Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

https://solitarywatch.org/2019/09/12/louisiana-on-lockdown-the-history-of-solitary-confinement-in-louisiana/

Policy Isssue Resources

close

Search

close

close

by Katie Rose Quandt | September 12, 2019

*The following is an excerpt from the report**Louisiana on Lockdown**, published this past June in a collaboration between Solitary Watch, the ACLU of Louisiana, and the Jesuit Social Research Institute at Loyola University New Orleans, with Solitary Watchs Katie Rose Quandt as the lead author. For the report, the authors conducted the largestsurvey ever made of people in solitary confinement, receiving responses from709 people held inLouisiana state prisons. These responses described shocking conditions of severe, prolonged isolation, staff abuse, medical neglect, and denial of basic human needs in a state with the highest rate of solitary confinement in the country and the second highest rate of incarceration in the country. This piece provides abrief historicalbackground on the use of solitary confinement in Louisiana, and the first stirrings of reform.*

From Red Hats to Camp J

Louisiana isolates more of its prison population than any other state. Yet the first major expos of solitary in Louisiana was produced not by a mainstream news outlet or advocacy organization, but from the award-winning magazine published by men incarcerated at Angola. In early 1995, *The Angolite* published a feature called The Planted, shedding light for the first time on the use of long-term solitary confinement in Angola. Written by Lane Nelson, and under the direction of Editor-in-Chief Wilbert Rideau, The Planted outlined the experiences of people isolated in what Angola officials called close cell restriction, or CCR.

Nelson explained that long-term solitary in Angola was a fairly new phenomenon, noting that since Angola was a working plantation, obviously, to keep prisoners locked in cells for years on end was counterproductiveworking all able-bodied prisoners was the highest priority.

However, he noted that short-term solitary confinement has, in some brutal form or another, been an integral part of Angolas long and bloody history. He outlined how, in the 1930s through 1950s, prison officials placed people in solitary for short periods as an effective way of breaking a prisoners spirit, and eventually getting some work out of him. A unit called the pisser was a box car type building which was divided into small, windowless cells. No bunk, no mattress, no toilet, no ventilation. Rats, heat/cold, and lack of air generally tortured a man into submission.

Angolas first extendedlockdown unit, called the Red Hats, was built in 1933, following the bloody escape and recapture of a man named Charlie Frazier. Red Hats was a one-story cement building containing 30 36-foot cells, with no mattresses or toilets. Robert King told *The Angolite* that I did some days in the Red Hats due to a buck in 1961. At the time they put 10 of us in a cell. The last time I was in the Red Hats was in 1970. I did 10 days. That place is pure agony. The Red Hats unit was in operation until the 1970s, when LADOC Secretary Elayn Hunt ended its use.

In 1976, a new disciplinary segregation unit called Camp J was completed at Angola. It would hold up to 400 people at a time in solitary until it closed in 2018, and it became infamous among incarcerated people and prison reformers. In 2018, Mercedes Montagnes, executive director of the New Orleans-based Promise of Justice Initiative, and lead counsel of a lawsuit challenging heat conditions on death row, likened Camp J to a dungeon.

Conditions in Camp J were toxic even for LADOC staff, according to an internal letter obtained by *The Advocate*. In July 2017, Angola warden Darryl Vannoy wrote to Corrections Secretary Jimmy LeBlanc, making a case for closing the unit on behalf of staff morale: The challenges staff encounter at Camp J are more complex than other areas of the institutionNumerous times upon an officers knowledge that they will be assigned to Camp J or loaned to Camp J for work detail they will leave work sick, walk of the job, or report to Human Resources to resign.

The Angola 3

Among those interviewed for the 1995 *Angolite* feature were Albert Woodfox, Herman Wallace, and Robert King, who at the time had been locked down alone for 23 years. In 1972, a young Angola officer named Brent Miller had been found stabbed to death. Woodfox and Wallace were convicted of the murder, despite highly dubious evidence linking them to the crime. They believed they were being punished and removed from general population because of their membership in the Black Panthers and their advocacy for improved

prison conditions. Woodfox and Wallace were given what were effectively life sentences, and sent to solitary cells, with no set date to return to general population.

As *Angolite* journalist Nelson pointed out, executions had slowed across the country in the 1960s, and the Supreme Court struck down all existing death sentences in 1972, setting a precedent for people on death row lingering in cells for years upon years. He wrote: A year passed, five years passed, and somewhere along the line prison officials realized how convenient it was to simply never let some prisoners out of CCR. Woodfox and Wallace, along with Robert King, another Black Panther activist who was also sent to solitary in 1972, would eventually become known as the Angola 3.

At the time, people in solitary housing were mostly held in close cell restriction. CCR inmates hold no jobs, attend no educational classes, have no religious services, do not mingle with other prisoners or even among themselves, wrote Nelson. In 2000, the Angola 3 fled a civil lawsuit challenging their decades-long stay in solitary confinement. Magistrate Judge Docia Dalby wrote that their experiences were so far beyond the pale she could not find anything even remotely comparable in the annals of American jurisprudence. Their story began to draw national attention. King was released in 2001, Wallace in 2013, and Woodfox in 2016. Wallace died three days after his release.

But the Angola 3 themselves had always made clear that while they might hold a record for time in solitary, their experience was by no means out of step with Louisianas draconian prison policies. In 2013, four members of Congress concurred when they sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Justice, requesting an investigation into the use of solitary confinement in Louisiana prisons. They wrote that the prolonged isolation of the Angola 3 is indicative of cruel and unusual punishment, and its blatant and persistent use suggests that this practice is pervasive and not confined to the Angola 3. We have reason to believe that there are other inmates who have received less attention from the press who have also been subject to such onerous, punitive periods of isolation.

A Continuity of Suffering

More than two decades after Nelsons The Planted was published, many of our survey respondents echoed the experiences outlined in the article. In *The Angolite* expos, Gloria Dean Williams, who had been in a womens CCR unit for 11 years at the time, said her life was a living hell! In the summer time the cells are like ovens, and ventilation is poor. In 1987, I tried to kill myself because of the psychological stressThe hardest thing about my cell confinement is not knowing if Ill die in this cell. Overpowering heat and hopelessness continue to plague Louisianas solitary population. Survey respondent Josh told us that in the summer its like being a hot-pocket in a microwave. Andre wrote, I always try to hurt myself. A lot of times I rather die than stay in a cage like a dog.

In The Planted, Colonel Nyati Bolt told the *Angolite* that he had spent 23 years in CCR by choice, because he refused to work in Angolas fields. He often told others that I will not work on a plantation and be a slave for the state. In his survey, Clarence told us that Most of my lockdown came from refusing to be a slaveworking in fields of corn, etc. Free people riding horses with guns telling you to pick this, do that, and/or write you up for disciplinary just because he or she can.

One year before his release, Bolt suffered a stroke in his cell. Medical care was delayed, and as a result he experienced long-term lapses of memory and painful headaches. He believed the stress of confinement contributed to the stroke. Many of our respondents also described crippling stress and anxiety, fears of long-term health complications since being placed in solitary, and delayed medical treatment.

Robert King described to *The Angolite* how, following lawsuits, Angola began allowing people out of CCR for limited recreation time. He said, I saw some guys throw a football and break their arms because their bones had gotten so brittle, their muscles so weak. Dudes would run the yard and hit a small hole and their ankle would just snap. In his survey, Anthony told us that his body is physically deteriorating. I came to David Wade Correctional Center in January weighing 220 pounds, he wrote. I went to court in June and I weighed 183 pounds. I am at a point where I know that I am deteriorating in this cell physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Albert Woodfox told *The Angolite*, Ive seen people do things to themselves and have other inmates do them something because they just couldnt handle being in a cell 23 hours a day. Carl wrote in his survey, These cells drive men mad. I have personally witnessed one man take his life, another tried to by running the length of the tier and smashing his head into the front bars, sadly for him he still lives, if you can really call it that Point is the cells are killing men and they know it.

Local advocates who are themselves survivors of solitary confinement, including many members of VOTE (Voice of the Experienced), as well as advocacy organizations like the ACLU of Louisiana and Solitary Watch that receive numerous letters from people in solitary confinement, know that long-term solitary confinement in torturous conditions is far from a thing of the past in Louisianas prisons. The more than 700 surveys received for this report confirm the persistence and monstrosity of these practices, and the urgent need for change.

An Opportunity for Change

After peaking at 40,000 in 2012, Louisianas prison population began to slowly fall for the first time, along with the states crime rates. More recentlyunder a new administration in Baton Rouge and new leadership at Angola, and with pressure from advocates as well as from a tight state budgetLouisiana has taken additional steps to reduce its rate of incarceration.

The bipartisan task force assembled in 2015 submitted recommendations that formed the basis for a package of 10 reform bills passed by the legislature and signed by Gov. John Bel Edwards in June 2017, and hailed as historic by advocates. The reforms are expected to reduce the states prison population by at least 10 percent and cut costs by $262 million over the next decade, by reducing mandatory minimums, shortening sentences, and making some people eligible for parole sooner. The changes in Louisiana reflect a broader national shift in thinking about mass incarceration that in some cases has spanned the political spectrum, winning supporters on both the left and right.

The past decade has also seen the growth of movements at the local, state, and national levels advocating for the limitation or abolition of long-term solitary confinement. Media coverage of this once largely invisible practice has increased exponentially. Human rights, civil

rights, and criminal justice reform organizationsas well as figures as varied as former President Barack Obama, former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, and Pope Francishave denounced the use of solitary confinement, citing both humanitarian and public safety concerns.

In response to legislation, litigation, or visionary new leadership, a number of states have taken steps to reduce their reliance on solitary. Nearly all reforms to date have been incremental, and overall the number of people in solitary in all U.S. facilities is estimated to have declined by no more than 20 percent, and remains in the tens of thousands. But advocates are hopeful that the near future will bring the issue to a tipping point.

When Albert Woodfox walked out of prison on February 19, 2016, after more than 43 years in solitary, it marked the beginning of a new chapter for a remarkable manand perhaps, for solitary confinement in Louisiana. The states previous attorney general, James Buddy Caldwell, had called Woodfox the most dangerous man on the planet and vowed never to allow his release;

Angola Warden Burl Cain had declared that Woodfox belonged in permanent solitary for practic[ing] Black Pantherism. But by the beginning of 2016, Cain had resigned amid accusations of financial misconduct, and Louisiana had a new attorney general, who decided not to re-prosecute Woodfox after his murder conviction was overturned for the second time.

In 2017, under pressure from a class action lawsuit, LADOC and Warden Darrel Vannoy eased conditions of isolation on Louisianas death row. Historically, people on death row were held in extreme solitary confinement, only leaving their cells to walk a hallway alonefor one hour a day (three days a week they could spend part of their hour alone in an unshaded recreation pen outside, weather permitting).

After the lawsuit was fled, Angolas warden implemented a pilot program that allows the men on death row to socialize on the tier in small groups for two hours, twice each day. Additionally, the pens were removed, a basketball court was built, and the men can now exercise together outside for five hours a week. The department has declared the program a success, as the rate of disciplinary infractions has decreased dramatically.

There have been other signs indicating increased willingness on the part of LADOC to reconsider howand to what extentit uses solitary confinement. In 2017, the department engaged with the Vera Institute of Justices Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative in a partnership aimed at reducing the amount of time inmates spend in isolation, alternatives to segregation and best practices for reintroducing people in restrictive housing to the prisons general population.

In May 2018, Angola closed its notorious Camp J solitary confinement unit. A year later, Vera published a report with detailed findings and recommendations for change that include significantly reducing the states use of solitary confinement, improving conditions and programming, and repurposing physical spaceincluding possible new, rehabilitation-oriented uses for Camp J. LADOC also committed to continuing its work with Vera in the future, with a substantive set of goals that includes reducing its solitary population by at least 50 percent within four years.

These reforms and promises have been rightly heralded as progress. But far more work remains to be done. Some of the men who were housed in Camp J were shuffled to restricted housing elsewhere, and the conditions in most other solitary units remain dismal. A current lawsuit by the ACLU of Louisiana and the Advocacy Center on behalf of men incarcerated at David Wade Correctional Center alleges extreme, abusive conditions and practices that include punishing people with mental illness by restraining them to chairs, exposing them to freezing temperatures, and holding them in solitary confinement for months or years. Even if Louisiana were to reduce its overall solitary population by 50 percent, its rate of solitary confinement use would still be nearly double the national average. And the state has done little to monitor and remedy the conditions of confinement in parish jails.

It is clear that comprehensive and lasting change cannot come only from within the system. In January 2019, opponents of solitary confinementmany of them formerly incarcerated people with personal experience of solitary or individuals with loved ones in solitaryjoined together to form the Louisiana Stop Solitary Coalition, with the purpose of creating a cohesive advocacy strategy. The coalition is aligned with Unlock the Box, a national campaign spearheaded by a group of advocacy organizations, with the stated goal of bringing the United States into compliance with the Mandela Rules within ten years.

Among the leaders of the Louisiana Stop Solitary Coalition is Albert Woodfox, who in March published a widely praised memoir, described by one reviewer as a crushing account of the inhumanity of solitary confinement. Together, solitary survivors and their allies in Louisiana are building a movement aimed at ending this inhumanity, once and for all.

Katie Rose Quandt is a senior contributing writer/editor at Solitary Watch and freelance journalist based in the Bronx. Her work has appeared in The Atlantic, Slate, The Nation, The Guardian, and Mother Jones. She is also a senior editor at the Prison Policy Initiative, and was an Alicia Patterson Foundation Fellow and Soros Justice Media Fellow. Find her @katierosequandt and at katierosequandt.com.

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 Jean Casella

June 15, 2020

by Jean Casella

November 14, 2019

by Jean Casella

June 25, 2019

Solitary Watch encouragescomments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Commentsthat violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Solitary Watch News