

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/07/10/demonstrators-protest-solitary-confinement-and-brutality-in-new-york-citys-jails/>

## Campaign and Advocacy

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by [Shae Cali](#) | July 10, 2012

Yesterday morning, members of the Jails Action Coalition (JAC), a newly formed grassroots activist group that opposes the expansion of solitary confinement and other abuses in New York City's jails, held a demonstration outside a meeting of the city's Board of Corrections. Chanting, "We demand prisoners rights, together we stand, together we fight!" and "Jobs and education, not incarceration!" protesters from the Bronx Defenders, Urban Justice Center, American Civil Liberties Union, Legal Aid Society, and other advocacy groups marched alongside affected family members and other concerned members of the community.

One man distributed pamphlets on solitary confinement in New York City jails. Curious pedestrians paused to watch as the words "People suffering by the hour, what do we do, fight the power" penetrated the routine sounds of Monday mornings hustle and bustle near 51 Chambers Street in Manhattan.

Also in attendance was Sister Marion Defeis, who served for 23 years as a chaplain at the city's jails. Last month, Sister Defeis publicly called for change in a [commentary in the New York Daily News](#): Recognizing that prolonged solitary confinement is a cruel form of punishment, people of faith and conscience must work to abolish this indefensible practice. Yesterday she once again spoke out against the DOC's use of punitive segregation, this time to a circle of JAC demonstrators as well as a number of passersby stopping to tune in.

Inside the meeting, a packed room of high-level officials from the Department of Corrections (DOC), including Commissioner Dora Schiri, sat around a table across from members of the Board of Corrections (BOC), an [entity which](#) monitors conditions in the City's jails, investigates serious incidents, evaluates the performance of the Department of Correction, reviews inmate and employee grievances, and makes recommendations in critical areas of correctional planning.

At the commencement of the meeting, the BOC briefly mentioned the demonstration being conducted by the JAC while a JAC member walked around the room passing out literature on solitary confinement in New York City jails to attendees of the meeting. In addition, the BOC handed out recent op-eds on solitary confinement, information on the recent congressional hearing on solitary confinement, and the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry's [recent briefing](#) in which the group opposed the use of solitary confinement for juvenile offenders. The DOC, in turn, gave the BOC detailed information on their use of punitive segregation. Both parties agreed to table the main discussion on punitive segregation to ensure time to review all materials.

Over the last two years, the DOC has increased its use of punitive segregation at Rikers Island by 44 percent. With its total number of isolation cells now nearing 1,000, it has one of the highest rates of solitary confinement in the country. According to a recent article in [City Limits](#), "For the last several years, union officials who represent jail workers have complained of an uptick in violence against their members. In 2010, there were 84 incidents of inmate assaults on staff resulting in serious injury, according to DOC statistics, up from 63 in 2009 and 53 in 2008. (Complete DOC statistics on jail violence can be viewed on [the agency's website](#).) They argue that more solitary confinement cells are needed to enhance the safety of jail staff."

But recent litigation filed in a federal court accuses guards of brutality in New York City jails. Eleven current and former inmates on Rikers Island [filed a lawsuit in Federal District Court in Manhattan](#) by the Legal Aid Society and two private law firms alleging that DOC officials have tolerated and even condoned the unprovoked beatings of inmates by guards. The suit seeks class-action status to cover almost all of the city's thousands of current inmates, and future inmates, as well. The suit describes the brutal beating of Rikers Island inmate Shameik Smallwood by a group of corrections officers in 2011, which, according to the lawsuit, resulted in reconstructive surgery.

Named as a defendant in the lawsuit, [Commissioner Dora Schiri](#) has fallen under serious scrutiny, despite her history of advocacy for restorative justice and reentry reform. [She maintains that at Rikers](#), an increase in punitive segregation is necessary and that the average length of stay, at 50 days, does not compare to the length of stay in supermax facilities, and is reserved for that group where incentives do not entice, where lesser sanctions are not sufficient to otherwise modify their conduct. She echoed this sentiment during today's meeting, stating that the term solitary confinement refers to multiple forms of housing, and that other jurisdictions have addressed conditions in supermax facilities and administrative segregation, such as in Maine and Colorado, implying that punitive segregation in New York City jails differs from conditions of confinement for inmates in solitary confinement in other jurisdictions.

But Dilcio Acosta, a self-described active member of JAC, said after the meeting that what the City does is segregating someone, keeping them away from human contact. Commissioner Schirio, he continued, is realizing that nationally everyone is saying that you cannot put a juvenile or a mentally ill person in solitary confinement, but if you call it another name, it is the same. From what I understand, the conditions are the same as in solitary confinement it is not encouraging rehabilitation. An activist from the organization RIPP, [Rights for Imprisoned People with Psychiatric Disabilities](#), echoed this sentiment, noting that the term Special Housing Unit (SHU) is simply a euphemism for solitary confinement.

The JAC formed last year largely in response to city plans to increase the use of punitive segregation on Rikers Island. Early JAC meetings brought people together for brainstorming and community organizing in multiple boroughs across the city. In a short period of time, JAC's membership has grown, combining members with deep community roots who embody the often-suppressed voices of those marginalized by the penal system alongside a cadre of veteran and budding lawyers savvy in social movements. The group's [mission statement](#) says that it is dedicated to promoting human rights, dignity and safety for people in New York City jails. Its specific goals include increasing transparency, ending the use of solitary confinement, addressing medical and mental health needs, advocating for more rehabilitative services, and fighting against the racist and discriminatory policies leading to mass incarceration.

As noted by the BOC at the meeting, the swell of activism in New York City parallels the public's growing concern with the use of solitary confinement across the nation. This was JAC's first public demonstration and the group has already succeeded in getting the attention of key decision makers. The group has reportedly secured a meeting with Dora Schirio and DOC officials for the near future to discuss punitive segregation and other concerns with the conditions on Rikers Island.

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 [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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I HAVE RECEIVED MANY LETTERS FROM STATE PRISONS GREENBAY, WISC AND THE INHUMAN CONDITIONS AMOUNTING TO TORTURE WHICH IS DESCRIBED BY INMATES SERVING THEIR SENTENCES IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT RESEMBLE THE REPORTED CONDITIONS WHICH EXIST AT RIKERS ISLAND. BEING DIAGNOSED WITH BIPOLAR 1 SINCE 1980 I CAN ONLY IMAGINE A LIFE WITHOUT HUMAN CONTACT AND THE SUPPORT I RECEIVED FROM MY WIFE PAULA OF FIFTY YEARS, MY TWO GROWN CHILDREN AND 4 GRANDCHILDREN. 95 PERCENT OF ALL PRISON INMATES EVENTUALLY ARE RELEASED BACK INTO OUR NEIGHBORHOODS. ARE WE THE PUBLIC SAFER WITH REHABILITATED INMATES OR INMATES WHO HAVE BEEN BEATEN, DISCOURAGED, ALL HUMAN COMPASSION REMOVED FROM YEARS IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT. AMERICA, WE CAN DO BETTER. I HONESTLY BELIEVE, ONCE SOMEONE LEARNS WHAT GOES ON BEHIND BARS, THEY WILL ACT TO CHANGE SOCIETY AND ITS VALUES. ALLAN FEINBLUM P.O. BOX 8406 NY, NY 10116 MEMBER OF RIPP AND JAC

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