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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | July 25, 2011

A new article in [The Crime Report](#) describes a dramatic reduction of solitary confinement in Maine State Prison. The changes have taken place under the leadership of a new Commissioner of Corrections, Joseph Ponte and under a Republican governor and state legislature. But as author Lance Tapley points out, the path to reform was paved by a grassroots political movement that last year pressed for legislation to limit the use of solitary confinement in the states prisons and jails. While that effort failed, it clearly influenced the subsequent reforms.

In a matter of weeks this spring, [new Corrections] Commissioner Ponte dramatically reformed the Maine State Prisons supermax, the Special Management Unit or SMU. Like others across the country it had been plagued by inmates cutting up, by suicides and suicide attempts, hunger strikes, inmate assaults on guards, guard assaults on inmates and, in Maines case, unexplained inmate deaths.

Like its counterparts elsewhere, Maines SMU had been increasingly accused of being a torture chamber, especially for the mentally ill.

Pontes major reform has been to quickly shrink the number of supermax prisoners by almost 60 percent, from a nearly-always-full 132 cells to, recently, 54.

One immediate result is that the unit is calmer, and no great disruption has occurred from putting inmates back into the prison general population. Although wardens have defended supermaxes as necessary to decrease prison violence, academic researchers say theres no evidence this is so. Maines experience so far supports the research.

Maine is not the first state to shrink its supermax numbers. In recent years Mississippi reduced its Parchman supermax population by 90 percent, also without upheaval. But reforms there were forced by an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) lawsuit.

In Maine the reforms came about after a grassroots political campaign and the appointment of a commissioner willing to listen to reformers

Maines own prison reformers are in a mild state of shock at seeing many of their long-time recommendations adopted. Ponte even appointed two members of the [Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition](#) to a Department of Corrections committee coordinating the reforms.

The article details the specific changes in prison policy that have led to a reduction in solitary confinement:

Pontes reforms go beyond the SMU, changing how discipline is enforced throughout the 915-inmate, all-male, maximum-security prison located in the coastal village of Warren.

In the past, guards threw prisoners into the SMU for small infractions, like getting themselves tattooed. Then, in a vicious circle, as an inmates rage or mental problems grew because of the isolation, his protests added time to his supermax stay

Among other changes, Ponte:

Tapley also outlines the process by which a home-grown prison-reform movement was able to influence state policy on the use of solitary confinement:

Ponte landed in the state as a rethinking was taking place on the part of corrections and elected officials, newspaper editorial writers, and others. They became more concerned about the humaneness, health effects, usefulness and cost of solitary confinement.

The new ideas had been promoted by a home-grown prison-reform movement that made curbing solitary its top priority.

Ponte and his committee guiding the reforms have as their playbook a bold report commissioned last year by the legislature at the behest of these activists.

The report resulted from a study of solitary confinement that legislators ordered as a substitute for a bill they defeated that had been

pushed by prisoner-rights, civil-liberties, religious, and mental-health groups. The bill would have greatly restricted the use of isolation.

Problems remain among them, the fact that thereports aim is to reduce, not eliminate, solitary confinement. In addition, it faces resistance from guards, and a lack of adequate mental health care services for inmates with isolation-exacerbated behavioral problems being released into the general inmate population. Nevertheless, Tapley writes, advocates in other states and on the national level are looking to the experience of Maine. John Humphries, program coordinator for Washington-based NRCAT[National Religious Campaign Against Torture], says Maines anti-solitary effort is providing inspiration to similar efforts emerging in other states especially because NRCAT and the ACLU are promoting Maine as a model for political action.



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.

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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I spent 10 years in California prisons and know the Pelican Bay SHU personally. I wrote a drug war novel Roll Call by Glenn Langohr to show the public the path we are on by incarcerating petty criminals is only breeding bigger ones who are displaced from society when they are released. The U.S is not the leaders of the free world; we are the leaders of the incarcerated world! I started <http://www.lockdownpublishing.com> when I got out of prison to help other prisoners change their lives through writing. I pray more people stand up and look at the five demands asking for humane treatment! <http://youtu.be/jEQ8Gh1-bFs>

i am glad to see this grate man stepping out of the darknes and bring backa good light and name for justice if only more would follow in his steps we may stand a stronger nashion and one that is ones more just i do have one problem with his thouts that being that you can take rec as a punishment after all he needs keep in mind that one hour a day is requaired by law and that should never be taken from them other wise he is a light in the darknes of justice may thare be light in the darknes of justice

that is good news for once

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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