

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2015/03/30/officials-advocates-call-for-restrictions-on-solitary-confinement-in-wisconsin/>

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by [Lisa Dawson](#) | March 30, 2015

In January of this year, the Wisconsin prison system implemented new policies which will revamp the way in which solitary confinement is used as a correction measure against prisoners violating prison rules. While the Legislature endorsed the changes, guards, people in prison, and prison activists say that it remains unclear whether the adjustments means fewer people will spend less time in isolation.

The Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC) holds approximately [1,500 people](#) of the state's 22,000 prisoners in some form of segregation on any given day, sometimes for [months, years or even decades at a time](#). According to the [Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism](#), solitary is routinely used to punish individuals for violations of prison regulations. A [2013 report](#) by the Association of State Correctional Administrators found 118 people in Wisconsin correctional facilities were held in solitary confinement for over two years, 14 of whom were kept in isolation for over a decade. According to a [2009 Wisconsin state audit](#), almost half of all people held in solitary suffer from serious mental illness.

At Waupun Correctional Institution, a state prison 55 miles from Madison, cells are about the size of a bathroom with a small window. People in the unit are held in 23-hour-a-day lockdown with no contact with the external world aside from that with corrections officers and incoming mail if they are lucky. According to [The Cap Times](#), the unit combines severe isolation and frequent use of force on people confined in the prison. In fact, two people held in solitary confinement at Waupun have committed suicide between December 2013 and July 2014. The story states:

The use-of-force reports released for Waupun from 2012 and most of 2013 include six cases in which force was deployed against inmates in segregation while they were engaged in acts of self-harm or attempted suicide.

One inmate cut his wrist and forearm with metal from his glasses and was pepper sprayed. Others were tasered or sprayed after taking pills or attempting to hang themselves with a bedsheet or pillow case.

Waupun's isolation unit has elicited numerous grievances from prisoners alleging abuse by officers. Since 2011, the [Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism](#) found 40 physical or psychological mistreatment claims of people in isolation, [comprising 33 prisoners since 2011](#). Officials [deny](#) any instances of abuse, however, instead accusing the prisoners of fabricating claims of mistreatment.

Secretary of Correction Calls for Change; Advocates Call for Clarity

Wisconsin secretary of Correction Ed Wall has [stated](#) that he would like to reduce the use of solitary in the state. In an April 2014 [message to his staff](#), Wall writes: Are we placing inmates in segregation because we are mad at them? And if we are, does this help our inmates or does it make us any safer?

Wall's communication with staff, obtained by Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, [stated](#) the DOC would be working with scientists, scholars and mental health professionals from across the country to outline new approaches, recognizing that the topic will undoubtedly touch nerves with staff for a variety of reasons.

According to [WisconsinWatch.org](#):

Despite these internal communications, the DOC has been publicly tight-lipped about policy changes regarding its use of solitary confinement. Wall declined an interview request and agency spokeswoman Joy Staab has declined to answer questions about specific changes.

The DOC took more than two months to fulfill an Aug. 1 request from the Center for records on the matter, then provided only records up until the time of the request. Still, nearly 250 pages of records were released.

Wall went on to muse that segregation has at times become a method to isolate and punish inmates as a form of internal judge, jury and executioner. Depriving people of outside contact, personal property, programming, etc., seems to focus on doing psychological harm.

rather than achieve desirable goals.

Wall also wrote, Courts have repeatedly found that forcing prisoners with mental illness to undergo solitary confinement constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. How would our placements be viewed by the courts?

According to [Wisconsin Public Radio](#) (WPR), [Walls memo] questions the effectiveness of putting inmates in isolation cells for as long as a year for non-violent rule-breaking, such as not taking their medications. The memo also suggests using alternative punishments that simply reduce a prisoners privileges and offer incentives for changed behavior instead of punishment.

The memo, which Wall requested not be disclosed, included instances of solitary being used harshly and punitively. In one case, he said an individual was sentenced to 180 days for having kitchen spices in his cell and wondered how this had anything to do with the safety and security of the institutions.

Others, however, feel the proposed changes are unclear and should be more extensive. According to WPR, Kate Edwards, a Buddhist prison chaplain who advocates for people held in segregation, says the new rules actually increase the number of rule infractions that can land an inmate in segregation for a year:

[Edwards] said the new rules also seem to ignore the plight of mentally ill inmates. One phrase in the new rules requires consideration of an inmates serious mental illness during hearings on whether to send them to segregation. She said that's not enough when international experts agree that solitary confinement is more likely to make a mental illness worse.

New Guidelines Call for Limits on Use of Solitary Confinement in Wisconsin

As concerns over the use of solitary confinement in Wisconsin prisons grow, DOC officials are taking measures to overhaul the states use of the practice. According to [CBS WDJT Milwaukee](#), the Wisconsin DOC has issued the following statement: The Wisconsin Department of Corrections has been working on restrictive housing reform for several years, which has included programming and psychological staff. The Department remains focused on our mission of protecting the public, our staff and those in charge.

In a [September 2014](#) memo to staff, Cathy Jess, administrator of the DOCs division of adult institution, writes:

The disciplinary process should be used as a means to motivate the inmate to alter their negative behavior, with long-term correction of the behavior as the end goal. Long-term segregation placements have been shown to be ineffective in terms of discipline and do not serve our corrective or rehabilitative goals.

According to the [Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism](#), Jess's memo signals change on the part of the DOCs current disciplinary code, which has been in place since 2001. While officials have yet to discuss any specifics and any potential changes remain unclear, Jess is on record as stating that the new rules are an excellent opportunity to focus on making positive changes to the states use of segregation. The story further states that the new code calls for expediting the process of enacting discipline for minor violations, while upholding the ideals of rehabilitation and fairness.

According to a December 2015 story by [Wisconsin Public Radio](#), new regulations were planned to go into effect in January of this year. The story states that the policies will change the way the Wisconsin prison system uses solitary confinement to discipline inmates who break the rules. WPR adds:

The Legislature approved the changes [last] spring, but correctional officers, inmates and prison reform advocates say it's still not clear whether the changes mean fewer inmates will spend less time in what is commonly called the hole.

Training for correctional officers in enforcing the new rules has just begun and inmates received new rule books this month.

But, Brian Cunningham, the head of the correctional officers union, calls the new rules an effort to placate troublesome inmates. He said officers who must now enforce the new rules weren't asked for input in designing them, and he's convinced training young, white officers to have the kinds of conversations with inmates the new rules call for will be next to impossible.

You cannot have some 18-year-old, non-graduated yokel talking to some 40-year-old, inner city, black inmate. It doesn't work, he said.

According to the [National Religious Campaign Against Torture](#) (NRCAT), the average yearly cost of holding a person in solitary confinement is [\\$50,000](#) double the cost of housing a prisoner in the general population. Reducing Wisconsin's use of the practice by half could save [\\$70 million](#) over the next two years, a needed cost cutting measure in light of the states current prison budget crisis. According to [Kenosha News](#), the costs of incarceration in the state have risen dramatically from 1990 to 2011, from under \$200 million to more than \$1.3 billion, respectively.

Movement to End Use of Long-Term Solitary

Faith-based organization [WISDOM](#), a statewide group of congregation-based community organizations, is drawing attention to the use of segregation in Wisconsin. As part of the advocacy groups efforts, the organization recently displayed a solitary cell replica in the lobby of Marquette University's Raynor Library, attracting students and others interested in getting a taste of what those held in solitary confinement in U.S. prisons and jails experience.

The [Journal Sentinel](#) describes the segregation cell replica:

The gray walls are made of wood but look like cinder block and the stainless steel toilet and sink, mattress pad and door with small window and slot to slide a food tray are accurate. The 6 feet by 12 feet exhibit was made by the theater department at Madison's Edgewood College.

An iPad and headphones are proffered to anyone who wants to hear the sounds of incarceration the audio comes from a Frontline story

on solitary confinement.

According to one event attendant, One of the things people find so frightening is the sound. You can talk about solitary confinement, but when you sit in the place its quite a different experience.

The story goes on to say that visitors have the option of going in [the segregation cell replica] only with a Bible or Quran and pen and piece of paper, just like actual prisoners. During the event, visitors are asked if they would like to sign a petition calling for changes in the way solitary confinement is used in Wisconsin prisons and jails, specifically limiting time to 15 days and ending incarceration for people under 18.

In a video describing the mock cells construction, Kate Edwards said, that after ministering to people in isolation, I took a vow to make visible the torture and the abuse that I was seeing in how we make use of solitary confinement.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RE0dZ5yGL0c>

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.

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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WI incarcerates in order to keep jobs in the state as this is how the governor looks good in saying he is creating jobs in the state, and to then send those people that are on P&P to prison for rule violations that involve no new crime, is a travesty and not at all rehabilitating it is job creation!

I live in, but am not native to Wisconsin. Wisconsin has more than 2X incarcerated as Minnesota. Something really wrong with this picture.

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