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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 [Roxanne Barnes](#) | August 13, 2021

A study conducted in 2017 concluded that recent incrementalist reforms in Washington state prisons Intensive Management Units, where people are held for 22 hours a day in isolation, failed to alleviate the suffering of solitary confinement. In this study, [published in the journal Health Justice](#), interviewers spoke with 183 people, both incarcerated people and staff, to assess the efficacy of recent reforms: blue rooms, cells where nature documentaries are played; suicide watch cells, where mental health is monitored; and daily wellness checks, where staff conduct check-ins. The study concluded that incrementalist reforms do little to comfort incarcerated people, often only breed further conflict, and may reinforce the practice of solitary by seemingly softening its edges.

In Allegheny County (Pittsburgh), members of the jail oversight board expressed serious concerns about the county jails new plans for maintaining control of incarcerated people, [the Post Gazette reports](#). The countys voters recently passed a referendum that banned the use of solitary confinement, chemical agents, or restraint chairs. But the alternative jail management tools recently acquired by the county at a cost of more than \$400,000 include military-style training and potentially deadly weapons. County Councilwoman Bethany Hallam questioned, Your plan is to use shotguns and bean bags to de-escalate?

In Washington state prisons, the Office of the Corrections Ombuds reports on the serious shortcomings in mental healthcare. The report, [described by Oregon Public Radio](#), documented that staff members are overwhelmed and have been known to discontinue peoples medications, and that when people violate behavioral rules, individuals suffering from mental health conditions are relocated to solitary confinement. The report claims that, this practice goes against years of research that has shown that time spent in solitary confinement exacerbates mental health symptoms.

[Politico reports](#) that in response to New York Citys plan to implement a new system of isolation despite the passage of the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, more than 70 state legislators signed a letter of protest accusing Mayor Bill de Blasio of implementing solitary by another name. The new housing system is called the Risk Management and Accountability system, and would only allow people one hour of programming while caged in their own cells. The letter insisted that, Such a system, whatever city officials may call it, would violate the letter, intent, and spirit of various aspects of HALTs requirements. [An Op-Ed](#) by forensic psychiatrist Dr. Terry Kupers condemns New York Citys plan, explaining that, without meaningful human touch, interaction or programming, will continue to suffer all of the harmful and well-known consequences of solitary

A new exhibition in Brooklyn seeks to demonstrate the conditions of solitary confinement experienced by 16-year-old Kalief Browder while held pre-trial on New York Citys Rikers Island. [PBS describes](#) the structure as an eight by ten by six foot glass box, with lines that mark the bed, window, and toilet in the room, replicating the conditions of the isolation cell where teenager Browder lived. Artist Coby Kennedy created the structure to spread awareness of the inhumane conditions in New York jails and prisons.

Immigrant advocacy groups working with detainees in Pennsylvanias York County Prison claim that five individuals are being punished with isolation for staging a hunger strike, [reports WTIE](#). The jail, which contracts with ICE to hold immigrants awaiting trial, denies claims that it retaliates against people for hunger strikes. 35 detainees stopped eating for a period of 72 hours, before the strike was squashed through intimidation and five individuals were placed in solitary confinement.

Connecticut Governor Lamonts recent veto of the PROTECT Act to end long-term solitary confinement also nixed an expansion of a corrections ombudsman program, an office the state used to have for safety and accountability purposes, [the Connecticut Mirror reports](#). For 37 years until 2010, the office existed to address complaints and allegations of injustice within state prisons, a service many inside and out relied on. The office was revived in 2019, but only to serve youth in the adult system. Without the office, the current grievance system is the only way individuals inside can communicate concerns, and may inside consider it inadequate. Lamont claimed that the ombudsman program would have created security and litigation risks.

The Southern Poverty Law Center filed a complaint with the Department of Homeland Securitys office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties on behalf of four black immigrants detained in two ICE detention centers in Louisiana, [reports New Orleans Public Radio](#). Among the allegations are that the men who protested their own abuse, or aligned themselves with the Black Lives Matter movement,

were placed in solitary confinement as retaliation at Pine Prairie ICE Processing Center. This comes after a similar [complaint](#) submitted in June 2021 by the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights organization that described a pattern of punitive solitary, with an accompanying report demonstrating that although African and Caribbean immigrants only made up 4% of people in ICE detention, they represented 24% of people in solitary confinement.

Roxanne Barnes is an educator and writer based in Los Angeles and a contributing writer to Solitary Watch.

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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