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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](#) | December 7, 2020

The *Intercept* [reported](#) that a group of immigrants held at the Etowah County Detention Center in Gadsen, Alabama banded together in July, all demanding coronavirus tests. But instead of providing testing, prison officials locked down the unit and transferred ten of the most vocal people to solitary confinement. One immigrant, Sebastian Abalo Cunna, wrote, [The captain] hand-picked cells and made an example in front of everyone that he really meant to throw anyone who get tested into a dungeon. It feels like punishment for standing up for our right to health and safety. While Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) says that its facilities must ensure that medical isolation is operationally distinct from any form of punitive housing, detained immigrants reported being sent to solitary confinement for extended periods of time up to 54 days for testing positive. According to several affidavits, solitary cells were squalid, with no access to mental health help, no law library access, no sunlight, and no fresh air. Falaye Kourouma, held at Etowah, said, Civil detention have turned into torture.

[According to the News Tribune](#), the University of Washington Center for Human Rights released the findings of an investigation of the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC), an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility operated by GEO Group in Tacoma, Washington. The [report](#) found that NWDC detains people longer, on average, in solitary confinement than any other dedicated ICE facility in the nation. The average length of stay in solitary at NWDC, according to the report, was 70 days. The national average in that same two-year period was about 30 days. But the report also claimed NWDC vastly under-reported data on solitary and the facility held people with mental illness in solitary, against ICE rules. A group of U.S. representatives sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Inspector General last week, calling for an immediate investigation into the recent allegations of violence against detained immigrants and a comprehensive review of the use of solitary confinement at NWDC.

The *Progressive* magazine published an [article](#) written by Rene Feltz, a recipient of Solitary Watch's [Solitary Confinement Reporting Project](#). The article traces the use of solitary confinement on detained immigrants in detention centers across the country in retaliation for striking against inhumane conditions. Manuel Abrego, who now works for immigrant rights group La Resistencia, was sent to solitary at the Tacoma Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Processing Center also known as the Northwest Detention Center in Washington after he helped organize a hunger strike in 2017. Abrego says the strike started because the food would come frozen. There is no way to eat it. Describing the solitary cell, Abrego said, When you are in there, it is like being dead because you are not in contact with people on the outside [It was] psychological torture. In 2014, a massive 1,200-person strike at the Tacoma ICE Center called for better food, treatment, and medical care. Many of the participants were sent to solitary confinement. Now, people in detention have been striking against the lack of medical precautions under COVID. In March, the Tacoma facility faced a lawsuit calling for the release of medically vulnerable immigrants, but ICE refused.

Shadowproof [reported](#) that Kinetik Justice Amun, an incarcerated organizer and whistleblower, filed a lawsuit in September against the Alabama Department of Corrections for his mistreatment at Limestone Correctional Facility. Kinetik, a member of the Free Alabama Movement who led a hunger strike in March 2019, was transferred to Limestone, placed in solitary confinement, and faced blatant abuses, he said. After Kinetik exposed scandalous practices at Limestone, such as the bucket detail and a gambling ring, officers accused Kinetik of heading a Security Threat Group to distribute drugs in the prison. Despite his denial of these claims, Kinetik was held in solitary for three months. While the accusations were allegedly based on the testimony of a prison informant in a rival gang, the man later submitted an affidavit admitting he was coerced to label Kinetik an enemy, under threats of solitary and violence.

ABC7 [reported](#) that the family of Nicholas Feliciano filed two lawsuits against New York City for failing to intervene when Feliciano hanged himself from a pipe in an isolated cell at Rikers Island jail. Eighteen-year-old Feliciano was put in solitary in November 2019 after a fight broke out and officers allegedly claimed his suicide attempt was a manipulative gesture. But Feliciano suffered brain damage from the lack of oxygen during those seven minutes he dangled from the pipe. While the corrections union President denied the officers stood and watched, the Feliciano family attorney David Rankin said, The idea that you can have multiple officers watch someone attempt to kill themselves for seven minutes, refer to it as a manipulative gesture and not attempt to help that person is a travesty. And this family needs justice.

Months after New York Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that the city would be eliminating the use of solitary confinement, NY1

[reported](#) that 102 people in New York City jails are still being held in solitary. Queens Councilman Daniel Dromm introduced legislation to end the use of solitary in city jails, which would allow officers to isolate people for up to four hours to deescalate conflicts. The City Council proposed a bill that would allow jails to keep people in their cells all but ten hours a day. While Correction Officers Benevolent Association President Benny Boscio says solitary confinement is a necessary mechanism, Dromm said, They need to come up with those alternatives: taking away commissary, restricting phone calls, whatever it may be. They have other things they can use to deal with that.

Kearney Hub [reported](#) that a 2017 lawsuit filed by the ACLU of Nebraska, ACLU National Prison Project, Nebraska Appleseed, the National Association of the Deaf, and two law firms has been dismissed. The federal civil rights lawsuit claimed that people held in Nebraska state prisons received inadequate health and mental health care, were subjected to excessive solitary confinement, and were not provided disability accommodations in violation of the 8th Amendment and Americans with Disabilities Act. After a judge denied the lawsuit class action certification because he believed the changes would be contrary to the idea of federalism, lead counsel on the case David Fathi said the work would take a new direction. Prison officials point to reforms, including the closure of the Nebraska State Penitentiary's solitary confinement unit, a decrease in the daily population held in solitary, and changes with medical and mental health care. Yet, Nebraska's prisons currently hold 5,285 people, at 145 percent of design capacity.

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 [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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I want to stay informed. Inhumane treatment needs to be abolished.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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