

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/06/15/no-evidence-of-national-reduction-in-solitary-confinement/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | June 15, 2010

An article in yesterday's *USA Today* suggests that there's been a widespread reduction in the use of solitary confinement in state prisons. Its author, Kevin Johnson, has done [excellent reporting on solitary confinement](#) in the past. And everything in this article is factually correct. But some of its generalizations and especially its headline (for which the author cannot be blamed) could prove misleading which is too bad, since the piece appears to quickly be making its way around the web, and will convince some readers of a trend that doesn't exist.

Under the headline [States Start Reducing Solitary Confinement to Help Budgets](#), the article begins:

State prison officials are reducing the number of offenders in solitary confinement once among the fastest-growing conditions of detention as budget pressures, legal challenges and concerns about the punishment's effectiveness mount. States such as Mississippi, Texas and Illinois have decreased the number of inmates in solitary confinement, a dramatic acknowledgement, analysts say, that states can no longer sustain the costs of hard-line criminal justice policies.

After providing some quotes about the pros and cons of letting prisoners out of solitary, the article gives examples from the three states mentioned in the opening paragraph.

As [we wrote earlier this week](#), Mississippi did see a dramatic reduction in the number of prisoners in its supermax unit from more than 1,000 to about 150. It is to our knowledge a unique case, and the changes were not made for the purpose of saving money. The were (as the article does acknowledge) spurred by lawsuits to be exact, a decade of suits brought by the ACLU. The state Corrections commissioner said the changes had saved about \$6 million and has not resulted in safety problems.

The second example is Texas, where a plan for 6,000 drug rehabilitation beds designed to divert offenders from prison had a side benefit, Republican state Rep. Jerry Madden said: a reduction in the solitary confinement population, from 9,343 in 2007 to 8,627 this year. This is a significant reduction in a single year though as [Grits for Breakfast](#) points out, the number of offenders in isolation declined more or less organically when Texas diverted relatively low-level offenders from the system. To my knowledge there was no concerted effort to reduce it.

The third example is Illinois, where a state prison review reduced the number of segregated offenders from 2,347 to 2,266, spokeswoman Sharyn Elman said. This is a decrease of less than 4 percent, and it's not clear why it happened. It's possible the reduction had something to do with the [concerted activist efforts](#) against the notorious Joliet supermax, which were supported in the past year by a [scathing expose](#) in the local press, protests from international human rights groups, and hearings in the U.S. Senate.

In any case, there's really no evidence that budgetary considerations played a significant role, even in these three states. (And again, the author isn't responsible for the misleading headline.) On the other hand, we do know that in Colorado, amidst deep budget cuts to education and social services, the state [managed to come up with more than \\$9 million](#) to open one wing of a new supermax prison, adding 300 more solitary confinement cells.

In fact, it's too bad our prison policies aren't driven primarily by considerations of cost and effectiveness. If they were, we'd probably have half as many people in prison as we do now (with some of them in drug or mental health treatment instead), and a tiny fraction of the current numbers in solitary confinement. (It costs over \$90,000 a year to keep a prisoner in Tamm.)

It is encouraging to see *any* prisoners moved out of solitary on a large scale in Mississippi, and on a smaller scale in Texas, Illinois, [Oregon](#), [New York](#), and elsewhere. If there's any lesson at all emerging from these scattered examples, it's that years of activism and court challenges sometimes do have an effect. But these efforts are scattered, and it's far too soon to call this a national trend.

We do not know whether the use of solitary confinement has diminished, grown, or changed at all in the last decade, because there are no reliable statistics on the subject. Existing statistics are ten years old, and far from reliable. The *USA Today* story, like many others on solitary confinement, cites statistics that appeared in a 2006 report by a nonpartisan commission that studied U.S. prisons and jails:

The number of prisoners in solitary confinement typically locked away for 23 hours a day grew 40% from 1995 to 2000 when there were

80,870 segregated inmates, a study by The Commission on Safety and Abuse in Americas Prisons found. The overall prison population increased 28% during that time. Isolating prisoners, the private study found, is often twice as costly.

The [report of the Commission on Safety and Abuse in Americas Prisons](#) is without a doubt a reliable source. But in this case, the Commission did not conduct independent research into numbers of prisoners in solitary; it simply picked up the numbers provided by the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, an agency of the U.S. Department of Justice. And the Commission clearly states that these numbers are incomplete. The report says:

On June 30, 2000, when the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics last collected data from state and federal prisons, approximately 80,000 people were reported to be confined in segregation units. That is just a fraction of the state and federal prisoners who spend weeks or months in expensive, high-security control units over the course of a year, and it does not capture everyone incarcerated in supermax prisons. And there is no similar data for local jails.

Other estimates of the number of prisoners in solitary confinement in America on any given day are as high as 100,000 or 120,000. (An accurate count is one of the long-term goals of the Solitary Watch project and will probably be years in the making.) Even if these numbers are going down by a few hundred here or a thousand there, it's like a drop in the ocean.



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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Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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California is also in the ways of Colorado. CA has cut social and social servants funding across the board, yet has managed to find 7 billion dollars to fund several prisons, providing 53,000 new beds for men women and children, Please show me where they are NOT attempting to warehouse the poor.

<http://www.correctionalnews.com/articles/2010/06/25/ab-900-moves-forward>

i glad to see the use down but still you all think this is a game of polls that's sick i mean inmates are living to you know only act like asses cos you treat them like that i mean adx is not needed first off and oh hell that state is in need of learning if it wants to build a supermax rather than teach the kids well then someone is in need of teaching badly i think that rocky mountain air is getting you minds low on blood to the brain cos you're not using the one god gave you right your brains not in your ass it's in the head it's meant for thinking smart things like kids are your state pride teach them well not hay lets open a solitary prison that if we don't teach are kids well they end up in i sorry but please start with class 11 common sense for the government and how you use your head then take what the hell solitary dose to you i love everyone to take that class so they understand how harmful and wrong it is

The Fed prisoner population is still increasing in order to give the states, who cannot print money like the Fed, a break. Overall the national prison population is still increasing albeit at a slower pace now that the states can no longer afford expanding their own system.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons is now the largest prison system in the land. These special units are a priority for the Correction Officers union and the industry leaders since they bring come with a higher price tag for the builders and more safety for the guards.

I want to point out that I am not same Alan above who I believe is a lawyer with the ACLU. I wish I was but I don't want the reader to confuse the two of us. Rather than a lawyer I have been an inmate as a juvenile and have written about my experience on here.

The explanation for Illinois seems to be that the Department rehabbed one of the seg cell houses at Pontiac, which required that portions be emptied. I dont see any evidence that the intent was to eliminate it as a seg housing unit.

However, Illinois IS currently undertaking a systemic review (along with several other states, as part of a Vera Institute initiative) of its use of seg. So, hopefully by next year, Illinois can join the list of states reducing its use of seg.

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