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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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close

Search

close

close

Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | January 21, 2019

On January 16, Paul Ford died in his solitary cell at Kilby Prison, the second incarcerated person in the custody of Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) to commit suicide this year. Although Ford had been diagnosed with a mood disorder and had attempted suicides several times before while in prison, his mental health screening for placement in solitary indicated no history of suicide attempts or serious mental illness. Last year, nine people in ADOC custody committed suicide, most of them while in solitary confinement. [According](#) to WBRC, the Southern Poverty Law Center has filed an emergency motion in response to the recent suicides, calling on the ADOC to immediately halt the placement of high-risk prisoners in segregation, in the context of an already ongoing class action lawsuit on behalf of mentally ill people in ADOC custody.

The *Santa Fe New Mexican* [reported](#) on a wrongful death suit filed by the family of Keith Kosiog, who committed suicide at age 39 while in solitary confinement at the Central New Mexico Correctional Facility in December while awaiting his trial. The lawsuit claims prison staff acted with willful, wanton and in reckless disregard for the safety and well being of Mr. Kosiog. Despite a documented history of mood disorder, PTSD, history of substance abuse, history of violence, [at least fourteen] previous suicide attempts, and a family history of completed suicide, Kosiog was transferred for safekeeping to the state prison, placed in solitary confinement, and provided less than half of his prescribed psychiatric medications.

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* [reported](#) on the trials of three corrections officials at the Milwaukee County Jail who allegedly played a role in leaving 38-year-old Terrill Thomas in solitary confinement without water for seven days until he died of dehydration in April 2016. At the trial last week, Assistant District Attorney Kurt Benkley presented photos of Thomas's cell with a bone-dry toilet and sink. Thomas, who struggled with bipolar disorder, lost 34 pounds in eight days before he died. Benkley argued that former correctional officer James Lee Ramsey-Guy should be held responsible since he did not inform other correctional officers that he had turned off Thomas water before leaving the facility. At that moment, he signed Terrill Thomas death warrant, said Benkley.

[According](#) to the Associated Press, the Connecticut Office of the Child Advocate released a report on Wednesday which found that children disproportionately children of color in state facilities are not receiving proper education, mental health treatment, or rehabilitative programs, and they are facing solitary confinement, as well as physical and chemical restraints. At the Manson Youth Institution, the report found children being held in solitary under a Security Risk Group Program allegedly to prevent gang activity, though state law prohibits this use of solitary. The state's associate child advocate, Mickey Kramer, said: [Solitary] is harmful in every environment. We need to take that tool out of the toolbox. Kramer expressed plans to meet with the newly appointed corrections commissioner to address the violations alleged in the report.

[According](#) to Wisconsin Public Radio, a recently released report from a court-appointed monitor found that children held at the Lincoln Hills School for Boys and Copper Lake School for Girls continue to face pepper spray and solitary confinement for longer than a week at a time. This violates a 2018 settlement in which the Wisconsin Department of Corrections agreed to immediately limit the use of solitary to seven days, and ultimately end its use after ten months. The report stated that staffing shortages have caused dangerous conditions, including detained children being forced to urinate and defecate in garbage cans in their rooms. Lawmakers had agreed to close the facilities by 2021, but Karen Lindell from the Juvenile Law Center said, We do want to see the facility continue to improve, even while we see the overall aim still being getting [youth] into other places.

The *Portland Tribune* [discussed](#) the progress of a newly implemented Oregon Youth Authority program, called STEPS (stop, think, explore, plan) that has presented staff with an alternative to the use of isolation for the youth held in their facility. The program, currently only utilized at the MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility, helps youth to calm down through therapy. While some staff continue to struggle with the cultural shift away from the previous punitive approach, violent incidents have declined along with the statewide decrease in use of solitary on youth, according to the director of the Oregon Youth Authority, Joe OLeary. Though a 2017 bill restricted the use of solitary as punishment for youth, some workers still use solitary with increased monitoring and for lesser periods of time.

Corrections One published an [article](#) written by an author and former staff sergeant for the U.S. military, who toured the new Stammheim prison in Stuttgart-Baden Württemberg, Germany. In the 1970s, the prison was a supermax known to have the most secure unit in the

world, but today the use of solitary confinement is rare. The average length of time someone spends in solitary is three to five days. Since the German prison system has shifted to a rehabilitative approach, emphasizing human dignity, incarcerated people are allowed to wear civilian clothing and hold keys to their own cells. Officers are banned from carrying handcuffs or pepper spray. Yet, no escapes have occurred at Stammheim. The author suggests that prison reform in the U.S. should be informed by some of the successful methods in the German system.

In a *Baltimore Sun* [op-ed](#), public policy counsel for the ACLU of Maryland Caylin Young asked Maryland legislators, If we understand the mental health implications of solitary confinement on adults, why would we subject the developing minds of Maryland's children to this potentially irreparable torture? In the 2012 *Miller v. Alabama* decision, the Supreme Court ruled that youth being sentenced to mandatory life without parole constituted cruel and unusual punishment, emphasizing the potential for the developing mind of youth to be influenced and rehabilitated. Young argues the use of solitary confinement stands in the way of rehabilitation, too, causing even more trauma to developing minds and directly opposing the purpose of the state's juvenile justice system.

Public Source published the [story](#) of Teresa Minor Spencer, who served sixteen years at Muncy State Correctional in Pennsylvania. All those years in prison, Spencer said, pale in comparison to the seventeen days I spent in solitary in 1992. Spencer, sent to solitary for having two onions in her cell, described her struggle re-entering society with the trauma of her isolation. The color of traffic lights caused her to panic. They made [her] feel like [she] was getting sucked into a vacuum. Without the psychiatric treatment she received after being released, Spencer says she wouldn't have been able to survive. Since her release, Spencer has served on the Pittsburgh Democratic committee, founded a grassroots nonprofit, and directs community engagement at a Baptist Church.

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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October 5, 2022

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