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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 8, 2018

The Denver-based weekly *Westword* published an [article](#) exposing the conditions within the isolated H Unit at the U.S. Penitentiary Administrative Maximum (ADX) in Florence, Colorado, where many of the men convicted of high-profile terrorism-related offenses are subjected to Special Administrative Measures, or SAMs. The author, Alan Prendergast, delves into the stories of several different men held at H Unit and their struggle to obtain lawyers, communicate with their families, practice Islam, and maintain their sanity and health under the uniquely restrictive SAMs regulations. He describes the H Unit as a black hole, a void where men are slowly buried alive in layers of isolation until they vanish entirely. The Center for Constitutional Rights and Yale Law School found that the number of federal cases of people held under SAMs has risen from sixteen in 2001 to 51 last year.

Ashley Marie Olsen Zieser, a 33-year-old woman formerly held at Chillicothe Correctional Center in Missouri, filed a lawsuit this week against corrections officer Edward Bearden for sexually assaulting her and forcing her to perform oral sex in 2015 and 2016. [According to Kansas City Star](#), Zeiser did not report the abuse because she feared repercussions, specifically solitary confinement and losing her work-release privilege. Two other women have filed lawsuits against Bearden for rape and sexual assault, one of whom claims Bearden raped her more than 20 times and that when she revealed this to a prison counselor, he too sexually assaulted her. The three women called for Bearden to be fired from his Department of Corrections job.

CNN [reported](#) that the ACLU of Georgia filed a lawsuit on behalf of 14 deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals incarcerated under the Georgia Department of Corrections, claiming that they were denied reasonable accommodations, which are mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The incarcerated deaf individuals experienced both linguistic and social isolation, through the deprivation of American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, the lack of videophones, and their placement in solitary confinement. One plaintiff, Jerry Coen, found himself in solitary for a week, and because he was denied an interpreter at the disciplinary hearing, he does not know the reason. He was further silenced at the hearing, with his hands cuffed behind his back, unable to gesture. The disability rights advocacy organization HEARD estimates that tens of thousands of deaf individuals are currently held in the U.S. prison system and experience higher levels of abuse and marginalization because of discrimination and the breakdown in communication.

Psychology Today [published](#) an article reviewing research that has proven solitary confinement harms people's mental health while failing to provide any rehabilitative benefits. The article recalls in 1963 one of the first modern SHU [Security Housing Unit] experiments, which studied a group of incarcerated people held in solitary confinement for four days alongside a group not held in solitary. The study found an increased level of anxiety for the group held in isolation, even in such a short period of time. Since then, studies have demonstrated commonly experienced long-lasting effects from solitary, such as depression, anxiety, increased arousal, and vegetative complaints that did not improve over time. More recent studies have also demonstrated that solitary confinement can generate aggressive and violent behaviors that often lengthen the persons time in solitary, leading to a destructive cycle.

The Vera Institute of Justice released a [report](#) called *Women in Segregation*, documenting the unique issues that women face in solitary confinement and calling for isolated women to be included in discussions and plans for prison reform. The report notes that while significantly more men are held in solitary confinement across the country, the women who are segregated tend to experience exacerbated mental health effects, based on a higher likelihood of past trauma and abuse. The report calls the research surrounding solitary confinement incomplete until women-specific issues are incorporated.

The *New York Times* [reviewed](#) the recently published *Damnation Island*, a nonfiction book exploring New York's Blackwells Island facility in the East River, which in the 19th Century warehoused poor people, mentally ill people, sick people, and people deemed criminals all in the same institution. Stacy Horn, the book's author, discusses Blackwells Island as a predecessor to today's Rikers Island, illustrating the continued abuses through the story of Kalief Browder, the teen who endured abuse and solitary confinement during his three years on Rikers, and ultimately committed suicide after his release.

Readers Digest [reprinted](#) an account written in 1938 by Bryan Conway, a man held at Alcatraz, describing his experience on the infamous island prison. Conway explained that the worst part of his experience at Alcatraz, which made his two months on the island worse than his ten years at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, was the severity of the disciplinary tactics and the mental torture. He

recalled the use of solitary confinement in an attempt to break up an organized labor strike. At one point, 139 men were held in isolation, given only bread and water. After the protesters continued refusing to work, the corrections officers cut off their water and the conditions due to the lack of sanitation were frightful. According to Conway, ultimately, solitary confinement effectively broke the mutiny. Isolation and abusive conditions have historically been used in prisons to crush protests by incarcerated people, a practice that continues today.

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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