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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Annajane Yolken](#) | July 15, 2016

Despair. Do you know what it is like to live in despair? To feel trapped, suffocated, like the walls are closing in for good? wrote an incarcerated person from inside a segregation unit in Rhode Island. To be buried alive and witness your own humanity escaping without your body. I sit in a cell where its so quiet you can literally hear your own heart beat.

There is a growing movement among activists and lawmakers in Rhode Island to address the use of solitary confinement at the states main prison complex, the Adult Correctional Institution (ACI) in Cranston although the movement faces resistance from the Department of Corrections.

At the ACI, people held in administrative segregation, close confinement, and disciplinary confinement are segregated for at least 23 hours a day in 8 by 10 foot cells and 24 hours a day for their first five days and throughout every weekend. Most are housed alone, while those in protective custody are doubled up with a cellmate.

The adverse effects of 23/24 hour lockdown on ones mental state is life altering, one person currently held in segregation noted. Ive seen prisoners go insane, eat shit, drink piss, cut themselves prisoners find themselves being punished due to their mental health issues and inability to cope with stress-filled, oppressive environments.

Following pressure from lawmakers, the ACI released a snapshot of its population in segregation for March 14, 2016. On that day, 196 people or 6.4 percent of the total prison population were in segregation in Rhode Island, including 127 in disciplinary confinement, 26 in administrative confinement, and 43 in close confinement.

All this segregation adds up: The prisons 112-bed High Security Center, which is largely comprised of men in segregation, costs \$176,174 per person, per year more than 4 times the cost of the states medium security units.

Rhode Island House Rep. Aaron Regunberg and State Sen. Harold Metts introduced legislation in the 2016 session to reform segregation at the ACI. Their bill sought to limit segregation to 15 days at a time, the limit after which the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture believes solitary confinement should be subject to [absolute prohibition](#).

The proposed legislation also aimed to prevent certain vulnerable populations, including people with mental illness and LGBTQ people, from being placed in segregation. Evidence highlights that people with mental illness are [disproportionately placed](#) in segregation units across the country, and greatly feel the negative psychological affects of isolation.

People go in insane and come out insane, wrote one man currently incarcerated at the ACI. Many talk to themselves This other person tried to hang himself and all it got him was more seg time.

To lock a man down for passing food, newspapers, books, pictures, etc. is crazy, wrote another incarcerated individual, and to instigate prisoners and then take their freedom in the form of good buy ativan online uk time and lock him up 23/24 hours a day In reality, its a social failure on every level.

A grassroots coalition called #EndSolitaryRI worked to support the proposed legislation and continues to raise awareness about the issue of solitary confinement. The campaign was launched by the local chapter of Black and Pink, an organization that supports LGBTQ prisoners. Black and Pink conducted a survey of over 1,100 incarcerated people identifying as LGBTQ nationwide in 2014 and found that [85 percent](#) had spent time in solitary confinement, [four times the rate](#) of all incarcerated people.

Some of those incarcerated in the ACI say Rhode Island fits this trend. This institution locks people in solitary for non-problematic reasons, one man wrote. Like if you identify as LGBTQ, if you put lawsuits in, or youre known for always having black literature or anything that talks bad about the government they tend to throw you in solitary for long periods of time.

The legislation faced strong opposition from the Rhode Island Department of Corrections, with Director A.T. Wall noting that segregation in Rhode Island is less severe than in other states that have undergone reform, such as California. The Department of

Corrections claimed the legislation would take away an important security tool, despite the fact that research shows states that decrease the use of segregation, such as Maine, [do not see an increase](#) in violent incidents.

The president of the Rhode Island Brotherhood of Correctional Officers, the local union of correctional officers, testified, There's a running joke right by the inmate population that they actually enjoy their breakfast in bed and they really enjoy their lunch and dinner, you know, served through room service.

But not all who have worked in the ACI are resistant to reform. Roberta Richman, a retired ACI warden, testified against the use of solitary confinement and segregation. I feel compelled to speak now, and I hope our state will do the right thing, and the smart thing, by reforming a practice that has so much potential to damage our fellow Rhode Islanders and our community as a whole.

While this year's proposed legislation did not leave the judicial committee, legislation formed a study commission to further understand the state and effects of segregation at the ACI. The commission will include lawmakers, Department of Corrections administrators, mental health workers, and other experts, and will present findings and recommendations to the House of Representatives by January 2017.

The legislation also raised awareness within the state, prompting the *Providence Journal*, the state's largest newspaper, to [write that](#) restricting the use of solitary confinement is the right move for Rhode Island.

Something has to change, one currently incarcerated man wrote about the push for reform. And I'm glad there are people to help with this change I can't wait to join the fight.

Annajane Yolken works with data and drug policy reform, currently with Project Weber/RENEW in Providence, RI. She formerly worked for the Center for Leadership and Educational Equity, Protect Families First, and Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE).

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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Then you shouldn't commit crimes and you won't have to worry.

You might want to turn on spell check before you spout self-righteous arguments demanding perfection from others in order for you to recognize their human rights.

See my middle finger. When one of these douchebags rapes your little girl you'll change your tune.

You're an asshole! Some of these men didn't do a damn thing. They were at the wrong place, the wrong time!

It is understandable that there is hesitation to change practices that have been going on for a long time. While the effects of social isolation are excruciating and damaging, it is also understandable that people who have either not experienced it themselves or read the research would have trouble understanding this. More public awareness of the harms of social isolation is important. When people understand the issue, then constructive, humane, and safe approaches can be found to minimize isolation.

North Dakota, for example, is doing wonderful work talking with people about their issues in a humane way and helping them feel better. While people may sometimes need to be in their own room if they are in a dangerous state (this is common sense—we cannot have people who are currently behaving in an actively dangerous manner rushing about and bashing people), everyone should have someone to speak with. If this needs to happen from within their own room, then that is what should happen. Everyone needs to have caring and humane social contact.

Correctional officers, no matter how they have related to others in the past, have an opportunity to bring compassion and kindness to people in the present. We have all done things that are less constructive in the past. This is true for every human being on the planet. The important thing is what we do in the present. In my experience, the essence of people often has little to do with what they are actually doing at any given moment.

My favorite example of the difference between our essence (which for all of us is good and kind and reflects all the qualities of who we

really are) and our surface level day to day behaviors is story from my childhood. As a young student, a fellow student at my school decided for no particular reason to ask me in a mean way why I wearing boys shoes. As a young person, I had no particular fashion sense. I was honestly lucky to be wearing two tennis shoes that matched.

However, rather than remembering the many lessons on some frogs wheel of conflict resolution that we had all been taught or remembering any lessons on how one might constructively respond to bullying, I did what seemed appropriate at the time. I summoned up my most sniping, snarky approach to this problem that I could (given that I was a very timid child who was lucky to have had the fashion sense that day to be wearing matching tennis shoes) and asked him why he was reading the atlas. Fairly predictably, this did not lead to a change of heart. He replied with an insult, and went back to reading the atlas. It was not an auspicious beginning.

However, as the school year went on and he mellowed out somewhat from the extremely normal and developmentally appropriate childhood urge to point out problems with other people, he became a fellow student for whom I had a great deal of respect. He had a lot of substance to his personality. His core personality was actually very kind, protective of others, and he had a great sense of decency and humanity. By the time the year was over, he was the individual in our grade in school for whom I probably had the most respect just as a fellow human being with a good heart and a sense of humanity.

As we get our own issues out of our way, it is easier to be the people we really are. I learned many years later that he had become a policeman. It made me happy to know that since police have one of the most important jobs in our community, and we need good people to do it. We are all good people deep in our hearts. This is true of people in the community, people who work as correctional officers, and people living in prison.

None of us are perfect. We all have bad days. We all engage in practices without necessarily knowing their full consequences. This is not a bad thing-it just makes us human. We can all do our best to bring our true selves to finding solutions. Everyones true self is completely unique to them, but everyones true self is also wonderful.

There is no one who does not have something truly beautiful and important to contribute, but we all also have things in the way of letting our real selves. When we are able to be humane and compassionate, we can help other people and live in a peaceful way. I think this is what we all want in our hearts, and so we can all keep trying. Doing our best is all any of us can do, but our efforts really matter and make a difference for people. No action is too small to matter.

After promoting prison reform for years, trying to help people understand the reality of what the force is behind our prison system it is good to see more people and organizations joining in and no longer sweeping it under the rug. Our prison population should be on par with the rest of the world. Since it is so much higher, what that says is we are a dangerous country and more violent criminals than any other country. Is that true? Are we more dangerous? Or is the bottom line of prison corporations so powerful we can do nothing to stop them? Or are we not paying attention and continue to vote in politicians who are owneyd by the corporations thinking it could never happen to us or our family?

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