

# 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](#) | December 28, 2020

*USA Today* published an [opinion piece](#) by solitary survivors Johnny Perez, Jack Morris, and Pamela Winn, all of whom now advocate for the rights of incarcerated people. All three recounted their own experiences being trapped in prison for the holidays. Perez, the director of the U.S. Prisons Program at the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, said that while many people in society are missing their extended family members for the holidays because of the pandemic, This year, approximately 300,000 incarcerated people will spend their holidays in solitary, more alone than anyone else could be. Perez pointed out that the most humane solution to the virus is releasing people who are especially vulnerable and do not pose a risk to public safety. But our leaders continue to ignore the humanity of the incarcerated and place them in situations that can turn any prison sentence into a death sentence, Perez wrote.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* [reported](#) that the family of Tyrone Briggs filed a lawsuit against the state for Briggs death in solitary confinement at the State Correctional Institution Mahanoy in Pennsylvania on November 11, 2019. According to the lawsuit, correctional officers used an extraordinary and unjustifiable amount of pepper spray on Briggs who was overheard saying, I cant breathe. Instead of receiving proper medical care for his asthma attack, officers placed Briggs in solitary confinement, where he stopped breathing and died. Briggs was serving a 15 to 30-year sentence for a crime he committed when he was fifteen years old. Briggs mother said, My sons loss is a great deal to my whole family. Well never get a chance to experience him as an adult.

The *Portsmouth Herald* [reported](#) that the York County Jail in Maine faced a coronavirus outbreak, after a staff member exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms was allowed to work for five days in two separate jail units. York County Sheriff Bill King said that wearing a mask was not required and was not a regular occurrence at the jail prior to the outbreak. Twenty-nine year old Ian Barwise recalled being moved from his cellalong with four othersinto the medical unit, after they apparently had tested positive. Barwise said, The jail will not answer any of my questions regarding the COVID situation, and they wont let us inform our families. They have just thrown us into solitary confinement without anything to doNot knowing what time it is and having the lights always on can make a person start to lose themselves.

[According](#) to *Truthout*, the Free Alabama Movement (FAM) has announced a 30-day blackout prison strike across Alabama around the New Year in hopes of sparking national change. Swift Justice, an organizer held in the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC), said people on the states death row and in administrative segregation will participate in the hunger strike. A lawsuit filed this month by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) claims that the ADOC is violating the 8th and 14th Amendments by failing to protect incarcerated people from excessive force, sexual abuse, violence, and retaliation. Swift Justice said, Nobody is going to come and save us from this. So the simple fact is, we got to care and if we dont care, nobody else is going to care.

The New York *Daily News* [reported](#) that 40-year-old Felix Collazo was sent to solitary confinement after he spoke out to the *Daily News* about the conditions in Unit 73 at Brooklyns Metropolitan Detention Center. Public defender Robert Radick, representing Collazo, said, It appears that Mr. Collazo was moved into administrative segregation almost immediately after (and likely as a result of) the publication of an article in the New York Daily News [that] recounted Mr. Collazos candid first-hand observations of the conditions in the jail, the lack of adequate medical care, and the absence of preventative measures amidst the recent COVID-19 outbreak. Radick said that the jail used solitary confinement to retaliate against his client for having exercised his First Amendment right to openly discuss what is a gravely important matter of fundamental public concern.

The *Texas Observer* published an [article](#) about the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ)s handling of the pandemic in its prisons. Ricky Hernandez was 26 years old on May 22, 2020 when he was found unresponsive and hanging in his solitary confinement cell at the Coffield Unit. Hernandezs family routinely visited him, since he struggled with mental illness and the visits would cheer him up. While his family still has not gotten answers from the Office of the Inspector General, Hernandezs neighbor told his family that officers had failed to check on Hernandez in the hours leading up to his death. While TDCJ is testing a pilot program for video visits in certain prisons, this program still excludes several prisons and family members. Prison oversight expert Michele Deitch said there is now a mental health crisis inside Texas prisons. This has been such a traumatizing experience for so many people. The fear, the anxiety, the fact that people are seeing more of their cellmates die, said Deitch.

*Dig Boston* published an [article](#) telling the stories of women held at Massachusetts Correctional Institution Framingham and the neglect and abuse they face inside. One woman named Connie Garcia, formerly incarcerated at Framingham, described the deterioration of her mental health. I had a nervous breakdown because I was young and they gave me ten years. My best friend died there. She committed suicide. Then, instead of receiving mental health care, Connie said she was sent to solitary confinement and placed in a four-point restraint. They tie you up, handcuff you, your feet and your hands and video you. It was like animal treatment, she said. An investigation conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice found that the Massachusetts Department of Corrections routinely violates the constitutional rights of incarcerated people by providing inadequate health care and sending people to solitary for prolonged periods of time.

WHYY [reported](#) that a U.S. district judge ruled that incarcerated people in Philadelphia must be allowed outside of their cells for a minimum of 45 minutes each day and ordered the city to provide testing for all its incarcerated residents and jail staff. But advocates say some people have reported only getting 20 minutes or less out of their cells per day since early December. At a city council hearing, lawmakers expressed concerns about the city placing sick people in solitary confinement as well as the city charging family members for video visitation. Councilmember Cindy Bass said that using solitary confinement for quarantine is absolutely unacceptable considering its extreme psychological effects. She said, There's got to be another way. So far, one incarcerated person and one staffer have died from the coronavirus in Philadelphia.

Florida Prisoner Solidarity [reported](#) that the Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC) has been sending people to solitary confinement—namely elderly Black men—who have spoken out against violent conditions in prison. Keith Soanes, incarcerated at Florida State Prison, is currently held in a close management unit, another name for solitary confinement. While Soanes never received a disciplinary infraction, he was accused of encouraging disturbances and unrest type activities. No evidence was ever presented, but officials pointed to his ideological alignment with the Black Panther Party as proof of gang affiliation. Soanes has been confined to a 97 cell for 24 hours a day, and he is only allowed one phone call per month and is barred from visits. So far, there have been almost 200 deaths in Florida prisons related to the coronavirus, according to Florida Prisoner Solidarity.

*Grist* published an [article](#) about Solitary Gardens, an art project by Jackie Summell that invites people in solitary confinement or solitary gardeners to design a garden plot with flowers or vegetables that volunteers on the outside plant and nurture. Summell conceived the project after Herman Wallace, one of the Angola 3 who spent over 40 years in solitary at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, died three days following his release from prison. Each garden measures the dimensions of the cell where Wallace spent 23 hours a day and has an aluminum gate resembling bars with walls of revolutionary mortar, or ground sugarcane, cotton, tobacco, and indigo. Summell said that using those specific plantation crops underscores the evolution of slavery into mass incarceration to identify the fact that we as a society have not eradicated chattel slavery, but renamed it.

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.

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 26, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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Even though these men and women have committed crimes they are people just like you and I. They say it all about rehabilitation. Treating a person like a wild animal in a cage isn't helping no one. They're someone's father, mother, sons, daughter & spouse.. what it was yours? I believe that our justice system thinks that just because they're on their side makes them God, especially in the great state of Texas. Y'all don't have God in your heart, y'all go in to Seg for a year or 2, I would love to see the outcome of that

How not acceptable to do this to any human merica :( my fiancée has spent 9 mos straight in there before :(   
#freearrengentrywrongfulconvictions

P.O. Box 11374  
Washington, DC 20008

[info@solitarywatch.org](mailto:info@solitarywatch.org)

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