

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 22, 2019

KSBY [reported](#) that the family of Russell Hammer, a 62-year old man who died in the custody of California's San Luis Obispo Jail in 2017, filed a lawsuit claiming Hammer was placed in solitary confinement, neglected and left to eat his own feces. The lawsuit asserts the jail has historically denied medical and mental health treatment, citing two other cases. One woman's condition allegedly deteriorated after she was denied her medication and placed in isolation, while the other died of a blood clot after being restrained in a chair for 46 hours. Twelve people have reportedly died in the custody of the jail since 2012. The U.S. Department of Justice opened an investigation into the conditions at the jail last year.

The *Washington Post* [reported](#) that over two dozen gravesites have been discovered near the former Florida School for Boys, leading researchers to believe many of the graves held the remains of detained children. The school opened in 1900 and saw the deaths of 100 children in the next 73 years. Staff at the facility allegedly chained the children, brutally beat them, and held them in solitary confinement in a building called the White House. One fifteen-year-old reportedly died after attempting to escape the facility and came to his death from a wound to the forehead, skull crushed from unknown cause. Another boy who attempted escape died from gunshot wounds in chest. Researchers are continuing the forensic and archaeological fieldwork at the burial site to verify the findings.

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* [reported](#) that a court-appointed monitor found that guards at the Lincoln Hill School for Boys and the Copper Lake School for Girls in Wisconsin continue to violate the federal court order mandating suicide prevention measures and banning the use of solitary confinement and pepper spray. While the Wisconsin Attorney General recently closed the investigation into guards at the prison, concluding the case with no charges against staff, an attorney for the ACLU of Wisconsin claims staff continue to violate detained youths' rights. We recognize that progress is being made in keeping youth in solitary for less time, but there appears to be continued, excessive use of solitary confinement locking youth alone in their cells under a variety of labels. State officials had previously agreed to close the facility by 2021, but now lawmakers say that deadline may be extended.

[According](#) to the *Associated Press*, the ACLU filed a lawsuit last week on behalf of a woman incarcerated at Western New Mexico Correctional Facility, claiming she faced retaliation after reporting sexual abuse in 2017. When the woman reported being raped by two of the prison officials, authorities placed her in solitary confinement and revoked her good time credits. An ACLU attorney said, What she experienced is symptomatic of general culture and pattern within NMCD [New Mexico Corrections Department] facilities of ignoring, dismissing and mishandling allegations of sexual abuse, and of retaliating against women who have the courage to report the abuse. One officer pleaded guilty to the criminal charges, while the other pleaded not guilty and will face trial in July.

[According](#) to the *Biloxi Sun Herald*, a former jail officer at the George County Jail in Mississippi was sentenced to two years for engaging in sexual activity with a detained woman. The woman, a mother of two who had been arrested for traffic fines, claimed the guard raped her, placed her in solitary confinement, and denied her the customary sack lunches. During a later jail stay, another guard reportedly fired a pepper spray gun at the woman, permanently injuring her eye. Though the neighboring city of Biloxi settled a 2015 lawsuit with the ACLU challenging the detention of people unable to pay fees, debtors' prisons continue to exist across the state.

[According](#) to the ACLU, the Broward County Jail in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida has denied people in its custody desperately needed mental health services, instead often placing them in solitary. One man, diagnosed with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, severely mutilated himself after spending 112 days in solitary. He told a jail officer, I have a real medical emergency. I just cut my penis off and flushed it down the toilet. I have no need for it anymore. Another man, also with a history of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, starved to death in 2012 after being left in solitary. Following a scathing report from a psychiatric expert about the inadequate mental health care at the jail, a settlement was proposed that would prohibit the jail from isolating people with psychiatric disabilities and mandate individual mental health plans.

The *New Jersey Star-Ledger* published a [piece](#) highlighting the voices of people who have experienced solitary confinement in New Jersey prisons, in light of the pending Isolated Confinement Restriction Act. The bill would prohibit the use of solitary for more than fifteen consecutive days, as well as ban solitary for vulnerable populations, including pregnant women, youth, people with psychiatric disabilities, and elderly people. Nafeesah Goldsmith, who spent 60 days in solitary at the New Jersey State Prison, recalled the strip

search process required to go to Rec, which was our only chance to be outside, she said, They watched me through the glass, standing naked in my cell, and they shouted out commands to me like I was a caged animal.

Vox published an [article](#) providing an overview of the use and history of solitary confinement in the U.S., a practice the author says stands out as a violation of human rights in the country's criminal justice system. After an 1890 Supreme Court ruling found that solitary induced an additional punishment of the most important and painful character, and is therefore forbidden by this provision of the constitution, the practice nearly disappeared until the 1980s. The resurgence of solitary came along with the notorious tough on crime policies and a popular but since disproven view that nothing works to rehabilitate people who have committed crimes. While public opinion, lawmakers, and prison administrators have once again begun to re-examine the use of solitary, tens of thousands of people continue to face isolation in U.S. prisons. It's time to abolish the practice, says the author.

The Appeal [published](#) some of the stories behind a recent class action lawsuit filed by the Southern Center for Human Rights (SCHR) and the Georgia Advocacy Office against the South Fulton Municipal Regional Jail for mistreating women with psychiatric disabilities. 44-year-old Kesha Brownlee died in the custody of the jail after swallowing a plastic spoon and toothbrush in 2017. Brownlee, who had a history of schizophrenia, spent more than two months in solitary at the jail, where she was being held for a probation violation. One of the plaintiffs, another woman struggling with a psychiatric disability, told a nurse she miscarried, but the nurse concluded she had used objects to gouge her vagina. SCHR attorney Sarah Geraghty said, Putting a person with a serious mental illness into a solitary confinement cell is going to worsen the person's illness. You see that playing out every day in this jail.

[According](#) to *The Appeal*, Portsmouth Sheriff Michael Moore in Virginia stopped sending people to the Hampton Roads Regional Jail, following a Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation in December 2018 revealing the facility's use of solitary on people with severe psychiatric disabilities. Sixty-eight people died in the custody of the jail between 2003 and 2018, including 24-year-old Jamycheal Mitchell, a man with mental illness who had been accused of stealing \$5 worth of food from 7-Eleven. The DOJ report condemned the incarceration of people with psychiatric disabilities and a history of minor offenses, like Mitchells. Last month, a group of advocates visited the jail and found dismal conditions, despite the DOJ's threat to sue by January if improvements were not made. Just this February, another death occurred at the jail: 62-year-old Victor Rhea Fountain.

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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