Across the United States, 80,000 to 100,000 incarcerated people are locked in prison or jail cells without any meaningful human interaction for 22 to 24 hours a day for weeks, years, and even decades straight.\(^1\) Prolonged social isolation can inflict permanent psychological and neurological damage and can literally cause people to lose their minds. Instead of being a “last resort” measure used temporarily for safety reasons, often incarcerated persons are placed in solitary confinement for possessing contraband, testing positive for drugs, or using profanity. Although it has become common practice in U.S. correctional systems, the use of solitary confinement, also known as segregation or restricted housing, has never been shown to reduce violence in prison. Because of the severe physical and mental damage that extreme isolation can cause, the United Nations has warned that the use of solitary confinement beyond 15 days can be tantamount to torture, and should be banned.\(^2\)

The Vera Institute for Justice found in 2016 that 17.4 percent of people in Louisiana prisons were in solitary—\textit{almost four times the national average}.\(^3\) Over the past two years, JSRI worked\(^4\) with Solitary Watch and the ACLU of Louisiana to produce a major report on the use of extreme isolation in Louisiana. It was released June 25. The report is based on surveys mailed to 2,902 people in solitary confinement in nine Louisiana prisons in 2017. A total of 709 persons completed the survey, making it one of the largest response cohorts ever for a study on solitary confinement. The survey asked several open-ended questions about prisoners’ experiences in solitary, which many responded to in rich detail—painting a harrowing picture of solitary confinement in Louisiana. A major finding of our report is that more than 77 percent of respondents said they had been held in solitary for more than a year, and that thirty percent said they had been in solitary for more than five years. Nationally, less than 20 percent of all individuals held in solitary had been there for one year or more.\(^5\)


\(^4\) JSRI (Jesuit Social Research Institute).

Below are statistical findings from one section of the report, “Life in Lockdown,” and several prisoners’ survey responses that provide important context to the topic area highlighted.

**Mental Deterioration and Lack of Mental Stimulation**

Well over half of respondents (60.8 percent) reported they had been diagnosed with a mental health illness prior to being placed in segregation. A majority of respondents (53.8 percent) said their mental health had worsened during their time in segregation.

Carl wrote, “Being in a cell up to two years I was ok, somewhere in between the 2 and 3 year point my mind collapsed. I experience sudden extreme emotions majorly, depression then I leap to anger back to depression and so on. Everything is a blur, I lose days, extreme confusion, everything is a contradiction... But for the last say 4.5 years out of maybe 6 years 5 months in this cell I’m a different animal, certainly not civilized, the kind you should take out back and shoot.... Fucking wish they would just kill me and be done with it. The impact of this cell, its made me into a psychotic person.”

Many wrote that their days in segregation are devoid of meaningful activity.

Phillip said his days consist of “counting the bricks and cracks in the walls.” Blake’s days are spent “laying down thinking about suicide, talking to voices that I hear.” Manuel described his daily schedule as: “Eat, read, poop, sleep. There is no stimulation whatsoever.” Owen spends his time “just existing and waiting to die.” Antonio said, “I just lay down all day long.”

**Denial of Medical Care**

Although 58.7 percent of respondents indicated they have serious and/or chronic health problems, a majority (53.6 percent) said that medical professionals conduct zero rounds per month where they are housed.

Jordan wrote, “Before I went blind in my left eye I complained to medical and they told me that I’m faking to get out of work call. I make another sick call and got written up. Then 4 months later I lost my sight.”

**Poor Sanitary Conditions**

Most respondents (75 percent) reported they were not satisfied with the cleanliness of their unit.

Travis wrote, “I’m often placed in filthy cells with feces in toilet walls, hairs, dirt on floor, beds, toilet caked with feces and not given bleach or soap sometimes to clean it. There’s no toilet brushes or gloves so I risk my health cleaning such filth.” Nelson wrote, “Cleaning supplies are only available for those who can afford them...Cells are infested with ants, flies, roaches, and mosquitos. Shower walls covered with soap scum and mildew. Drains hold nauseating odor which permeates entire shower.”

**Physical Abuse by Staff**

The vast majority of respondents (79.8 percent) said that physical assaults at the hands of staff in segregation are common or very common.

“I was beaten by majors and staff officers while in chains. They do this to inmates all the time because no one sees them on the outside world,” wrote Jonas. Hank wrote that he has been “physically assaulted while in full restraints, sprayed w/chemical agents while in full restraints for requesting to see shift supervisor concerning a problem I was having w/ the unit sgt. I’ve had a major squeeze my testicles for filing a complaint. I can go on forever listing the wrong done to me by security. I’ve been in prison for 24 summers.”

**A More Civilized Louisiana?**

Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky famously wrote in 1862, “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” If this is true, then based on this report Louisiana must be judged among the least civilized of societies.

Fortunately, several recent positive developments may spur reform of solitary confinement in Louisiana. In addition to our report, Albert Woodfox, who spent over 44 years in solitary confinement in Louisiana prisons, recently published a book, Solitary, which is receiving wide acclaim. In April, a group of Louisiana prison reform advocates, including JSRI, came together to form the Louisiana Stop Solitary Coalition. Notably, the Vera Institute for Justice has been working with the Louisiana Department of Corrections (DOC) on ways to reform solitary confinement in Louisiana. A report they published in May lists several steps the DOC appears willing to take to greatly reduce the use of extreme confinement, including expanding programs and privileges to foster positive incentives to reduce rule infractions and enacting firm policies that prohibit placing people with psychiatric illness in solitary.

Louisiana on Lockdown may be found at https://solitarywatch.org/louisianaonlockdown/.

—Endnotes on page 8
Catholic Social Thought and Workers

The rights and duties of workers are woven throughout modern Catholic doctrine. In *Rerum Novarum*¹ (1891), Pope Leo XIII built upon the concepts of human dignity and that work is not just a market commodity, in order to articulate specific workers’ rights. These include: freedom to receive and spend wages [9]²; integrity of family life, including support of children [19-20]; and wages sufficient to support “thrifty and upright” workers and, by implication, their families [63]. Leo also enunciated the right to form workers’ associations (unions) and to strike [69-72].

Leo underscored rights to reasonable hours, rest periods, health safeguards, safe working conditions, and special provisions for women and children [59, 60, and 64]; freedom to attend to religious obligations [31]; and not to work on Sundays or Holy Days [58]. Workers also must work well and conscientiously, not injure employers or their property, refrain from violence, and be thrifty and prudent [30 and 65].

As it closed in 1965, Vatican II underscored the dignity in human labor, as it both supports workers and families and is a way in which humans “are a partner in bringing God’s creation to fruition” and are “associated with the redemptive work itself of Jesus Christ, who conferred an eminent dignity on labor when at Nazareth He worked with His own hands.”³ The council confirmed a “family wage” in these words:

> Finally, payment for labor must be such as to furnish a man with the means to cultivate his own material, social, cultural, and spiritual life worthily, and that of his dependents.⁴

In 1981, Saint John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens*⁵ focused again on workers. His theme was work: “the essential key, to the whole social question” [3]⁶. John Paul argued that through the Genesis work-mandate “to subdue the earth,” humans image their Creator and share God’s creative action. This makes people the “subjects of work,” and labor is neither a tool in the productive process nor a commodity. All other facets of the economic system belong to the “objective” order and are intended to serve humanity and our calling to be persons [6].

The pontiff clarified many rights drawn from Catholic teaching. First was “suitable employment for all who are capable of it,” and, when unavailable, provision of unemployment benefits by employers or, upon their failure, the state [18]. Just remuneration for work by a head of family must “suffice for establishing and properly maintaining a family and for providing security for its future” [19]. This means a family wage or other measures such as family allowances for child-raising parents.

John Paul insisted that there must be no age or gender discrimination. Benefits must include health care, coverage of work accidents, inexpensive or free medical assistance for workers and families, old age pensions and insurance, and appropriate vacations and holidays [19]. Trade and professional unions retain the right to organize, act politically, and to strike “within just limits” [20]. The pope affirmed the dignity of agricultural labor [21], rights of disabled persons to appropriate training and work [22], and the right to emigrate to find work [23].

Three decades later in *Caritas in Veritate,* Pope Benedict underscored workers’ centrality in the economy: “…the primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity…” [25]⁷ Further, work must be freely chosen, workers respected without discrimination, workers’ organizations (unions) allowed, and child labor prohibited. Work must allow family needs (including education) to be met, provide “enough room” for personal and spiritual development, and guarantee a decent retirement [63].

**ENDNOTES**

2. Numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in *Rerum Novarum*.
4. Ibid.
6. Numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in *Laborem Exercens*.
8. Numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in *Caritas in Veritate*. 
"We...look back over our history, and when we do that we understand very well that the origins of the International Labour Organization have much to do with the social teaching of The Church all the way from Rerum Novarum through to the present day. I think this intertwining of history and this community of values is what truly places us in a very good and strong position to work together to address the issues that we have before us today."

--Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General, speaking at a global seminar in Rome organized by the Catholic Church to coincide with the celebration of the Feast of Saint Joseph the Worker (2016)

This year, the International Labour Organization (ILO) celebrates its 100th anniversary. Its founding was established in the Treaty of Versailles at the conclusion of the First World War. It was understood then—and now—that peace in the world can be realized only if it is built on a firm foundation of social justice for all.

In its first two years, the ILO members adopted nine conventions dealing with such issues as hours of work, unemployment, maternity protection, and child labor. For example, they agreed to limit the work day to eight hours and forbid children under 14 from working (with limited exceptions) in their countries. This represented significant social progress in the early 1920s.

When the ILO celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1969, Pope Paul VI offered these words of support:

...We are an attentive observer of the work you accomplish here, and more than that, a fervent admirer of the activity you carry on, and also a collaborator who is happy to have been invited to celebrate with you the existence, functions, achievements and merits of this world institution, and to do so as a friend.

Later that same year, the ILO was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In the presentation of the award, the chair of the Nobel Committee, Mrs. Aase Lionaes, stated:

Beneath the foundation stone of the ILO’s main office in Geneva lies a document on which is written: Si vis
If you desire peace, cultivate justice. There are few organizations that have succeeded to the extent that the ILO has, in translating into action the fundamental moral idea on which it is based.\textsuperscript{5}

Since those earlier years, the ILO has continued to address labor standards and human rights and to develop specific policies and programs that promote decent work and the rights of all workers. Today, the ILO brings together governments, workers and employers from 187 member states. This makes it a unique tripartite organization within the United Nations system.\textsuperscript{6}

One of the most notable and consistent contributions of the ILO is its research and publications. Every year, the ILO publishes various reports and books that are meant to educate the global public and influence world leaders on the conditions of work and various human rights challenges. Among its flagship publications are the \textit{Global Wage Report} and \textit{World Employment and Social Outlook}.\textsuperscript{7}

In 2015, the UN came together to create the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 17 in all.\textsuperscript{8} Number 8 was specifically promoted by the ILO and calls for “sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.” Since then the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda has been promoted aggressively by the organization and its allies around the world.\textsuperscript{9} The ILO is essentially pushing for what the people of the world have been clamoring for: access to quality jobs—jobs that pay a fair and adequate wage and that are secure and safe.

Over the years and in many ways, the ILO has made a genuine difference in the lives of workers and their families. The issue of child labor offers one such example.

“Over the past decade, and with ILO assistance, more than 60 countries implementing almost 200 laws have adapted their legal frameworks to conform to the ILO’s child labour Conventions.”\textsuperscript{10} Furthermore, “[o]ver the past 15 years, nearly one million children have been withdrawn or prevented from entering child labour by virtue of ILO projects in almost 110 countries all over the world.”\textsuperscript{11}

“The total number of girls and boys in child labour dropped 30% from 246 million in 2000 to 152 million in 2017,”\textsuperscript{12} mostly because of the work of the ILO and its members.

Despite these and other examples of important achievements of the ILO, it is also true that disagreements, diplomatic compromises, weak enforcement, and all too frequent indifference and even resistance to the rights of the most marginalized have all limited the progress most of us would like to see regarding human rights, generally, and workers’ rights, specifically.

It is up to all of us to continue to put pressure on the global economic and political powers that be to assure continued social progress. And part of this work requires significant efforts to educate and activate the citizenry here and internationally.

Pope Francis affirmed the work of the ILO in a message he sent to the Director General of the ILO and his staff in 2014:

Dear Friends, the social teaching of the Catholic Church supports the initiatives of the ILO which aim to promote the dignity of the human person and the nobility of human labour. I encourage you in your efforts to face the challenges of today’s world in fidelity to these lofty goals. At the same time, I invoke God’s blessing on all that you do to defend and advance the dignity of work for the common good of our human family.\textsuperscript{13}

This article represents a very small part of the 100-year-old story of the International Labour Organization. To learn more about their mission, their work, and their results, I invite you to go to their website: www.ilo.org.

\textbf{ENDNOTES}


3 Ibid.


8 For more information on the SDGs, go to https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs


11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

Teaching is one of the foundational occupations in any society. As a profession, public school teaching can be chaotic, because the teacher has no choice regarding who is coming through their classroom door and in what state on any given day. Maybe the students come from safe, well-resourced homes. Maybe the students come from violent situations where food insecurity is common. Regardless of the environment, teachers are bound by law and professional ethics to instruct all students in their care to the best of their ability with the resources provided to them by the school district or what they have provided themselves. Public education is structured in such a way that public school teachers are completely at the mercy of the electorate and their chosen public officials regarding funding, standards, curriculum, and materials. This relationship, however, is most glaringly obvious in the case of teacher salaries in the public sector.

Public school teacher salaries are set by each respective district, which receives its revenue from federal, state, and local sources. Each state has its own formula for allocating education funds. In Louisiana, for example, per pupil spending is determined by the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) formula, which is developed by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and approved or rejected by the state Legislature in an up or down vote annually. The MFP consists of four levels. A key component of the MFP is the weighted student membership count under level 1 funding, which increases funding to a district based on its enrollment counts of specific groups such as English language learners, low-income students, special education students, and gifted and talented students. As a whole, per pupil spending is a combination of federal, state, and local money with the poorer parishes receiving a larger share of their per pupil expenditures from the state, whereas locally generated money makes up the majority of their respective per pupil expenditures in wealthier parishes. Education funding is a favorite place for fiscal hawks to trim budgets.

Public education is a site of constant partisan bickering, and, often as a result, funding suffers from periods of stagnation. This has profoundly affected teacher salaries everywhere and has created a national teacher shortage. Regarding the national teacher shortage, a 2019 report of the Economic Policy Institute explains,

A shortage of teachers harms students, teachers, and the public education system as a whole. Lack of sufficient, qualified teachers and staff instability threaten students’ ability to learn and reduce teachers’ effectiveness, and high teacher turnover consumes economic resources that could be better deployed elsewhere. The teacher shortage makes it more difficult to build a solid reputation for teaching and to professionalize it, which further contributes to perpetuating the shortage. In addition,
the fact that the shortage is distributed so unevenly among students of different socioeconomic backgrounds challenges the U.S. education system’s goal of providing a sound education equitably to all children.³

As education intersects with so many other areas of social concern, the impact of teacher shortages will aggravate other disparities such as race and poverty. The first districts to be harmed by the shortages are the poorer districts, which often serve students of color and low-income communities.

Figure 1 shows the average salaries for K-12 public school teachers in the Gulf South states of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas, and the national average.⁴ According to 2016-2017 data from the National Education Association, the average teacher salary for all the Gulf South States falls below the national average ($58,950) in the following order from highest to lowest: Texas at $52,575, Louisiana at $50,000, Florida at $49,407, Alabama at $48,868, and Mississippi at $42,925. The subsequent teacher shortages, brought on in part by this low pay, cause districts to employ more under-credentialed and uncertified teachers in classrooms with more students, despite evidence showing that smaller class sizes are better learning environments.⁵ Even within a given state, teacher salaries may vary substantially. Wealthier districts are able to attract seasoned teachers with better pay, while the poorer districts are forced to rely on minimally experienced or uncertified teachers who have higher attrition rates.⁶

As an alternative to bringing in a greater number of less-qualified faculty, some districts opt to increase class sizes, which only serves to create barriers for students who need smaller class sizes and the individualized learning it allows. One cannot merely appeal to a sense of responsibility to attract and retain teachers. In a country where the cost of living continually rises, both lawmakers and constituents will have to accept two non-partisan truths—you get what you pay for and public education is not free. If the United States still wishes to pursue its ambitious goal of providing all of its residents with a quality elementary and secondary education, then the policymakers and citizens must consent to allocate the required money. A school system’s ability to perform its function depends on the resources at its disposal. Well-funded schools are able to meet a wide range of student needs, provide access to current technology, and provide differentiated instruction and services in a well-maintained setting. Underfunded schools can do little of this. Well-paid teachers can work wonders in the classroom. Poorly paid teachers do what they can as they try to eke out a standard of living befitting a person whom the society has entrusted with its most valued resource: its children.

ENDNOTES

THE MISSION OF THE JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Jesuit Social Research Institute works to transform the Gulf South through action research, analysis, education, and advocacy on the core issues of poverty, race, and migration. The Institute is a collaboration of Loyola University New Orleans and the Society of Jesus rooted in the faith that does justice.