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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](#) | June 23, 2020

On the [Last Week Tonight show](#), John Oliver discussed the alarmingly high rates of coronavirus in prisons and jails across the U.S., as the New York Times reported that the five largest known outbreaks of the virus are in correctional facilities. Oliver explained that prisons and jails are not equipped to handle public health crises and if someone does show symptoms, they're often placed in solitary confinement because prisons have nowhere else to quarantine them. And it's not a great incentive for inmates to come forward if your policy is basically, Look, just tell us that you're sick, and we'll put you in the special punishment hole. Oliver aired footage taken with contraband cell phones in various correctional facilities showing the dire conditions and called for the immediate depopulation of prisons in order to prevent more COVID-19 deaths.

The Appeal [reported](#) on the new report released by the national Unlock the Box Campaign, which estimated that the number of people held in solitary confinement in prisons across the country had risen to about 300,000 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Brie Williams, a professor of medicine at UCSF and founder of the organization Amend, said that the use of solitary confinement during a public health crisis deters people from reporting symptoms, which in turn threatens the health of those who live and work in the facilities. Jean Casella, the co-director of Solitary Watch, expressed concern that the widespread, indefinite lockdowns may continue to extend and put us in danger of losing the ground that we've gained in reducing the use of solitary.

Law.com [reported](#) that 35-year-old Calvin Lofton accepted \$375,000 in a settlement, claiming his eighteen months in solitary confinement at the Williamson County Jail in Tennessee violated the Americans with Disabilities Act and his Fifth and Fourteenth Amendment rights. Lofton was held in isolation, sometimes not able to come out of his cell for days at a time, because, as a double amputee with no toes, he could not wear the required slippers. Mario Williams, Lofton's attorney, said, The issue is serious. They're housing people with disabilities in solitary 23/7 because they're disabled. You can't come into jail with a disability and have them just shut the door on you and forget about you.

Teen Vogue published an [article](#) about the use of solitary confinement on children, telling the stories of Jaki Murillo and Jesse De La Cruz, both placed in solitary confinement in California as teenagers. Murillo, held in the secure housing unit (SHU) for over a year, is now 26 years old and said, I do not believe [juveniles] should be in a room for the endless amount of hours and [be] treated like they're nothing. For a kid to feel that was all they have, it messed me up. Murillo said it took her two years to feel comfortable again in crowds, and even today, she is more comfortable alone in a dark room. While several states have passed bills restricting the use of solitary in juvenile facilities, Cheryl Bonacci of the Anti-Recidivism Coalition argues the whole approach to incarcerating children needs to change. According to Bonacci, when we put kids in solitary, We just say, You're a bad kid. Why don't we say, What's going on?

The City [reported](#) that a year after 27-year-old transgender woman Layleen Polanco died in solitary confinement on Rikers Island in New York, the city's jails have still not meaningfully reformed their use of solitary confinement. NYC Department of Corrections claims that they don't use solitary confinement at all, calling the practice of holding people for 21 hours alone in their cells punitive segregation. According to the Board of Correction, as of last Thursday, 121 people were held in punitive segregation in the city's jails. Juan Mndez, the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, said, Providing slightly over two hours a day of meaningful social contact would constitute a bad faith interpretation of the purpose of the Nelson Mandela rules.

The *Mercury News* [reported](#) that 61-year-old Sitawa Nantambu Jamaa, who has been incarcerated for 40 years and was a leader in efforts to end the use of solitary confinement in California's prisons, was granted medical parole. During his incarceration, Jamaa has been denied parole or had his hearing postponed seventeen times. Jamaa was previously housed in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) in Pelican Bay State Prison, where the landmark statewide hunger strikes against solitary confinement began in 2011 and again in 2013. Jamaa was held in solitary confinement based on an alleged gang affiliation with the Black Guerilla Family, based merely on his associations and his political, cultural, and historical writings, including speaking Swahili. In 2015, the strikers reached a settlement with the state to end indefinite solitary confinement, though recent reports show that many still languish in what amounts to solitary under a different name.

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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