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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](#) | February 10, 2020

The *Lancet Public Health Journal* published the findings of a five-year [study](#) that examined the post-release effects of solitary confinement, by tracking nearly 14,000 people rotating through Danish jails and prisons. The Cornell University study, which is the second study to find an increased risk of mortality for people released after having spent time in solitary, evidenced that people who faced isolation in prison had a 60 percent higher chance of dying within five years of being released. That's a significant increase in the risk of mortality, said Christopher Wildeman, a professor and associate vice provost at the Cornell College of Human Ecology. There's almost always an alternative that a warden or guard could use that wouldn't involve putting someone in solitary, Wildeman [told](#) the *Cornell Chronicle*. The finding that just a day or two in solitary confinement appears linked to a higher risk of death after release is somewhat surprising, he said.

[According](#) to the Associated Press, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) released a report on a South Carolina juvenile prison, concluding that the high levels of violence and isolation violate the rights of the incarcerated youth. Investigators found 134 fights and 71 assaults had occurred in just under a year, though the prison only holds about 100 youth. The report also found that youth are sent to solitary for trivial offenses such as playing cards or drawing a tattoo with a regular ink pen. The report described, Everything in the room is made of concrete and steel; steel doors provide entrance in and out of the cell and the door only has a slot for the officer to slide a tray of food to the youth and to communicate with them. The DOJ recommended officials implement alternatives to solitary confinement, such as cool-down rooms, a unit with educational opportunities, or sending kids with mental health needs to a psychiatric hospital. The DOJ threatened to sue state officials if changes are not made within two months.

Bay City News [reported](#) that in response to a lawsuit, federal magistrate judge Sallie Kim has ordered San Francisco County jails to ensure that people held in pretrial custody for over four years are allowed access to sunlight at least one hour every week, and at least one hour of exercise five days a week. Currently, people held in administrative segregation at the jails are isolated for at least 23 hours a day. Attorney Yolanda Huang said, A prisoner in a San Francisco County Jail never gets to see the sun, or feel sunlight on his skin. Those who are held in jail for long periods of time slowly develop chronic health diseases including endocrine disorders such as diabetes, cognitive dysfunctions and memory losses. Kim called the current use of solitary confinement unacceptable, though the ruling does not apply to people held in disciplinary segregation.

The *Phoenix New Times* [reported](#) that Arizona Senator Juan Mendez introduced a bill last week that would limit the length of stays in solitary confinement to fifteen days and require officials to provide clear and convincing evidence of the reason for isolation as well as proof that no alternative is available. The bill would also ban the placement of people with serious mental illness, pregnant women, LGBTQ people, or people with disabilities in solitary. A spokesperson for the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) said they do not use solitary confinement, but the director of the ACLU of Arizona said ADC uses names like maximum custody, restrictive housing, or close custody, to describe the same conditions as solitary confinement. The bill specifies that isolated confinement, no matter the label, means holding a person in a cell for at least seventeen hours a day.

Erie News Now [reported](#) that Pennsylvania Senator Larry Farnese and Representative Tina Davis have introduced bills that would ban the use of solitary confinement for longer than fifteen consecutive days, as well as completely prohibit the isolation of certain vulnerable populations, such as pregnant women, youth, older people, LGBTQ people, and people with mental illness. John Hargreaves of the Pennsylvania Prison Society said, The Department of Corrections has a recidivism rate of 65 percent, meaning that within three years, 65 percent of the inmates in state prisons return. The ones in RHU (Restrictive Housing Unit), in our estimation, come back much more often. The bills are both pending in the state Judiciary Committees.

[According](#) to *Capitol Weekly*, California Health Policy Strategies released a report based on data from the California Board of State and Community Corrections, finding a 43 percent increase since 2009 in mental health cases reported in California jails in addition to an 80 percent increase in medication prescriptions. The report found that one out of every four people in California jails face serious psychological distress, while one out of every nineteen fit this diagnosis outside of jails. People with mental illness are often placed in solitary confinement for behavior related to their illness or for lack of hospital beds. Once in solitary confinement the harsh conditions of segregation worsen the symptoms of mental illness, the report read. Moreover, not only are the mentally ill more likely to be placed in

solitary confinement, they often find it exceedingly difficult to meet the requirements for release.

The *Washington City Paper* [reported](#) that the DC Central Detention Facility was on lockdown last week to search for contraband, according to the DC Department of Corrections Director Quincy Booth. At a DC Council oversight hearing, Booth told council members that locking down the facility is the best practice to find contraband and claimed the lockdown ensures that the environment stays safe. But some family and community members, including Black Lives Matter DC, objected to officials holding the entire jail population in conditions of solitary confinement, cancelling recreation, denying all visitations for the week, and suspending educational opportunities. Booth said the lockdowns typically last about a week but the DOC can impose them as frequently as it deems necessary.

NPR [obtained video footage](#) of a 2017 incident at the scandal-plagued Adelanto Processing in California, which is run by the private firm GEO Group for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The video shows eight Central American men engaging in a nonviolent protest by linking arms and refusing to move from a table until given a chance to speak to a supervisor or ICE official about conditions at the center. Detention officers responded by spraying them with pepper spray at least three times and forcibly dragging them from the table. Several were put into hot showers (which are known to increase the painful burning from pepper spray), and all were placed in solitary confinement for 10 days as punishment for inciting a rebellion and assaulting staff. A settlement for an undisclosed amount was reached last week in a lawsuit brought by the men against guards and the GEO Group for use of excessive force in violation of their civil rights.

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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by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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