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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](#) | February 11, 2019

As temperatures in New York dropped to ten degrees last week, the Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC) in Brooklyn facility operated by the federal Bureau of Prisons that houses 1,600 mostly pretrial individuals lost power and administrators locked down the facility for several days, leaving many detained individuals without heat, lighting, warm meals, clean clothing, medical assistance, visitation, or legal counsel. The executive director of Federal Defenders of New York even relayed reports of people being locked in solitary as retaliation against their cries for help during the crisis. U.S. Member of Congress Jerry Nadler was struck by the absolute lack of urgency or caring on the part of leadership when he visited the facility. The sister of one incarcerated person [told](#) the *Huffington Post*, It happens all the time [MDC] isn't like any other prison. It's designed to break you.

The *Associated Press* [reported](#) that immigration officials have force-fed six of the individuals held at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) El Paso Processing Center in Texas, who have been hunger striking for about a month, in protest of mistreatment by guards and prolonged detention. Detained immigrants say that nearly 30 people have been participating in the hunger strike, though ICE claims the number of El Paso participants is eleven, in addition to four at other facilities. An attorney representing one of the hunger strikers explained the retaliation faced by hunger strikers: They are put into solitary confinement and then the ICE officers kind of psychologically torture them. The involuntary nasal tubes have caused bleeding and vomiting, but a federal judge authorized the force-feeding of people held at El Paso last month.

The *Montgomery Advertiser* [reported](#) that the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) declared a suicide and mental illness crisis in Alabama state prisons, since thirteen incarcerated people have committed suicide in the last fourteen months. SPLC attorney Maria Morris said that most of the suicides have occurred in solitary confinement, including the death of Paul Ford, who committed suicide at Kilby Correctional Facility on January 17. Ford had previously tried to kill himself in segregation at Holman prison, after which he was placed on suicide watch but then returned to his previous cell with the noose still hanging in it. When he was transferred to Kilby, his history of mental illness was not flagged. Following Ford's death, U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson ordered the state to provide information on any person with serious mental illness housed in solitary, but the state has failed to provide the information within the judge's deadline.

Families, community members, and advocacy organizations have called for a U.S. Department of Justice investigation into the deaths of Shali Tilson and Jamie Henry at the Rockdale County Jail in Georgia last year. [According](#) to the *Rockdale & Newton Citizen*, 22-year-old Tilson died of dehydration after allegedly being placed in solitary confinement instead of receiving treatment for his mental health crisis. Forty-year-old Henry was allegedly found dead at the facility less than two days after she was arrested.

[According](#) to the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, former sheriff's major Nancy Evans pled no contest and was found guilty of felony conduct for her role in the death of 38-year-old Terrill Thomas at the Milwaukee County Jail in April 2016. Thomas died from dehydration six days after the water had been turned off in his solitary confinement cell at the jail. The court ruled that Evans lied about her knowledge of surveillance footage in the interest of keeping her job. Thomas was one of [at least four people](#), including one baby, who died at the jail while it was under the supervision of former Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke.

Shadowproof [reported](#) that negotiations between the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the hunger strikers of the 3C unit at California State Prison, Corcoran, may now be falling apart, since the majority of the protesters' six demands have been denied. Their first demand is for an end to the indefinite lockdown that began in September, following a violent incident they claim was provoked by prison guards. The men held in the 3C unit have only been given one to three hours in the recreation yard per week, rather than the 10 hours a week they are supposed to receive. Over 250 men participated in the hunger strike, which officially ended on January 28, and families have organized a protest outside the facility and circulated a petition calling for an end to the lockdown.

A recent report by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of the Inspector General report documented 14,000 cases of contractor violations at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities, including incidents of sexual assault and use of tear gas. But it found that with the exception of just two cases, ICE consistently gave the contractor waivers instead of fines. Activists say that

GEO Group, the contractor that operates the Denver Ice Detention Facility in Aurora, fails to provide adequate health care and forces detained immigrants to work with little to no pay, often under the threat of solitary confinement. Jeanette Vizguerra, who has been detained at the Aurora facility, described the treatment as a violation of our human rights, [according](#) to ABCs Denver7 affiliate.

The *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* published an [opinion piece](#) calling for the abolition of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, noting the rampant mistreatment of immigrants that occurs at many ICE facilities. At Irwin County Detention Center in Georgia, Eduardo Samaniego was placed in solitary confinement, or suicide watch, for more than two weeks, where he failed to receive mental health care, proper medical care, or even a mattress. At the Irwin facility, immigrants are placed in both administrative and punitive solitary confinement, including one group of immigrants placed in solitary for six months for organizing a protest. At another ICE facility in Georgia, Stewart Detention Center, two immigrants with mental illnesses committed suicide in solitary in the past two years.

KQED radio published an [article](#) from CALmatters reporting that close to a third of incarcerated people in California have a serious mental illness, according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). In the past five years, the 60 percent increase of people deemed incompetent to stand trial has left people waiting months or years in jail before ever reaching a state hospital. Disability Rights California filed a lawsuit against Sacramento County, claiming that it placed people with mental illness in solitary confinement and inflicted dangerous, inhumane and degrading conditions. The lead plaintiff, Lorenzo Mays, sat in the county's jail for eight years waiting to be declared competent. Though a mental health court in Santa Clara County, aiming to connect psychiatrically disabled people with services, has spread to other counties since its inception in 2013, these courts only reach a fraction of Californians with mental illness.

Rewire.News [reported](#) that Candice Crowder, a 33-year-old Black transgender woman, recently filed a lawsuit against the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), claiming that in response to Crowder's sexual assault and physical abuse, prison staff placed her in solitary confinement, beat her, and housed her in proximity of her abuser. Crowder's lawyer says, Candice's story is not unique. According to a 2007 study, in comparison to the 4.4 percent of other incarcerated people who reported experiencing sexual assault in prison, 59 percent of trans women said they were sexually assaulted. The lawsuit calls for the CDCR to comply with Prison Rape Elimination Act standards, as well as provide Crowder with medical treatment and transfer her to California Medical Facility.

The *Frederick News-Post* [reported](#) that four bills were introduced to the Maryland General Assembly last week aiming to reform the state's use of solitary confinement, or restrictive housing. Senate Bill 809 would ban the placement of pregnant women in solitary and Senate Bill 774 would ban the placement of youth under the age of 18 in solitary without good cause. The Maryland Correctional Institution for Women currently places pregnant women in the infirmary, where they are only allowed out of their cells for 60 to 90 minutes a day and are denied natural light, proper nutrition, and health socialization. The two other proposed bills would restrict the length of consecutive stays in solitary and prevent people from being released to society directly from solitary.

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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