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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](#) | September 15, 2021

A Time Magazine [retrospective reflects](#) on prison conditions 50 years after the Attica Correctional Facility uprising. Heather Ann Thompson, author of the prize-winning book on Attica, *Blood in the Water*, writes that back in 1971, ending solitary confinement was high on the uprisings list of demands. Thompson describes that although the uprisings stated intentions were securing equitable pay for incarcerated workers, ending solitary confinement, and providing adequate medical care in prisons, their advocacy work was obscured by smear campaigns from New Yorks government after the state violently recaptured the facility. Today, Thompson asserts that a low estimate for the number of people in the US currently detained in solitary confinement nationwide is 60,000-90,000, based on outside data, and she details throughout the article how medical and housing conditions in different prisons have deteriorated drastically, despite the attention Attica brought to the issue.

In [his essay](#) for the Marshall Projects Life Inside series, Tariq MaQbool detailed his experience with solitary confinement and violent discrimination against Muslim Americans in the decades following 9/11. MaQbool, who is in prison in New Jersey but maintains his innocence, remembers the two years he spent in administrative segregation (a form of solitary) pretrial, as the worst of his 18 years in prison. Well before his incarceration he experienced anti-Muslim bias after 9/11, including during the selection process for his jury back in 2002, when his lawyers spent four months trying to find an impartial group. He says, I just sat stunned as one jury candidate after another got up and left, stating that they couldnt be fair to someone like me. Maqbool traces how systematic discrimination has shaped his experience with American prisons. He says, It was hard for me to accept that my race and religion, which I saw as parts of my American identity, could be a liability when it came to justice.

In [commentary](#) in the Concord Monitor marking the 20th anniversary of September 11, 2001, Robert Azzi writes about the discriminatory treatment of Muslims that followed the attacks. At one point our government held 762 people, including citizens, nationwide, for three to eight months, many in solitary confinement with regular strip searches. As reported in the [Guardian](#), The [federal appeals] court described evidence showing detainees abuse included slamming them into walls; bending or twisting their arms, hands, wrists and fingers; stepping on their leg restraints; leaving them handcuffed or shackled in their cells; and insulting their religion or making humiliating sexual comments during strip searches. All were eventually released without charge, but use of solitary confinement to coerce confessions and plea deals from terrorism suspects [became commonplace](#), both at Guantnamo and on American soil.

Tyrone Briggs died in solitary confinement in 2019 at Pennsylvanias Mahanoy prison after a corrections officer pepper sprayed him. Briggs, who was asthmatic, received no treatment, only an inhaler, [reports](#) PennLive. He struggled to breathe and said, I cant breathe, to staff before they locked him in solitary. Now two years after his death, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) has reached an \$8.5 million settlement with Briggs family. The settlement also includes a pledge from the department to reform its protocol for pepper spray use, although Briggs died from a direct hit of pepper spray to the face, something that Abolitionist Law Center lawyer Bret Grotes says is already against prison policy for people with asthma.

Three men held at the Indiana Miami Correctional Facility have joined ten others in filing lawsuits saying they were subjected to near total darkness and received painful shocks while held in isolation cells, [reports](#) the Pharos Tribune. The lawsuit, filed by the ACLU of Indiana and alleging cruel and unusual punishment, was preceded by grievances filed by each of the men describing the gruesome circumstances of the cells in the restrictive housing unit at Miami Correctional. ACLU of Indiana legal director Kenneth Falk said, In case after case, prison officials subjected these men to brutal conditions no human being should ever experience knowing full well the pain and trauma they were inflicting.

[Writing](#) for Catholic News Service, Stephen Colecchi expresses his belief that solitary confinement is clearly torture for social beings like humans. Colecchi invokes Genesis in his analysis, quoting, God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them (1:27). It is not good for the man to be alone (2:18). He goes on to describe Pope Francis address to prison chaplains in 2007, where he urged authorities to avoid, any means of punishment or correction that either undermine(s) or debase(s) the human dignity of prisoners. Colecchi describes the irreparable harm to the human spirit as a whole that comes from torture, quoting Saint John Paul, who said that dignity, is as much debased in his torturer as in the torturers victim. Colecchis essay calls for an end to the misuse and overuse of isolation.

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](#)

October 26, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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