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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](#) | September 30, 2018

As Dr. Christine Blasey Ford faced attacks and death threats for publicly accusing Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault, Victoria Law published an [article](#) in *Truthout* highlighting the punishment, humiliation, and danger incarcerated survivors frequently face when they report sexual assaults in prison. Solitary confinement, under the guise of protection or as retaliation by prison staff, is the response many incarcerated women receive to their reports of rape and other sexual assaults by staff or by other incarcerated individuals. Transgender women in mens prisons are at even more risk of being placed in solitary. Incarcerated women know that saying #MeToo rarely, if ever, stops the violence, Law writes. Instead, it brings more problems and additional punishments, including being cut off from all human contact.

[According](#) to the *Charlotte Observer*, Mecklenburg County in North Carolina has eased up on its practice of holding teenaged youth, many of whom are awaiting trial, in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day without phone, visitor, or library access. The new policy allows youth to leave their cells for four hours a day during the week, but not at all on weekends. While jail officials claim to need solitary confinement for the safety of the facility, the newly elected county sheriff has expressed interest in eliminating solitary confinement for youth, as well as adults, in the county. Irena Como, a senior staff attorney for the ACLU of North Carolina, pointed to the damaging psychological effects of isolation, which are especially severe for developing brains. She said, They can and should eliminate solitary confinement for all children under 18. Period.

The Root [reported](#) on the disproportionate number of black children who face incarceration in adult jails and prisons. The article cites a report from the National Association of Social Workers that found 47 percent of juveniles whose cases are transferred to the adult system are black, while only fourteen percent of the juvenile population is black. Since adult facilities say they are unequipped to handle incarcerated youth, many are placed in solitary for their own protection. Fifteen-year-old Jaquin Thomas, 17-year-old Neicey Fennel, and Kalief Browder, who was jailed at 16 years old, all committed suicide after spending time in solitary confinement in adult facilities.

The *Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder* published a [commentary](#) condemning the extended lockdown in Minnesota's Stillwater Correctional Facility, after an incarcerated man there killed a corrections officer. The lockdown, a form of solitary that the article calls psychological torture, forced all incarcerated people to remain isolated in their cells for three to five weeks, even during meals, and denied them access to phone calls, visits, and programming. The article says, Corrections officers are understandably shaken by the loss of their colleague. People incarcerated are shaken by that, as well. Healing needs to happen among all people who are part of that system. But prolonged punishment of all the men in the Stillwater prison, who were not part of the incident, does not promote a settling and peace within that community.

The *Santa Fe New Mexican* [discussed](#) the futile solitary reform efforts in the state, especially in the context of the suicide of 20-year-old Isaiah Trinity Cabrales in August at the Penitentiary of New Mexico, where he had been in solitary for seven months. A 2015 bill that would have limited solitary and prohibited it for children and people with mental illnesses was shut down in committee, and a 2017 bill that would have banned solitary for pregnant women, children, and mentally ill people was vetoed by Gov. Susana Martinez. State Representative Antonio Maestas and State Senator Mary Kay Papen expect to co-sponsor future legislation against the use of solitary that they hope could pass with a new governor in office. Maestas said, Its time to end solitary confinement in New Mexico, particularly for children and the mentally ill.

In a recently released Office of Inspector General [report](#) from the US Department of Justice (DOJ), *Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons Management of its Female Inmate Population*, the DOJ called for the construction of a new solitary confinement unit, or Secure Housing Unit (SHU), at the Federal Correctional Institution Danbury in Connecticut, despite the fact that Danbury houses less than 200 low-security individuals. The report based this recommendation on the prison staff and wardens concerns that the lack of a SHU causes operational problems. The report says, The Warden also told us that the female inmates on occasion, are emboldened to misbehave due to the lack of a solitary unit, though the report did not provide data to back up this claim.

Jessica Feerman, Associate Director of the Juvenile Law Center, and Sharlen Moore, Director of Youth Justice Milwaukee, published an [article](#) in *The Root* discussing the racist dynamics at two Wisconsin juvenile facilities, Lincoln Hills School for Boys and Copper Lake

School for Girls, where 95 percent of the staff is white and most of the incarcerated youth is black. The two facilities are set to be closed by 2021 because of the documented abusive conditions, including the use of solitary, pepper spray, and strip searches for even minor violations, such as solitary confinement for stealing a muffin or some candy from the shelf and pepper spray for holding their hands out through the slot in their cells doors. The authors call for urgent action: We must stop the immediate abuses, bring resources back to communities to provide positive supports for youth, and decriminalize normative adolescent behavior for young people of color.

An [article](#) in *The Appeal* called attention to the potentially increasing risk of retaliation incarcerated organizers face, now that media attention has shifted away from the National Prison Strike. While several incarcerated organizers have already been placed in solitary confinement or transferred to different facilities, a representative from the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee explained, Prison officials know they have a much freer hand since the strike has faded from the public's view. The article points to the after-effects of the Florida prison strike last year, when officials put people in solitary confinement, shut down the phones, and threatened them with Security Threat Group status. While the National Prison Strike officially ended on September 9, organizers continue to push for progress on the ten demands presented during the strike.

The Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) released a [report](#) this year, *Children and Adolescents in the United States Adult Criminal Justice System*, which includes a section on the use of solitary confinement on children. The report notes that children in adult prisons and jails may be held in solitary at rates even higher than adults: According to information reported by several large jails and prisons systems, more than 10% of the children housed there are subjected to solitary confinement, while smaller facilities have reported that 100% of the children they hold are in isolation. Youth in solitary are at greatly increased risk of self-harm and suicide. The report recommends that the United States prohibit any form of solitary for children and develop public policies and national guidelines to strictly regulate all forms of isolation or segregation of youth.

Valerie Kiebala 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 [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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