

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2019/07/18/voices-from-solitary-i-spent-16-months-in-solitary-confinement-and-now-im-fighting-to-end-it/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | July 18, 2019

The following piece was written by Kiana Calloway, a formerly incarcerated organizer with [Voice of the Experienced \(VOTE\)](#), a grassroots organization in New Orleans made up of formerly incarcerated people and their allies that works for policy change and for full civil and human rights for people impacted by the criminal justice system. He is also a fellow in the Movement for Black Lives Electoral Justice League. Calloway spent seventeen years of his life incarcerated for a crime he did not commit, and endured sixteen months in solitary confinement at Camp J, a notorious lockdown unit at the Louisiana State Penitentiary that has since been shut down. Calloway spoke in New Orleans at the recent release of the report [Louisiana on Lockdown](#), published by Solitary Watch, the ACLU of Louisiana, and the Jesuit Social Research Institute at Loyola University New Orleans. This account was originally published on the [ACLU blog](#). Valerie Kiebal

I was just 17 years old when I was sent to solitary confinement in Camp J, one of the most severe lockdown units at one of America's most brutal prisons, the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. I languished in solitary for 16 months.

Back then I didn't know that Louisiana was the solitary confinement capital of the world. All I knew was that I'd been convicted of a crime I didn't commit, and I had to maintain my humanity in one of the most dehumanizing places on earth.

It's called 23 and 1 because you spend 23 hours alone in your cell, with one hour to take a shower or make a phone call, if allowed. There are no educational programs. You are stuck in your cell with just the voices in your own head and the cries of men who have already gone mad. Most of the other people in my unit were suffering from severe mental illness. I remember how they would ram their heads into the bars, play with their own defecation, or throw urine or feces.

The hardest part of living in solitary is trying not to lose hope. Each morning that I woke up in solitary I would quote the same serenity prayer I remember my father reciting when I was young. God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

The consequences are devastating. It's been 22 years since my time in solitary and 8 years since my release from prison, but I still have flashbacks and nightmares. Even when I'm with someone else, I find myself secluded in my own mind. I call it being psychologically incarcerated. I'm learning to identify and deal with it, but I am still not normal.

A [new report](#) from the ACLU of Louisiana, Solitary Watch and the Jesuit Social Research Institute proves that the degrading conditions I experienced continue to harm other people. The report is based on a survey of more than 700 people held in solitary, and as someone who has experienced solitary first-hand, their stories ring painfully true. These cells drive men mad, wrote Carl, one of the report's survey respondents. I have personally witnessed one man take his life, another tried to by running the length of the tier and smashing his head into the front bars, sadly for him he still lives, if you can really call it that. Point is the cells are killing men and they know it.

I hope that the information in this report will help prove to corrections officials that more changes are needed throughout the system, not just for the benefit of people living in solitary but also for their families and communities.

The report contains specific, immediate recommendations for reducing the Louisiana Department of Corrections' extreme dependence on prolonged isolation and moving quickly toward more safe, effective, and humane alternatives. The need for reform is urgent. Because putting people in dehumanizing situations pushes them to do dehumanizing things. If your life is destruction, the only thing you can give out is destruction.

That's why the United Nations has said that extended solitary confinement can rise to the level of torture, and called on countries around the world to ban the practice beyond 15 days.

Solitary confinement is an experience I will never forget. Just the other morning, my wife told me I was screaming during the night and I knew it was a nightmare about my time in solitary.

But I'm strong, and through my work with [Voice of the Experienced](#), a grassroots organization founded and run by formerly incarcerated people, I'm blessed to be able to use my experiences to press for reforms to combat mass incarceration and [restore the civil rights](#) of those most impacted by the criminal legal system.

For too long, the voices from Louisiana's solitary cells were silenced. Through this report and the courageous advocacy of other survivors, we can help make sure they are finally heard.

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

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