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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](#) | January 4, 2021

[According to the Mercury News](#), 57-year-old Todd Ashker filed a complaint about the torturous conditions in solitary at Kern Valley State Prison. Ashker was the lead plaintiff in a 2016 landmark settlement that ordered Ashker and hundreds of others to be released from solitary confinement at the Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit (SHU). But years later, Ashker claims the conditions in administrative segregation at Kern Valley are even worse than the Pelican Bay SHU. According to the complaint, prison officials justify Ashker's continued placement in solitary with false accusations that he plotted to kill prison staff and a fabricated gang situation that allegedly put Ashker in danger. The complaint says that Ashker has faced unrelenting and spirit-crushing mental anguish, pain, and suffering as a result of the decades he has spent without any normal human interactive contact without any hope of release or relief.

Spectrum News [reported](#) that Sean Ryan, a man who has spent nearly 27 years in solitary confinement in the New York State prison system, was placed in medical quarantine after testing positive for the coronavirus. Ryan was already isolated in solitary before the virus hit, but he still contracted the virus. And in quarantine, Ryan lost his commissary and phone calls, according to his sister Heather Trentacosta. If someone makes a mistake or does a crime and is punished, where is the room to improve if you're being tortured? she asked. Now, Trentacosta said she aims to prove her brother innocent and has launched a podcast called Without Conviction, looking into his and other people's cases.

The Northwest Arkansas *Democrat Gazette* published an [article](#) by David Morgan, who was incarcerated for 30 years as a juvenile-lifer in Arkansas. Morgan puts into perspective the difficulty of sheltering-in-place, relating his experience living out in society during the pandemic with his experience spending fifteen months in solitary confinement. I can say without a doubt that isolation feels hopeless, Morgan wrote. To survive isolation in prison, you have to turn off normal behaviors. You can't speak to anyone. You can't hide from yourself. You can't distract yourself with a phone, TV, or a good book. Instead, you sit on a concrete or steel bed for twelve hours, keeping time by your food trays and talking to yourself. Currently, the Arkansas prison system holds sixteen percent of its population in extreme isolation. Morgan called for people to open their hearts and demand humane treatment for incarcerated people.

More Than Our Crimes published an [opinion piece written](#) by Rob Barton, who has been incarcerated for 25 years in the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). The BOP has been locked down since March, and according to Barton, There's no outside rec. No work. No programming. No school. No religious services. No mental health services, even for inmates who are supposed to see a psychiatrist specialist weekly. No visits, including lawyers. No nothing. We are fed in our cells. We work out in our cells. For the most part, we bathe in our cells. Twenty-four hours a day, we're left in our cells. The national Unlock the Box campaign reported that nearly 300,000 people have been subjected to solitary during the pandemic. Brie Williams of AMEND said, There is a long legacy of many prisons not all but many prisons turning to solitary confinement, turning to lockdowns to manage what are really public health problems.

The *Gotham Gazette* published an [op-ed](#) by Alvin Bragg, the former Chief Deputy at the New York Attorney General's Office. In the article, he called for an end to solitary confinement in New York City and across the state. The harms are undeniable, according to Bragg, and last well beyond a person's confinement. Further, while Black people make up 18 percent of the state's population, they make up 57 percent of the people held in solitary confinement. Currently, the use of solitary in New York City is restricted to 30 days but the Department of Correction has found ways to dodge the requirements, Bragg said. He called for the State Legislature and the City Council to act now and pass the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act, which would prohibit the use of solitary for longer than fifteen days and prevent loopholes.

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.

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