

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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close

Search

close

close

Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | September 9, 2018

A lawsuit filed on behalf of Nicolas Reyes, a man from El Salvador serving a 47-year sentence at Red Onion State Prison in Virginia, claims that he has been held in solitary confinement solely based on his inability to complete a journal writing requirement for the step-down program because he does not speak or understand English. The lawsuit asserts that Reyes has suffered psychological deterioration from his time in solitary, including routine, vivid hallucinations, in which he communicates with his dead parents and the former president of El Salvador. [According](#) to the *Washington Post*, the step-down program has significantly reduced the number of people in long-term solitary, but an ACLU attorney representing Reyes said, A step-down program is not meaningful when there's no access to it for the prisoners. Certainly in this case, it has kept someone in without any real justification.

WVTF [reported](#) that Askari Danso, a 39-year-old man who has been incarcerated since his teenage years, was placed in solitary confinement and transferred to several facilities across Virginia in retaliation for his work advocating prison reform. Danso was transferred from Buckingham County prison to Augusta Correctional Center to Sussex I State Prison, where he was placed in solitary and spent 22 days with no soap, no toothpaste, no books just staring at the wall. At each facility, Danso organized to raise consciousness about various criminal justice issues, including mass incarceration, structural racism, exploitation of prison labor, and inhumane conditions. Most recently, Danso was transferred to the supermax Red Onion State Prison and remains isolated in solitary confinement. Numerous incarcerated organizers across the country [face similar retaliation](#) for their work surrounding the National Prison Strike, which lasted from August 21 to September 9 and brought to the public's attention the urgency of fundamental prison reform.

Steven Jay Russell, who has spent over 22 years in solitary confinement, wrote an [article](#) in the *Huffington Post* illustrating his life beyond what Jim Carrey portrayed in the 2010 movie about Russell called *I Love You Phillip Morris*. Originally serving time for insurance fraud in Texas, Russell racked up a 144-year sentence in solitary confinement, after escaping from prison four times. He is now housed in the Polunsky Unit, adjacent to and in conditions identical to Texas Death Row, Russell says that he's being held indefinitely in solitary, partly to make sure I can't escape again and partly, I believe, to punish me for the embarrassment I've caused the state of Texas. Due to spine and hip injuries, Russell now relies on a wheelchair, which makes escaping a physical impossibility for him. In a *Solitary Watch* [article](#) on the use of solitary on former escapees, Amy Fetting of the ACLU National Prison Project explained that it is common to find prison systems inflicting permanent isolation on prisoners who attempt to escape even years or decades after their attempt no matter what their behavior has been in the interim.

Fox5 Baltimore [reported](#) that teenage girls are being held in Baltimore County and Frederick County, Maryland, in adult correctional facilities, often in solitary confinement, even though many of the teenagers have not been tried or convicted. The Maryland Office of Public Defender notified Baltimore County last month that placing teenagers in these conditions violates the Prison Rape Elimination Act as well as the girls' Constitutional rights, but the number of minors charged as adults in Maryland continues to rise.

The University of Wisconsin Madison newspaper, the *Daily Cardinal*, [reported](#) that a man Brian Keith Rocca died in the custody of Dane County Jail in Madison, Wisconsin this week, in an apparent suicide. The maximum-security building where Rocca was housed has faced criticism for years, after a 2015 county report found the use of solitary confinement and the lack of supervision increased the likelihood of suicides. A study following the report found that 14.4 percent of people held in solitary at the jail were also on suicide watch. A University of Wisconsin professor recalls being told on a visit to the jail, One of the biggest problems they had was that there was no decent way of handling a suicidal person except to lock them in solitary. The report recommended closing the jail building, and the county has now announced they will begin to construct a Public Safety Building next year in its place.

*Law at the Margins* published a [piece](#) by Carrington Keys, one of the [Dallas 6](#) group of incarcerated men who were charged with rioting following a nonviolent protest against isolation and brutality in the Restricted Housing Unit (RHU) at SCI Dallas, a state prison in Pennsylvania. Keys spent over a decade in solitary, which he mostly attributes to his persistence in filing grievances and lawsuits against prison staff. He recalled, In the hole [solitary], prison guards control an inmate's every activity his or her entire livelihood. Guards regulate every move. They decide if you will eat, exercise, shower, and receive mail. Prison guards can make your mail disappear to the trash can, or they can starve you for weeks, mark it as refusal, and act as if it never happened. In order to survive, Keys says, Prisoners are forced to band together as the Dallas 6 did. The Dallas 6 ultimately beat the riot charges in court, and Keys was released from prison.

in May of this year after serving over 19 years.

Keri Blakinger [reported](#) in the *Houston Chronicle* that for the fourth time in less than two years, the Harris County Jail has been found out of compliance with state standards, after the Texas Commission on Jail Standards investigated the facility following two suicides at the jail in the span of one month. One man, Eldon Lee Jackson, committed suicide at the facility in July only one day after being placed in solitary confinement, despite having attempted suicide months before. Though jail officials released a suicide prevention plan to be launched next month, a local Black Lives Matter organizer emphasized the need for consistent compliance at the jail. He said, The next punitive measure could be a remedial order that could require the already over-crowded facility to lower its population or close portions of the jail.

The *Belleville News-Democrat* featured the [story](#) of Anthony Gay, a man recently released from Dixon Correctional Center in Illinois after spending years in solitary confinement. Much of that time was at the notorious Tamms supermax prison, which was closed in 2013 by then-Governor Pat Quinn after years of protests and advocacy. The article explained that while in solitary, Gay cut and slashed parts of his own body more than 500 times in protest, was strapped naked to metal bed frames without food, and, on a grim day in 2010 during what court records state was extreme mental delirium, sliced off part of his testicle and tied it to a cell door. Gay was sentenced as a teenager for stealing one dollar and a hat, but ended up accruing 99 more years onto his sentence, for various alleged assaults on guards, most of which were likely related to mental illness. Gays attorneys were able to reduce his sentence by 73 years, and now Gay faces the challenge of returning to society after having endured the torture of solitary.

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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