

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](#) | April 29, 2019

The Appeal [reported](#) that incarcerated hunger strikers protesting the use of solitary confinement and retaliatory transfers have been kept in appalling conditions at Holman Correctional Facility in Alabama. An incarcerated organizer described what happened when the water was shut off in cells: They was forced to stay in a cell with urine in the commode and defecating in the toilet and leaving it there. When they did cut the water on a day or two later, they tried to flush the toilet, but it overflowed. They didnt get anything to clean up the cells. One hunger striker held at Limestone Correctional Facility was force-fed last week. The article reported that the men, all of whom are active in either peacemaking efforts or the prisoners rights movement and none of whom have disciplinary infractions, claim they were not provided a reason for their transfer and isolation. The Alabama Department of Corrections justified their action as preventative measures.

The sister of Kalief Browder, Deion Browder, wrote an [op-ed](#) in *USA Today* about the largely untold trauma Black families face as a result of their loved ones incarceration. Kalief Browder was sent to Rikers Island at 16 for allegedly stealing a backpack, and remained there for three yearstwo of which he spent in solitarybefore the chargers were ultimately dismissed. After returning home, Browder committed suicide at the age of 22. To cope with her pain, Deion says their mother, Venida, threw herself into the role of an activist, fighting for justice for her son and all youth facing the school-to-prison pipeline. Venida died of heart complications a year after her sons death. Black women, Deion Browder writes, are often left to pick up the pieces and fight to reform a broken criminal justice system that ultimately breaks them. She says her mother died trying to preserve the legacy of her son. Keeping kids out of solitary will preserve hers.

[According](#) to the *Queens Daily Eagle*, the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act in New York, a bill that would prohibit the use of solitary confinement for more than fifteen days in a row, has secured 76 co-sponsors in the State Senate, giving it majority support in both houses of the legislature. The Department of Corrections and Community Supervision opposes the bill, calling solitary confinement a deterrent to unauthorized behavior and a protect[ion] for both incarcerated individuals and officers. But Jack Davis, a formerly incarcerated outreach specialist for the HALT Solitary campaign, said, The sickness of solitary affects both. We need our legislators to follow the laws of humanity. This is humanitarian issue.

The *Texas Tribune* [covered](#) a Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) program intended to transition people out of long-term solitary. The mental health therapeutic diversion program began in 2014 and has received praise for playing a role in reducing the isolated population in Texas prisons. Incarcerated participants in the program, however, claim they still face solitary and do not receive the promised treatment. Program participant Robert Uvalle said, They dont offer any kind of therapeutic programs. It seems like its all self help. Most of the time we are locke [sic] in our cell all day like solitary. Data from 2018 showed that roughly half of the participants did not complete the program, and a quarter of those who did were transferred to isolated mental health units. TDCJ does not count the program participants as part of its isolated population, which the department claims dropped from 11,000 in 2008 to 6,000 last year.

Westword published an [article](#) examining the struggle of returning to society after experiencing the trauma of solitary confinement, through the story of Richard Boccardi. Boccardi spent three years in extreme isolation at the Colorado State Penitentiary, then a supermax prison, before being released directly back to the community. During the following ten years, Boccardi would be in and out of prison and solitary confinement, facing post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, bipolar disorder, unemployment, and homelessness. Despite the development of re-entry resources unavailable when Boccardi was released, Colorado is plagued by a 50 percent recidivism rate and expects a 20 percent increase in incarceration rates in the near future. Boccardi has now been out of prison since 2008 and finds human connection in his work as a standup comedian.

As a part of the Overlooked series, the *New York Times* published an [obituary](#) for Martin Sostre, who died in 2015 at the age of 92. Sostre spent many of his twenty years incarcerated in the New York state system in solitary, first for starting an Islamic study group deemed an anti-white movement, later for protesting dehumanizing prison policies. Sostre became what he called a politicized prisoner, teaching himself constitutional law, and fighting against rectal examinations, religious restrictions, and solitary. A historian at the University of Mississippi said, [Sostre] was raising issues of solitary confinement as cruel and unusual punishment long before anyone was even granting that prisoners have a constitutional right to anything. In 1969, a judge ruled Sostre released from solitary and awarded him \$13,020 for the 372 days he spent isolated, and in 1975, Sostre was granted clemency.

The Southern Poverty Law Center released a [report](#) this month assembling data and research on the use of solitary confinement in Florida. The report found that the Florida Department of Corrections holds over 10 percent of its population in solitary10,000 peopleand that people of color disproportionately face solitary across the state. Black people, though only 16.9 percent of the states population, make up 47 percent of incarcerated people and over 60 percent of people held in solitary confinement. The report provided recommendations for Florida, including ending the use of solitary confinement, enacting sentencing reforms to decrease the overall incarcerated population, and implementing effective alternatives to solitary confinement.

The *Marshall Project* [reported](#) that 2011 reforms in California designed to alleviate overcrowding in the state system have shifted a significant portion of the incarcerated population to county jails. While each county has felt the shift differently, Sacramento County reported an increase of over 100 percent in mental health cases, as well as a nearly 100 percent increase in staff assaults, since 2010. Disability Rights California found the county held people with disabilities in solitary confinement for up to 24 hours, and county-appointed investigators found suicidal people faced isolation for weeks alone in empty classrooms without toilets. Now, Sacramento County faces a lawsuit against the conditions, and while the plaintiffs are in settlement talks with the county, officials say they do not have the money to implement the necessary changes.

The Detainee Allies organization, which originally formed as a small group of letter writers, now has over 200 volunteers working to elevate the voices of migrants held at the Otay Mesa Detention Center in California. The detained immigrants, many of whom are seeking asylum, describe inhumane conditions, including a forced labor program, poor food quality, and restricted communication with their families. CoreCivic, the private prison company running the facility, claims the work program is voluntary. But a 2017 lawsuit says that solitary confinement was used to threaten people into working to clean, maintain and operate the facility. One detained woman from Guatemala wrote to Detainee Allies, Each day gets more intolerable at the Otay Mesa facility, [according](#) to *Radio-Canada*.

The *Colorado Independent* [reported](#) that state Sen. Leroy Garcia introduced a bill that would re-open the Centennial South Facility in Caon City, originally a supermax prison designed to hold people in solitary confinement. The move comes in the face of an increasing state prison population, largely due to drug charges. Rep. Leslie Herod, who had previously opposed re-opening the facility, said, We are in a position where we were at capacity. And thats just the reality. While the Department of Corrections claims the facility could be utilized as lower-security housing, some lawmakers are concerned that people may end up facing isolated conditions, since the design accommodates fewer communal spaces. The bill would include measures to monitor the Department of Corrections efforts to increase parole eligible releases before re-opening the facility.

Valerie Kiebala 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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