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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 [Aviva Stahl](#) | July 31, 2016

A woman has [filed a lawsuit](#) against New York's Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), alleging that she was wrongfully thrown in solitary confinement for 90 days for having a cake knife in her cell. Pamela Smart, 48, is a former high school teacher who was convicted of convincing one of her students to kill her husband; her and her attorneys fear the disciplinary record could prevent her from being granted clemency by the New Hampshire governor.

Longtime anti-solitary activist Bonnie Kerness spoke to a [New Jersey radio station](#) about a proposed bill, that if passed would limit the use of isolation in the states prisons to 15 consecutive days. Solitary confinement is inhuman. It is torture. We are not solitary human beings, Kerness said. The Isolated Confinement Restriction Act is currently under consideration by the New Jersey State Assembly; the State Senate passed a companion bill in June.

Army whistleblower Chelsea Manning is facing potentially [indefinite solitary confinement](#) after trying to commit suicide, according to her lawyers at the American Civil Liberties Union. The charges are said to include resisting the force cell move team, prohibited property, and conduct which threatens. ACLU staff attorney Chase Strangio said, It is deeply troubling that Chelsea is now being subjected to an investigation and possible punishment for her attempt to take her life.

People incarcerated in a New York unit for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have been abused, neglected and deprived of adequate mental health services, according to lawyers from Disability Rights New York. According to the [Washington Times](#), the unit was opened as part of a settlement reached earlier this year with state officials and the New York Civil Liberties Union, which sued the state in 2011 over its use of solitary confinement for about 4,000 prisoners serving their time in 23-hour isolation at any given time in the 54-prison system.

The union president for New York City's correctional officers, Elias Husamudeen, has blamed the recent spike in violence on Rikers Island on reforms being pushed by Department of Corrections head Joe Ponte and Mayor Bill de Blasio. Husamudeen also [called on prisoners](#) who assault officers to be sent to a different jail system where punitive segregation exists, a reference to Ponte and de Blasio's efforts to reduce the use of isolation.

The former secretary of the Washington State Department of Corrections, Dan Pacholke, penned a [blog post](#) for Veras Institute of Justice about reducing the use of segregation in America's prisons. Look at who is in your segregation bedspeople who are mentally ill, for example, or involved in gangs and why they are there. Think about interventions that can be applied specifically to these populations. Start somewhere. Try something.

Aviva Stahl is a Brooklyn-based reporter who writes about science/health at the intersection of mass incarceration, national security, and trans rights. She's written for the New York Times, Wired, BuzzFeed News, Solitary Watch, and other outlets. Find her [@stahlidarity](#) and at [stahlidarity.com](#).

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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Mr. Pacholke makes a wonderful point in his blog post. Small changes can make a big difference. The reality, as he so well notes, is that some people may be in a very difficult state and may not be able to be integrated in the general population at any given time for safety reasons. However, everyone deserves humane treatment. Everyone deserves to have ample, caring social contact with staff.

People should be spoken to in a kind and respectful manner with the hopes of moving them to the general population as soon as is realistically possible. Even if someone must be in their own room for the safety of others, they should not be socially isolated. Safe ways must be found so that staff can provide them with compassionate, ample, therapeutic contact. Every person should be seen and treated as a fellow human being.

It will be much better for people to be with others if they are able to do so, but as Mr. Pacholke notes, this can sometimes take time and patience. The safety of correctional officers is extremely important. The safety of other people living in prison is extremely important. The mental well-being of people who may be in a less constructive state is also extremely important.

Small steps to reach out to people in pain will be helpful. People who are in a difficult and dangerous state are not happy people. They need care and concern. They need people to treat them in a respectful and thoughtful manner even if they need to be in their own room. No one should languish in a cell feeling forgotten by others for weeks and months at a time. No one heals this way. Small steps to create humane connections and to help people heal and grow will help everyone.

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