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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](#) | December 30, 2019

The *San Francisco Chronicle* [reported](#) that the suicide rate in California prisons has reached an all-time high this year, in what the Secretary of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) called an inmate suicide crisis. There have been 36 reported suicides in 2019, which means that for every 100,000 people incarcerated in the states prisons, 28.7 committed suicide. This is an increase over last year, when the number was 26.3 suicides per 100,000, and higher than the national average for state prisons of 20 suicides per 100,000. Data shows that at least ten of the suicides in CDCR occurred in solitary confinement, which amounts to an extremely high rate of 203.3 deaths in segregated housing per 100,000 people. Attorney Michael Bien said, The suicide rate is just the most obvious statistic that emerges. We need to find a better way of taking care of mentally ill people than putting them in the criminal justice system.

[According](#) to the Miami *New Times*, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and Americans for Immigrant Justice released a report earlier this month called [Prison by Any Other Name](#) that examined conditions at four immigration detention facilities in Florida: the Krome Service Processing Center, the Broward Transitional Center, and the Monroe and Glades County jails. At all four facilities, the report found inadequate medical care, poor mental health care, failure to accommodate people with disabilities, use of force, abuse of solitary confinement, and deaths. One man held at the Monroe jail found himself in solitary for obstructing the pill line because he was singing a song. In his sixteen days of isolation, the man was only allowed two showers and developed a fungus on his skin because of the mildew infesting his cell. The report says that 26 percent of immigrants held at Monroe at any given day are kept in solitary confinement.

The *Associated Press* [reported](#) that three California county jails have been experimenting with methods to reduce the use of solitary confinement, after the Prison Law Office sued seven counties for inhumane conditions. Following a massive transfer of people with convictions to local jails to alleviate overcrowding in state prisons, several of the county jails had begun to rely more on isolation. Contra Costa County has reported a reduction from 100 people held in solitary at the beginning of 2019 to just three people in isolation, while Santa Clara County had held 400 people in solitary and as of December has 26. Contra Costa and Sacramento County have both begun relying more on positive incentives to reward good behavior, such as television time or additional food. The counties continue to use solitary confinement for what is deemed violent behavior. (In Santa Clara County, the high rates of solitary confinement and preventable jail deaths became issues in the 2018 sheriffs race, as documented at the time [in an article](#) jointly published by Solitary Watch and The Appeal; this pressure subsequently helped convince once-resistant sheriff Laurie Smith to institute reforms.)

Wisconsin Public Radio [reported](#) that a group of African American legislators in Milwaukee have proposed a package of bills called Disrupting Disparities, aiming to address racial inequality across the state. The package includes several criminal justice reforms, including a bill that would restrict the length of solitary confinement stays for people with psychiatric disabilities and another bill that would restrict the use of restraints on incarcerated youth. Wisconsin faces high levels of racial disparity in several aspects of its society, including the highest infant mortality rate for African Americans in the country and the largest racial gap in school achievement. Representative David Crowley, who helped draft the proposals, said, There are so many creative ways to use these dollars to rebuild trust between police departments and our communities.

The *New Haven Register* [reported](#) that the Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic at Yale Law School sent a letter to the UN special rapporteur on torture in May, expressing concern with the Connecticut Department of Corrections use of solitary confinement. The letter said that the DOC systematically engages in the psychological and physical torture of incarcerated people by resorting to prolonged isolation to punish and to control people. While the DOC claims that solitary confinement does not exist in their system, the Stop Solitary CT campaign and the ACLU of Connecticut say that the abuse of solitary has become so damaging that the states supermax prison, Northern Correctional Institution in Somers, should be shut down completely and a larger culture change should ensue. According to the ACLU of Connecticut, 50 out of the 80 people held at Northern are Black, 17 are Hispanic, and just 11 are white.

The Phoenix *New Times* told the [story](#) of Justin Fuller, a man held at Saguaro Correctional Center in Eloy, Arizona, privately operated by CoreCivic. Fuller alleges that officer Christina Lopez came to his cell and raped him last summer. He says that ever since, he has been

held in solitary confinement and faced retaliation from administrators. According to Fuller, Lopez came to his cell and told him, If I didnt have sex with her she would make my life hell, but if I did then she would treat me like a king. Fuller claims that administrators repeatedly hindered his attempts to speak with a lawyer and sent him to a suicide cell, saying, Its gonna be hard to speak back there. Lopez is one of two female CoreCivic employees who have been arrested for unlawful sexual misconduct with an incarcerated person.

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) proposed a [resolution](#) last month to limit the use of prolonged solitary confinement. The resolution breaks down the high use of solitary confinement in prisons and jails across the United States, especially in Louisiana, Florida, Texas, New York, Georgia, Utah, Nebraska, New Mexico, Tennessee, and Delaware, along with the federal system. The proposal points to research linking time spent in solitary confinement to increased recidivism, as well as negative psychological and physical effects. Praising states that have markedly reduce the use of solitary confinement, the resolution calls for an end to the use of solitary for nonviolent behavior, a balance between limited isolation and separating dangerous individuals, and the implementation of alternatives to solitary. The move is especially significant considering ALECs [well-known history](#) as an organization championing conservative and corporate interests, which in the criminal justice area has included pushing for tough on time legislation such as three-strikes and truth-in-sentencing laws. Recently, ALEC has supported cutting costs to taxpayers by reducing prison populations, while maintaining its support for prison privatization.

The New York *Amsterdam News* [reported](#) that advocates, including survivors of solitary confinement and family members of incarcerated people, held a vigil outside of Governor Andrew Cuomos office last week, calling for the state to pass the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act. A report recently released by the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) found that across New York state prisons, solitary confinement stays increased in 2018 to about 40,000, with the average stay lasting 105 days. Solitary survivor and organizer Victor Pate said, Being in solitary confinement through the holidays brings depression and loneliness like nothing youve ever felt before. There is this despair that eats at your sense of self, like living is no different than dying. We need Governor Cuomo to stop blocking reform and support the HALT Act.

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 [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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