sponsored a state bill that would ban shackling pregnant or postpartum women as well as ban their placement in solitary confinement, except in cases where the woman is a serious threat or flight risk. In these cases, an official would have to get the approval of a doctor. Lehner and co-sponsor Senator Nickie Antonio wrote, This legislation is the first step to ensuring incarcerated women in Ohio are given the dignity, health and safety they deserve.

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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