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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](#) | January 13, 2020

The *Associated Press* [reported](#) that the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Mississippi NAACP, and the ACLU of Mississippi wrote a letter to the U.S. Department of Justice, calling for immediate intervention in the acute and undeniable crises, with five deaths in just the last ten days, and a history of preventable deaths and injuries. Rap figurehead Jay-Z and artist Yo Gotti also threatened to sue the governor and head of corrections, [according](#) to the *Clarion Ledger*. Eight Mississippi correctional facilities were kept on lockdown last week, which the letter describes as conditions amounting to solitary confinement without access to basic privileges including recreation, showers, and visitation. Mississippi State Penitentiary remains on lockdown. Governor Phil Bryant agreed with a federal investigation, but also said that criminals and gangs need to be investigated. Benny Ivey, who spent eleven years incarcerated in the state and had been involved in a prison gang, said, The fact of the matter is, if you aint treated like animals, you wont act like an animal.

In a related story, Kenneth Daggans [told](#) WLOX about his eight years in solitary confinement at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm. With no mops or brooms, Daggans said they had to clean their own cells with toilet water. There was just a lack of human rights a lack of sanitation. The inhumanity of these conditions, he said, only leave room for people to be violent towards each other and cause this type of strife, you know these types of incidents that has taken place. No, its not all gangs. Solitary Watch [reported](#) on the severity of the conditions in the supermax Unit 32 at Parchman back in 2010. Recent videos and photos recorded inside Unit 32 and [published](#) on *Newsone*, reveal that not much has changed for people held in solitary at Parchman.

The *Associated Press* [reported](#) that advocates rallied at the New York State Capitol last week, calling for lawmakers to pass the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act. The bill would ban the use of solitary confinement for longer than fifteen days. While the correctional officers union continues to oppose the bill, Senator Brad Hoylman said, Were faced with a system where we have mindless approaches to incarceration that punish people for no reason whatsoever. And Jerome Wright, an organizer with the Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement and survivor of solitary, [told](#) WBFO, Its like taking somebody and locking them up. And then putting them in the bathroom and saying on top of you being restricted from going anywhere else, you have to stay in this bathroom. The watchdog Justice Center found that eight prisons, of the 25 they inspected, were in violation of existing regulations on solitary confinement.

KJZZ dedicated a radio show [segment](#) to discussing with journalist Terry Greene Sterling and criminologist Jose Ashford the excessive incarceration and isolation of people with serious mental illness in Arizona. Greene Sterling covered the case of Adrian Perez, a man with schizophrenia, who has been held at the Cochise County jail at least sixteen times in the past thirteen years, many times held in solitary confinement 23 hours out of the day. Greene Sterling said, His story is not a story of an outlier. Its a story of what happens over and over again with people with serious mental illness [SMI] in the American criminal justice system. Ashford explained that holding people with SMI in solitary causes their psychosis to get much worse. He said, All the things that psychiatrists work on to help people with SMI function, like normal communication and all that [In solitary], you dont communicate in the normal way. You might bang on bars or scream and shout. So thats very harmful.

ProPublica [reported](#) that California Governor Gavin Newsom included in his 2020 budget proposal a plan to strengthen the states oversight of county jails, calling on the Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) to take stronger actions with facilities that violate standards. Newsom also called for the current standards to be amended to align with national best practices. Margot Mendelson, an attorney with the Prison Law Office, said the current standards are egregiously inadequate, specifically regarding solitary confinement. An investigation released by *McClatchy* and *ProPublica* found there are no standards restricting the use of solitary confinement on people with mental illness held in county jails. The California State Sheriffs Association, who halted a bill last year to increase the power oversight groups wield over sheriffs, said it is reviewing Newsoms budget proposal.

Valerie Kiebala 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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