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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](#) | April 29, 2018

The Guardian published an [article](#) on Anthony Ray Hinton's recently released book *The Sun Does Shine*, in which he discusses his 30 years of wrongful imprisonment as a Black man in the Alabama prison system for three murders he did not commit. Hinton describes his years spent in solitary confinement, barely able to breathe in 120°F summer heat, eating food that tasted like dust. Hinton has since been released and now speaks across the country about the criminal justice system and against the death penalty.

The *San Francisco Bay View* published an [account](#) by a participant in a hunger strike at Polk Correctional Institution in North Carolina calling for changes to the High Security Maximum Control (HCON) solitary confinement unit. Willie James Dean-Bey describes his experience of life in HCON: Sensory deprivation is an understatement. Mental instability is the status quo. Cruel and unusual punishment is expected and violations of our due process rights and policy are constant. The list of demands included in the article calls for basic human rights in the HCON unit, such as hygienic necessities, adequate food, daily showers, a phone call once a month, medical care, and mental health care. The author conveys the urgency and severity of these demands: The next step for us, if disregarded, will be a class action lawsuit. There is no breaking our hunger strike unless our needs and demands are met.

The publication *India* [reported](#) that the Uttarakhand High Court in India ruled solitary confinement unconstitutional, as the court determined it constitutes torture and violates the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), and Articles 20(2) and 21 of the Constitution of India. The court ruling upheld the death penalty for two individuals convicted of gang rape and murder, but also overturned the U.P. Jail Manual that mandated each death row individual be kept in solitary confinement and isolated from any human communication. The court called the manual anarchic, cruel and insensitive and expressed that even individuals sentenced to death have basic rights.

The *Houston Chronicle* published an [article](#) citing Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) data that reveals a significant increase in the percentage of African Americans held in solitary confinement in Texas jails over the past decade, up from 17.7 percent in 2008 to 24.7 percent at the end of last year, despite an overall decrease in incarcerated African Americans and an overall reduction in the use of solitary confinement. While the percentage of Hispanic individuals held in solitary confinement dropped by 3 points, and the percentage of white individuals dropped by 4 points, Hispanic people still make up just over half the demographic held in solitary.

The Crime Report [covered](#) an event at the City University of New York's John Jay College that displayed a replica solitary cell and hosted a panel including Tyrrell Muhammad from the Prison Visiting Project of the Correctional Association of New York, Miyhosi Benton from the Women and Justice Project, and Johnny Perez from the National Religious Campaign Against Torture. Benton described the psychological damage she experienced being placed in solitary confinement for her own protection when she was 19 years old and pregnant. Perez, who spent three years in solitary at Rikers, explained, "You go from solitary to 42nd Street, but you [can't forget] the demons you face in solitary. I still have dreams about those demons always stay with you." Muhammad, also a survivor of solitary, suggested that changing the approach to training correctional officers to see themselves as therapists and counselors could change the system to treat people more humanely and rehabilitate them more effectively. During the same week, the colleges Center Media, Crime, and Justice hosted a [two-day symposium for journalists](#) on solitary confinement.

The Harvard Crimson [covered](#) a 24-hour protest against solitary confinement at Harvard University, hosted by the Harvard Organization for Prison Education and Reform (HOPE). The demonstration featured a 7-foot by 9-foot box where people sat without their phones and without the ability to speak with anyone. That's representative of how someone who has been put in solitary confinement would have the conditions that they would face, one of the HOPE members said. The group has also worked to mobilize support for the Massachusetts Omnibus Criminal Justice Reform Bill, which has passed the state legislature and is headed for the governor's desk. The bill would reduce the use of solitary confinement and prohibit placing children and pregnant women in solitary.

An [article](#) in *The Houston Chronicle* featured Anthony Graves, a wrongfully convicted African American man who was held on the Texas death row for 18 years before being exonerated. While the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) has reduced the use of solitary confinement by nearly half, this reduction has excluded those facing death sentences. Graves described his experience on Texas death row: "Everything you've seen in the transatlantic slavery process I witnessed. I wasn't on the bottom of a ship, but I was on a bus that

packed us like a can of sardines. Of his time in solitary he said: Guys are going insane. Solitary confinement breaks your will to live. While a Texas prison spokesman suggested that the current use of solitary for death row individuals is appropriate, a University of Texas Law School report determined death row conditions are inhumane and violate international human rights law.

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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