

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/11/13/states-reduced-use-solitary-confinement-suffering-continues-left-behind/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | November 13, 2013

Under pressure from activists, lawsuits, and even a few reformers within the corrections system, several states have significantly reduced the number of people they hold in solitary confinement in their prison systems. These reductions, achieved largely through reclassifying prisoners and returning the least troublesome ones to the general population, have rightly been celebrated by opponents of solitary confinement.

In recent months, however, reports by organizations and investigative journalists have documented what happens to those who remain behind when the use of solitary is reduced rather than eliminated. In doing so, they show the pitfalls involved in opposing the overuse of solitary, rather than confronting all extreme isolation as torture.

A case in point is Maine, where the use of solitary confinement in the supermax unit of Maine State Prison has been reduced by more than 60 percent. The changes in Maine followed a grassroots campaign against solitary, the introduction (though not the passage) of legislation to limit solitary, and finally the appointment of a new corrections commissioner who decided to review and reduce the prison systems use of solitary. Many advocates declared victory, some going so far as to call what had happened the Maine miracle.

Helping to spur these changes was a [series of articles](#) by Lance Tapley in the *Portland Phoenix*, exposing the hidden brutality inside the supermax. This week, Tapley has a [new article](#) in the *Phoenix*, along with a series of [photographs](#). These are based on a visit he was permitted to make to the supermax unit where those who did not benefit from the reduction still languish.

Tapley was shown cell that had what looked like blood on the floor and faintly stank of shit, and walked through cellblocks where he heard undulating cries and saw shadowy faces behind the steel doors tiny windows. He writes:

Maine corrections commissioner Joseph Ponte has reduced the typical number of prisoners in isolation from close to 100 to 40 or so in a 900-man prison. Of the supermaxs four cellblocks or pods, two, of Administrative Segregation, have 50 cells each, and one is now empty. The Mental Health Unit, where solitary confinement has never been total, has two pods of 16 cells each, one for acute prisoners, one for stabilization. Together they held 17 men the day I was there.

Stays in the supermax also are much shorter now, and there's a lot less prisoner cutting up and fewer brutal cell extractions by guards to tie prisoners into the restraint chair. For his reforms, Ponte has deservedly received national attention.

But the Maine supermax is still there, and it's still grim. While 40 prisoners may not sound like many, it's the total, according to one report, that England and Wales, with 56 million inhabitants, keep in isolation less severe than in American supermaxes.

And the supermax is part of a prison from which I receive constant reports of guard cruelty, inadequate medical care, understaffing, deliberate mixing of predators and the vulnerable, and currently turmoil because scores more men are being forced to double-bunk. Corrections says the double-bunking is being done for proper classification of prisoners. Critics suspect it's being done to save money.

Tapley notes that the state in fact has plans to open twenty more cells in the supermaxs Mental Health Unit to house violence-prone patients from the state's chief psychiatric hospital and unconvicted jail inmates whom the courts have concluded should be examined for their sanity.

Maine is not the only prison system that has been praised for its dramatic reductions in solitary confinement, but condemned for its treatment of those who still remain in isolation.

Mississippi has been held up as a [model of reform](#) in the area of solitary confinement after it reduced its use of solitary by approximately 75 percent and closed down a notorious [supermax unit](#). In 2012 its corrections chief, Christopher Epps, was featured in the front-page story in the *New York Times*, and invited to [testify](#) before a Senate Judiciary Subcommittee hearing on solitary to share his success story.

Yet a lawsuit filed by the ACLU and Southern Poverty Law Center in May 2013 alleges a massive human right violation at East Mississippi Correctional Facility. One ACLU lawyer described the privately run prison, which is supposed to provide treatment for

prisoners with mental illness, as a cesspool, and stated: When you combine solitary confinement, abuse, lack of basic medical and mental health care, and denial of basic human needs, it's a recipe for disaster. An ACLU press release details conditions at EMCF:

The lawsuit describes a facility where prisoners are often locked in filthy cells and ignored even when they are suffering from serious medical issues. Many cells lack light and working toilets, forcing prisoners to use trays or plastic bags that are tossed through slots in their cell doors. Rats often climb over prisoners' beds, and some prisoners capture the rats, put them on makeshift leashes, and sell them as pets to other inmates.

Although designated as a facility to care for prisoners with special needs and serious psychiatric disabilities, EMCF denies prisoners even the most rudimentary mental health care services. The prison also seriously underfeeds prisoners. A correctional health expert notified the Mississippi Department of Corrections of this problem after reviewing prisoner records that showed a pattern of prisoners losing significant amounts of weight at EMCF, some more than 20 or 30 pounds.

Despite evidence demonstrating the adverse effect of long-term solitary confinement on prisoners' mental health, the prison continues to place prisoners in isolation for weeks, months or years at a time with little stimulation or access to showers and medical care. Prisoners in solitary confinement frequently set fires or flood their cells to get attention for medical treatment.

In Colorado the story is much the same. The state reduced the number of people it holds in solitary in the supermax Colorado State Penitentiary, under the leadership of corrections director Tom Clements, who, in an instance of grim irony, was [murdered](#) last spring by a man who had just been released directly from solitary onto the streets.

But those who remain in CSP are a majority of them suffering from mental illness, are warehoused in 23-hour-a-day lockdown, often for years, according to an [ACLU report](#) published in July. The report chronicles instances of solitary confinement driving untreated mentally ill prisoners to a psychotic state, leading them to attempt suicide, attack others, eat their feces, or bang their heads against the wall in an effort to drown out the voices in their heads.'

And then there is the federal prison system, which claims to have reduced the population of its Special Housing Units (SHUs) by about 25 percent following the [Senate Judiciary Subcommittee hearing](#) and a scathing [GAO report](#) on the Bureau of Prisons' extensive use of solitary. The federal government is responsible for some of the most brutally isolating prison conditions in the world, which have driven many individuals to [madness and suicide](#).

Beyond this, it is far from clear where prisoners are going when they are removed from the SHUs. Some may be returning to the general population, but others apparently are being placed in other kinds of segregation units, like the Special Management Units (SMUs), where they are still locked down 23 hours a day, but with one or two others in the same cell. This allows the BOP to say it is reducing its use of solitary, while retaining prisoners in other forms of extreme isolation that are just as bad or worse.

[Live from Lockdown](#) is a site that publishes authentic & uncensored voices from inside maximum security & supermax prisons & control units. Recently published this series of tweets based on messages from individuals in federal SMUs:

@lockdownlive Comrades are happy 2 hear of talk around #solitary but are quick 2 point out- inside it appears no one cares & things are getting worse

@lockdownlive For example, in all the real deal fed spots, not Camp Cupcake, #solitary aint solitary any more

@lockdownlive Now picture 2 and 3 people in a 5 x 9 cell 23 hours or more a day, yea we might be out of #solitary but shit aint get better

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow

name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

Dear Rosamond,

I am so sorry for the loss of your daughter, Nicole. I will light a candle for her on her birthday, and keep you both in my prayers always. May your suffering be the suffering that ends all such injustices.

I lost my sweet. Daughter in prison. And she should of never went there, she was not a prisoner thats where a Judge centers her for 30 days .she was there for 16 days.and one of the guides killed her.after he raped her .on her birthday December 18 th next day .night get a knock on the door,to call the priron.they said she hung her self .butshe didnt.he killed her.and after now that shes gone.The Judge said in the news. Papper ,he will remember this the rest of his life. He sould of never put her in a Prison.And y knowthere was no no Justice. Now i havee to suffer because of that Jugde. I beged him not to put her in a prison .that we will pay for her to get the right help..he said no by your self a Christmas present. .y know what that present a casket for my sweet angle Nicole my daughter. That i will all ways love and miss.

He writes:

I receive constant reports of guard cruelty, inadequate medical care, understaffing, deliberate mixing of predators and the vulnerable, and currently turmoil because scores more men are being forced to double-bunk. Corrections says the double-bunking is being done for proper classification of prisoners. Critics suspect its being done to save money

In a study on Prison Rape this practice of deliberately throwing a lamb to a troublesome inmate was noted as a way to appease the aggressive inmate. I doubt if the CO cares about the money saved or the sexual abuse he is very well aware will result of this.

Then there is this excerpt:

Some may be returning to the general population, but others apparently are being placed in other kinds of segregation units, like the Special Management Units (SMUs), where they are still locked down 23 hours a day, but with one or two others in the same cell. This allows the BOP to say it is reducing its use of solitary, while retaining prisoners in other forms of extreme isolation that are just as bad or worse.

During the BOP director Charles Samuels Jr. November 6, 2013 appearance, before the Senate Judiciary Committee Senator Richard Durbin, asked the Bureau of Prisons Director:

What has the Bureau of Prisons done since June 2012 to study the relationship between solitary confinement and mental illness among federal inmates?

In an evasive response Samuels told the Committee that there are approximately 4,000 fewer inmates in restricted housing today but he did not even mention the mentally ill federal prisoners under his supervision in his response.

When asked what had happened to the 25 percent of prisoners who had been removed from the SHUs, a Bureau of Prisons spokesperson had no concrete numbers, but said that they either were put into general population, sent to state prisons, or possibly dispatched to Special Management Units, or SMUs.

On the later, this is a distinction without much of a difference.

This is the new reality in 2013.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News