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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | November 2, 2020

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* [reported](#) that a circuit court recently ruled that the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) violated the 8th Amendment rights of Ernest Porter by holding him in solitary confinement for 33 years on death row. Porter's death sentence was vacated in 2003, but the PADOC continued to hold him on death row. After the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in September that keeping people with death sentences in solitary constituted cruel and unusual punishment, Porter was moved from death row into general population. Porter's lawyers say that his mental health deteriorated in solitary, causing severe anxiety, depression, panic, paranoia, bipolar mood swings, and at times suicidal impulses. Despite this, Porter has maintained a perfect disciplinary record, his lawyers say. Daniel Greenfield, an attorney with the MacArthur Justice Center, said, Previous decisions found what a death sentence really meant was you could throw away the key and not really examine the conditions under which they were held. Nothing is too barbaric. This decision really throws cold water on that. Porter's complaint will now return to federal district court, after the PADOC appealed the ruling.

Prospect published an [article](#) about the growing use of solitary confinement across the country during the pandemic. According to a [report](#) in June by the national Unlock the Box campaign, the use of solitary shot up by 500 percent during COVID meaning an estimated 300,000 people were held in solitary. Yet again, as the third wave of the coronavirus hits, advocates worry that prisons will resort to locking people down, despite the proven damages of solitary. Jermaine Scott, held at Mansfield Correctional Institution in Ohio, said that officials sent him to the death row block for 17 days when he contracted the virus, instead of providing adequate medical care. Over 1,900 people have contracted the virus and twelve people have died at the Ohio prison. As of October 25, at least 91 incarcerated people have died of the virus across Ohio prisons. David Fathi, the director of the ACLU National Prison Project said, Solitary confinement is not a public-health response. It doesn't slow the spread of the virus and in many cases may actually accelerate it.

Loyola University's *Maroon* published an [opinion piece](#), written by Susan Weishar, a fellow with Loyola's Jesuit Social Research Institute. Weishar cited the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's data showing anxiety amongst U.S. adults was three times higher in the middle of the pandemic in June 2020 than in March 2020, and self-reported data shows depression was four times higher. But in Louisiana, the incarceration capital of the world, [a report published in collaboration between the Jesuit Social Research Institute and Solitary Watch](#) in 2019 found that 77 percent of people in solitary in Louisiana who responded to a survey said that they had been isolated for longer than a year and 30 percent said they had been in solitary for longer than five years. One respondent said, 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. Point is the cells are killing men and they know it.

Washington State's *Daily News* published an [op-ed](#) arguing that now is a good time to reassess the widespread use of solitary confinement in our prisons. Reflecting on the general American public's newfound understanding of the effects of isolation from their experience sheltering-in-place, the author pointed to a recent article expressing concern for the mental health of a college student who had been isolated in a trailer due to COVID-19. But in U.S. prisons, people have spent years and decades locked in solitary confinement. Albert Woodfox, for one, spent 44 years in solitary at the Angola prison in Louisiana. The author points to those who claim the U.S. is a Christian nation, and quotes a bible verse in regards to solitary confinement: In as much as he have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren you have done it unto me.

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.

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