

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | October 21, 2018

[According](#) to the *LAist*, incarcerated people at Orange County's Theo Lacy Facility in California began a hunger strike this week in protest of the conditions at the jail, including the use of solitary confinement. Philip Sloan, currently awaiting trial at the jail, said, "We are protesting the overall treatment or mistreatment of inmates of all ethnic backgrounds. We are still human beings. We've got constitutional rights. A coordinator at the ACLU of Southern California explained that solitary is now a go-to thing to do at the jail and its implementation has become arbitrary. There is no consistency in the way it is used. While the department of corrections claimed its use of solitary follows protocol, the ACLU was told that 1,000 people held at Orange County jails have begun refusing food in protest."

The *Chicago Reporter* published an [article](#) citing recently released data from an investigation done by the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University and NPR that found women in prisons across the country face higher rates of disciplinary punishment than incarcerated men, including more time in solitary, for similar rule violations. A report released in 2010 found that incarcerated women in Illinois exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms three times more than incarcerated men, and that 98 percent of the women had experienced physical abuse prior to their incarceration. While movement toward gender-responsive corrections has gained momentum in some states, including Illinois, a study released in 2016 revealed deep gender biases among staff at Logan Correctional Center in Illinois and found, "Segregation and other highly punitive responses are being overused despite the reality that these practices trigger trauma, create troubling behaviors they are designed to eliminate, and fail to create long-term behavior change."

The *Marshall Project* published an [article](#) written by Jeremy Woody, a 48-year-old deaf man who served four years in Central State Prison in Georgia. Woody described the lack of access to American Sign Language interpreters in prison, inhibiting him from receiving proper medical care, mental health care, taking classes, participating in re-entry programs, or communicating with anyone. Woody recalled being placed in solitary after he was brought to disciplinary court with his hands shackled behind his back, preventing him from gesturing or writing. He said one guard wrote "guilty or not guilty?" on a piece of paper, but the guards refused to release Woody from his cuffs. "I wanted to write not guilty. I wanted to ask for an interpreter. But I couldn't. They said, OK, you have nothing to say? Guilty."

D.C. member of Congress Eleanor Holmes Norton has called for an investigation at the federal USP Hazelton in West Virginia, where two incarcerated people from D.C. have died in the past year, raising concerns about brutal treatment of inmates housed in the Special Housing Unit. One incarcerated man told Norton he was attacked by guards and left in solitary confinement for days, where he was unable to receive medical attention. He had indicated that the chain wrapped around his stomach made it difficult for him to breathe, [according](#) to the *Dominion Post*. Others reported experiencing brutal attacks, some while restrained. Norton pointed to the lack of adequate staff training as a factor in the mistreatment of those in custody at Hazelton.

The [ACLU of Louisiana](#) went to trial last week, along with Promise of Justice Initiative, the Southern Poverty Law Center, Cohen Milstein Sellers & Toll, the Advocacy Center of Louisiana, and attorney Jeffrey Dubner, in a case filed in 2015 against the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola for its inhumane and unconstitutional systematic denial of medical care, which the suit claims has led the state to have the highest rate of prison deaths per capita in the country. In the earliest in-depth reporting on the lawsuit and negligent medical care at Angola, Solitary Watch staff writer Katie Rose Quandt and founder Jim Ridgeway [investigated](#) the prison in 2016, reporting the stories of plaintiffs and delays in care, underqualified staff and a malingering rule that effectively punishes people for requesting medical assistance.

The Abolitionist Law Center released a [report](#) on the facts, figures, and stories of life-without-parole (LWOP) sentences, or what the report calls death-by-incarceration (DBI) sentences, specifically in Pennsylvania. The report found that DBI sentences steeply increased nationwide from 12,453 in 1992 to over 53,000 people today, with 5,300 of those people incarcerated in Pennsylvania. In one case, the report says a man with intellectual disabilities, Arthur Cetewayo Johnson, was eighteen years old when the police coerced him into signing a homicide confession, which was the only evidence used to sentence him to life without the possibility of parole. Johnson spent 37 years in solitary confinement until a judge's ruling placed him back in the general prison population. The report finds that DBI sentences disproportionately impact people of color and ultimately inflict more harm than good on individuals, families, and communities.

[According](#) to the *Crime Report*, the Campaign for Youth Justice (CFYJ) conducted a study, finding that the number of sexual assaults of children under the age of eighteen held in adult facilities across the country tripled from 8,768 in 2011 to 24,661 in 2015. While this increase may be partly attributed to greater documentation under the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), the study explained that youth are often placed in solitary with the justification of compliance with PREA rules. There is also growing recognition, the report said, that safety should not only be defined as the absence of sexual assault, but also the absence of prolonged solitary confinement, having access to mental health treatment to address depression and self-harm, and being free from other traumatic institutional policies.

The *Washington Post* published a [Letter to the Editor](#) written by the executive director of Interfaith Action for Human Rights (IAHR), Charles Feinberg, calling for an end to the use of solitary confinement in the states of Maryland and Virginia. Half of people incarcerated in Maryland prisons experienced solitary at least once last year, according to a state report, and IAHR has gathered significant anecdotal evidence that many individuals in Maryland and Virginia prisons have been in solitary for months and years, though access to accurate data on Virginia's use of solitary remains out of public reach. Feinberg says, While it may be true nationwide [that] the number of incarcerated people in solitary is decreasing, Maryland and Virginia are significant abusers of solitary confinement.

New Jersey ranked fourth in the country for the number of incarcerated people held in solitary longer than six years, according to the report published by Yale University's Arthur Liman Center and the Association of State Correctional Administrators this month. An [article](#) published by WPG Radio said the state New Jersey Department of Corrections denies using solitary confinement, but admits to using restrictive housing, another commonly used name for isolation. One man who spent five years isolated in a New Jersey prison said, Everything is extremely deteriorated rats, mice, mold. A bill previously vetoed by former Gov. Chris Christie and currently pending under Gov. Pat Murphy would prohibit the use of solitary for longer than 15 days at a time and mandate greater medical and mental health monitoring for isolated individuals.

The Center for Constitutional Rights released the [Pelican Bay Prisoners Statement on the 3rd Anniversary of the Settlement](#), referring to the settlement of the *Ashker v. Governor of California* lawsuit that mandated an end to the use of indefinite solitary confinement in the states prisons. While praising some work that has been accomplished, the statement says, Much work remains, explaining that many people transferred from the Security Housing Unit (SHU) still face the same restrictions and conditions as solitary confinement. To honor the settlement, the statement continues, we need to live in *true* general population housing units that provide adequate social interaction, outdoor time, programming, work opportunities, and preparation for release. Solitary Watch [published a detailed analysis](#) by Victoria Law of the current state of solitary in California back in July, on the fifth anniversary of the massive prison hunger strike that helped lead to the settlement.

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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