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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](#) | August 25, 2020

The *Los Angeles Times* published a [piece](#) on the work of 60-year-old Dolores Canales, who co-founded California Families Against Solitary Confinement in 2011. Canales is also a member of the Steering Committee of the [Unlock the Box campaign](#), a group that has worked closely with Solitary Watch. Canales son is currently incarcerated at Theo Lacy facility in Orange County and participated in the Pelican Bay hunger strikes to protest the use of indefinite solitary. According to Canales and the ACLU, Orange County jail locks people in solitary for 23 hours a day, often for arbitrary reasons, such as failing to refer to jail staff by their formal title of Deputy or Sir. Daisy Ramirez of the ACLU said, People with mental health needs are essentially being punished for being in a mental health crisis and thrown in the hole, which we know will only exacerbate the trauma they are experiencing.

WXYZ [reported](#) that a newly formed advocacy group called Open MI Door is calling for an end to the use of solitary confinement in the state, which reflects extreme racial disparities, with 71 percent of the people in solitary being Black. One member of the group is Danielle Dunn, whose brother, Johnny Lancaster, died of dehydration in solitary confinement in a Michigan prison last year during a mental health breakdown. Two bills have been introduced in the Michigan Senate to reform the use of solitary.

KATU [reported](#) that incarcerated people at the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institute in Pendleton, Oregon, began a hunger strike last week. The group of men is demanding that chronically ill Steven Corbett be transferred to the hospital, people in solitary be provided basic hygiene and cleaning supplies, and an end to the use of solitary confinement for non-violent rule violations, among other demands. A student at the Southwestern Law School says that Corbett has Chron's disease and has been experiencing seizures that cause his organs to fall out of his body, but the incarcerated people say the nurses think he is faking it. According to the hunger strikers, people in solitary confinement at the prison currently cannot purchase toothpaste, cleaning supplies, or additional soap until 30 days after they arrive in the unit.

Gothamist [reported](#) that Haitian immigrant Ernest Francois has faced retaliation, including solitary confinement and harassment, after speaking to *Gothamist*/WNYC about poor health care at the Essex County Correctional Facility, a Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center in New Jersey. Francois claims that following the publication of the story, correctional officers called Francois a snitch loudly enough for other incarcerated people to hear, sent him to administrative segregation, and assaulted him. Francois said he received copies of his booking photo with racist, homophobic, and threatening messages. After Francois lawyer sent a complaint to Essex County officials, the warden agreed to investigate the incident but refused to release him from solitary confinement.

The *Chicago Tribune* published an [article](#) about the coronavirus response at the federal United States Penitentiary Marion in Illinois. The cases of coronavirus have reportedly been rising at the prison, and one incarcerated person died after contracting the virus. According to three people held at Marion, the administration has used solitary confinement as quarantine. One man described his time in isolation after testing positive for the coronavirus. He said he had no air conditions, slept on a concrete slab, and was allowed only one 15-minute shower every few days. He said they were given Tylenol if they were sick. It feels like were being punished for catching corona, he said.

Law & Crime [reported](#) that Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center filed a complaint against the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility the El Paso Service Processing Center in Texas for complaints of sexual assault and harassment. Detained women claim that guards touched and attempted to coerce them into engaging in sexual activity in camera blind spots, telling them, They are powerless, that they have no rights, that no one will believe them, according to Linda Corchado at Las Americas. Another man at the facility reported that an officer began rubbing his own genitals after the detained man told him to stop staring at him in the shower. Later, the man claimed an officer walked into his shower, and when the man wrote a complaint about the handling of the incident, he was put in solitary confinement for five days.

The *New York Daily News* [reported](#) that the family of 44-year-old Kenneth Houck, who died in May in solitary confinement at the federal Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, says his death is suspicious. In an initial Bureau of Prisons (BOP) press release following Houck's death, there was no mention of hanging or suicide. But the official report from the Office of Chief Medical Examiner determined the cause of death was suicide by hanging. Federal Defenders attorney Deirdre Von Dornum said, Houck's death a pretrial prisoner charged with a sex offense and held in solitary confinement who died in unknown circumstances later ruled to be a suicide raises

the same questions as Jeffrey Epstein's death. In a previous \$40 million lawsuit against the BOP, Houck, who is gay, claimed the facility did nothing to stop his brutal beating by other incarcerated people.

[According](#) to the *NM Political Report*, three men transferred from a New Mexico state prison to the penitentiary in Santa Fe were held in solitary as quarantine, after coming in contact with an infected person. Tom Murray, one of the three, said the guards were not wearing masks. He said, We were laying on filthy messy mattresses that people have defecated on and God knows what. Paul Wallace, another man transferred into quarantine, struggles with bipolar and schizoaffective disorder and was not properly provided his medication in solitary. I freaked out pretty bad. I started thinking violent because they weren't treating me right, said Wallace. I felt like they treated me like I was in trouble. You know, like I did something wrong. I didn't do nothing wrong. The New Mexico Department of Corrections claims their staff did not mistreat the three men in solitary.

Talk Poverty published an [article](#) discussing the responses to a volunteer-based hotline for incarcerated people about their experiences in Oregon and Washington State prisons during the coronavirus. Out of 369 calls, over a quarter said they did not report coronavirus symptoms for fear of being sent to solitary. James Moffatt, a 56-year-old held at Santiam Correctional Institution, contracted a violent case of the virus and was sent to solitary at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility and then Oregon State Penitentiary. Moffatt battles both medical and mental health conditions and said, Mentally, [solitary] was the most draining thing that I've ever experienced. I kept saying to them, I'm being punished for being sick. And they said, Well we realize you're in DSU [disciplinary segregation unit], but you're not being punished. And I said, Well if I'm being treated exactly the same as somebody that's here on a disciplinary measure, then how is it not punishment?

The *Miami Herald* told the [story](#) of Gabriela Amaya Cruz and Jae Bucci, two transgender women who were jailed during a protest in downtown Miami in July and put in solitary confinement. After facing harassment about her sexual orientation, Bucci was forced to choose between housing with men in general population or staying in solitary confinement. How can you force me to sit with men if my sex says female? That doesn't make any sense, she said. They need to create a standard on how to handle or treat trans people. They cannot just put us in solitary, that is not okay. Casey Bruce-White from the ACLU of Florida said that this discrimination is prevalent. Too often, transgender people of color and transgender women are disproportionately subjected to harassment and discrimination during the booking process.

Prison Writers published a [piece](#) by J.S. Slaymaker, who is currently held at the Ramsey Unit in Texas and spent fifteen years in administrative segregation. Slaymaker broke down some of the various names used for solitary in Texas, including Security Detention, which Slaymaker says is for allegedly disruptive gang members who often have no serious rule violation, as well as those who do commit serious violations. Slaymaker describes the psychological effects he experienced from his several years in isolation, including a sense of detachment or dissociation that has shattered his social skills. I love the solitude of segregation, he writes. This is what I mean when I say that ad-seg makes monsters of us. Not only are we no longer the men we once were, or had hoped to become, but we are no longer fit company for anyone. Not even ourselves.

The *New York Times* [published](#) the obituary for the former director of the Bureau of Prisons, Norman Carlson, who died at age 86 in Phoenix, Arizona. Carlson is credited with creating the solitary confinement-based model for the supermax prison in Marion, Illinois, after two correctional officers were killed on the same day in the prison. After Carlson converted Marion into the first modern all-lockdown facility, with prisoners isolated for nearly 23 hours a day, other state and federal prisons including the ADX supermax in Colorado followed suit, based on same lockdown construction. Journalist Mark Binelli wrote, The renewed use of solitary coincided with the era of mass incarceration and the widespread closing of state-run mental-health facilities.

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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