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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](#) | March 12, 2019

The WAMU radio show 1A hosted Terry Kupers, a leading expert on the psychological effects of solitary confinement, and Robert Hood, former warden of the ADX federal supermax in Florence, Colorado, for an [episode](#) addressing the reality incarcerated people face at ADX under conditions of severe isolation. Kupers, who has visited 30 supermaxes across the country and has been a practicing psychiatrist for 40 years, said, I have never seen the degree of psychosis, of despair and depression, of suicide actual attempts or successful suicides that I see in supermax prisons. While the dominant narrative paints people held at ADX to be the worst of the worst, Kupers believes that 70 percent of people held there suffer from a serious mental illness. Hood, who once enforced the harsh regime at ADX, called for a re-look at this almost 30-year-old facility and said, We are missing the boat with the supermax.

In a report released last week, Disability Rights California documented several violations occurring at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Adelanto Detention Center, along with other detention facilities in the state. [According](#) to the San Bernardino *Sun*, the report found that the GEO Group, the private prison company operating the Adelanto facility, significantly underreports the number of suicide attempts, and last year, federal investigators found nooses in up to twenty cells in one visit to the facility. Though most detained immigrants face only civil charges, with an increasing number of them being asylum seekers, the report found they face punitive, prison-like conditions, including isolation for up to 22 hours a day, which disproportionately harm people with mental illness and disabilities.

Rewire.News [reported](#) that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) family detention facilities have been holding parents and children in medical isolation, a form of solitary allegedly used for public health reasons. At the Berks County Residential Center in Pennsylvania, two Haitian families, including a father and his 3-year-old son, were held in medical isolation last year for two weeks. The justification given for their isolation was an inconclusive tuberculosis test, though pediatrician Katherine Peeler said, Medically, this doesn't make any sense. A Physicians for Human Rights coordinator said, These are families fleeing violence who then get locked up and have every part of their day controlled. It's like prison. When you add solitary to that, so kids can't leave a room and play or be around other children, it's horrifying to think about.

Architectural Record published an [article](#) discussing the role that architects and designers play in restructuring U.S. jails and prisons to be more humane and rehabilitative spaces. At the height of punitive design lies solitary confinement, originally conceived to enforce penitence and reflection, but ultimately inflicting severe mental distress on the several tens of thousands of people held in isolation across the country. Architect Kenneth Ricci suggests, Environment cues behavior. You maximize safety by designing for good sight lines, reasonable decibel levels, and daylight and exterior views, especially of nature, which measurably reduces adrenaline levels. The article asserts that designs like the podular model and others integrating a courtyard view may open the door for movement toward a larger cultural transformation in U.S. prisons.

WBGH News [reported](#) a decrease in the number of suicides in Massachusetts county jails dropping from ten suicides in 2017 to three last year. Following lawsuits against the mistreatment of people with psychiatric disabilities in the counties custody, recent legislation has prompted reforms that may have contributed to the drop in suicides. While the reforms have taken steps to limit solitary confinement and enhance mental health services, Bonnie Tenneriello, an attorney at Prisoners Legal Services thinks more needs to be done. Even the people we think pose the greatest threat to our prisons, let's get them out of their cell, let's get them treatment, let's treat them like human beings, because locking them in a box is manufacturing suicides, she said.

Albert Woodfox, the former Black Panther and member of the Angola 3 who endured over 40 years in solitary confinement at Angola's Louisiana State Penitentiary, released his memoir *Solitary* last week. *The Guardian* published an [excerpt](#) from Woodfox's book, and a *Washington Post* [review](#) said, Woodfox's story makes uncomfortable reading, which is as it should be. Solitary should make every reader writhe with shame and ask: What am I going to do to help change this? A National Public Radio [review](#) explained that the book is both a call to banish solitary confinement in the U.S. as well as an important record of how underprivileged communities are almost forced into crime.

The *Bismarck Tribune* published an [editorial](#) in support of prison reforms implemented by North Dakota Department of Corrections and

Rehabilitation (DOCR) director Leann Bertsch, prompted by her 2015 visit to study prisons in Norway. The changes, referred to by Bertsch as increasing humanity, include treatment programs for substance abuse, increased educational programming, and restrictions on the use of solitary confinement. These same reforms, however, faced criticism from DOCR employees in an internal survey. Some call them failing, some complain about decisions to terminate employees, and some voice security concerns. But while the *Bismarck Tribune* Editorial Board calls for more transparency in the DOCRs process, they also believe the Legislature and the DOCR have been moving in the right direction.

U.S. Senators Dick Durbin, Chris Coons, Cory Booker, Kamala Harris, Patrick Leahy, Brian Schatz, and Elizabeth Warren re-introduced the Solitary Confinement Reform Act last week, which aims to reduce the use of solitary confinement, ban the placement of LGBTQ individuals in solitary, and improve mental health care in the federal prison system. The senators additionally sent a letter to Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Director Hugh Hurwitz pointing to the recent sharp rise in use of solitary confinement within the BOP, and calling instead for solitary to be used only as necessary and never as a default solution, according to a [press release](#) posted on Durbin's website. Currently, figures suggest that the BOP holds at least 7.8 percent of people in solitary confinement, well above the national average.

The New Jersey Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (NJ CAIC) released a [video](#) sharing highlights from their recent event *Surviving Solitary* at the Greene Space in New York City. The video compiles the moving spoken word presentations of several people who have endured solitary confinement in New Jersey, and reveals that at least 1,500 people currently sit in solitary in the states prisons and jails. NJ CAIC calls for support for [bill A314/S3261](#), currently pending in the New Jersey legislature, that would sharply reduce the use of solitary confinement.

The Root [reported](#) that the ACLU sent a letter to the North Carolina Director of Public Safety calling for the transfer of 37-year-old transgender woman Kanautica Zayre-Brown to a woman's prison from Harnett Correctional, warning that Ms. Zayre-Brown's physical and emotional health is greatly deteriorating and if DPS does not act soon, dire consequences are likely to result. As happens to many incarcerated transgender people, Zayre-Brown was recently placed in solitary confinement for alleged protective reasons. An ACLU attorney cited a study revealing that half of black trans women in the United States face incarceration during their lives and said, Trans women in prison the great majority of whom are trans women of color are being denied the most basic health care, [and] being subjected to absolutely undeniably violent conditions of confinement.

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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P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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