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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 [Roxanne Barnes](#) | October 14, 2021

A Kaiser Health News [report](#) co-published with [NPR](#) details the trauma that survivors of solitary confinement carry with them years after their imprisonment. Pamela Winn, founder of nonprofit RestoreHER, which fights against mass-incarceration, describes her lasting mental health effects from spending eight months in solitary confinement. Her time in solitary continues to make it difficult for her to be around other people and has heightened her paranoia, despite the fact that she has been out of incarceration for the past ten years. The report elaborates on the myriad studies that demonstrate how solitary confinement causes heart damage, depression, heightened suicides, and a sense of fear around other people. Craig Haney, social psychology professor at the University of California Santa Cruz and an expert on the psychological effects of solitary, notes that for people who have spent time in solitary confinement, other people can become a source of anxiety rather than support.

In [an op-ed](#) for the Seattle Times, Chris Blackwell and Rachael Seevers (an incarcerated writer and an attorney) explain how the Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC) announced end to disciplinary confinement actually accounts for only a fraction of the people in solitary confinement and leaves hundreds in conditions that the international community has deemed torture. They report that the DOC is unwilling to put limits on other forms of solitary confinement still in use. In August, when the Office of the Corrections Ombuds found people being held in administrative segregation for over 100 days, the DOC refused a recommended cap of 30 days. Blackwell and Seevers enumerate the different forms of solitary that are still in practice in Washington, noting that 157 people have been held in maximum security for at least the past 500 days, and some for a decade. They insist that to truly employ evidence-based practices, the DOC should abolish long-term solitary confinement entirely.

After a COVID-19 outbreak in Maine's Cumberland County Jail, the whole 300-person population has been held in lockdown for 23 hours a day since mid-September, the Sun Journal [reports](#). People inside report mental health is at a crisis point; there has been a noticeable increase in the code-white intercom call that indicates a suicide attempt, and many people require mood stabilizing medication for the first time. Everyone in the jail was given a tablet at the beginning of the pandemic, but families report that even basic entertainment or sending emails rack up exorbitant fees. Correctional officers use COVID-19 safety and staff absenteeism as justification for isolating the entire facility, which is, as Emma Bond of the ACLU of Maine says, not a reason to impinge on people's constitutional rights with this inhumane practice.

The North Carolina Department of Public Safety released a report finding that people with mental health disorders fare better when placed in therapeutic housing than when placed in solitary confinement, [reports](#) North Carolina Public Radio. According to the Department of Justice, 37 percent of people in prison have a history of mental health problems. Idaho State University professor of clinical psychology Shannon Lynch explains that there has been a pretty high reliance not in all corrections facilities but in many corrections facilities on using solitary confinement, or restrictive settings to manage a lot of different behavioral problems. This North Carolina report determined that when placed in a Therapeutic Diversion Unit, people were less likely to commit infractions, require in-patient mental health treatment, and attempt suicide.

Leavenworth Detention Center, a privately run pre-trial detention center in Kansas, has held people inside in solitary confinement since February, following two suicides and ten severe beatings and stabbings, [reports](#) the Kansas Reflector. The facility is run by the company CoreCivic. It holds 900 individuals, and the facility says it is severely understaffed, with 25 percent staff vacancy on average. As a result, COVID-19 has run rampant through the facility, family and attorney visits are still on hold, and people inside are stacked three to a room. Until August, those requiring medical treatment were only permitted access to healthcare in emergencies. During a September sentencing hearing, a US District Judge said, The only way I could describe it frankly, what's going on at CoreCivic right now is its an absolute hell hole.

Roxanne Barnes is an educator and writer based in Los Angeles and a contributing writer to Solitary Watch.

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](#)

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by [Caitlin Konya](#)

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October 12, 2022

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