

Solitary Watch

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](#) | December 31, 2018

Gothamist published an [article](#) noting that thousands of people spent the holidays in isolation in New York's state prisons, where 2,500 adults are currently held in Special Housing Units (SHU) and about 1,000 others are held in another form of solitary called keeplock. Victor Pate, a formerly incarcerated advocate who was once held in solitary at Attica during the wintertime for having too many bed sheets, recalled being forced to choose between spending his recreation hour outside in the snow up to my knees or staying in my cell. Most days he stayed in his cell, but he said those two weeks in solitary felt like the end of the world. It felt like its never going to get better. It felt like this might be the end of me. On the day before Christmas Eve, advocates gathered outside Governor Andrew Cuomo's office to call for passage of the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act, which would restrict the use of solitary to fifteen days.

The Australian website *News.com.au* published a [story](#) examining what Christmastime is like for the 2,738 people currently held on death row in the United States, many of them in solitary confinement. The piece quotes Ron Keine, held on New Mexico's death row for two years until his exoneration in 1976, who described his experience in a [blog post](#): It is Christmas time on the row. At night I can hear the muffled sounds of a grown man crying in his pillow. Everywhere in the world it is a time for happiness, a time to rejoice, but here it is depression and sadness in the very souls of us death row denizens. While the children are opening presents on Christmas morning, reveling in bliss, miles away in some forgotten dungeon cell, a tear runs down my cheek. As the family sits down, heads bowed for the meals prayer, I sit alone on my steel bunk.

A federal lawsuit filed this week claims young men accused of assaulting correctional officers faced brutal retaliation and solitary confinement after being transferred from Rikers Island to Albany County Correctional Facility. [According](#) to the *New York Times*, when the youth, some as young as 17, arrived at the upstate facility, the guards would issue deliberately confusing commands and when the inmates failed to comply, the guards would pummel and kick them, use their Taser guns, and shove their fingers and batons into their rectums. Officers shouted, This is not Rikers, before sending the young men to solitary for up to 600 days. New rules instituted in the New York City jail system in 2015 banned the use of solitary for individuals up to age 21, after which the number of young people transferred to facilities outside the city increased. The lawsuit claims the transfers to Albany violated their constitutional rights.

A lawsuit filed this past July claims that the 3,800 people held in the custody of Sacramento's two jails, the majority of whom are pre-trial detainees, have been subjected to dangerous, inhumane, and degrading conditions. In addition to severe medical negligence resulting in suffering and even blindness; inadequate mental health care; and mistreatment of individuals with disabilities; the lawsuit calls out the jail system for its routine use of solitary confinement: Every day, Defendant locks up hundreds of people in solitary confinement in dark, cramped, filthy cells for 23 hours or more per day. Many people do not get outside to see the sun for weeks or months at a time. The extreme isolation and deprivation place people at serious risk of profound physical and psychological harm. A federal judge will soon rule on whether or not the lawsuit constitutes a class action, [according](#) to *Davis Vanguard*.

The *Windy City Times* [reported](#) that 27-year-old transgender woman Strawberry Hampton has been transferred from an all-male prison to the Logan Correctional Center for women, after a lawsuit filed last year against the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) claimed Hampton was subjected to prolonged isolation in cells covered with urine and feces and without running water or a mattress and a series of sexual assaults by a group of officers, who forced her to perform sexual acts with her cellmate for the officers' entertainment, among other allegations. Vanessa del Valle with the MacArthur Justice Center said the transfer is a victory, but IDOC has done nothing to remedy the systematic failures that created the persistent harm Strawberry has endured since she entered IDOC custody.

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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