

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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close

Search

close

close

Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | November 18, 2019

Representative Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) [introduced a House Resolution](#) that she calls The Peoples Justice Guarantee, which lays out steps for a humane and effective justice system, mass decarceration, and diversionary alternatives for community safety. [According to The Appeal](#), Pressley said, The criminal legal justice system is racist, xenophobic, rogue, and fundamentally flawed beyond reform. It must be dismantled and radically transformed through a large-scale decarceration effort. Solitary confinement is addressed in several places in the resolution, the most sweeping being a call to reduce the risk of recidivism by transforming the experience of confinement by ending solitary confinement along with other changes to prison conditions. The resolution also cites the ASCA/Liman Centers figure that over 61,000 people across the United States are subjected to solitary confinement every day, isolated for 22 to 24 hours a day with little to no human interaction (a figure that, in fact, does not include people held in solitary for 14 days or less), and notes that people with disabilities and LGBTQ people are disproportionately isolated in prisons and jails.

In a [press release](#), Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) announced the introduction of a bill that would strictly limit the use of solitary confinement in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities. The legislation, called the Restricting Solitary Confinement in Immigration Detention Act, is sponsored by Durbin, Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ), and Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA), and would ban solitary for children, people with mental illness, people with disabilities, pregnant women, and other vulnerable populations held in immigration detention. The bill would also restrict the length of time anyone could spend in solitary confinement, implement alternatives to solitary, and establish oversight and transparency measures.

ProPublica [reported](#) that California Governor Gavin Newsom plans to introduce a criminal justice reform resolution in January that would administer greater power to the state to monitor local sheriffs and county jails. The announcement follows a year-long investigation by McClatchy and *ProPublica* as part of its [Overcorrection series](#) on the crisis in California's jails. The series has revealed inhumane conditions in a statewide system of jails that hold 70,000 people, many of them stretched far beyond capacity following 2011 reforms that shifted people from the overcrowded prison system to the county jails. Most recently, [the investigation found](#) a high use of solitary confinement for suicidal people held in Kern County, where people have been held in closet-sized rooms with nothing but a grate in the floor for bodily fluids and a yoga mat to sleep on. Currently, the California Board of State and Community Corrections does not monitor deaths in jail custody and has little enforcement power.

The *Seattle Times* [reported](#) that 36 of the 600 hunger strikers at Clallam Bay Corrections Center in Washington State were transferred to Walla Walla State Penitentiary, and fifteen of them were placed in the Intensive Management Unit (IMU), or solitary confinement. At Clallam Bay, people can be isolated in disciplinary segregation for a maximum of 20 days and in administrative segregation for over twice that amount of time with no infractions. Sixty-year-old Andres Pacificar was held in solitary confinement for thirteen months. The mental pain that IMU creates breaks men down, he said. You know, I used to question my existence for so long. I would talk to myself because you get used to being inside your own head and not having anyone to talk to. You're not sure [the difference between] reality and just thoughts. Where's the line?

KUOW [reported](#) that the Washington Department of Corrections has settled a lawsuit for \$500,000, which claimed that staff could have prevented the suicide of 29-year-old Morgan Bluehorse in solitary at Airway Heights Corrections Center in 2014. Bluehorse, diagnosed in prison with bipolar disorder, PTSD, severe depression, and other mental illnesses, allegedly told staff that he heard voices telling him that he was worthless and I shouldn't be living, and said I can't handle these cells alone. Bluehorse had concerns about his safety in general population and staff had identified him as high risk for victimization, but the lawsuit argued that the prison's response of placing him in solitary confinement, along with inadequate mental health care and medication, led to his death. So far this year, four deaths in Washington prisons have been reported as suicides.

Tulsa World [reported](#) that Tulsa County, Oklahoma, settled a wrongful death lawsuit for \$10 million on behalf of 37-year-old Elliot Earl Williams, who died in 2011 in the county's jail. Williams, who struggled with mental illness, died in his cell after having injured his neck from hitting his head in an isolated holding cell. The lawsuit claimed that the negligence of jail staff to provide medical care for the neck injury caused a hematoma, ultimately shutting down his spinal cord and respiratory system. A jury found the county and sheriff liable for Williams' death.

The *Sun Sentinel* published an [op-ed](#) condemning a move by Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) seeking to dismiss of a class action lawsuit filed by the Southern Poverty Law Center, Florida Legal Services, and the Florida Justice Institute. The lawsuit pushes for a ban on solitary for children in the states juvenile justice system, which twenty other states and the federal system have already implemented. The author pointed to the states history of placing children in abusive conditions, including solitary confinement. One facility, the Dozier School for Boys, reportedly held a [rape dungeon](#), placed kids in concrete solitary confinement cells with buckets for toilets, and disappeared or killed several children before it closed in 2011. According to the lawsuit, 14,000 children are placed in solitary across the state every year.

In an article published on *Medium*, Sarah Shourd discusses how she has addressed the reality of solitary confinement through a variety of media, and how each medium has had a different impact and reached a different audience. Shourd, who survived more than a year in solitary while a political hostage in Iran, spent subsequent years exposing the use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons (and was a Contributing Editor in the early days of Solitary Watch). Her interviews with dozens of people held in solitary led to articles, portions of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place*, and a play, *The BOX*. More recently, while completing a John S. Knight Fellowship at Stanford, Shourd collaborated on *Flying Kites*, a graphic novel focused on the 2013 Pelican Bay hunger strike. In her *Medium* piece, Shourd writes about how exploring different media can help journalists and authors bring fact-based stories to the audience that needs to hear them most especially important when dealing with an issue like solitary, whose subjects have been hidden away and dehumanized. She recalls one audience member who left in the middle of her play after having such a strong emotional reaction that he was drenched in sweat, despite never having been incarcerated. Studies have shown that a good story travels directly to the part of our brain that processes lived experience, Shourd writes. Story is already a bridge, traveling the very short distance between us and them, so that an experience that was once alien to us now feels almost like our own. Stories influence our behavior, the decisions we make little and large. Stories may be one of the main ways we humans evolve, and one of the main hopes for our future on this planet.

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 [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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Help isn't helping. Save the others left behind.

71 days, no phone, 10 days solitary, 2 assaults, developed pneumonia and covid-19. Released 10/9/20. Suit dropped 10/8/20!?!

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