

# 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](#) | August 19, 2018

[According](#) to *The Appeal*, the Promise of Justice Initiative released a [report](#) examining the high rate of deaths in the custody of the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison (EBRPP) in Louisiana. Twenty-five men, fifteen of whom were African American and most of whom suffered from a mental or physical illness, died at EBRPP between 2012 and 2016. In one instance, Lamar Johnson, a father of three who had been arrested on a traffic violation, committed suicide after spending one day in solitary confinement. Despite Johnson's warnings that he couldn't take it and did not want to live, jail officials failed to provide mental health care or take any steps to prevent his suicide. The report concluded that the conditions at EBRPP violate the U.S. Constitution by effectively imposing the death penalty on detainees through its failure to provide basic medical care and mental health services.

Jailhouse Lawyers Speak (JLS), a group of incarcerated prisoners rights advocates, published a [press release](#) announcing the commencement of a Nationwide Prisoners Strike on August 21, planned partly in response to the deadliest prison riot in 25 years at Lee Correctional Institution in South Carolina this past April and the increase in lockdowns nationwide that generally force entire facilities or units into solitary confinement. JLS publicized the [ten demands](#) of the incarcerated organizers, ultimately calling for humane living conditions, access to rehabilitation, sentencing reform, and the end of modern day slavery. The strike, endorsed by the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, will include work stoppages, boycotts, and hunger strikes. Many incarcerated organizers say they anticipate retaliation in the form of solitary confinement, threats, and mail interference.

Keri Blakinger wrote an [article](#) in *Houston Chronicle* investigating the death last month of Eldon Jackson at the Harris County Jail in Texas, after another woman Debora Lyons, committed suicide in the common area of the same jail this week. The Texas jail, despite its previously commended mental health care reforms and relatively low suicide rate, placed Jackson in solitary confinement in the state of mind that he was in, and gave him the tools to kill himself, according to Jackson's wife. Jackson had recently attempted suicide and had exhibited signs of serious mental illness. Blakinger notes that the 2017 Sandra Bland Act, which attempted to improve mental health care and prevent suicides in Texas jails, failed to address the use of solitary confinement on individuals with mental illness.

*Think Progress* [reported](#) that about 600 LGBTQ individuals were held in a solitary confinement unit, named the Alternative Lifestyle Tank, in the custody of the San Bernardino County Sheriffs Department in California. According to a lawsuit filed by the ACLU, the jail staff claimed that isolating the group of LGBTQ individuals for 23 hours a day and denying them access to programming was for their own protection, though the lawsuit also claimed that the LGBTQ individuals faced physical and verbal abuse from the staff. In the recent settlement, San Bernardino County agreed to pay \$1 million to the group held in solitary confinement as well as increase housing and programming for LGBTQ individuals.

Fox5 [reported](#) that despite a 2015 Maryland law that restricts the placement of juveniles in adult correctional facilities, families have reported that teens are being held in solitary confinement at the Baltimore County Detention Center. One woman said that her cousin, 16-year-old Celandia LaCruze, told her, 'They're keeping me in the cell all day, and I'm not allowed out. According to her cousin, LaCruze spends at least 20 hours a day confined to her cell. The Maryland Department of Juvenile Services has denied responsibility, pointing to a federal law that requires the separation of juveniles and adults, and the article reports that the risk of teens facing solitary confinement grows as the number of Maryland teens arrested as adults increases.

The *New York Daily News* published an [op-ed](#) written by Roger Clark, a man who spent over 5 years in solitary confinement in the New York state prison system. Claiming that many enter these facilities relatively healthy and leave with tortured minds, Clark cited the psychological effects from his own time in solitary and called for New York legislators to limit the state's use of solitary confinement to align with the United Nations standard, which deems it torture to hold someone in solitary for longer than 15 days.

*Common Dreams* [reported](#) the release of a report by Virginia state investigators, after claims surfaced in June that immigrant children faced physical abuse and solitary confinement at Shenandoah Valley Detention Center. The report confirmed the use of a restraint chair, the use of a mesh spit guard on children's heads, and the use of solitary confinement, but the investigators concluded that no abuse or neglect had taken place. While the Washington Lawyers Committee found the report deeply flawed in its methodology and conclusion, Virginia Gov. Northam accepted and applauded the report. The Washington Lawyers Committee will represent the children in court,

arguing against the conditions one reporter called Abu Ghraib for eighth graders.

*Westword* published a [story](#) about Jonathan Upah, a man with a history of mental illness, who ended up in solitary confinement at Van Cise-Simonet Detention Center in Denver, where nearly half of the detained population of 2,000 has been diagnosed with mental health conditions, according to a Denver Sheriff Departments report. While the department claims the jail does not impose solitary confinement, Upah's father found out, during a phone conversation with his son, that he was being held in isolation for 23 hours a day. Jonathan said they told him it was for his own protection, but his case worker suggested it was for budgetary reasons. The sheriff's department claims it continues to seek improvements for the jail's mental health care, but Upah's father says they are just medicating [Jonathan] and locking him up in solitary, like he's a dog in a kennel.

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 [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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