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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | December 16, 2019

WORT Community Radio [reported](#) that one person has died at Columbia Correctional Institution in Wisconsin since the facility was locked down on November 4. Unconfirmed reports state that the death was a suicide. The lockdown has imposed severe restrictions, equivalent to solitary confinement, on the people held at the prison, according to Jacob Glicklich, a representative of the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee. Incarcerated people are kept within cells, they tend to get food which is cold and generally of substandard quality. [They don't have] access to rec, what programming exists, [or] showers, [and] regular phone access disappears, so during a time of increased stress [they] aren't able to contact family, Glicklich said. Two days after the death, the Department of Corrections said they lifted some of the restrictions, though the facility remains locked down.

The *Associated Press* [reported](#) that attorney Matt Coyte has filed two lawsuits recently, challenging abusive conditions at the Doa Ana County Detention Center in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Forty-two year old Susan Hylton, the plaintiff in one of the lawsuits, said she was placed in solitary confinement for 85 days at the prison after she tried to report sexual and physical abuse by the guards. According to the lawsuit, Hylton was forced to strip naked in the presence of male guards and remove her tampon. When Hylton asked to report the incident, a female guard said, Can't we just work this out? and put her in solitary confinement, where she received burnt food for every meal and lost 20 pounds, the lawsuit said. Another person represented by Coyte settled a lawsuit in 2013 with the county for \$15.5 million, for his two years in solitary confinement without trial.

The *Chicago Tribune* published an [article](#) highlighting the case of Kifah Jayyousi, the final remaining plaintiff in a pending lawsuit filed by the Center for Constitutional Rights in 2010. The lawsuit claimed that the heavy restrictions imposed on people held in the Communication Management Units (CMU) at the federal prisons in Terre Haute, Indiana, and Marion, Illinois, constitute an unlawful level of isolation from the outside world. The units were unofficially named Guantanamo North because of the high number of Muslims held there, mostly facing terrorism convictions. Jayyousi has since been released from the Terre Haute CMU, but a judge recently ruled that Jayyousi may still benefit from relief and the expungement of his time in the CMU from his record. Jayyousi's daughter said, Just because he was released it doesn't mean we're going to forget about this, or forget about the rest of the families still trapped in this cycle. It terrifies me that it's still open.

The *New Haven Register* [covered](#) the launch of Stop Solitary Connecticut's campaign for legislation to end the use of solitary confinement across the state and to close down the supermax prison Northern Correctional Institution. The group calls for legislation that would mandate at least eight hours out of the cell per day, increased programming, and restrictions on use of restraints. Leighton Johnson said his five years in solitary confinement at Northern felt like being dumped into a world of chaos, a never-ending cesspool of loneliness, hate, disorientation, and in some cases, people will spend three days in a filthy cell with urine, feces, blood throughout the cell. Rahisha Bivens of Stop Solitary CT noted that 82 percent of people held in solitary at Northern are nonwhite, and people in solitary face a 33 percent higher likelihood of committing suicide.

The *Times Union* published an [Letter to the Editor](#) by Jerome Wright, an organizer for the #HALTSolitary Campaign in New York, which aims to end long-term solitary confinement across the state. The piece responded to a previous Letter to the Editor by the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) commissioner, Anthony J. Annucci, claiming an editorial in the *Times Union* supporting the Humane Alternatives to Long Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act did not tell the whole truth about the state's prison system. Wright said, The truth is that DOCCS never meant solitary to be anything other than punitive, and people who don't die by suicide there will eventually return to society worse off. That's the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Wright spent seven years in solitary confinement in the New York prison system, which he called a chamber of living death.

The *Miami Herald* published an [article](#) on the case of Demetrius McCutchen, now 50 years old, who was sentenced to life in prison for murder when he was fifteen-years-old. McCutchen, initially barred from speaking with the *Herald* for security threat and classification concerns, spent decades in solitary confinement in Florida prisons, where he says he saw frequent guard brutality and medical staff complicity with abuse. Ian Manuel, who knows McCutchen from serving time together, says, Being kept in solitary confinement for nearly 25 years has taken a tremendous toll on him in every way imaginable. He is similar to [me]: just in an incredible amount of inner agony. And utilizing the remedies he's learned to relieve the tension, if only momentarily, referring to the innovative ways McCutchen

has found to harm himself.

[According](#) to CTV News, the *New England Journal of Medicine* published a study last week that examined the brains of scientists who spent fourteen months in the isolated, monotonous environment of Antarctica. The study used magnetic resonance imaging to scan the brains before and after the trip, finding that the crewmembers hippocampus on average shrank by seven percent and a neuron-developing protein dropped by about 45 percent. This effect on the hippocampus upsets spatial processing, selective attention, emotional experiences, and social interaction. The scientists believe that the change may be reversible. Recent studies on rats found a similarly harmful effect on the hippocampus and development of new neurons when isolated from other rats.

Harvard Law Review published an [article](#) providing historical background on the origin of solitary confinement in the U.S., starting with the implementation of isolation at the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia. According to the article, the use of solitary confinement at its inception was regulated by public figures outside of the jail, including judges and legislators. Today, in contrast, the use of solitary confinement is typically solely left to the discretion of prison officials. Additionally, prolonged solitary confinement was only allowed for cases in which the court imposed such a sentence. Solitary confinement for disciplinary purposes was only allowed for days or weeks, not years and decades, as it is now used.

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.

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by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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