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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](#) | June 24, 2018

The Associated Press [reported](#) on a lawsuit filed by immigrant youth held at the Shenandoah Valley Juvenile Center in Virginia. The suit claims that the children faced physical restraints, solitary confinement, and abuse from the detention center staff. A child development specialist recalled, They would get put in isolation for months for things like picking up a pencil when a guard had said not to move. Some of them started hearing voices that were telling them to hurt people or hurt themselves, and I knew when they had gotten to Shenandoah they were not having any violent thoughts. While many of the immigrant youth came to the facility on accusations of gang activity, a top official at the juvenile center testified that the youth did not, in fact, seem to be gang members, but rather, they had experienced trauma in their home countries that has caused them to face mental health conditions. The children are being held for reasons of immigration documentation and have not been convicted of any crime.

The Human Rights Defense Center, Legal Aid, and a pro bono law firm filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of three teens against the Palm Beach County Sheriff, the county school board, and the school districts superintendent for holding the boys in solitary confinement at the Palm Beach County jail for up to 21 months, administering their education through the metal cell door, and depriving them of mental health treatment. One of the plaintiffs reported that after he flooded his cell in protest of his shortened telephone call, the deputies conducted a cell extraction and shattered his front teeth, and later laughed at him and broke his dentures upon his return to solitary. [According](#) to the *Palm Beach Post*, the lawsuit claims that the teens experienced psychological damage from their time in isolation, with one boy reporting that he had hallucinations, heard screaming, and stared at his wall believing that he was watching television. The lawsuit does not seek damages, but calls for the county to end their use of solitary confinement for juveniles.

Philadelphia City Councilwoman Helen Gym apologized to a group of teens in May for the abuse, solitary confinement, lack of education, and trauma they endured in the city's juvenile justice system. She said, We should have done more to protect you. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* [reported](#) that Gym is forming a task force to determine alternative programs for youth and allocate money to bring youth back to their community from various out-of-county institutions. Gym continued, [We] want to think about really healthy places for our youth in the juvenile justice system, to feel they can have a sense of opportunity. We know that when kids are far away from home in institutional facilities, that their education is not up to par, and that's a significant issue for us. They need better.

Crime Report published an [article](#) linking the dramatic increase in the rate of suicides within Alabama's prisons last year to the state's use of solitary confinement. While experts and lawyers have shown that placing mentally ill individuals in solitary confinement heightens the likelihood of suicide, the Alabama Department of Corrections (DOC) recorded a rise in the percentage of mentally ill individuals placed in solitary confinement in the state since 2014. In January, there were 274 people with mental illness in isolation. The article noted other factors influencing the rise in suicide rate, including the overcrowding and understaffing that has caused a lack of supervision in solitary units, the physical structure of the solitary cells, and the lengthy duration of the solitary stays.

CBS published a [piece](#) by Ted Koppel on the Ear Hustle podcast, co-produced by Earlonne Woods, a man held at San Quentin State Prison in California, and Nigel Poor. In one episode, focused on solitary confinement, a man who spent 19 years in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) said: I was sitting there thinking, is this it? I mean, I saw no future. How do I spend the next 20, 25, 30 [years] til I die in this cell? Because I wasn't prepared for it. Before the settlement of a class action lawsuit placed limits on the duration of solitary in California, individuals could be subjected to isolation indefinitely. Johnson explained, Never allow anyone to make you less than what you are. That's the true intent of isolation. It's to belittle you, demean you, dehumanize you, to make you less a person than what you are.

The Juvenile Justice Information Exchange published an [article](#) suggesting that in order to lessen outbreaks of destructive behavior, prison staff should implement a trauma-informed approach rather than resorting to solitary confinement. The director of the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care, Joan Gillece, explained that the key to safety is addressing the trauma that underlies violent or disobedient behaviors. In one instance, an officer was faced with girls banging on their cell doors late at night. He began to understand that the girls' traumas had occurred during the night. Instead of disciplining them for creating problems, he would read to the girls at night. Training correctional staff to understand trauma, as Gillece has begun to do in Maryland, can lead to a constructive cultural shift, but she says that leadership needs to commit to it.

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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