

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [David Cloud](#) | June 6, 2012

In November of 2011, Solitary Watch reported on New York City's plans to [sharply increase solitary confinement on Rikers Island](#) in response to [growing rates of violence](#) in the jail's general population. For a time, this issue seemed to be buried in the details of the corrections budget and out of community conscience. That has changed, as a vocal dissent has emerged to put pressure on officials and make the case that more segregation is exactly the opposite of what Rikers needs to quell random bursts of violence.

Grassroots organizations, such as the [Jail Action Coalition](#) and members of the legal community, including Legal Aid's [Prisoners Rights Project](#), assert that while violence in Rikers is real, DOC's proclaimed chronic shortage of segregation units is illusory. In a prior interview with Solitary Watch, the [Prisoners Rights Project pointed out](#) that in the 1990s, the total jail population was much larger and there were less segregation beds. Instead, these advocates contend that perceived need for more segregation cells stems from bad policy, arbitrary enforcement of punitive segregation, and an unaddressed culture of brutality among DOC staff. Furthermore, they suggest that better training of staff and more behavioral health programming is the best way to abate violence.

The Department of Corrections stands by its policy choice as a necessary measure to protect the safety of its staff. In response to the notion that a smaller jail population should yield a smaller demand for isolation, Commissioner Dora Schiro has stated, "The inmate census is lower now than before, but the inmates who are in jail are far more difficult to manage and far more damaged than the inmate population previously." A rather bold assertion that may reflect the fact that nearly a third of Rikers inmates have mental health needs. Others think that segregation at Rikers is simply overused as a behavioral management tool to compensate for a shortage of staff and lack of programming.

The latest criticism comes from Sister Marion Defeis, who served for 23 years as a chaplain at the city's jails, in an op-ed published in the New York [Daily News](#). After describing her own experiences, witnessing the lethargy and depression of prisoners in solitary on Rikers, Sister Defeis denounces the practice of holding people in isolation until they are mentally broken as a violation of our shared decency and humanity as well as the prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment. She calls on the religious community to speak out against solitary:

Every human being has inherent God-given dignity, a quality that does not disappear behind prison gates. Recognizing that prolonged solitary confinement is a cruel form of punishment, people of faith and conscience must work to abolish this indefensible practice.

The segregation units at Rikers are notoriously known as the Bings. As Defeis notes in her piece, a correctional officer told her that the moniker grew out of the fact that a person's mind goes "bing" when subjected to such conditions. Conditions in punitive segregation at Rikers stick to the common recipe for mental anguish: 23-hour lockdown, minimal recreation, lack of human contact, and sensory deprivation.

Defeis and others are perplexed by the City's investments in increased numbers of segregation cells, against the highly publicized reductions in the use of solitary by states such as [Mississippi](#) and [Maine](#). These reforms demonstrate that there are more efficient, effective and humane alternatives to solitary confinement, Defeis argues.

New York City's commitment to expanding its punitive segregation units is an issue that will likely continue to spark more debate. As awareness continues to grow, it is likely that more seasoned professionals like Sister Defeis will go public and take a stance against the issue. Stay tuned for continued coverage of this issue at Solitary Watch.

David Cloud is an attorney and public health professional who worked on the Vera Institute for Justice's Safe Alternatives to Segregation Project and now serves as research director for Amend at UCSF.

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.

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