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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | December 9, 2018

KOB4 [reported](#) that Keith Kosirog and Adonus Encinias, two men held in solitary confinement at the Central New Mexico Correctional Facility in Los Lunas, committed suicide last Sunday. Albuquerque attorney Matt Coyte, who has represented individuals held in solitary, noted that evidence showed Kosirog had a psychiatric disability. Coyte expressed disappointment that Gov. Susana Martinez had vetoed a bill that would have outlawed the placement of people with mental illnesses in solitary. Two inmates committing suicide in the same facility on the same day is a stark example of the toxic effects solitary confinement has on people in isolation, Coyte said, particularly the mentally ill.

[According](#) to Cleveland19, six people have died at the Cuyahoga County Jail in Ohio since June, causing families, community members, and the NAACP to speak out against conditions at the jail. In addition, Judge Michael Nelson has said that he will stop setting bonds for people charged with non-violent offenses, since the jail is not safe. The mother of 36-year-old Robert Sharp, who died at the facility in 2015 after being placed in solitary confinement, instead of receiving medical care for a reported drug overdose, said she is still waiting for answers. All they had to do was take my child to the hospital, she said.

Rolling Stone [reported](#) that Maria Butina, a 30-year-old Russian woman held at the Alexandria Detention Center in Virginia on charges of conspiracy and working as a spy, remains in solitary confinement after she allegedly gave another incarcerated person contact information for her lawyer. While prison officials claim she is isolated for her safety, Butina's lawyers say that she has not committed any violation and that the prolonged deprivation of human contact and interaction is starting to have a profound psychological impact on Ms. Butina, and asked that she be released back into the general jail population. The judge in the case rejected the motion filed by Butina's lawyers, saying that she does not have the ability to rule on prison officials' internal decisions with the evidence provided.

The ACLU published a [piece](#) by Rick Raemisch, director of the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC), who in 2017 limited the use of solitary confinement in his state's prisons to fifteen days, in accordance with the United Nations Nelson Mandela Rules. In place of solitary, the CDOC has implemented de-escalation cells and expanded access to common halls, re-entry units, and exercise units, which, Raemisch says, have been positive for both staff and prisoners. I am convinced that ending long-term solitary confinement and instituting programmatic reforms can be accomplished in prison systems across the country. Raemisch emphasized the necessity of ending long-term solitary for not only the dignity and health of incarcerated people but also for the safety of communities, citing the figure that 97 percent of incarcerated people end up returning to their communities.

KJZZ [covered](#) a riot at Arizona State Prison Complex Yuma Cheyenne Unit that occurred on March 1, 2018, during which one incarcerated man died and 37 people suffered injuries. Differing opinions have surfaced regarding what sparked the incident, ranging from racial tension to excessive use of force by staff, but one incarcerated man attributed the frustration to the constant conditions of solitary faced at the prison. He said, They was tired of getting locked down. Cause we get locked down on Cheyenne every time they find a bottle of hooch. In the aftermath of the riot, incarcerated people reported being held outside in the recreation yard for five days and denied restroom access, medical care, and heat, which they claim violated their civil rights.

The Guardian published a [commentary](#) written by Joseph Jackson, the coordinator of Maine Prison Advocacy Coalition, who served nineteen years in prison and spent over a year and a half in solitary confinement. Jackson recalled the shift towards a philosophy of punishment in the Maine state prison system when the supermax prison was constructed in Warren, Maine, in 2002. While disciplinary hearings had previously been held before a panel made up of a corrections officer, an advocate, and a community member, the new supermax disbanded the three-member boards and gave all decision-making power to correctional staff, leading to an increase in solitary confinement for those who failed urine tests and been found guilty of tattooing, smiling at the wrong time, staring at an officer too long, or fighting. Although the use of solitary has more recently been reduced in Maine, Jackson calls for the development of a system based on healing and restoration, and a further reversal of the punitive changes that diverted attention away from community safety.

The Appeal [reported](#) that a federal judge found the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) deliberately indifferent to the needs of over 12,000 incarcerated individuals with psychiatric disabilities, constituting cruel and unusual punishment. Though a settlement agreement in 2016 mandated stricter evaluations for people with mental illness held in solitary, the judge found that more than 80 percent of people

isolated in IDOC facilities have mental illnesses. One woman with severe psychiatric disabilities and a history of self-harm continually faced time in solitary for behaviors related to her disability, a common experience for incarcerated people with mental illness. Attorney Alan Mills of the Uptown Peoples Law Center, which is suing the IDOC, said the cycle of perpetuating mental illness through the use of solitary has to stop. As long as the baseline is punitiveness, how bad can we make this then you're never actually going to get people better.

The New Jersey Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (NJCAIC) published an [interview](#) on its website with Ron Pierce, the Democracy and Justice Fellow at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, who served over 30 years in New Jersey prisons, four of them in solitary confinement. In response to claims that New Jersey does not use solitary, Pierce said, Just because you house two people in a cell doesn't make it less solitary confinement. It actually makes it worse. He said, I would recommend try living in a bathroom size room with one other person for a short time and maybe it would give you an understanding of why it is worse. Pierce said solitary confinement is torture. That's all it is. It's a mental deprivation. It's meant to break you, to take your humanity from you.

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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by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

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by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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