

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Solitary Watch is a nonprofit national watchdog group that investigates, documents, and disseminates information on the widespread use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons and jails. As the only site dedicated solely to solitary confinement across the United States, our mission is to provide the public as well as practicing attorneys, legal scholars, law enforcement and corrections officers, policymakers, educators, advocates, people in prison and their families with the first centralized source of unfolding news, original reporting, firsthand accounts, background research, and advocacy tools on this vital domestic human rights issue, in order to bring about awareness, debate, and change. (Scroll down for more information on solitary confinement.)

When we founded Solitary Watch in 2009, solitary confinement was the best-kept secret of the U.S. criminal justice system—a shadow world that was inhabited by upwards of 100,000 people, yet managed to remain out of sight of the American public, and resolutely off-limits to the press. We firmly believed then, as we do now, that **accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice.**

In the past decade, our work has had an impact that belies our small size. **We have played a pivotal role in generating public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking** in response to what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

As criminal justice issues finally begin to receive some of the attention they deserve, in a nation that has 4.4 percent of the world's population and 21 percent of its incarcerated people, **our work will help determine what happens next.** The unparalleled depth we bring to our work has made us a resource for other journalists, and for educators, scholars, lawyers, corrections officials, policy experts, advocates, and survivors of solitary around the world. And as each year passes, we continue to break new ground.

We are expanding the impact of our high-quality advocacy journalism by [partnering with progressive media venues](#) that bring our stories to hundreds of thousands of readers. These stories include [work by incarcerated journalists](#), as well as the unforgettable firsthand accounts by people living in long-term solitary confinement published in our [Voices from Solitary](#) series. And as we provide a unique forum for the experiences of people in solitary, we also bring them a spark of human contact through the [Lifelines to Solitary](#) and [Photo Requests from Solitary](#) projects.

The use and abuse of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons is one of the most pressing domestic human rights issues in America today and also one of the most invisible. Today, at least 25,000 individuals are being held in long-term solitary in the nation's supermax facilities. According to available data, the total number of men, women, and children living in solitary confinement in all state and federal prisons likely exceeds 70,000, with tens of thousands more in isolation in local jails, juvenile facilities, and immigration detention centers.

Far from being a last-resort measure reserved for the worst of the worst, solitary confinement has become a control strategy of first resort in many prisons. This despite the fact that it has never been shown to serve any legitimate penological purpose, and may actually increase both prison violence and recidivism. Individuals can be placed in complete isolation for months or years not only for violent acts but for possessing contraband, using drugs, ignoring orders, or using profanity. Thousands more are held in indefinite solitary confinement because they have been validated as gang members, based on highly questionable information. Others have ended up in solitary because they have untreated mental illnesses, are children in need of protection, are gay or transgender, are Muslim, have unsavory political beliefs, or report rape or abuse by prison officials.

For the people who endure it, life in solitary confinement means spending at least 23 hours a day in a cell that measures, on average, 6 x 9 feet, within supermax prisons or prison units that have made a science out of isolation. Their meals generally come through slots in the solid steel doors of their cells, as do any communications with prison staff. Some are permitted to exercise one hour a day, alone, in a fenced or walled dog run. Individuals in solitary confinement may be denied visits, telephone calls, television, reading materials, and art supplies. And they can remain in isolation for months, years, or decades. In Louisiana, Albert Woodfox of the Angola 3 spent more than 43 years in solitary before his release in 2016.

Numerous studies have found evidence of the psychological damage caused by solitary confinement. One recent federal court case called solitary confinement units virtual incubators of psychosis, seeding illness in otherwise healthy prisoners and exacerbating illness in those already suffering from mental infirmities (*Ruiz v. Johnson* 2001). As little as a week in solitary has been shown to affect EEG activity, while longer stretches produce psychopathologies at an alarmingly high rate. For those already suffering from or prone to mental illness, which in some states can make up nearly half of all people held in solitary, solitary confinement can cause irreparable psychological damage, as well as extreme mental anguish. About 50 percent of all prison suicides take place among the approximately 5 percent of

incarcerated individuals held in solitary confinement. For these reason, the United Nations has identified solitary as a form of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment that often rises to the level of torture. In its 2015 Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules), the UN called upon member states to ban the use of solitary confinement beyond 14 days, and to eliminate it altogether for youth and pregnant women, as well as people with psychological, cognitive, and developmental disabilities, and other vulnerable individuals.

Research has also found that solitary confinement serves no legitimate purpose. It has never been shown to reduce prison violence, and in many circumstances may increase it. Solitary also increases recidivism and makes transitioning back to families and communities more difficult, especially for those released directly from isolation. Efforts in several U.S. jurisdictions to reduce or eliminate the use of long-term isolation, as well as models from Europe, show that humane, effective, and safe alternatives to solitary confinement do exist. So far, however, most reform efforts have been scattered and incremental.

Recent activism against solitary confinement by the American Civil Liberties Union, National Religious Campaign Against Torture, Stop Solitary for Kids, and many state-level campaigns, as well as grassroots groups and people in prison themselves, clearly show that this is an issue whose time has come. Only sustained advocacy and widespread public support will bring about lasting change, and make solitary confinement a thing of the past.

For more comprehensive information on solitary confinement, [see our FAQ, available in English and Spanish.](#)

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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