



Solitary Confinement in Louisiana: An Assault on the Dignity and Sanctity of Human Life

— LOUISIANA —
STOP SOLITARY
COALITION

Louisiana Stop Solitary Coalition Faith Sub-Committee

What is Solitary Confinement?

Solitary confinement is the practice of isolating incarcerated people in closed cells for 22-24 hours a day, with minimum human contact for periods of time ranging from days to decades.

While in solitary confinement (also known as segregation, restrictive housing, or lockdown) a person's access to exercise, programming, or family visitation is either greatly curtailed or completely denied. The United Nations considers solitary confinement torture after 15 days, yet a 2019 report found that 77 percent of persons held in solitary in Louisiana prisons had been there for more than a year!¹



Who gets put in solitary confinement?

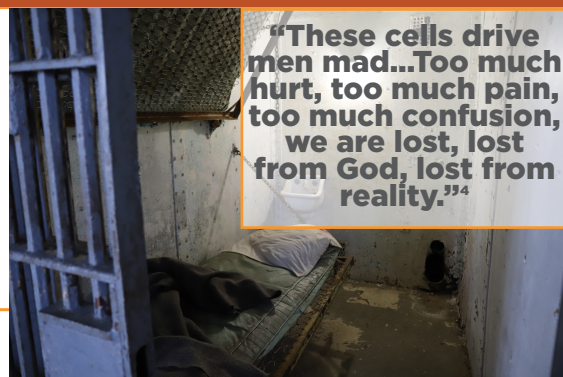
Incarcerated people can be placed in isolation for many reasons, from serious infractions, such as fighting, to minor ones, like talking back to a guard or getting caught with a pack of cigarettes. Many end up in solitary because they have untreated mental illnesses. A disproportionate number of Black people are placed in segregation in every Louisiana state prison.

Individuals are sent to solitary confinement based on charges that are levied, adjudicated, and enforced by prison officials with little or no outside oversight. The Vera Institute for Justice found that disciplinary rules for segregation in Louisiana prisons were "vaguely defined in policy and inconsistently enforced in practice, which leads to lengthy placements in segregation."²

In 2016, 17.4 percent of people in Louisiana prisons were in solitary confinement, almost four times the national average!³

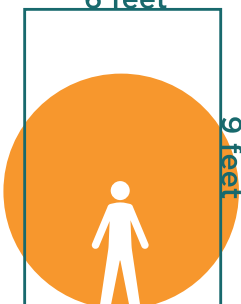
What are conditions like in solitary confinement?

Solitary confinement cells generally measure 6 x 9 feet. Meals come through slots in solid metal doors, as do any communications with prison staff. Within these cells, people live lives of enforced idleness and severe isolation. One man in extended solitary in a Louisiana prison told investigators in 2019:



"These cells drive men mad...Too much hurt, too much pain, too much confusion, we are lost, lost from God, lost from reality."⁴

6 feet



9 feet

What are the health impacts of solitary confinement?



The result of solitary confinement is severe social and sensory deprivation which inflicts immense suffering and causes people to deteriorate mentally, physically, and socially. Solitary confinement has been shown to cause psychosis, anxiety, hallucinations, depression, and heart disease, and too often leads to self-mutilation and death by suicide.⁵

Why People of Faith Should Care About Ending Solitary Confinement in Our State

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

Every human being is a child of God, made in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:27).

We did nothing to earn this sacred dignity—and there is nothing we can do to lose it. Because of the immeasurable value and worth of every human life, we must oppose solitary confinement which is an assault on the life and dignity of the human person.



Solidarity

We are one human family and are called to be our sisters' and brothers' keepers. Because we are deeply interconnected in a web of relationships, the harm caused by solitary confinement has a rippling effect, making prison environments more prone to violence for both staff and prisoners, increasing incidents of mental illness of prisoners sent to solitary, and impeding the chances of returned citizens who endured solitary confinement a successful re-entry to the free world.

No One is Disposable!

Pope Francis has frequently denounced a “throwaway culture” that ruthlessly discards human beings not considered useful in a modern society where everything and everyone is considered disposable. By channeling so many incarcerated persons in Louisiana into solitary confinement, the message has become “They’re not worth saving. They are disposable.”

However, because life is sacred and every human being is endowed with an inalienable dignity, we would be wise to consider the words of Pope Francis:

“We must never allow the throwaway culture to enter our hearts, because we are all brothers and sisters. No one is disposable.”



What people of faith can do:

Recently formerly incarcerated persons, social justice organizations and faith-based groups have helped bring about some significant victories in the struggle to end solitary confinement in Louisiana prisons and jails.

In 2017 the Louisiana Department of Corrections began work with the Vera Institute of Justice to implement reforms to policies and practices that underlie the high rates of segregation in Louisiana prisons. In 2018 the Louisiana Department of Corrections agreed to close the notorious Camp J at Angola, which at its peak confined more than 400 prisoners in solitary cells for more than 23 hours a day.

In 2020, legislation spearheaded by the Louisiana Stop Solitary Coalition to limit the use of solitary confinement for pregnant or nursing mothers was unanimously passed by both chambers of the Louisiana Legislature. Although a bill to end the use of solitary confinement for people with severe mental illnesses did not pass in 2021, the Louisiana DOC agreed to address the issue through an Alternatives to Segregation Task Force, which began meeting in November 2021.

The moral authority and social capital of Louisiana's faith communities is needed to spur further reform efforts to end the use of state-sanctioned torture, i.e. solitary confinement, in Louisiana prisons, jails and immigrant detention centers.



Sign the petition from people of faith to Governor Edwards and other state officials to end the use of solitary confinement in LA prisons and jails. Go to:
<https://tinyurl.com/StopSolitaryPetition>



Urge your congregation or parish to join the Louisiana Stop Solitary Faith Sub-committee that meets monthly by Zoom to plan and organize activities and events to highlight the moral imperative to end solitary confinement in our state.
Contact sherie@jaclouisiana.org



Send this pamphlet to other people of faith and urge them to join in the work of the Louisiana Stop Solitary Coalition.



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“The most immoral aspect of solitary confinement is that it is anti-humanity...Its sole purpose is to break the human spirit.”

- Albert Woodfox, Member of the Angola Three, who was held in solitary confinement at Louisiana State Prison (Angola) for 44 years and 10 months.

1. Louisiana on Lockdown... (2019) at <https://solitarywatch.org/louisianaonlockdown/>
2. The Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative... (2019) at <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/safe-alternatives-segregation-initiative-findings-recommendations-ldps.pdf>
3. The Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative... (2019)
4. Louisiana on Lockdown... (2019)
5. Solitary Watch FAQ at <https://solitarywatch.org/facts/faq/>