

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | December 23, 2019

The *Associated Press* published an [article](#) on the high rate of suicides by people held in solitary confinement across New York state prisons. A report from the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision found that 30 of the 130 suicides between 2004 and 2013 in New York prison occurred in solitary confinement. While suicide prevention protocols mandate regular monitoring and mental health treatment, these regulations are often neglected in practice. Cachin Anderson, for example, dove head first into the floor, declaring that he wanted to end it and go home. But instead of placing Anderson in a monitored unit, he was placed in solitary confinement, where he committed suicide in the summer of 2017. An oversight board said his death may have been prevented if proper protocol was followed.

A *Shadowproof* [article](#) described the conditions that led incarcerated organizers at Lee Correctional Institute in South Carolina to draft a letter that activists presented to the U.S. Embassy in London and United Nations offices in Jamaica and Washington D.C. According to an incarcerated man named Al, since a violent incident at Lee in 2018, several South Carolina prisons have been locked down. They cut these flaps, portholes in the door, to where they can feed you in and out, like solitary or something. In some locations they're even putting cages up on the shower doors. Al said there's barely any recreation time, and that he had only gone to outdoor recreation three times in two months. The corrections department additionally installed metal plates over cell windows, blocking any sunlight. In a 43-day period starting this past October, ten people were reported to have died in the custody of the state, half of which were suicides.

NBC [reported](#) that immigrants held in detention centers across Louisiana who are protesting the conditions in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities have been met with pepper spray, solitary confinement, and physical abuse. One man who participated in the strike at Pine Prairie facility said his 25-year-old son was put in solitary confinement after he seemed to faint from the pepper spray. I thought that my son had died, said Eliober. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) sent a letter to the Department of Homeland Security following the incident at Pine Prairie and a similar incident at Bossier Parish Medium Security Facility, calling for the nonviolent protests to be met with a nonviolent response. They come to the U.S. trying to exercise their right to protest, which is guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution regardless of their immigration status, said an attorney with SPLC. Two immigrants have died in ICE custody since October, one of which was reported a suicide.

*North Carolina Health News* [reported](#) that the North Carolina Department of Public Safety has increased the placement of people with mental illness in solitary confinement nearly two-fold in recent years. The increase followed the deaths of five correctional officers in 2017, but prior to the incidents, the state had been making headway in reducing the use of solitary confinement. Between 2015 and 2017, the state cut in half the number of mentally ill people held in isolation, and in 2016, the state implemented Therapeutic Diversion Units (TDU) to transition people with mental illness out of solitary confinement. The therapeutic units brought a decrease in self-harm and violent behavior, but no additional funding has been provided to expand the units since the officers' deaths. From January 2018 to July 2019, about 650 people with mental illness were released straight from solitary to society, while in 2015, that number was 135.

The *Marshall Project* published the [story](#) of Chuck Coma, a man who suffered a traumatic brain injury after a brutal attack from his cellmate, while he was held at the federal prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. Coma had been sent to solitary at the Special Management Unit following an incident involving his cellmate attacking officers. Upon his placement in double-celled solitary confinement, Coma and his cellmate requested to be separated but were ignored until Coma was found unconscious with a noose around his neck and indications that he had been attacked. Some psychologists say that the widespread practice of putting two people in a solitary confinement cell can cause more psychological damage than being held in isolation alone, and can certainly lead to a heightened threat of violent behavior. Coma has since been released but struggles with severe permanent brain damage. His 77-year-old mother, who is now his primary caretaker, said, He will never ever be Chucky. It's just like a bad dream that never ends.

KOLN [reported](#) on a Nebraska state bill introduced by Senator Patty Pansing Brooks that would ban the use of solitary confinement for most children held in correctional facilities across the state. The campaign against juvenile solitary in Nebraska is being supported by a video series called Voices of Resilience, which spreads the stories of people who have experienced solitary confinement. The series is produced by the ACLU of Nebraska in partnership with filmmaker Jason Witmer, who spent several stretches in solitary confinement in Nebraska facilities, including a period of two straight years in isolation. Witmer says that solitary confinement is never a good thing. Its

over used and its over abused, and people never came out better. [According](#) to the *Journal Star*, Nebraska holds over 500 children in solitary confinement every year, for periods ranging from eleven to 30 days.

*USA Today* conducted an [investigation](#) into conditions in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities across the country, reviewing reports from 2015 to November 2019. The investigation found 15,821 violations of ICE policy, including use of solitary confinement, sexual assault, physical abuse, poor medical care, hunger strikes, and several suicides, despite over 90 percent of the facilities passing inspections. The article tells several of the stories of immigrants held in ICE custody, including 43-year-old Roylan Hernandez-Diaz, who hanged himself in solitary confinement at Richwood Correctional Center in Louisiana. At the same facility, detained immigrants reported guards calling them fing dogs and excessive use of solitary confinement for minor incidents.

The *New York Post* [reported](#) that the Correction Officers Benevolent Association filed a petition to the New York City Board of Collective Bargaining, in opposition to the Board of Corrections proposed rule to ban solitary confinement. The union argues that solitary confinement is necessary for safety reasons, claiming the city rewards violent inmates with pizza parties. This move comes in response to [increasing pressure](#) from advocates and some public officials to end nearly all uses of solitary in New York City jails.

*The Atlantic* published an [article](#) on the widespread practice of warehousing people with mental illness in jails, often for trivial misdemeanors or crimes related to their mental illness. People with psychiatric disabilities have a high likelihood to end up in solitary confinement, while awaiting a competency designation or awaiting a bed in a mental hospital. In one case, a young man with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder deteriorated terribly, according to his father, after he was placed in solitary at the El Paso County Jail for allegedly striking a guard. He has since been in and out of jail, facing new felony charges, despite awaiting placement at a state hospital for mental health services. The advocacy group Mental Health America released a statement, declaring that the U.S. currently suffers from a lack of alternatives to the policing and criminalization of people with mental illness.

*The Louisiana Law Review* published a [research paper](#) by Professor Andrea Armstrong of the Loyola University New Orleans College of Law, highlighting prison and jail conditions as the missing link in criminal justice reform. The paper argues that reform efforts tend to focus on keeping people out of prison, shortening sentences, or assisting with re-entry after prison, while paying too little attention to the far-reaching impact that conditions within prisons can have on incarcerated people and their communities. A case in point is Louisiana, a state with one of the highest incarceration rates in the world and also one of the highest rates of solitary confinement use. The paper quotes a man featured in the 2019 report [Louisiana on Lockdown](#), published by Solitary Watch in partnership with the ACLU of Louisiana and Loyola University. Carl, incarcerated in Louisiana state prison, wrote in a survey for the report: These cells drive men mad. I have personally witnessed one man take his life, another tried to by running the length of the tier and smashing his head into the front bars, sadly for him he still lives, if you can really call it that

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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