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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](#) | March 11, 2018

[According](#) to the New England Center for Investigative Reporting, Bristol County Jail in Massachusetts faces at least four wrongful death lawsuits claiming that the jail places mentally ill, suicidal, and drug addicted individuals in solitary confinement instead of providing them medical and mental health care. While Bristol County only holds 13 percent of the states jail population, more than a quarter of suicides in jail have occurred there over the last six years. A senior attorney with Prisoners Legal Services said that her organization had heard for a long, long time from prisoners with mental illness who were warehoused in solitary confinement for up to 23 hours a day.

USA Today [reported](#) that Teriyona Winton, a 16-year-old girl charged with murder, was held at the adult Tennessee Prison for Women in Nashville, where she was placed in safekeeping, a type of solitary confinement used in Tennessee when the county jail doesn't have adequate resources to provide medical or mental health care to an individual awaiting trial. Shelby County allegedly did not have the capacity to hold a child, so Winton was sent to solitary confinement in an adult prison. Winton explained that she was isolated in her cell except for showers, recreation, and gym. Her education was administered through a slot in her door. The Sheriff's Office said that they are working to find a safe place to house youth.

The *Legal Reader* [reported](#) on the start of the trial in a class action lawsuit against the privately run East Mississippi Correctional Facility (EMCF). The lawsuit, originally filed in 2013 by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), claims that thousands of individuals held at EMCF are subjected to medical neglect and barbaric conditions. While EMCF claims they protect individuals to the best of their ability, the lawsuit argues that the deliberate indifference of the EMCF staff violates the incarcerated individuals' rights. In one instance, a man was found with a rope around his neck attempting to cut himself. Instead of providing the necessary mental health care, EMCF deemed the man mentally competent and released him back into general population without supervision. After nine days, he committed suicide. In an entry on the ACLU's blog, senior staff attorney Carl Takei [described](#) the horrific conditions he witnessed during an earlier visit to EMCF conditions that, he writes, have cost some prisoners their limbs, their eyesight, and even their lives.

A prisoner advocacy organization in New Zealand called People Against Prisons Aotearoa held a candlelight vigil this week in memory of those who had committed suicide in prison, [according](#) to *Waatea News*. A spokesperson for the organization said that the suicide rate in prisons is six times higher than the rate in society. Last month, an 18-year-old committed suicide after being placed in an at-risk unit, which is a solitary confinement unit known for punishing those who speak out. Until we overcome this lazy, life-threatening use of at-risk units and solitary confinement as our initial response to mental illness and suicide in prisons, mental illness in prison is not going to go away, suicide in prison is not going to go away, and the body count is going to keep climbing, the spokesperson said.

The *Democrat & Chronicle* [published](#) a commentary by columnist Erica Bryant, which states: Make no mistake, [solitary confinement] is torture. Bryant distinguished between solitary confinement in theory, which separates the most dangerous, violent people, and solitary confinement in practice, which isolates thousands of individuals based on minor non-violent infractions, such as smoking a cigarette, talking back to a corrections officer, or taking an extra set of bed sheets and often targets individuals with mental illness. Bryant discussed a recent event organized by the New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (CAIC) that displayed a replica solitary confinement cell in a church in Rochester. CAIC's aim is to help people understand the cruelty of solitary and gather support for the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act, currently pending in the state legislature.

AZ Central [reported](#) that the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors in Arizona settled a lawsuit this Wednesday, agreeing to pay \$7 million to the family of Ernest Atencio, who died after guards allegedly assaulted him. The Atencio settlement follows a long list of excessive use of force and wrongful death lawsuits during Sheriff Arpaio's 24-year term, which is known for its tough-on-crime image and is criticized for the inhumane conditions at Arpaio's jails. One case claimed that Brian Crenshaw, a 40-year-old mentally disabled and legally blind man, was placed in solitary confinement and denied medical care after a guard physically assaulted him in 2003. Crenshaw was found with additional severe injuries, fell into a coma, and died four weeks later. Maricopa County settled the lawsuit and agreed to pay \$2 million.

Pink News [reported](#) that a lawsuit has been filed on behalf of Strawberry Hampton, a transgender woman who has been held in solitary confinement by the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) for 24 hours a day for the past nine months. Hampton's attorney explained, As a woman in a man's prison, Strawberry fights for her survival every day. Instead of protecting her and housing her in a woman's prison where she can be kept safe, IDOC officials have housed her with men, thrown her in segregation, and refused to provide her with the mental health care she needs.

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.

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October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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