

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/01/26/aclu-gets-one-angola-prisoner-released-from-solitary/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | January 26, 2010

The [American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana](#) is kept busy trying to safeguard the basic constitutional rights of the states [45,000+ prisoners](#). According to the group's web site:

Louisiana has the highest rate of incarceration in the world. We have 13 state prisons and a staggering 108 local jails. Our prisons rival Mississippi as the most abhorrent in terms of violence and horrible living conditions. People get killed in Louisiana's prisons.

At the ACLU of Louisiana, we receive more than 80 prison complaints per month. The complaints we get include are about beatings from guards, inadequate medical care, squalid living conditions, and being denied access to a lawyer.

The ACLU also notes that Louisiana subjects a disproportionate number of prisoners to isolation despite the extensive evidence of harm of solitary confinement. The most notorious instance of long-term lockdown is the Angola 3, kept in isolation for more than three decades. But there are many others, as well. One of these prisoners released from solitary after the ACLU protested his confinement in a letter to Angola's Warden Burl Cain. Hymel Varnado had been in isolation for 12 years, for no ostensible reason. As the [ACLU of Louisiana reports](#):

For over a century, it's been clear that prolonged isolation has severe medical consequences, and in 1890 the US Supreme Court found that it can cause mental illness and that it is often too severe a punishment, said Marjorie R. Esman, Executive Director of the ACLU of Louisiana. It shouldn't have taken over a century for the Warden of Angola to recognize that no one should be isolated from human contact without a very good reason.

Varnado, who has no record of escape attempts, assaulting staff or harming himself or others, was transferred to a shared cell on Dec. 30, 2009, after ACLU lawyers wrote to Angola's Warden Burl Cain urging that Varnado be placed in a less restrictive setting and explaining the many medical reports and court rulings showing that prolonged isolation is dangerous and cruel.

Since his arrival at Angola in May 1997, Varnado has spent almost his entire time in an individual cell 23 hours a day. He was allowed to exercise alone in a fenced yard three times a week. His isolation caused him to experience psychological torture on a daily basis, including sleep deprivation and acute psychological pain.

Varnado was placed in solitary confinement not because of his behavior while in prison, but because he was young 21 at the time of his incarceration. In fact, he was released from solitary into a dormitory for several months last year and although he did well there and his health improved, he was returned to solitary when the dorm was closed.

Logic, as well as human decency, demand that we allow people to interact with others, said Esman. The evidence has been clear for long enough that isolation causes illness. Hymel Varnado did not need to be isolated from other prisoners, and he spent years deprived of his ability to function for no reason other than that he was young when he committed his crimes. We're delighted that Mr. Varnado will now be able to have human companionship.

Angola's practice of keeping prisoners in permanent lockdown will soon be challenged in court, on grounds similar to those outlined in the ACLU's letter. A [lawsuit filed in federal court](#) in Louisiana on behalf of Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox, the two members of the Angola 3 who are still being held in solitary, is expected to come to trial this spring. The suit argues that the men's 37 years in solitary confinement have caused serious physical and psychological damage, constituting cruel and unusual punishment, and that their continued isolation serves no legitimate penological purpose.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The

Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets [@solitarywatch](#).

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October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

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September 29, 2022

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