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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](#) | November 11, 2019

The ACLU will host a [briefing on Capitol Hill](#) on legislation recently introduced by U.S. Representative Cedric Richmond (D-LA). [HR4488](#), the Solitary Confinement Study and Reform Act of 2019, would establish national standards to limit the use of solitary in U.S. correctional facilities. The briefing will take place in Room 121, Cannon House Office Building, 27 Independence Ave SE, Washington, DC, on Thursday, November 21, from 4 to 6 PM. It is open to the public, but an [RSVP](#) is required to attend.

ProPublica published an [article](#) examining the use of solitary confinement at the Kern County jail in Bakersfield, California, to allegedly combat the high rate of suicides that spiked in 2011. This despite the fact that placing people in isolated suicide watch cells stripped of human interaction and basic items such as mattresses and soap has been proven to worsen a person's mental health and heighten the likelihood of a suicide attempt. Predictably, the Kern County jail has seen the highest suicide rate for the past four years out of California's ten largest jail systems. Last year, the suicide watch cells overflowed to the point that the jail began putting people in safety cells with no toilet, no water, and no bed. Governor Gavin Newsom released a statement that County jails should not hold people in their custody in isolation indefinitely, no matter what the situation is, but the state's board of community corrections has no authority to enforce proper standards at the county level.

In another piece on the dangers of safety cells, *The Kitsap Sun* published an [article](#) addressing treatment of people with mental illness at the Kitsap County Jail, located in Washington State, across Puget Sound from Seattle. In the case of 36-year-old mother Tessa Nall, jail staff had isolated her in a solitary crisis cell and released her back into the general population less than a day after her last suicide attempt. Tessa hanged herself and suffered permanent brain damage from the suicide attempt that has left her in a wheelchair, now heavily reliant on a caretaker. Jill Bourgeois shared a cell with another woman at the jail, who suffered a mental crisis and died after hanging herself. Bourgeois said people often hide their suicidal ideation from staff because of the traumatic conditions of the solitary crisis cells. You don't dare tell jail staff that, she said. If you do they lock you in a little room, naked, with a hole in the floor. You just want to get better. Nall's family sued the county for their failure to provide proper care.

Civil rights attorney Laura Rovner's TEDx talk on [What happens to people in solitary confinement](#) is now featured on the main TED website and has received over 650,000 views. Rovner, who is professor at the University of Denver's Sturm College of Law, has represented people confined for decades in the federal supermax prison ADX Florence in Colorado, which she says has nearly perfected solitary confinement and managed to bar access to the media and any human rights organizations from observing the conditions. The isolation so severely starves people of contact with any living being that in one of her clients' cases, Rovner said he lay on the floor for hours waiting to see the shoes of a guard walk past. Ultimately, Rovner characterized solitary confinement as a prolonged social death, and called on listeners to bear witness to the torture of solitary confinement in ADX and across the U.S. prison system.

The *Albuquerque Journal* [reported](#) on the New Mexico Corrections Department's release of a report on its use of solitary confinement, which the department calls restricted housing. From the report's data, attorney Matt Coyte found that fourteen percent of the incarcerated population had been held in solitary over a three-month period, though the department reported 6.6 percent of the population isolated. The report also demonstrated that many of the people isolated were awaiting transfer to another facility, and 85 of them were held in solitary for longer than fifteen days. Coyte said, The UN considers more than 15 days to be torture. And you have no reason to isolate this man other than transport. He hasn't done anything wrong, and you're exceeding the international standard for torture each time you transport him. Which makes no sense.

[According](#) to the Government Accountability Project, Senator Elizabeth Warren sent a letter last week to the Department of Homeland Security's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL), requesting Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to provide her detailed documentation of the use of solitary confinement across immigration detention facilities between 2013 and 2019. Warren never received a response from ICE to her letter in June calling for information on the agency's use of solitary confinement, and expressed the urgent need for a response, since a detained immigrant in solitary confinement committed suicide in October, and at least three immigrants with mental illness have committed suicide in the last three years after being placed in solitary confinement. Warren called for ICE to respond by November 14, 2019.

The *CT Mirror* [reported](#) that the U.S. Department of Justice has begun an investigation into the conditions at the Manson Youth Institution in Connecticut. This past January, the Office of the Child Advocate produced a report on the facility, finding a lack of basic services and a heavy reliance on solitary confinement. The report found that youth with psychiatric disabilities are most likely to be placed in solitary confinement for prolonged and repeated periods. The Office of the Child Advocate found the conditions for children who are confined to quarters to violate the states ban on the use of administrative segregation on children, since children are held for all but a half hour a day in isolation and shackled every time they leave their cells. But the Department of Corrections claims the conditions are not solitary confinement and pointed to recent reforms at the facility.

The Chicago *Sun Times* published an [opinion article](#) written by an educator, who teaches children in the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC). The facility detained 2,764 children last year, which the author says adds up to over \$30 million per year that the county spends on jailing children pre-trial. In 2017, the jail placed children in solitary confinement 1,000 more times than in 2016, despite a drop in population. Separating children from their parents and subjecting them to conditions of torture, abuse, and trauma of jail harms the community and raises crime rates, according to the author. Seventy percent of the kids in jail in 2018 were Black and 14 percent were Latinx. The article calls for the county to end the detention of youth and for that money to be funneled into supportive structures that increase community safety.

Recovery Radio 104.3 show hosted a [segment](#) featuring the author of the Soberdogs Recovery blog, [Kyle Ruggeri](#), sharing his experience in solitary confinement as someone who struggled with drug addiction. Ruggeri was sent to solitary five times, on nonviolent charges, for a total of one year and 25 days in New Yorks state prisons. Radio host Keith Greer and Ruggeri discussed the harm of stigmatizing people for substance use disorder, and using solitary confinement as punishment for showing symptoms of a mental illness. We dont do this with other diseases, Greer said. We dont take people who show the symptoms of that disease and punish them for it. Ruggeri described waking up in solitary every day as waking up to the nightmare. He said, Ive never felt that level of hopelessness ever in my life, not even close.

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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