

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/11/09/new-aclu-report-slams-overuse-solitary-new-mexico-prisons-jails/>

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by [Lisa Dawson](#) | November 9, 2013

An important new report and accompanying [press release](#) issued by the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty (NMCLP) and the ACLU of New Mexico (ACLU-NM) finds that solitary confinement in New Mexico prisons and jails is both overused and understated.

The report further states that the use of isolation, as practiced by the New Mexico Corrections Department (NMCD), violates the human rights of those subjected to it by isolating people suffering from serious mental illness and permitting the use of prolonged segregation. Findings of the study are based on a year-long investigation into the use of solitary confinement in the states correctional facilities. According to the release:

Solitary confinement means detaining a prisoner in 23-hour-a-day lockdown in small cells, where the person is banned from most out-of-cell activities and social interaction. The investigation found that both state prisons and county jails hold hundreds people in solitary at any one time around the state. The average length of stay of solitary in the prisons is almost 3 years. In the jails, it can last for months, or even years at a time.

[Inside the Box: The Real Costs of Solitary Confinement in New Mexico's Prisons and Jails](#) states that New Mexico houses approximately 16 percent of its total prison population in some form of solitary confinement, also noting the substantial increase in the cost associated with holding a prisoner in solitary as opposed to that for a prisoner held in the general population. While it costs more money to detain prisoners in isolation than in the general population, it does not improve public safety or reduce prison violence.

The report also elaborates on the detrimental effects inflicted on people subjected to the practice:

[I]mposing extreme isolation on prisoners, without allowing for social interaction, education and opportunities for rehabilitation, can have dire consequences. Countless studies have shown that otherwise mentally stable people can experience severely adverse effects from even short periods of enforced isolation. Symptoms can include social withdrawal, panic attacks, irrational anger, loss of impulse control, paranoia, severe depression, and hallucinations. The effect on children and those already suffering from mental illnesses can be particularly devastating.

Mentioned throughout the study was the challenge associated with obtaining clear information on New Mexico's use of solitary confinement, a problem largely attributable to reporting by NMCD that lacks adequate transparency at both the state and local level. The release states:

The amount of information we were able to gather is dwarfed by the amount of information we still lack, said Steven Robert Allen, Director of Public Policy at the ACLU of New Mexico. New Mexico desperately needs to implement uniform transparency requirements to fully reveal how and why solitary confinement is being used in our prisons and jails.

Not surprisingly, the report further elaborates on the paucity of data available on the states use of segregation:

This research project illuminated just how difficult it is to acquire clear data on the use of solitary confinement in New Mexico. For example, it was impossible to determine with any degree of certainty either the percentage or raw numbers of prisoners held in solitary confinement in New Mexico jails because this data simply is not compiled in an accessible, uniform manner.

Solitary Watch reports on the obstacles encountered by journalists in reporting on solitary confinement in U.S. prisons [here](#) and [here](#). Based on their findings, the NMCLP and ACLU-NM identify key areas in need of urgent reform, proposing that the NMCD implement the following measures (each of which are expanded upon in detail in the report):

- Increase transparency and oversight of the use of solitary confinement
- Limit the length of solitary confinement to no more than 30 days
- Mandate that all prisoners be provided with mental, physical and social stimulation
- Ban the use of solitary confinement on the mentally ill
- Ban the use of solitary confinement on children

NMCLP and the ACLU make a point to commend NMCD for its willingness to cooperate with their investigation, and for efforts at reform already underway:

NMCD is now looking at new ways to reduce the use of solitary confinement in its facilities. In June 2012, NMCD invited the Vera Institute of Justice (www.vera.org) to conduct a comprehensive assessment on its use of solitary confinement at state detention facilities. This process will hopefully lead to a sensible reduction in the use of solitary confinement in New Mexico prisons with corresponding taxpayer savings and an increase in prison and public safety.

We got in the habit of making it too easy to lock down prisoners, says Jerry Roark, NMCD Director of Adult Prisons. Right now, we have way too many non-predatory prisoners in segregation. We need to change that, and we're working on it.

Lisa Dawson served as an assistant editor, social media manager, and contributor at Solitary Watch. She continues to support prisoners and their family members who need help navigating re-entry. She is on Twitter [@endsolitary](https://twitter.com/endsolitary).

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 [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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What is the most useful thing we can do to end the practice. What action could I take?

Please see our Action page for things you can do to oppose solitary confinement. If you are in New Mexico you can contact the ACLU there.

Basta al aislamiento en solitario

Thank you for keeping the spotlight on this barbarism

My husband has been in solitary confinement in New Mexico for 12 of the last 14 years, based solely on gang affiliation, not on any behavior. It has stripped him down to his bare soul, and has caused him to question everything, even himself and his own mind. He has not had a contact visit, since our marriage in 2009. He has not touched his mother in over 14 years. We cannot keep allowing this torture to take place, for these inmates, or our families.

Solitary confinement needs to be stopped driving men/women insane is cruel and unusual punishment that should not be condoned under any circumstance. If mental illness starts after as little as 10 days then it is pre-meditated torture and abuse. What's the sentence for that? People sentenced to prison is their punishment anything else becomes abuse. And must be stopped.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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