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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](#) | November 18, 2021

Health and Justice published an [research study](#) which analyzed the results of solitary confinement policy changes in the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, seeking to fill a gap in knowledge about exactly how various [solitary confinement] reforms have actually impacted the lives of people living and working in the prisons where these reforms have taken place. The researchers looked at what created the impetus for change within the department, which they concluded was the correctional staffs participation in a Norwegian Correctional Service program in 2015, as well as the results of those policy changes. They concluded that reductions in solitary confinement were experienced as beneficial to the health and wellness of incarcerated persons and staff alike.

James Byrd, a man who has spent more than three years in a solitary confinement cell in Allegheny County Jail, wrote an [op-ed](#) for the Pittsburgh Nonprofit Institute of Journalism about his experience, and about how Allegheny officials have failed to take the necessary measures to end the use of solitary confinement. He outlines what isolation for 23 to 24 hours a day feels like, stating, I no longer simply live in solitary confinement, solitary confinement forever lives within me! Although Allegheny County banned the use of solitary, Byrd and several others are still being held in confinement for unspecified safety issues.

Barbara Fair, lead organizer for the Connecticut movement Stop Solitary CT, wrote an [op-ed](#) in the Connecticut Mirror, arguing that a recent executive order from Governor Ned Lamont insufficiently shifts prison culture away from solitary confinement. Gov. Lamont issued the order shortly after vetoing the PROTECT Act, which would have restricted solitary confinement and provided outside oversight to ensure compliance. Fair describes how individuals in isolation are held on lockdown from Thursday to Sunday, stating that the administrative staff is unaware this has been going on for months which is exactly why independent oversight and community input must be statutorily implemented. She further insists that those who resist change should retire.

Salon published an [excerpt](#) from Chris Hedges book, *Our Class: Trauma and Transformation in an American Prison*, where he describes one of his students writing a scene about his experience being held in solitary confinement for a full year. The student, whose name is Steph, said, I hated those in authority by the time I got out of solitary. To me, any person who could live with subjecting a human being to such dehumanizing conditions was evil. In the scene, Steph depicted discovering his sons death from a newspaper while in solitary.

New York Focus published an [article](#) noting that prisons in upstate New York incarcerated nearly 32,000 people, more than five times the population of New York Citys jails, but receive a fraction of the scrutiny from either oversight agencies or the press. The article dives into systemic issues of beatings, solitary confinement, and unreported deaths in Great Meadow Correctional Facility. Families report that incidents of retaliation from guards are frequent and grievances arent recorded. One man who was held in solitary confinement in Great Meadows described: You see how police are killing people outside and get away with it? Its the same thing in here, but worse This prison is the worst prison in New York State.

On Monday, November 8th, activists rallied outside New York City Hall in outrage over the failure of the Risk Management Accountability System to end solitary confinement, [reports](#) AMNY. The RMAS is Mayor Bill de Blasio's plan to bring New York City into compliance with the states HALT Solitary Confinement Act; advocates have criticized the plan for having barely made a difference in the severity of solitary. Anisah Sabur, who spent 61 days in solitary confinement on Rikers Island, stated, I tell the mayor to rescind this executive order. This order is not a change, the crisis still remains! Melania Brown, whose sister Layleen Polanco died in solitary confinement, called out to the Mayor insisting, You made a promise to end solitary confinement and you didnt do it. Let my people go. Let them all go.

New York Governor Kathy Hochul announced that six state prisons that are currently operating under capacity will close next year, [reports](#) Corrections1. Among those slated for closure is Southport Correctional Facility, which advocates have been trying to shut down for years, including director of the Releasing Aging People in Prison Campaign Jose Saldana. Saldana described Southport as a prison dedicated exclusively to solitary confinement for decades that tortured countless souls and ripped apart many families. Despite this victory against Southport, Saldana insisted that bills must accompany these prison closures that would release older people and reduce and accelerate sentences for parole violations.

The advocacy organization Zealous, whose recently published project, [Silenced](#), focuses on solitary confinement in Michigan, [hosted](#) an online conversation this past Thursday about the history of solitary confinement. As described by an [article](#) in Spectrum News, the event delved into a global understanding of the damages of American solitary confinement, describing the way that isolation practices have been exported to other countries. Dr. Baz Dreisinger, a John Jay College of Criminal Justice professor in attendance at the event, connected solitary confinement programs in prisons around the world to US influence, saying, all of these practices are grounded in ideas around this supermax model, the U.S. invention that was hoisted on the world.

The Washington Post [reports](#) that four hundred individuals from the Central Detention Facility in Washington, D.C. will be transferred to the United States Penitentiary, Lewisburg, a federal prison in Pennsylvania, after an inspection revealed widespread human rights violations in the [D.C. jail](#). Anthony Petty and Shannon Fyfe published an op-ed in the Washington Post condemning the announced transfer. Petty himself was formerly incarcerated in Lewisburg, where he said conditions were horrific and abuse from staff was rampant. Petty and Fyfe insist that sending CDF residents to Lewisburg would take them from one bad environment to another one that is perhaps even worse, and definitely farther from their support networks.

The Advocate published an [article](#) about ICE detainees at Louisianas Winn Correctional Center, where the water is yellow, the food is always cold, the facilities are filthy and overcrowded, and complaints about health issues are often ignored. One person who is incarcerated there describes the abusive use of solitary confinement, saying, If you dont comply to whatever they say you have to do, if you make any mistake, if you dont follow every order, they throw you in solitary. There is a room for this purpose called the Cyper Room. He described witnessing detainees kept in solitary confinement for weeks at a time.

Candace Steel, a woman who gave birth in 2017 while being held in solitary confinement in Santa Rita Jail in California, has recently been awarded \$250,000 in compensation, [reports](#) the BL. In January 2020, a US District Court judge found that Steel had been treated with deliberate indifference. In an interview in 2018, Steel described her experience: I was hitting that call button like a million, bazillion times and nobody answered They ignored me completely. I noticed they shut the little window to muffle my screams because I was screaming, Help me! Help me! My babys coming!

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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