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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 1, 2018

The *Associated Press* [published](#) an anonymous firsthand account from an 18-year-old Honduran boy who experienced abuse at the Shenandoah Valley Juvenile Center and participated in the recent lawsuit against alleged brutality and use of solitary confinement at the facility. The plaintiff reported incidents including officers withholding food and a group of officers kicking him so hard he couldn't breathe. I was just crying and praying to see my mother one more time. I ended up getting put in solitary confinement for no reason, he said. Several other children recounted similar experiences, and a federal judge ruled that the lawsuit represents all Latino migrant children who have been, are, or will be detained at the facility. Last week, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam called on state agencies to launch investigations into the allegations, and 77 Democratic lawmakers petitioned for response to the children's claims.

The family of Jorge Cortez, a 57-year-old man held at Galveston County Jail in Texas for a probation violation, filed a lawsuit alleging wrongful death from lack of medical care. Cortez suffered from undiagnosed lung cancer, which caused him dizziness, and he requested to be moved from the top bunk. After staff denied Cortez's request, he fell off the bunk and punctured his lung. He was only given ibuprofen for the pain and was subsequently sent to solitary confinement. Cortez's health declined in isolation, and he died after being taken to the hospital. His daughter [told KPRC Click2Houston](#), He did not deserve to die. He was supposed to come home to us, to his daughters, to his grandkids. Galveston County Jail and their medical staff needs to be held accountable. Five other individuals have died in the custody of the jail within five years.

Vox published an [article](#) discussing the likely consequences of Justice Anthony Kennedy's retirement for the U.S. criminal justice system. The author wrote, Simply put, a Court without Kennedy (and with a new Trump appointee) will probably reject challenges to two practices Kennedy has previously opposed: solitary confinement and capital punishment. Kennedy recognized: Research still confirms what this Court suggested over a century ago: Years on end of near-total isolation exact a terrible place. In a separate case, Kennedy ordered California to release tens of thousands of individuals held in California correctional institutions when it failed to address overcrowding and lack of adequate medical care.

Truthout [covered](#) the use of solitary confinement on youth in the United States, in light of the recent class action lawsuit against the Palm Beach County Jail in Florida for holding three teenage boys with learning disabilities in solitary confinement, allegedly causing hallucinations, depression, and other mental health issues. While President Obama banned solitary for juveniles held in the federal system, the American Psychological Association reported that thousands of youth are still held in isolation across various states. Florida, along with 29 other states, formally prohibits the use of solitary in juvenile facilities, but youth can still be isolated for safety reasons or, as in the case of the youth in Palm Beach County, when they are charged as adults. Seven other states do not regulate the use of solitary confinement for youth. The Palm Beach County attorney who filed the lawsuit pointed to Colorado as a model for improvement. Since the passing of reforms that provided legal recourse for youth charged as adults, the rate of youth incarceration in Colorado has drastically dropped.

A *South Coast Today* [editorial](#) argued for a bipartisan investigation into the exceptionally high rate of suicide at the Bristol County Jail in New Bedford, Massachusetts. In a ten-year span, the facility has accounted for 25 percent of the state's jail suicides, while only holding 13 percent of the state's jail population. Bristol County Sheriff Hodgson has molded the jail as a tough on crime institution, implementing policies such as extended solitary confinement, small food portions, and a daily \$5 fee in order to purchase from the prison canteen. While Gov. Charlie Baker claims to conduct the necessary audits at all county correctional facilities, the article asserts that these routine audits do not sufficiently explain the cause of the long-term hike in suicides, and calls for the DOC to launch a study into the jail's practices and culture.

The Hamilton County Justice Center in Cincinnati settled a class action lawsuit, which aims to address its persistent overcrowding problem. The suit seeks to impose a limit on how many individuals can be held at the facility and calls for the county to employ an expert on jail depopulation, who previously achieved a reduction in the population of Chicago's Cook County Jail. [According](#) to the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, one plaintiff, Samuel Robinson, alleged that his bone disease prevented him from being able to use the extra plastic,asket-like bed assigned to him when he was informed that no other cell was available. His objection landed him in solitary confinement. Robinson, the only plaintiff to be awarded monetary compensation, received \$5,000 in damages. Hamilton County Sheriff Jim Neil has

agreed to implement the rulings of the settlement, though hesaid that they are only a temporary solution.

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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