



LOUISIANA ON LOCKDOWN

Groundbreaking New Report by Solitary Watch, ACLU of LA, and JSRI Exposes Impact of Solitary Confinement in Louisiana Prisons

BY SUE WEISHAR, PH.D.

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—*almost four times the national average*.³ Over the past two years, JSRI worked⁴ 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

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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.⁶

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.”⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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

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LOUISIANA ON LOCKDOWN - ENDNOTES

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- 1 From Sentencing Project at <https://www.sentencingproject.org/news/opinion-solitary-confinement-widespread-ineffective/>
- 2 From Solitary Watch at <https://solitarywatch.org/facts/faq/>
- 3 Cloud, D., LaChance, J., Smith, L., & Galarza, L. (2019). *The Safe Alternatives to Segregation initiative: Findings and recommendations for the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, and progress toward implementation*. Vera Center on Sentencing and Corrections. Retrieved from https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/safe-alternatives-segregation-initiative-findings-recommendations/legacy_downloads/safe-alternatives-segregation-initiative-findings-recommendations-ldps.pdf
- 4 Former JSRI Fellow, Ali Bustamante, Ph.D., conducted the statistical analysis for the report. Sue Weishar, Ph.D., assisted with qualitative data analysis and editing the report. JSRI Advisory Board Member, Ashley Howard, Ph.D., oversaw the inputting of approximately one-third of the surveys by her Loyola Honors history class.
- 5 Kemp, K., Choinski, W., Resnik, J., & VanCleave, A. (2018). *Reforming Restrictive Housing: The 2018 ASCA-Liman Nationwide Survey of Time-in-Cell*. New Haven: The Association of State Correctional Administrators & The Liman Center for Public Interest Law at Yale Law School. Retrieved from https://law.yale.edu/system/files/area/center/liman/document/asca_liman_2018_restrictive_housing_revised_sept_25_2018.pdf
- 6 To preserve anonymity, the real names of respondents were not used in the report. The report lists responses with minimal editing for grammar or spelling.
- 7 Dostoyevsky, F. (1915). *The house of the dead*. New York, New York: MacMillan.
- 8 Woodfox, A. (2019) *Solitary: Unbroken by four decades in solitary confinement. My story of transformation and hope*. Grove Atlantic.
- 9 Cloud, et al. Op.Cit.

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JUSTSOUTH QUARTERLY MADE
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JustSouth is published quarterly by the Jesuit Social Research Institute, College of Arts and Sciences, Loyola University New Orleans, 6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 94, New Orleans, LA 70118

The *JustSouth Monthly* is published 12 times a year and is available upon request without charge at jsri@loyno.edu. Copyright 2014 © Jesuit Social Research Institute. ISSN 2161-315X

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