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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 16, 2018

As part of an ongoing series, the *Virginian-Pilot* published an [article](#) discussing the widespread placement of mentally ill people in local jails across the country and exploring cheaper, more humane, and more effective alternatives. Behind the statistic that over 3,000 U.S. jails house roughly 186,000 people in serious psychological distress is the reality that these people are frequently caught in a spiraling cycle of jail time and solitary confinement, based on actions related to their untreated mental illness. Their incarceration only exacerbates their condition, leading to suffering and sometimes death. Even with a court order to be placed in a mental hospital, the lack of space or resources at these facilities causes people with psychiatric disabilities to remain isolated in jail. The author points to clubhouses, such as Fountain House in New York, as a potential alternative that offers a community-driven environment where people with mental illness can access therapy, resources, and socialization with other people struggling with psychiatric disabilities.

KOB4 [reported](#) on the death of Keith Kosiog, one of two men who committed suicide last week in solitary confinement at Central New Mexico Correctional Facility in Los Lunas. Kosiog, who suffered from depression and PTSD after he served in the Marines, was transferred from a county jail to the state prison for safekeeping, a procedure that allows for people with severe medical or mental health problems to be isolated in the state prison when the county does not have the resources to address the person's condition. According to attorney Matthew Coyte, the evidence is clear that isolation is toxic to the mentally ill. So somebody who is mentally ill and sent to the prison because the jail can't handle him for whatever reason and ends up in isolation, they are going to get worse.

NPR published an [interview](#) with formerly incarcerated journalist Keri Blakinger, which included her recollection of the time she spent in solitary confinement. Blakinger, who struggled with suicidal tendencies and drug addiction, said, [Solitary] felt like being buried alive. I wasn't sure that I would be the same afterwards, and to be clear, I was only in there for a very short period of time, and some people do it for years and somehow come out in one piece. But for me, on the second day, I was plotting to kill myself. Could I stand on this sink and hit my head on the bed at the right angle? Could I bash my head into the wall? Could I slip a noose through this? I do still have nightmares about it from time to time. It's definitely something that has stuck with me. Blakinger is now a reporter for the *Houston Chronicle*, focusing on criminal justice.

[According](#) to the *Oregonian*, Portland officials have opened a discussion on alternatives to placing mentally ill people in jail, since Disability Rights Oregon found woefully inadequate health care and routine use of solitary confinement at the Multnomah County Detention Center last year. The executive director of the Oregon Justice Resource Center recommended a preventative approach that intervenes before the police get involved, and emphasized, When we think about alternatives we need to think about true alternatives and not replicating the criminal justice system. While county officials expressed interest in working with the city to create alternatives, they also said the county is currently struggling with lack of resources and funding.

Sky News published an article [covering](#) the case of Bobby Moore, a man determined to be intellectually disabled, who has nonetheless spent over 30 years in solitary confinement on Texas death row. Despite a Supreme Court decision last year ruling it a violation of the 8th Amendment to execute him, Moore remains isolated on death row. Representatives from The Arc, an organization that advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, said, Every day of additional time on death row means another day of unnecessary and excruciating pain from solitary confinement.

According to an [article](#) in NOVA, incarcerated people especially those in solitary face a unique vulnerability in the face of rising global temperatures, as their lack of freedom to move prevents them from escaping the effects of climate change. One man recalled being held in solitary confinement, or the devil's den, at the Connally Unit in Texas, where he could only sleep for minutes at a time & wake up in pools of [his] own sweat. Others that was locked in a cell 23 hrs. of the day, he wrote, would flood their prison cell floors and lay down in the water. A lawyer who filed a class-action lawsuit that ultimately achieved air conditioning for the men held in the Wallace Pack Unit in Texas found that at least 22 people had died in the custody of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice due to heat exposure between 1998 and 2012.

The New Jersey Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement published an [interview](#) with Lydia Thorton, who spent nine and a half months in solitary confinement in New Jersey. For her, solitary often meant 24 hours a day isolated in a cell, since she decided to

stop going to recreation, or what she calls the dog run, after her first time. Outside sounds like a wonderful break. I chose not to go because you're strip searched to go outside. You strip in your cell. They watch you and check your clothes. Give your clothes back. You can't come back in [unless it rains] so if you need to go to the bathroom, doesn't matter. You stay out until everyone comes back in and then you're strip searched again. Well, for me, strip searches are one of those things that are such an affront to dignity that I swore going outside was just not worth it.

Sara Jayyousi wrote a [piece](#) published in the *London Review of Books* recalling visitation with her father during his nearly thirteen years of incarceration, much of which he spent in the highly restrictive federal Communications Management Units (CMUs) in Terre Haute, Indiana, and Marion, Illinois. Jayyousi, who also insists that her father is innocent, said, I am 11, 12, 13, 14. I am 15, 16, 17 and I am not allowed to breathe the same air in the same room as him without Plexiglas between us. We ask them on holidays for just a quick hug with our father and they say it's a security issue. Jayyousi is now 22 years old and her father has been released but, she says, I still hear the guards keys, still smell the metal. I still feel the Plexiglas against the palms of my hands.

The *Washington Post* published an [editorial](#) questioning the transparency of the Virginia Department of Corrections regarding its use of solitary confinement in state prisons. Though Virginia has implemented reforms since 2011 to reduce the use of solitary or as they call it, restrictive housing and claims it no longer holds people with mental illness in solitary, a recent lawsuit asserts that a mentally ill man has been kept in solitary at Red Onion State Prison for over twelve years, unable to access less restrictive housing because of language barriers. The article calls for the passage of a new bill sponsored by State Delegate Patrick Hope that would mandate the state to produce more complete data on people held in solitary in Virginia.

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.

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 26, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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