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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](#) | July 21, 2020

The *Cornell Chronicle* published an [article](#) highlighting the findings of a [study](#) released in March, studying the affects of short stints in solitary confinement on a persons experience once they are released from prison. In their study, professor Christopher Wildeman and researcher Lars Andersen found those held in solitary even for as short as one or two days suffered a fifteen percent higher likelihood of committing another crime after they were released. Wildeman called this a pretty massive increase, since recidivism rates already reach 50 to 60 percent. Wildeman said, Knowing the magnitude of the harms associated with being placed in solitary is especially pressing, as many correctional officials are currently weighing placing inmates in solitary confinement as a method for stemming COVID-19 infections in their facilities. Another [study](#) released earlier by Wildeman and Andersen (and [covered](#) in Solitary Watch), which was based on data from the same group of men incarcerated in Danish prisons, found those who had spent time in solitary had higher rates of unnatural deaths (suicides, homicides, and drug overdoses) in the five years after their release from prison.

The *Times Union* [reported](#) that the regulations Governor Andrew Cuomo proposed a year ago restricting the use of solitary across New York state prisons have not yet been implemented. Cuomo proposed the regulations as an alternative to the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act, which the governor said would cost too much to implement. Advocates and supportive legislators deny this budgetary claim and also point out significant shortfalls to Cuomos administrative regulations. While the HALT bill would ban solitary for longer than fifteen days, in alignment with international standards, Cuomos regulations only cap solitary time at 30 days and do not include measures to prevent someone from being sent back into isolation once those 30 days expire. The HALT bill currently has enough support in the legislature to pass, but has yet to be brought to the floor for a vote by legislative leaders. Advocates will have one last chance to push for a vote when the legislature returns to Albany this week.

WVTF [reported](#) that people in Virginia state prisons have been held under lockdown for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic. The wife of a man held at Buckingham Correctional Center said that fights had broken out because incarcerated people were getting on each others nerves with so little out of cell time, no recreation, and limited family communication. She said, They were lucky to average going outside perhaps once every three days for one hour. A relative of another man, at Greensville Correctional Center, reported that two men held in solitary had broken out of their cells, covered the cameras, set fires, and held officers hostage to demand their allegedly promised transfer out of solitary. Other groups of incarcerated men at Dillwyn, River North, and Sussex I have staged protests against conditions as well, according to incarcerated man Sydney Martin. Martin said, Being in a cell all day, thats like caging an animal. You lose that sense of reality.

The *PA Post* [reported](#) that the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections have eased the statewide lockdown implemented under COVID-19, but some county jails across Pennsylvania including Philadelphia, Allegheny, Dauphin, Franklin, and Lebanon counties continue to keep people locked in their cells for over 20 hours a day. The ACLU of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project filed a lawsuit against the City of Philadelphia, claiming that the countys jail had kept people locked in their cells for as long as three days without showers or exercise. The county has since agreed to increase the out-of-cell time to 45 minutes a day. Su Ming Yeh of the Pennsylvania Law Project, said, The prison should be taking precautions to socially distance people, but there are different ways to do that without punitive lockdowns.

Forbes [reported](#) that punishments known in the Bureau of Prisons as shots which include bans on visits, phone use, email use, and locking people in cells for prolonged periods of time are being inflicted on people incarcerated in the federal system allegedly to alleviate the spread of COVID-19. People held at the minimum-security prison FCI Otisville in New York have twice been subjected to an extended lockdown, once after people were told they would be transferred to home confinement. Weeks after they were moved to solitary instead of sent home, an officer tested positive for the virus at the facility. Joe Rojas of the Council of Prison Locals filed a complaint against the warden at FCI Coleman in Florida after an officer was ordered back to work despite testing positive for COVID-19. Rojas said, It is not safe for the staff and it is certainly not safe for the inmates.

The *Virginian-Pilot* published the [story](#) of Carmen Miranda, a Puerto Rican immigrant being held the Western Tidewater Regional Jail in Virginia. Miranda says that more than once she was given the wrong medication, which left her conditions untreated and caused painful side effects. Miranda also claims that after she complained about receiving the wrong medication, officers beat her and slammed

her face into a metal door while forcibly moving her to solitary confinement. She, and another witness, say officers left her in solitary in her own urine for hours. Miranda has since been released from the jail under supervision, but her sister said, The biggest pain was the discrimination against her for being Hispanic. We have the medicine bottle and witnesses. We want justice. They were killing her little by little and nobody wanted to help us.

Mother Jones published an [article](#) about the recent coronavirus outbreak at San Quentin State Prison in California, where 1,300 incarcerated people and 184 staff have now tested positive, and six incarcerated people have died from the virus. The prison is 112 percent over capacity, but instead of releasing masses of people, it has moved incarcerated people with symptoms into the highest security unit or to the solitary confinement unit, known as Carson or the hole. Kerry Rudd, held in a 100-person dorm at San Quentin, said, Its like a horror movie when youre watching like a monster inch its way towards you and you havent no way out, you have nowhere to run. Us being locked in here, its like were watching this virus get steadily closer to us and theres nothing we can do.

Researchers and physicians at University of California San Francisco released a [journal article](#) condemning the use of solitary confinement in place of medical isolation for people infected with the coronavirus. Dr. Brie Williams, founder of the organization Amend, said, Now is the time to put health first in correctional policy and practice. We must ensure that medical isolation and quarantine procedures follow community standards of care and are not, in reality, solitary confinement by another name. The article outlined several recommendations for correctional facilities to implement in order to minimize the harm inflicted on both incarcerated people and correctional workers during the coronavirus pandemic, including releasing all those who can be safely returned back to their communities.

The Appeal [reported](#) on the release of a new report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation that found Black youth behind bars less likely to qualify for release under COVID-19. In the months since the pandemic emerged in March, the report reads, the disparities in detention that disadvantage Black youth have gotten worse, solely because Black youth have been released at a slower rate than their white peers. According to his father, one 17-year-old disabled boy was placed in solitary confinement for a month at Hays County Juvenile Detention Center in Texas after testing positive for the coronavirus, despite the heavily documented damage solitary inflicts on children, especially those with disabilities.

The City [obtained](#) hundreds of pages of New York state prison death reports from May 2017 until January 2020 through a Freedom of Information Act request, finding gross medical negligence in many of the deaths. The reports showed that four out of the eighteen suicides that occurred in New York prisons during 2019 happened in solitary confinement. One 26-year-old man hanged himself in his solitary cell at Wende Correctional Facility in 2017, leaving a note to his mother that he could not live like this anymore. Based on the findings in the reports, 35 of the 60 deaths in the last three years in New York state prisons could have been prevented with adequate medical care, including three deaths from asthma attacks that might not have occurred had they been provided proper inhalers or other medication.

City Limits [reported](#) that Mayor Bill de Blasio has created a task force to develop a plan for ending the use of solitary confinement across New York City jails. According to a June report from the NYC Board of Correction, 119 people remain in solitary confinement in city jails. Currently, the maximum time a person can be sentenced to solitary in New York City is 60 days, but jail staff can request extensions once the sentence has expired. Stanley Richards, a member of de Blasios task force, said, We have to find a way to separate people without traumatizing them or isolating them and torturing them. We have to find a way to hold them accountable.

Santa Barbara News-Press [reported](#) that a settlement has been reached in response to a 2017 lawsuit filed by Disability Rights California, the Prison Law Office, and King & Spalding LLP on behalf of five people incarcerated at the Santa Barbara County Jail. The lawsuit claimed that the jail failed to provide adequate mental health and medical care, overused and misused solitary confinement, discriminated against people with disabilities, and allowed to unsanitary and unsafe living conditions for people incarcerated at the jail. In light of the settlement, the jail will implement modifications in line with the Americans with Disabilities Act, increase access to participation in recreational activities, and provide space for vulnerable populations to engage in programming, according to the sheriffs office.

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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