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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](#) | September 23, 2019

The Associated Press [reported](#) on recently released video [footage](#) that provides information about the death last year of 22-year-old Shali Tilson at the Rockdale County Jail in Georgia. The footage shows officers neglected to conduct the mandated checks every fifteen minutes on Tilson, who had a history of bipolar disorder and schizophrenia and had been placed in solitary confinement on suicide watch, where he remained naked with no bedding, furniture, toilet, running water, or visitation access. In his nine days at the jail, Tilson lost 20 pounds. The video shows Tilson pressing the emergency button in his cell later found to be broken and banging on his door, but officers reportedly did not enter his cell for eight hours, before he died of a pulmonary embolism caused by dehydration, according to the lawsuit filed on behalf of Tilson's parents. The sheriff denies the jail violated Tilson's constitutional rights, but attorney Harold Spence called it a preventable and tragic death.

The *Boston Globe* [reported](#) that over 2,100 people incarcerated across the Massachusetts Department of Corrections (MDOC) spent time in solitary confinement last year. An attorney with Prisoners Legal Services said, This is a staggeringly high number and shows that many people are placed in solitary for minor infractions of prison rules. Massachusetts lawmakers passed reform legislation last year, requiring the MDOC to report data regarding their use of solitary confinement. But the MDOC data does not include 97 people held in the disciplinary detention unit, which holds people in severe isolation for up to ten years with only one hour out of their cells per day. State Senator James Eldridge believes the diversionary units are pretty blatantly ignor[ing] the reforms. I feel strongly, he said, that the Department of Correction is thumbing its nose at the Legislature's solitary confinement reforms.

Formerly incarcerated artist Jesse Krimes created a new installation in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, highlighting the rise in rural incarceration rates. The installation, titled *Voices from the Heartland: Safety, Justice, and Community in Small and Rural America*, is supported by the Vera Institute of Justice, which on Saturday [hosted a day](#) of events and discussions featuring artists, advocates, journalists, and public officials. As described in an [article](#) by The Marshall Project, Krime's newest project features quilts drawing on the local Mennonite culture and depicting incarceration-related themes, as well as a corn maze with a solitary confinement cell in the middle and dead ends where participants can read the stories of currently and formerly incarcerated people. Major cities are cutting incarceration rates, while rural communities incarceration rates are going through the roof, Krimes said. Racial disparities are the most drastic in these smaller communities. We all have a stake in reversing that. The installation will again be open to the public next Saturday, September 28.

Gothamist [reported](#) that officers at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Essex County Correctional Facility in New Jersey are alleged to have brutally beat 20-year-old Jose Hernandez Velasquez in May, after Velasquez cursed an officer for refusing to give him his food. Velasquez says the officers brought him to the shower, stripped him naked, punched him about 30 times, and stomped on his genitals. After an emergency room doctor reported clinical concern for testicular injury, Velasquez was brought directly back to the ICE facility and placed in solitary confinement, with a urine-soaked mattress, no phone access, and no ability to file a grievance for 30 days. The county prosecutors' office says it has reopened an investigation into the incident. A recent Department of Homeland Security investigation found unsanitary and unsafe conditions in the jail, strip-searching, and use of solitary confinement.

[According](#) to *Cleveland.com*, a lawsuit on behalf of 25-year-old Corrie Lawrence claims he faced brutal abuse and retaliation from officers at Cuyahoga County Jail after speaking with the U.S. Marshals investigation team about conditions at the jail. Members of the jail's Special Response Team allegedly sanctioned another incarcerated person to attack Lawrence in his cell, after which the officers attacked Lawrence themselves in the elevator and said, Nr, you better keep your fg mouth shut up here or youre going to see me again. After being denied medical treatment, Lawrence was placed in disciplinary isolation, or solitary confinement, where he was only allowed out of his cell for 20 minutes a day. After Lawrence spoke with the U.S. Marshals about his experience, the guards labeled him a snitch and continued to make threats against his life, the lawsuit says. Lawrence has since been transferred to a different jail.

The *Sacramento Bee* published an opinion [piece](#) written by John Purugganan, who has been incarcerated in California since 1989, describing a shift toward rehabilitation in the Secure Housing Unit (SHU) at Pelican Bay State Prison. Purugganan writes that cells are now unlocked for much of the day, and residents participate in job training, self-help classes, computer coding, and Creative Expression courses taught by other incarcerated people, such as music, gardening, beading, and a screenwriters workshop. He hopes that the change

signifies a shift in thinking on the part of the larger society. Citizens, Purugganan writes, are beginning to understand that rehabilitation is not about forgiveness or giving convicted criminals a pass, it is about prioritizing public safety. Critics of solitary confinement reforms in California have provided much harsher portraits of life at Pelican Bay and other state prisons.

PEN America, Daily Kos, Defending Rights & Dissent, RootsAction.org, Progress America, and People For the American Way drafted a [petition](#) calling for Congress to hold hearings to address the largest book ban in America, which is taking place in prisons across the country. Recently, many states and the federal system have heightened restrictions on books for people held in their custody, in an alleged attempt to prevent contraband trafficking. In Texas prisons, for instance, 10,000 books have been banned, especially those with content on civil rights, political education, and prison conditions. Book bans particularly affect people in solitary confinement, who often rely on reading material to maintain their sanity and mental stimulation. The petition calls for Congress to increase access to books for the more than 177,000 people incarcerated in the federal system and highlight the significance of the problem nationally.

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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