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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](#) | September 2, 2019

The ACLU of Virginia [announced](#) that a lawsuit against the Virginia Department of Corrections (VDOC) has moved forward, after Federal District Court Judge Robert Payne dismissed an attempt by the VDOC to dismiss the suit. The lawsuit, filed on behalf of Nicolas Reyes, a Hispanic man who spent over twelve years in solitary confinement at Red Onion State Prison, claims his illiteracy in English prevented him from participating in the step-down program. Reyes extended time in solitary constitutes cruel and unusual punishment, says the lawsuit, and violated his rights of due process and equal protection, leading to psychological and physical damage. ACLU attorney Vishal Agraharkar said, Mr. Reyes complete isolation because of his limited English compounded the harm he faced in a prison that made little to no effort to provide services in his native tongue.

The *Hartford Courant* [reported](#) on a U.S. District Court judges [ruling](#) that Richard Reynolds has faced cruel and unusual punishment on death row at Northern Correctional Institution in Connecticut. After the death penalty was ruled unconstitutional in Connecticut, Reynolds was re-sentenced to a lifetime of incarceration without the possibility of parole. In the lawsuit, Reynolds says he has lived in solitary confinement for 23 years in the most restrictive conditions, as a special circumstances inmate. Reynolds claims the isolation constituted psychological torture and he had to endure unhygienic conditions when, on multiple occasions, his cell would flood with waste and fecal matter. The judge ordered the state to allow Reynolds to interact with other incarcerated people and to allow him contact visits, with any damages to be determined in a future hearing.

VICE News published an [article](#) examining the lack of preparation provided to people released from the most isolating federal prison in the country, the ADX Florence supermax in Colorado. According to Bureau of Prisons (BOP) data, 82 people have been released directly from segregation at ADX or other high-security facilities to the community, which likely does not count many people who briefly transfer to another prison before release. While ADX does have a step-down process, many people described getting kicked out of the program for violations, and never being able to reach completion. Several people interviewed recalled the severe psychological damage they experienced or witnessed at ADX and recalled the massive obstacles to successfully returning to society, after years or decades of basically no human interaction. One man said, I went there as a violent person, but leaving there I was ten times more violent. There's no rehabilitation. None. They got all these stupid little courses you take. They're meaningless. It doesn't help you. It doesn't help you when you get out of prison.

The Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting in partnership with ProPublica published an [article](#) on conditions inside Mississippi prisons, including the South Mississippi Correctional Institution (SMCI), which has now been locked down for nearly seven months. Several stories of gangs running the prison reveal a dangerously violent environment for incarcerated people as well as staff. Part of what allows the Mississippi prison system to be a Gangland, as one victim of gang violence called it, is the exceptionally low pay for correctional officers and the record low ratios of officers to incarcerated people. As staffing levels have dropped, prisons now rely heavily on lockdowns, holding people in solitary confinement without a charge or end date. Besides the well-known damage it causes to people in isolation, Mississippi Corrections Commissioner Pelicia Hall said that the extended lockdowns even create an unsafe environment for my staff.

Huffington Post published the [story](#) of Mariam Abdullah, a teenager who committed suicide in July of 2016 at Perryville Prison in Arizona after spending years of her life isolated in solitary confinement. Abdullah had fled Iraq with her family years before and suffered an immense amount of trauma, developing a mood disorder, bipolar disorder, and narcissistic personality disorder, and attempting suicide fifteen times. Despite this, Abdullah was placed in solitary confinement, where she began experiencing hallucinations, visualizing jungle animals on the walls. Instead of receiving the mental health care and monitoring needed to address her serious mental illness, Abdullah was constantly brought back and forth between solitary confinement and suicide watch. Arizona ranks sixth in the country for the highest use of solitary confinement, and in the past couple of years, the state has documented an increase in suicides, suicide attempts, and self-harm in its state prisons. Most recently, two suicides occurred in Arizona prisons July, including one at Perryville.

The Intercept and *The Takeaway* conducted an [investigation](#) into the death of 40-year-old Mexican immigrant Efrain Romero de la Rosa last July at Stewart Detention Center in Georgia, which is run by CoreCivic under contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The investigation found that staff had neglected to take into account Romero's mental illness, which should have prevented him

from being held several times in solitary confinement. The Romero family's attorney said the beginning of a deterioration was seen with his first fifteen days in solitary. While Romero's documented schizophrenia met the criteria for a special vulnerability under ICE policy, staff failed to record this, and even after a social worker determined Romero to have a serious mental illness, he was placed in solitary for the last time, where he hanged himself. An attorney with Project South, Azadeh Shahshahani, said, ICE and CoreCivic failed Efran de la Rosa at every step. This horrific facility needs to be immediately shut down. Romero's death came fourteen months after the suicide of 27-year-old Jeancarlo Jimenez-Joseph at the same facility.

The New Republic published a [report](#) on ICE's Krome Service Processing Center in Miami, presenting a contrasting image to the facility's self-proclaimed reputation as a state-of-the-art center with stellar medical and mental health services, in compliance with ICE policy and U.S. laws. While the Krome Transitional Unit (KTU) has boosted the facility's image for its mental health services, Krome also holds another, more hidden psychiatric ward, as well as a Segregated Housing Unit (SHU) and isolated suicide watch cells. The SHU holds people in solitary confinement for 20 hours a day, mostly for disciplinary infractions, and half of the people isolated there have a mental illness. Bud Conlin, founder of Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees, explained that people are sent to solitary at Krome for trivial or subjective infractions, such as accidentally breaking a razor or a confrontation with a guard. That can be a serious mistake, Conlin said, because people who go into solitary often develop and some already have serious mental problems.

Fox42 [reported](#) that the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center (YRTC) in Nebraska has been closed, after lawmakers found girls living in abusive conditions and solitary confinement on an unannounced visit. One mother said that her fifteen-year-old daughter was only there a month, and in that short month, she spent over 15 days of that month in her own confinement, in a room with no electricity. She was found to be in there with no mattress, no pillow and no blanket. Another mother said, Some of these girls, when in room confinement, they would bang on doors for hours on end just to use the bathroom and nobody would come. In one instance my daughter had to use the sink that was in the room confinement. Since the facility's closure, the girls have been transferred to a boys facility, though mothers still question the treatment and safety of their daughters there. Lawmakers will hold a review of juvenile and psychiatric state facilities across the state in October.

[According](#) to NBC4, New York state officials have released a proposal that would reduce the maximum stay in solitary confinement to 30 days over the next three years, in prisons and jails across the state. The proposal drew upon a plan originally put forward by Governor Andrew Cuomo and legislative leaders in place of the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act, which would have taken immediate steps to limit the use of solitary confinement to fifteen days and implement effective alternatives. Advocates say that the new rules must be enacted sooner than proposed. Three years is too long, said #HALTsolitary Campaign advocate Jack Davis. The #HALTsolitary Campaign responded to the proposal, saying that it will leave many vulnerable New Yorkers behind.

Raw Story [reported](#) that Ali Qandah, a Muslim man who spent ten months at the St. Charles County Jail in Missouri, has filed a lawsuit against the county for the violence, discrimination, and isolation he faced during his time at the jail. Qandah claims that officers aided another incarcerated man in attacking him and placed Qandah in solitary confinement for eight months based on his religious identity. Qandah recalls solitary confinement was like death, but you're still breathing. Qandah's lawyer said, They treat people there like animals. The people who are doing it are openly racist and the county doesn't care.

The *Washington Post* published an [op-ed](#) written by Ellen Gallagher, a whistleblower working for the Department of Homeland Security, who publicly disclosed the widespread use of solitary across Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in violation of federal policy. Gallagher points out that many of the 680 workers arrested in the recent worksite raids will likely be subjected to abuses once they reach the detention centers, where people are held in solitary for reasons ranging from insolence to spitting to having a cell phone to attempted horseplay or failure to follow an order. A [new report](#) by the Project on Government Oversight revealed that 40 percent of immigrants held in solitary confinement struggle with mental illness and in 4,000 of the examined cases, the immigrant was isolated for over 15 days. Gallagher calls on DHS to enforce its own standards. Failure to act, she wrote, in the face of overwhelming evidence of abuse amounts to the enabling of, if not complicity with, indefensible and deliberate harm.

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](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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