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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | March 4, 2018

The *Denver Post* [reported](#) on the reforms taking place in Colorado's Division of Youth Services (DYS), which have drastically reduced the use of solitary confinement for youth and resulted in a decrease of violence in most facilities. The reforms aim to move the state juvenile correctional system from a punitive jail environment to a more rehabilitative home atmosphere. While the reforms have seemed to bring progress, an attorney for the ACLU noted, There is still quite a ways to go if we want to ensure that all children in the custody of DYS are receiving humane, helpful care, referring to reports of an alleged lack of transparency and continued abuse against the children.

The *Arizona Capital Times* [published](#) an op-ed describing solitary confinement at the Maricopa County Jail in Phoenix, Arizona, and arguing for the dismantling of the jail's Special Management Unit (SMU) because of the severity of the psychological effects caused by the isolation. The author, an attorney and staff member of the ACLU's National Prison Project, explained, The SMU is supposed to be reserved for prisoners who are so dangerous they cannot be safely managed elsewhere. Instead it has become a dumping ground for those who are acutely mentally ill. The article argues for the sheriff to close down the SMU based on solitary confinements proven ineffectiveness and harmfulness.

[According](#) to the *Des Moines Register*, The Iowa Department of Human Services has proposed to change the Eldora State Training School for boys from a mental health treatment center to a juvenile detention center, despite a recent federal lawsuit against Eldora for its failure to provide adequate mental health care. For the 110 boys held at the facility, Eldora only has one psychologist, who does not have a license to practice psychology. The lawsuit alleges that a suicidal 16-year-old boy was placed in solitary confinement for over 842 hours during an 11-month period and suffered a broken arm from the physical restraints used to confine him in solitary. A lawyer with Disability Rights Iowa explained the proposed change from a treatment-centered facility to a correctional facility wouldn't resolve that issue. One reason we have a system for juveniles that is separate from what we have for adults is that the juvenile system is supposed to be designed to be rehabilitative and treatment oriented.

The *Tennessean* [reported](#) that Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam has spoken out against the state's use of solitary confinement for juveniles, saying, It doesn't make sense. Haslam said he was unaware of the practice of safekeeping, which was exposed in a [recent investigation](#) by USA Today and the Marshall Project. Safekeeping transfers individuals, including juveniles, to solitary confinement when the jail doesn't have the capacity to address the individuals' mental or medical health care needs. Haslam said, I think most of us would agree that's not an adequate answer. I don't have a solution yet, but he acknowledged, There's got to be a better way. Lawmakers are set to discuss a bill proposing further oversight for prisons in the coming weeks.

The *Pacific Standard* [reported](#) on a controversial practice used by elementary schools across the country called seclusion enclosures, isolation booths, isolation boxes, or time-out rooms, which keeps children in isolation allegedly for safety or disciplinary reasons. A report by NPR and ProPublica found that in 75 percent of the incidents, the children facing solitary had disabilities. Civil rights lawyer Lanette Suarez commented, In school settings, the practice of restraining and secluding children with disabilities for student safety has crossed over into a form of corporal punishment that infringes upon the students' ability to receive an inclusive education. Many states have faced criticism for their use of the practice, and recently parents of students at Mint Valley Elementary School in Longview, Washington filed a federal lawsuit against the school district, claiming that the practice caused psychological harm to their children and the parents should have been notified of the practice.

Seattle Weekly [reported](#) that Jesus Chavez Flores, a man who had been participating in a hunger strike at Northwest Detention Center (NWDC) in Tacoma, Washington, was recently released from solitary confinement. In February, 120 individuals held at NWDC staged a hunger strike against conditions they considered unfair, such as a labor program that paid workers one dollar or less per day. The ACLU filed a lawsuit on behalf of Chavez, after NWDC guards allegedly physically assaulted Chavez and held him in solitary confinement for 20 days, in what the lawsuit claims was retaliation for his participation in the hunger strike. While Chavez was released from solitary confinement this week, he continues to be held in a higher security section. Chavez's attorney expects there to be a hearing to determine if Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and GEO Group, the private prison company that runs NWDC, have violated the Chavez's 1st Amendment rights.

France 24 [reported](#) on the progress of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio's plan to close down the Rikers Island detention facility within the next 10 years. While city officials begin plans to build four new jails to replace Rikers, the article explained the reality within Rikers through individuals who had experienced the facility. In addition to brutality and physical violence perpetrated by guards, the facility routinely used solitary confinement. Five Muslim-Ak spent six months in solitary at Rikers and described, "Everyone's screaming, yelling, it's just like a madhouse, a whole different world. I felt like I was alone in a crowd. It's torture." Johnny Perez, another individual formerly held at Rikers, explained, "If we don't make the necessary policy changes that we need and the cultural shift that we need, we could see the same problems happening again, years from now."

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.

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