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Report Reveals Brutality, Neglect, and Prolonged Solitary Confinement at Southport State Prison

by [Victoria Law](#) | December 14, 2017

Imagine row after row of cell doors that rarely open and row after row of people trapped behind those doors, in small cells, day after day. Imagine having to hold most of your conversations by shouting through your cell door at voices whose faces you cannot see; imagine trying to sleep as a cacophony of other voices continue shouting around you.

This is the reality inside Southport Correctional Facility, New York's first supermax prison. Located four hours west of New York City near the Pennsylvania border, Southport holds roughly 350 people in Special Housing Units (SHUs), or specially-designed solitary confinement units, on any given day. These 350 people spend at least 23 hours each day alone in their cells with little to no human interaction or programming to engage their minds.

On Wednesday, the Correctional Association of New York, the state's oldest prison monitoring organization, released a report entitled [Solitary at Southport](#). Drawing on the organization's 2015 inspection of the prison, one-on-one interviews with nearly every person held in the SHU, follow-up investigations, and responses from over 190 written surveys and correspondence, *Solitary at Southport* reveals a prison that embodies some of the very worst aspects of incarceration in New York.

On any given day, New York State prisons hold roughly 2,900 people in SHUs, or 5.8 percent of its state prisoners. An additional 1,000 people are estimated to be held in keeplock, another form of isolation in which people are locked into their own cells (rather than specially-designated cells) for 23 to 24 hours each day, bringing the percentage to 7.65 percent. In comparison, the [national average is 4.4 percent](#). Most people are transferred to Southport and the state's other supermax prison, Upstate, for extended punitive stays in solitary after being charged with rule violations in other prisons. Some remain there for years.

At Southport, the Correctional Association spoke with hundreds of people who were suffering from extended isolation, including high rates of depression and anxiety as well as numerous instances of self-harm. Nearly 90 percent of the people at Southport are Black (62 percent) or Latino (27 percent). They reported pervasive violence and racism from the nearly all-white staff, including not only brutal beatings but also disciplinary tickets for behaviors as minor as disobeying a direct order or talking back to staff. Tickets that extended their SHU sentence by months. Advocates also learned that nearly 17 percent of people in Southport were under the age of 25 and that 6 percent were age 21 or younger.

A Year in Isolation Stretches to Five

Rogelio was sent to Southport in 1999, initially for one year, after a fight at the Shawangunk Correctional Facility. There, he encountered problems with the porters: other incarcerated people assigned to clean the hallways and serve food. They weaponized the food, meaning that they contaminated his meals. He explained in an interview following a press conference in Manhattan marking the release of the report. Rogelio responded by throwing things at them from his cell. Each time, he was issued a disciplinary ticket; each ticket led to an additional nine months in Southport. He spent a total of five years in Southport. In 2004, he was transferred to Comstock and placed in general population.

Rogelio's experience is not uncommon. The Correctional Association found that approximately 57 percent of people in Southport received at least one disciplinary ticket in 2015. That number jumped to 77 percent the following year. Nearly all (98 percent) of these tickets resulted in guilty findings and, in half of those cases, people were given an additional 60 and 75 days in isolation. Black people, like Rogelio, made up 64 percent of those who received a ticket and 67 percent of those who were sentenced to at least six months additional time in the SHU.

It was a horrible, horrible experience, said Rogelio, who returned home in November 2011 and is now a member of the [Brooklyn-based advocacy organization VOCAL](#). I still feel the effects of it today. I deal with it every single day.

Violence at the Hands of Staff Leads to Time in the SHU

Southport was not always a supermax. When Jerome Wright was first sent to Southport in 1989, people could still congregate and participate in group activities, such as eating together. In 1991, the prison was converted from a maximum-security prison into a

supermax, or a prison dedicated to solitary confinement. By then, Wright was in the SHU.

The story behind that SHU sentence, Wright explained in a phone interview, is complicated. He had been transferred from nearby Elmira Correctional Facility, where he had signed on as a plaintiff in a class-action suit against Elmira officials for racist behavior and racial discrimination. I was testifying against officers who were using the N-word, he explained, adding that racism permeated the prison from housing and job assignments to everyday treatment.

Wright was temporarily moved to Wende Correctional Facility in order to testify in court. At Wende, he was beaten by prison staff, he says, as retaliation for suing their colleagues. He was then charged with assaulting correction officers. In addition to prosecuting Wright in the local courts, prison officials gave him 72 months a full six years in the SHU. He was returned to Southport and placed in what was at that time a small number of solitary cells.

Wright spent two-and-a-half years in isolation. During that time, he was frequently denied his one hour of out-of-cell recreation. But, he recounted, he was lucky. His family visited him every week and wrote letters constantly. That level of outside involvement protected him from the violence that he saw many others endure at the hands of officers. Not only were officers wary of abusing a person whose family would raise a ruckus, he explained, they [also] knew I had those lawyers from the [Elmira] lawsuit. From his cell, he saw others denied their one hour of recreation or who were brought out in shackles and handcuffs only to be beaten by staff. A friend had his dreadlocks ripped out of his head, he recounted. This rampant brutality has led to hundreds of lawsuits against Southport alone and, just [within the past five years, \\$10 million in settlements](#).

After two and a half years, the prosecuting attorney realized that the officers had fabricated the assault charges against Wright, who was then returned to general population. They called it a time cut, he said, like they were doing me a favor when I shouldn't have been there in the first place. By then, the prison had changed, becoming nothing but solitary cells.

Self-Harm and Suicide in Isolation

For the past two years, Southport has the highest rate of self-harm in the states prison system and the second highest suicide rate. Over 25 percent of Southport prisoners are on the mental health caseload and over half had been on the mental health caseload in the past. Despite these figures, Southport does not provide group therapy or programming for people with mental health needs. Instead, clinical staff conduct weekly rounds, but, noted the report, mental health staff displayed a lack of recognition of the possible negative impacts of solitary confinement on patients mental health or well-being. Specifically, despite the vast amount of literature documenting the mental health deterioration caused by solitary confinement, mental health staff at Southport reported that they do not see the SHU causing any negative impact or deterioration on peoples mental health.

In 2008, New York passed the [SHU Exclusion Law](#). The law calls for people diagnosed with Serious Mental Illnesses who face isolation for more than 30 days to be diverted to a Residential Mental Health Treatment Unit. Though approximately 200 people have been diverted, since the law was implemented, Beck pointed out that the law doesn't apply to people who have significant mental health issues but are not diagnosed as Serious Mental Illness. Even more disturbingly, several people in Southport who had previously been diagnosed as having Serious Mental Illness were re-classified as having less severe mental health needs, thus allowing prison officials to place them in the SHU.

One man told the Correctional Association that, when he was seven, he had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, chronic depression and ADHD. When he was arrested and sent to Rikers at age 17, then to the state prison system, I was given a 1S mental health designation meaning I had the most serious mental illness. However, they changed my diagnosis to anti-social disorder, borderline personality disorder, and chronic depression. First they took away my S-designation [which would divert him from the SHU], and then they took me off of the OMH [Office of Mental Health] caseload completely.

These rewritten diagnoses aren't limited in Southport. Jack Beck, Director of the Correctional Associations Prison Visiting Project and the reports co-author, notes that, after the law passed, far fewer people throughout the New York State prison system have been diagnosed with Serious Mental Illness and are eligible for diversions. They're able to be kept in solitary confinement for years and don't have access to appropriate mental health treatment, he said.

Despite Reforms, Thousands Remain in Isolation

Solitary at Southport is the tip of the iceberg, Jack Beck stated at the press conference. It epitomizes the abuse, harm and torture of solitary confinement. Though the report focuses on the dehumanizing conditions at Southport, Beck notes that he has been investigating prison conditions for 35 years and, in that time, has seen, again and again, the harm caused by extreme isolation. (At the time of this publication, New York DOCCS had not responded to a request for comment on the reports findings.)

In 2011, after spending 780 days in a double-celled SHU (meaning that he was locked in his cell 23 hours a day with a cellmate), Leroy Peoples filed the lawsuit [Peoples v. Fischer](#) to challenge the states solitary confinement policies. Two years later, in 2013, the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) filed an amended complaint to extend the scope of the lawsuit to include all people in disciplinary segregation in New York State prisons who had been affected by these policies. In December 2015, the NYCLU and DOCCS announced a settlement agreement in the class-action suit, in which DOCCS agreed to a [series of incremental changes](#) in its policies and practices around solitary. At the time, more than 4,000 individuals in New York State prisons were in some form of isolation, amounting to 8 percent of the states total prison population.

Months before the settlement agreement, however, something else occurred that would cause the numbers of people in solitary to balloon. On June 5, 2015, two men escaped from Clinton Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison near the Canadian border. Their escape, complete with a hole cut in the back of the cell, and a journey through a prison steam pipe with a [guitar case filled with assorted clothes, 20 packs of peanuts, 40 granola bars and a dozen sticks of pepperoni](#), was accomplished only with the help of a member of the prison staff. But the three-week manhunt that followed captured headlines, inflaming the publics imagination, triggering brutal retaliation at Clinton, and tightening security measures in prisons across the state.

Before the escape, New York State held roughly 3,600 people in the SHU. After the escape, that number ballooned to over 4,100 people. This was a direct response to the escapes, said Scott Paltrowitz of the Correctional Association and the [New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement](#). Nearly nine months elapsed before the numbers in isolation dropped to the pre-escape levels.

Since then, the incremental reductions in SHU time brought about by the *Peoples* settlement have begun to take effect. But despite the settlement, and despite the passage of the SHU Exclusion Act, the number of people in isolation in New York remains high, while transparency about the states practices is lacking. DOCCS refuses to provide information on how many people are in keeplock, noted Paltrowitz. The lack of information raises the question of whether the decreased numbers in SHU correspond with increased numbers in keeplock. But even if the numbers in keeplock have not increased, Paltrowitz notes that solitary numbers still exceed the national average, and New York lags behind many other states in instituting meaningful reforms.

Thats why we say HALT, said Beck, referring to the [HALT \(Humane Alternatives to Long-Term\) Solitary Confinement Act](#). If passed, the bill would limit solitary confinement to 15 days, bringing New York in line with the [United Nations Mandela Rules](#), the international standards for the treatment of prisoners. For people who may need to be separated for longer than 15 days, HALT provides for alternatives to isolation in the form of special rehabilitation units.

We promote separation when necessary, but not isolation at any time, explained Wright, who is now the Upstate Organizer for CAIC. Reflecting back on his nearly 30 years in prison, he remembers, There were times at the beginning of my sentence when, as a young man, I needed to be separated from others. But not isolated. The HALT Act mandates a strict limit of one year even for the rehab units, with out-of-cell time for treatment and congregate activities while people are held there. Advocates are building legislative support for the bill, which offers hope to New Yorkers who have been held in solitary for as long as 30 years.

Its been years since Wright was confined in Southport. But, he says, I know it was bad [then] and it hasnt gotten better. No positive change has happened. Its still a torturous environment.

Victoria Law is a freelance journalist and author focused on incarceration. Her books include *Resistance Behind Bars*, *Prison By Any Other Name*, and *"Prisons Make Us Safer"* and *20 Other Myths About Mass Incarceration*. She tweets @LVikiml.

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IM HERE TO TELL YOU!!!!!! I spent two and a half of my WORST YEARS IN THAT GOD DAMN HELL HOLE!! And Im a white country man with family that just had absolutely no access to any type of treatment for PTSD or drug addiction in the area where Im from in upstate New York!! Broome County New York to be exact!! Let me tell those out there that need to know the truth about our corruption and CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY THAT HAPPEN ON A REGULAR BASIS ALLLLLLL ACROSS New York State legal system!! If people were not so god damn brain washed and one hundred percent cowards we would not loose so many lives to unnecessary bullshit!!! When we are in those cells we are one hundred percent defenseless while the pigs carry sticks around called nigger beaters that have rubber bands around the handles for every nigger they have beat!!! I could go on and on for days!!! Excuse my French for anyone that is offended but I tell it exactly how it is and I do not sugar coat anything!! Shame on all those guards that have committed crimes against humanity and have never been charged!! I man up and hold myself accountable and learn from my mistakes but these sick bastards will get away with there sick perverse crimes!!

The reason this type of facility was intended for violent, uncontrollable people. My son spent over a year there, for a dirty urine screen in a medium security facility.. Im chatting with a lawyer. Mr. Perez, I suggest you do the same.

I hope this is not true cause I have a son going there for a motorcycle accident why would they put a person who had a motorcycle accident in a supermax correctional facility is beyond me I sure hope I dont have to get my lawyers up there hope to see you soon my son and I want to hear all about it god bless .

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This SHU situation could be cut in half. Bring back prison Industry Inmates could learn a trade & have no time to misbehave. the

Industry could be geared to foreign aid as not to interfere with private Industry.

Funny how Mr. Wright failed to mention, that during his incarceration at Southport, there were events that led to the supermax designation. In 1990, 250 inmates decided it was a good idea to start a riot, in which 8 inmates and 19 staff were injured. Then in May of 1991, inmates took 4 staff hostage. It wasn't long after the hostage taking that Southport was made a supermax. He is also wrong about the suicide rate..I worked the ambulance in the county and we were never called for a suicide..health issues and codes yes. An ambulance is always called in the event of a death .and the inmate is always taken to the hospital in full arrest. The hospital would make the call as to time of death and autopsy would make the call as to cause of death. We also never went out on the units..the inmates were taken to the infirmary from their cell. So yeah take most of this article with a grain of salt.

Its true I agree big time that some prisons are run horribly and inmates are mistreated, but you always have to be cautious when reading stories like this Inmates never tell stories like this and mention what they MIGHT have done to cause this treatment just like if youre watching a show like Lockup, correctional officers will never mention any time they may have mistreated an inmate, if they did.

The continued use of the phrase solitary confinement is a misnomer in todays correctionsstop perpetuating the Shawshank Redemption style of prison.it is not like that at all. If you truly wish to see what it is like in a modern correctional setting put on a uniform and walk a tieryou will see the abuse the Correction Officer (not a prison guard) has to be subjected to on a daily basis, yet there is no concern for their well-being or mental health issues they face due to this ongoing abuse.

who cares dont break the law and you wont be an inmate there.

what a concept! :)

Come put a blue shirt on and come down back for your self and see what prison is really like, you want to create a article about inmates being miss treated in SHU? They are in the prisons Special Housing Unit because they cant handle being our with GP or General Population, guessing for drugs, fights, stabbing, threats, assaults on staff. I understand you civilians think you know what it is Like from holleywood movies. The fact of life is if you break the law, there must be consequences for your actions. Life is about choices and if you cant obey the law, you must receive a ticket. Remember inmates made a decision to break the law, they left their rights at the door.

Amazing how it doesnt seem to occur to these gullible bleeding hearts that the inmates might be LYING to them!

This article is garbage and ONE sided. Hope people read this with an open mind and dont believe everything that is written

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