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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](#) | October 8, 2017

The Department of Homeland Security's Office of the Inspector General (IG) found in an investigation, released September 29, that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents failed to report to ICE headquarters when they place individuals with mental illness in solitary confinement. The investigation, according to an [article](#) by the Project on Government Oversight (POGO), found that ICE may be missing opportunities to use alternatives that may be better for those with mental health conditions. Tara Tidwell Cullen, from the National Immigrant Justice Center, told POGO that the IG report presents a sanitized account of the use of solitary confinement in detention centers, as immigrants have often claimed ICE uses solitary confinement for protecting the mentally ill or punishing minor perceived infractions.

The Human Rights Campaign [discussed](#) the National Center for Transgender Equality's recent report on the experience of being Black and transgender in the United States, detailing the high levels of discrimination, including disproportionately high levels of unemployment, poverty, HIV, and sexual assault. Following the release of the report, US Representative Keith Ellison introduced a congressional resolution, calling for policy changes to reflect the violence experienced by transgender women of color. The resolutions recommendations included employment protections for transgender people and an end to placing transgender people in solitary confinement.

Shaka Senghor, a man who served 19 years in prison for killing a man during a drug transaction, talked to *Vibe* about his experience in prison, the seven years he spent in solitary confinement, and his experience re-entering society. Senghor [recalled](#) seeing some of the most barbaric and inhumane environments anyone can even imagine, referring to his time in solitary. Now, Senghor fills a spot on Oprah Winfrey's new docu-series *Released*, following the lives of people recently released from prison.

The University of Connecticut Newspaper *The Daily Campus* recounted the [story](#) of formerly incarcerated individual Eddy Zheng, after his speech to U Conn students about the 21 years he spent behind bars. Zheng, a recent immigrant from China, entered prison at 16 years old, one of the youngest people in San Quentin, where he became involved in the prison community, taking classes and playing in the band. After petitioning for Asian American Studies to be added to the prison curriculum, Zheng received 11 months in solitary confinement. Since his release, Zheng has spoken out about the immigration to school to prison to deportation pipeline and founded the *Restoring Our Original True Selves* (ROOTS) program.

The Root recounted an [incident](#) in 2013 at Spring Creek Correctional Facility in Seward, Alaska, according to a report filed to the Office of the Ombudsman. After one incarcerated man intentionally broke his shower head and flooded the unit, a corrections officer pepper-sprayed him and gave him 40 days in solitary confinement, according to the report. Eleven other men, who had cheered when the unit was flooded, were ordered to strip naked, placed on dog leashes, and forced to remain without clothes for 12 hours in an area kept at a temperature of 50 degrees and covered with debris, blood and feces. While the Alaska Department of Corrections did not dispute any of the allegations, no officer has been charged for the incident.

Colorlines [interviewed](#) author and forensic psychiatrist Terry Kupers, who began as a physician for a Black Panther Party clinic in South Central LA. Following a COINTELPRO and LAPD raid on their office, Kupers visited his patients in the LA County Jail Hospital Ward and saw the horrid conditions. Kupers described the relevance of race to the issue of solitary confinement, noting an unfortunate national trend to send White prisoners to mental-health treatment for the same rule-breaking behaviors that get Blacks placed in SHU. Kupers also expressed his concern with the Trump administration's favoring of private prisons, insistence on harsher sentencing, and upsurge in detention of immigrants. Kupers recently released a new book *Solitary: The Inside Story of Supermax Isolation and How We Can Abolish It*.

The *Argus Leader* reported that James Elmer Shaw, a man serving a 40-year sentence in South Dakota, filed a lawsuit against prison administrators for indifference to his post-surgical medical needs. Shaw alleges that directly following a knee surgery, he was placed in solitary confinement for three days, instead of in the handicap cell necessary for proper recovery. Shaw was again placed in solitary confinement after he expressed desire to file a complaint against the prison administrators for this treatment. Shaw [alleges](#) that prison administrators violated the Eighth Amendment's protection from cruel and unusual punishment, while the prison claims not to have been

aware of his medical records. U.S. District Judge Karen Schreier ruled that: a cell search paired with being placed in the SHU could be considered an adverse action that would chill an ordinary person from taking part in a protected activity.

Playwright Alessandro Camon [discusses](#) with *Theatermania* the inspiration and purpose for his new play *Time Alone*. After meeting hundreds of people incarcerated in the prison system of California, including Pelican Bay SHU, Camon decided to tell a story of walls, division, incarceration, isolation, trauma, and humanity. The play takes two characters in solitary confinement, with different stories and worldviews, and merges their stories into something beyond loneliness. Camon explains, Prison alone is not the solution in fact, it perpetuates divisions that result in further crime. We need to do better.

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.

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by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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