

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | November 25, 2018

Crosscut [reported](#) that Amar Mergensana, a 40-year-old asylum seeker from the Russian Republic of Buryatia in Siberia, died this week after he committed suicide in the custody of Northwest Detention Center, an ICE facility operated by GEO Group in Tacoma, Washington. The immigrant advocacy organization NWDC Resistance called for an investigation into his death, claiming that Mergensana had been placed in solitary confinement as retaliatory punishment for asserting his dignity by hunger striking and was denied medical treatment in the days before his death. Mergensana is the second to die in ICE custody since the government's new fiscal year began in October, while ICE reported the deaths of twelve people in their custody last year.

The *Boston Globe* [covered](#) the story of Shaquille Brown, a man born with a neurodevelopmental disability who first entered the criminal justice system at age 13. In his early twenties, Brown spent ten months in solitary confinement, referred to as the Departmental Disciplinary Unit (DDU), at MCI-Shirley in Massachusetts, despite later being found innocent of the charges that landed him in solitary. A social worker said that Brown's placement in solitary worsened his psychological conditions in an act of gross negligence. Brown was released in 2017 with virtually no mental health treatment or re-entry support, and was plagued by fear and anxiety. Within months he was back behind bars, charged with murder.

[According](#) to the *Pantagraph*, U.S. District Court Judge Michael Mihm, who ordered the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) to overhaul their mental health care system in 2016, has received an influx of letters from people incarcerated at IDOC facilities describing abusive conditions, solitary confinement, suicide attempts, and inadequate mental health care, in violation of the judge's order. While the IDOC claims all grievances are being reviewed and handled, the lawyers for incarcerated people are calling for Mihm to follow up on his order by imposing deadlines for the IDOC and placing limits on the time that people with psychiatric disabilities can be held in solitary.

The Marshall Project published an [article](#) revealing that since the implementation of a 2014 policy meant to improve care for people with mental illness in the federal system, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has greatly reduced the number of people it deems mentally ill thereby avoiding a need to provide increased services or expend increased resources. In February 2018, the BOP designated only 3 percent of people in its custody to have a mental illness serious enough to require treatment. In contrast, California reported 30 percent of incarcerated people to have a serious mental disorder, and New York reported that 21 percent of incarcerated people receive mental health treatment. Among other things, the under-diagnosis of people with mental illness allows such individuals to be placed in [solitary confinement](#), with little to no mental health treatment.

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 [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 26, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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