

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](#) | September 23, 2018

The *Tacoma News Tribune* [reported](#) that immigrants detained at the Northwest Detention Center (NWDC), an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility in Tacoma, Washington, have engaged in hunger strikes to protest separation from their children, inhumane conditions at the facility, and a forced labor program, among other concerns. Two of the hunger strikers, one of whom has refused food for nearly a month, have filed a lawsuit to prevent the use of solitary confinement and force-feeding as retaliation against strikers, but their request for a temporary order was denied in federal district court. ICE claims it has the right to force-feed hunger strikers in order to safeguard the health and well-being of its detainees, but an organizer with a local immigrants rights advocacy group [told Truthout](#), ICE could end all this by meeting the strikers demands of getting basic medical care. But they have chosen not to. No one is safe under ICE custody; no one is safe at NWDC.

The *Kitsap Sun* [reported](#) that a district court judge in Washington State ruled that 56-year-old Barry Gayle Wegers rights of due process were violated when he was kept in solitary confinement for 50 days, while his mental health treatment was delayed at Western State Hospital. The judge wrote, Describing the states treatment, or more accurately its lack of treatment, of Weger as appalling, shocking, horrifying, outrageous, or unconscionable is unnecessarily generous to the state. While in solitary, Weger, a severely mentally and physically disabled man who uses a wheelchair, reportedly smeared feces and urine on himself and expressed delusional ideas. The judge dismissed Wegers two impaired driving charges on grounds of constitutional violations.

The *Advocate* [reported](#) the mother of Jonathan Fano, a 27-year-old mentally ill man who committed suicide at East Baton Rouge Parish Prison (EBRPP) in Louisiana last year, has filed a lawsuit claiming inadequate medical care, mental health care, and staffing violated Fanos rights and led to his death. Fano was held in solitary confinement at the jail for 92 days, often allowed out of his cell for only twenty minutes a day. EBRPP, the parishes local jail, has a death rate for people in its custody two and a half times the national average, with 25 deaths between 2012 and 2016.

The deputy director of the ACLU National Prison Project, Amy Fetting, [reported](#) on the introduction of the new federal Pregnant Women in Custody Act (PWCA), which would restrict the placement of pregnant women in solitary confinement and limit the use of shackles on pregnant women in the federal system. Currently, 24 states do not have restrictions on the use of shackles on pregnant women, and incarcerated pregnant women across the country continue to face solitary. Fetting calls for greater focus on womens health care in correctional settings, where women-specific health care and basic needs are often disregarded. Fetting said, I once asked a corrections official who claimed he was reforming the practice of solitary confinement across his system why he had no reform plans for the womens unit. He looked surprised and told me he had just forgotten about the women.

In a *Washington Post* [article](#) laying out the overwhelming evidence of structural racism throughout the criminal justice system, the author cited a 2016 Yale University study that found incarcerated black people had a higher likelihood of being held in solitary confinement than incarcerated white people, in 48 jurisdictions across 45 states. Black women were found to be placed in solitary confinement even more disproportionately, making up 41 percent of the solitary confinement population but 24 percent of the female prison population. The article documented a host of other racial disparities in the criminal justice system, which is shown to systemically discriminate against black people at each stage, including policing, sentencing, pleas, bail, and incarceration.

Harpers Magazine published a [story](#) from *Six by Ten*, a new collection of oral history accounts from people who have experienced solitary confinement, set to be released in October. In his account, Brian Nelson recalls being put on the circuit, a process of constant transfers and time in solitary that lasted for seven and a half years, for refusing to become an informant to Illinois prison officials. Nelson describes the difficulty of being released directly from solitary confinement back into society in 2010 without any preparation and without any of his mental health medications.

[According](#) to the *Denver Post*, a budget committee approved \$1 million to revamp the Centennial Correctional Facility South, a facility originally designed for solitary confinement that was closed in 2012 before it had fully opened. Since Colorado has instituted reforms to drastically reduce the use of solitary, the money would go towards retrofitting the facility into a general population prison. While the Colorado Department of Corrections says it needs the facility to alleviate overcrowding, the budget committee staff analyst Vance Roper

stated that overcrowding will persist if lawmakers continue to heighten sentences and create new felonies. Christie Donner, director of the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition echoed, The overcrowding of prisons isn't an emergency that just came up. The decision to reopen the facility will be in hands of the legislature in January.

City Limits published a [commentary](#) written by a licensed mental health counselor, former corrections department captain, and professor of Criminal Justice and the Social and Behavioral Sciences, that calls for trauma-informed correctional care (TICC) as an answer to the increased levels of violence at Rikers Island in New York. The article says, The trauma of incarceration cannot be overstated. The negative psychological effects of being locked in a cage, experiencing violence seeing people murdered, being beaten by guards, or attacked by other inmates can lead to PTSD and other psychiatric disorders, and those held in solitary confinement suffer even more severe symptoms: delusions, violent outbursts, paranoia and panic attacks. Instead of perpetuating a traumatic prison environment, the article argues, addressing the trauma that both incarcerated people and correctional officers have experienced can prevent violence and intervene before individuals re-enter society in a worse position.

[According to Crime Report](#), a University of Massachusetts researcher released a study earlier this year that found that people with diagnosed mental illnesses are more likely 36 percent more likely to be placed in solitary confinement than those without mental illnesses. The researcher explained, Multiple studies have shown that those with mental health problems may be more susceptible to the negative effects of solitary confinement, thereby creating a cycle in which mentally ill offenders are put in solitary confinement due to their mental illness, which is made worse by isolation, leading to further or worsening symptomatic behavior. The study also called for more extensive research into the disproportionate use of solitary on people with mental illnesses, an issue currently lacking the necessary examination.

PBS's Religion & Ethics Newsweekly published an [article](#) discussing the role of architects in the development of solitary confinement, dating back to a British architect who developed a panoptic design for the solitary cells at Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania, where incarcerated people existed completely isolated in their individual cells, and forced to wear hoods over their faces on the rare forays outside their cells. As profiled in an accompanying television segment, architect Raphael Sperry has recently led an effort pressuring the American Institute of Architects to establish a standard in their code of ethics prohibiting architects from designing solitary confinement units. Sperry says, It's no more acceptable than designing a torture chamber, because people in [solitary] experience torture.

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 [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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