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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 7, 2019

A groundbreaking and disturbing new [study](#) published by the JAMA Network found that people held in solitary confinement during their incarceration had a significantly higher likelihood of dying within the first year of their release back into the community. The study used data from the North Carolina Department of Public Safety tracking nearly 230,000 incarcerated people in a state prison between 2000 and 2015. Based on the study, *Inverse* [reported](#) that people held in solitary were 24 percent more likely to die within a year after their release than people not held in solitary. Seventy-eight percent of the people who died committed suicide and 54 percent were murdered. Additionally, people held in solitary were 127 percent more prone to die from an opioid overdose within the first two weeks of being released.

[According](#) to Houston Public Media, the Texas Civil Rights Project released a new [report](#), *Torture by Another Name: Solitary Confinement in Texas*, that found the Texas prison system, in May 2019, held over 4,000 people in solitary confinement, most of whom have been there for years. About 2,000 people in Texas are held in solitary as alleged security threats, and the study shows prison officials often have little to no evidence to back such allegations. The author of the report, Meagan Harding, said, Texas holds more people in long-term solitary confinement, so six years or more, than all the other states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons combined.

The *Clayton News Daily* [reported](#) that the state of Georgia signed into law the Georgia Dignity Act, which aims to protect the rights of incarcerated pregnant women. The law prohibits, for pregnant and postpartum women, the use of solitary confinement and limits the use of restraints and strip searches, among other restrictions. The law also requires correctional facilities to provide access to feminine hygiene products and women-specific medical information to incarcerated women. The law went into effect on October 1. [According](#) to the *Root*, five states still allow women to be shackled during and after labor.

The *Appeal* [reported](#) that the director of the Oklahoma Department of Corrections, Scott Crow, responded to a letter from advocacy and legal organizations in July, which called for the 44 people held on Oklahomas death row H Unit to be removed from the current conditions of indefinite solitary confinement. In his response [letter](#), Crow agreed to move all qualifying death row inmates within a month to another unit with greater access to natural light and view of the outdoors as well as contact visitation. An attorney with the Prison Law Office, Corene Kendrick, said, The letter doesnt explain what qualifying means, so we will need to get more information about what the criteria will be. Additionally, even those who qualify will be continue to be denied congregate religious services until the department makes further deliberations.

The *Bellingham Herald* [reported](#) that the family of Shannon Rose Jefferson, a 36-year-old Lummi tribal member and mother of six children, settled a wrongful death lawsuit with Whatcom County in Washington State for \$350,000. Jefferson died by suicide in 2014 while she was being held in solitary confinement at the Whatcom County Jail on a charge of failing to appear in court. The lawsuit claims Jeffersons death could have been prevented if the jail had provided a proper mental health evaluation and had not neglected her in an isolated cell for 23 hours a day. Records show that jail officials were aware of Jeffersons mental health needs and history of suicidal behavior. The county claimed no responsibility in the settlement, but the Jefferson familys lawyer said, There is no question that Whatcom County can do better much, much better to protect the lives of the people in its custody. Native American and mentally ill citizens, in particular, deserve much more humane treatment.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* [reported](#) that the suicide rate in California prisons surpassed the national average for both state prisons and federal prisons in the past two years. In 2018, 34 people died by suicide across the California prison system, averaging three suicides a month. Already this year, 26 people have committed suicide, according to attorney Michael Bien. One incarcerated man, James East, recalled hearing his neighbors body thump in the adjacent solitary cell, only to find out staff had done nothing until the following day when East pointed out his neighbors dead, hanged body. Despite having a history of suicidal attempts and recent suicidal ideations, the man, Hector Martinez, was neglected and left in that cell to die, wrote East. Placing people with a high risk of suicide in solitary is a typical response, according to advocate and attorney Keith Wattley, but Its absolutely the case that people are discouraged from seeking help, and so they dont, and so they hurt themselves, said Wattley.

The *Phoenix New Times* published a shattering [feature story](#) about a 17-year-old girl who now faces being tried and imprisoned as an

adult in Arizona after she allegedly attacked a juvenile corrections officer. The article traces the story of Breanna Gonzales, a girl of Cherokee and Mexican descent, back to the multiple instances of rape and physical abuse she endured in her early teens. She was placed in various juvenile facilities for status offenses such as running away or violating probation, and there, instead of receiving adequate treatment for her trauma, she was often re-traumatized by being put in separation, a form of solitary confinement, or the chair, which restrained her arms and legs. The article calls Gonzales's experience an example of the abuse to the prison pipeline faced by many teen girls, especially girls of color.

Valerie Kieba 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](#)

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by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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