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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 3, 2020

The Equal Justice Initiative [reported](#) that 28-year-old Charles Braggs died in solitary confinement at the St. Clair Correctional Facility in Alabama on July 27, three days after the segregation supervisor reportedly sprayed a chemical agent at Braggs. People held in the segregation unit at St. Clair have reported unsanitary conditions, unbearable heat, faulty locks, and lack of showers. Braggs was being held on a robbery conviction dating from his teenage years, and had been held in solitary for over a year before his death. Derrick Dent, the unit supervisor, had been previously reprimanded for his excessive use of force on incarcerated people. The Department of Justice (DOJ) released a [report](#) last week, finding rampant excessive force throughout Alabama prisons.

The *Daily Beast* [reported](#) that an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officer knelt on the back of 31-year-old Carlos Rivas Monsano, after throwing Rivas to the ground and causing his head to bleed. Another man held at the Caroline Detention Facility in Virginia, who witnessed the incident, said, It was like seeing George Floyd all over again. The incident occurred at a meeting about coronavirus precautions, where incarcerated people had expressed concerns about the sanitation, distribution of masks, and quarantine conditions. After Rivas spoke up and the officer threw him on the ground, witnesses say the officer began punching Rivas in the face, worsening the bleeding from his head. The men say they have not seen Rivas since the July 13 incident and seven of the witnesses were sent to solitary confinement in what they thought to be intimidation.

The *Washington Post* [reported](#) that 38-year-old transgender man Anna C.J. Rugg set fire to his solitary cell in the medical isolation unit at the California Institution for Women (CIW) after making four formal requests to see mental health staff. This lockdown is too much, Rugg wrote to a friend. I lost it. Dont hate me. Rugg had tested positive for the coronavirus and was already struggling with serious health and mental health issues. While before the pandemic, the women would spend 23 hours a day outside of their cells, now they are reportedly locked in their cells for 23 hours a day. Women held at CIW reported that no one from mental health came by our doors to see how we were holding up after the lockdown was instituted. Incarcerated woman April Harris said, People arent scared of COVID-19, they are scared of the treatment of isolation.

WTNH [reported](#) that Albert Woodfox, who spent 44 years and 10 months in solitary confinement at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, won the 2020 Harriet Beecher Stowe Award for his book entitled, Solitary. Woodfox, a Black Panther and member of the Angola 3, was released four years ago before he wrote the book. Briann Greenfield, the Executive Director of the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center said Woodfox's book illuminates a contemporary social justice issue, just as Stowe's novel Uncle Toms Cabin did with slavery. Greenfield says Solitary tells a story that forces us to look at our criminal justice system, as well as the systematic racism in both our criminal justice system and our society at large.

Forbes published an [article](#) about a new report from the Department of Justice Office of Inspector General (OIG) condemning the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) use of highly restrictive lockdowns at FCC Lompoc Facility in California. In a case against the BOP and FCC Lompoc, the ACLU claimed the current conditions amount to cruel and unusual punishment. Only a small number of people have been released from FCC Lompoc under COVID-19 and a shortage of medical staff and correctional staff has led to increased spread of the virus. According to the OIG, the lockdown at FCC Lompoc confined people to their cells for 24 hours a day and ceased peoples access to showers, recreation, phone calls, commissary conditions even more restrictive than the Special Housing Unit (SHU).

The Vera Institute of Justice [reported](#) that *The Lancet Psychiatry* released a new [study](#), analyzing data on 662,735 people incarcerated across 20 countries in 35 independent studies about risk factors for self-harm, the leading cause of morbidity in prison. The study determined 40 risk factors for self-harm, including socioeconomic, criminological, clinical, and historical factors, and found the leading custodial risk factor was placement in solitary confinement. The authors do not make a causal association about this finding and note that placement in solitary can often be a consequence of self-harm.

NY1 [reported](#) that newly elected leader of the Correction Officers Benevolent Association, Benny Boscio, came out in opposition to solitary confinement reform in New York City jails and the already-slated closure of Rikers Island Jail. Two days into Boscios presidency of the officer union, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that the city would develop a plan to end the use of solitary confinement throughout New York City, after pressure from organizers and family members highlighting the death of transgender woman Layleen

Polanco in solitary at Rikers Island. I am not in an agreement with [solitary reforms] at all. We cant end it. We have to have something in place, said Boscio. By no means can we do away with something like that, claiming officers get a bad rap and need solitary to stay safe.

USA Today published an [article](#) written by the Teacher Project, an education reporting fellowship at Columbia Journalism School, about the use of restraints and seclusion on kids with disabilities in private special-education schools across the country. While some schools and families argue that seclusion is necessary for certain behaviorally challenged students, activists and other families recall the traumatic experiences of children in restraints and isolation mirroring police tactics, sometimes even leading to death. Lori Desautels, a professor of educational neuroscience, said, When we isolate kids, what were doing is we are literally damaging their neurobiological responses. And we are compromising the stress response system and damaging brain tissue. Many states do not provide data on private school use of these practices, but the Department of Educations annual report found only 15 percent of public school students are Black, but 25 percent of students restrained or secluded are Black.

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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