

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](#) | October 22, 2017

East Bay Express [reported](#) that as of Friday, October 20, 125 out of 412 individuals incarcerated in Glenn Dyer Jail in Oakland had entered their sixth day of a hunger strike. At the forefront of the demands is an end to indefinite solitary confinement. While the Alameda County Sheriffs Office spokesperson claims isolation is necessary for safety reasons, the participants in the strike, many of whom belong to the group Prisoners United, wrote, Literally we are being silenced. We have been deprived from all forms of social oxygen, with no contact with another human being for weeks at a time. The [full list of demands](#) can be read in *The Mercury News*, which [also reported](#) that individuals jailed Santa Clara County had plans to join the hunger strike.

Governor Andrew Cuomo [announced](#) new regulations for the use of solitary confinement in the New York jail system. The proposal, which has been approved by the State Commission of Correction, calls for all persons held in isolation to receive at least four hours outside their cells per day, heightened review of the isolation of children and pregnant women, and a report to the State Commission of Correction for any essential services denied to any individual. New York also instituted incremental reductions in the use of solitary in state prisons following the 2015 settlement of a lawsuit brought by the New York Civil Liberties Union. Despite these changes, the state still utilizes solitary confinement at levels well above the national average, according to the [New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement](#), an advocacy group pushing for passage of a bill that would place stricter limits on the use of isolation in both prisons and jails.

The Southern Poverty Law Center [published](#) a complaint filed against Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials on behalf of a 19-year-old Honduran immigrant who has been kept in solitary confinement in Georgias Stewart Detention Center in response to his pleas for protection from relentless sexual harassment and bullying by both guards and other detainees. The young man left Honduras due to the repeated threats he received for being gay, but he said, The discrimination I experience at Stewart is worse than what I experienced in Honduras. It happens more often, and being in detention, I cant escape my harassers. Despite expressing his struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts, he was placed in solitary confinement directly across from a cell in which another individual had recently committed suicide. The complaint asserts that this use of solitary confinement violates DHSs own detention standards.

Oprah Winfrey recently visited Pelican Bay State Prison, where thousands of individuals were held in solitary confinement for years or decades, and shared her experience in a segment on 60 Minutes. In the CBS [transcript](#) of her segment, Corrections Secretary Scott Kernan, UC Santa Cruz psychology professor Craig Haney, and Clyde Jackson, who was held in isolation in Pelican Bay for 24 years, all expressed the view that the isolation in Pelican Bay failed to properly achieve its original goal of addressing the gang problem and reducing violence in Californias prisons. According to Kernan, That was a policy that was intended to save lives and make prisons safer across the system. It was a mistake, in retrospect, as we look back.

A criminal justice reform bill introduced in the Massachusetts State Senate would demand greater accountability in the reviewing process for those in solitary confinement. If passed, [according](#) to the *Boston Globe*, the bill would mandate hearings every six months for individuals held in solitary confinement, and would require the state to release a report every three months detailing the population in solitary confinement. Currently, Massachusetts law allows incarcerated individuals to be held in solitary confinement for up to 10 years. Leslie Walker of Prisoners Legal Services of Massachusetts deems the potential law a great, hopeful step forward, but also wants the bill to lessen the maximum amount of time people are allowed to spend in solitary. There is no evidence that shows this long-term punishment improves anyone, she stated.

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) filed a brief in federal court last week against the Alabama Department of Corrections for subjecting individuals with mental health concerns to solitary confinement. The SPLCs [announcement](#) of the brief cited U.S. District Court Judge Myron Thompson, who declared the Alabama prison mental health care system horrendously inadequate. The brief highlighted the correlation between solitary confinement and the increased rate of suicide.

Umar Farouk Abdulmatallab, who pled guilty in 2012 to attempting to detonate a bomb hidden in his underwear while on a Detroit-bound plane, filed a federal lawsuit for religious discrimination and the denial of his Constitutional rights at ADX, the supermax prison in Florence, Colorado, where he has been housed in extreme solitary confinement under Special Administrative Measures (SAMs) that

further restrict his communications. As [reported](#) by the *New York Times*, Abdulmatallab asserts that he has been fed non-Halal food and denied the opportunity for group prayer and access to an imam. When he went on hunger strike in protest, he was force-fed through a tube. The suit also claims that guards at ADX permitted white supremacist men held in the unit to curse, yell, scream, and say things that are religiously insulting and offensive to Muslims; displayed pornography to Abdulmatallab while he was attempting to pray; and defiled his prayer rug and Quran while searching his cell.

A *Wisconsin State Journal* [editorial](#) expressed support for aspects of a proposed \$76 million renovation of the Dane County Jail in Madison, awaiting debate among county officials. The proposal includes a decrease in jail beds overall and an increase in mental health beds and medical beds, as alternatives to housing individuals with mental health complications in solitary confinement. Citing a recent *New York Times* op-ed by Rick Raemisch, a former Dane County sheriff who now heads the Colorado Department of Corrections, the editorial notes: Inmates held for weeks in small, solitary rooms are more likely to reoffend And thats a direct threat to public safety because the vast majority of offenders are eventually released.

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 [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 26, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

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by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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