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After Decades of Notorious Abuses, Louisiana's Prisons Have Begun Reforming Their Solitary Confinement Practices. Could This Week's Gubernatorial Election Change That?

by [Jean Casella](#) | November 14, 2019

Update, Nov 18: Gov. John Bel Edwards was [reelected to a second term](#) on Saturday, November 16, narrowly defeating Republican challenger Eddie Rispone in the Louisiana gubernatorial election.

The following is an excerpt from [Louisiana on Lockdown](#), a report jointly published in June 2019 by Solitary Watch, the ACLU of Louisiana, and the Jesuit Social Research Center at Loyola University New Orleans. In that report, based on surveys completed in 2017-18 by more than 700 individuals held in solitary in Louisiana's state prisons, incarcerated people recounted their experiences of abuse and neglect in Louisiana's restrictive housing units, which at the time held nearly 15 percent of people in the state prison system. (Many state-sentenced prisoners in Louisiana are also held in local parish jails.)

The report also summarized the legacy of harsh conditions in Louisiana prisons, from the days when the state penitentiary known as Angola was a slave plantation, to the more recent story of the Angola 3, three African American men who were held in solitary for as long as four decades. That history, however, ended on a hopeful note, citing recent criminal justice reforms in Louisiana that include significant reductions in the use of solitary confinement. And recently, the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections (LADOC) has met with local advocates and pledged to further pursue alternatives to solitary, continuing its partnership with the Vera Institute of Justice's [Safe Prisons, Safe Communities](#) project. (*Full disclosure:* I recently took part in a study tour of Norway's famously humane prison system, organized and paid for by the Vera Institute, in a group that also included LADOC Secretary James LeBlanc and two other Louisiana prison administrators.)

The recent criminal justice reforms in Louisiana have taken place since the 2015 election of Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards, though the state's 2017 reform bill had bipartisan support. This Saturday, November 16, Edwards faces Republican challenger Eddie Rispone in a runoff election. Rispone has in the past [attacked Edwards](#) for being soft on crime, claiming he oversaw the release of dangerous criminals and an increase in murder rates. The claims were untrue, and some conservative supporters of reform joined Edwards in renouncing them. But since solitary reforms in the state have happened due to executive policies rather than legislation, leadership in the statehouse could determine whether Louisiana finally sheds its reputation as the solitary confinement capital of the world.

Sunday's election is expected to be close, and it will also be closely watched, in Louisiana and beyond. Tonight, President Donald Trump makes a third trip to the state, to hold a campaign rally for Rispone. *Jean Casella*

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Excerpt from [Louisiana on Lockdown: A Report on the Use of Solitary Confinement in Louisiana State Prisons, With Testimony from the People Who Live It](#)

After peaking at 40,000 in 2012, Louisiana's prison population [began to slowly fall](#) for the first time, along with the state's crime rates. More recently under a new administration in Baton Rouge and new leadership at Angola, and with pressure from advocates as well as from a tight state budget Louisiana has taken additional steps to reduce its rate of incarceration.

The bipartisan task force assembled in 2015 submitted recommendations that formed the basis for a package of 10 reform bills passed by the legislature and signed by Gov. John Bel Edwards in June 2017, and [hailed as historic](#) by advocates. The [reforms](#) are expected to reduce the state's prison population by at least 10 percent and cut costs by \$262 million over the next decade, by reducing mandatory minimums, shortening sentences, and making some people eligible for parole sooner. The changes in Louisiana reflect a broader national shift in thinking about mass incarceration that in some cases has spanned the political spectrum, winning supporters on both the left and right.

The past decade has also seen the growth of movements at the local, state, and national levels advocating for the limitation or abolition of long-term solitary confinement. [Media coverage](#) of this once largely invisible practice has increased exponentially. Human rights, civil

rights, and criminal justice reform organizations as well as figures as varied as former President Barack Obama, former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, and Pope Francis have denounced the use of solitary confinement, citing both humanitarian and public safety concerns.

In response to legislation, litigation, or visionary new leadership, a number of states have taken steps to reduce their reliance on solitary. Nearly all reforms to date have been incremental, and overall the number of people in solitary in all U.S. facilities is estimated to have declined by no more than 20 percent, and remains in the tens of thousands. But advocates are hopeful that the near future will bring the issue to a tipping point.

When Albert Woodfox walked out of prison on February 19, 2016, after more than 43 years in solitary, it marked the beginning of a new chapter for a remarkable man and perhaps, for solitary confinement in Louisiana. The state's previous attorney general, James Buddy Caldwell, had called Woodfox the most dangerous man on the planet and vowed never to allow his release; Angola Warden Burl Cain had [declared](#) that Woodfox belonged in permanent solitary for practicing Black Pantherism. But by the beginning of 2016, Cain had [resigned](#) amid accusations of financial misconduct, and Louisiana had a new attorney general, who decided not to re-prosecute Woodfox after his murder conviction was overturned for the second time.

In 2017, under pressure from a class action lawsuit, LADOC and Warden Darrel Vannoy eased conditions of isolation on Louisiana's death row. Historically, people on death row were held in extreme solitary confinement, only leaving their cells to walk a hallway alone for one hour a day (three days a week they could spend part of their hour alone in an unshaded recreation pen outside, weather permitting).

After the lawsuit was filed, Angola's warden implemented a [pilot program](#) that allows the men on death row to socialize on the tier in small groups for two hours, twice each day. Additionally, the pens were removed, a basketball court was built, and the men can now exercise together outside for five hours a week. The department has declared the program a success, as the rate of disciplinary infractions has decreased dramatically.

There have been other signs indicating increased willingness on the part of LADOC to reconsider how and to what extent it uses solitary confinement. In 2017, the department engaged with the Vera Institute of Justice's Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative in a partnership [aimed at](#) reducing the amount of time inmates spend in isolation, alternatives to segregation and best practices for reintroducing people in restrictive housing to the prison's general population.

In May 2018, Angola closed its notorious Camp J solitary confinement unit. A year later, Vera published a [report](#) with detailed findings and recommendations for change that include significantly reducing the state's use of solitary confinement, improving conditions and programming, and repurposing physical space including possible new, rehabilitation-oriented uses for Camp J. LADOC also committed to continuing its work with Vera in the future, with a substantive [set of goals](#) that includes reducing its solitary population by at least 50 percent within four years.

These reforms and promises have been rightly heralded as progress. But far more work remains to be done. Some of the men who were housed in Camp J were shuffled to restricted housing elsewhere, and the conditions in most other solitary units remain dismal. A current [lawsuit](#) by the ACLU of Louisiana and the Advocacy Center on behalf of men incarcerated at David Wade Correctional Center alleges extreme, abusive conditions and practices that include punishing people with mental illness by restraining them to chairs, exposing them to freezing temperatures, and holding them in solitary confinement for months or years. Even if Louisiana were to reduce its overall solitary population by 50 percent, its rate of solitary confinement use would still be well over the national average. And the state has done little to monitor and remedy the conditions of confinement in parish jails.

It is clear that comprehensive and lasting change cannot come only from within the system. In January 2019, opponents of solitary confinement—many of them formerly incarcerated people with personal experience of solitary or individuals with loved ones in solitary—joined together to form the Louisiana Stop Solitary Coalition, with the purpose of creating a cohesive advocacy strategy. The coalition is aligned with [Unlock the Box](#), a national [campaign](#) spearheaded by a group of advocacy organizations, with the stated goal of bringing the United States into compliance with the Mandela Rules within ten years.

Among the leaders of the Louisiana Stop Solitary Coalition is Albert Woodfox, who in March published a widely praised [memoir](#), described by one reviewer as a crushing account of the inhumanity of solitary confinement. Together, solitary survivors and their allies in Louisiana are building a movement aimed at ending this inhumanity, once and for all.

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Banner Photo: Artist Jackie Sumell's full-sized model of the solitary confinement cell occupied by Angola 3 member Herman Wallace, from The House That Herman Built.

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.

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by [Jean Casella](#)

June 15, 2020

by [Katie Rose Quandt](#)

September 12, 2019

by [Jean Casella](#)

June 25, 2019

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P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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