

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/12/13/solitary-confinement-commentary-controversial-costco/>

Campaign and Advocacy

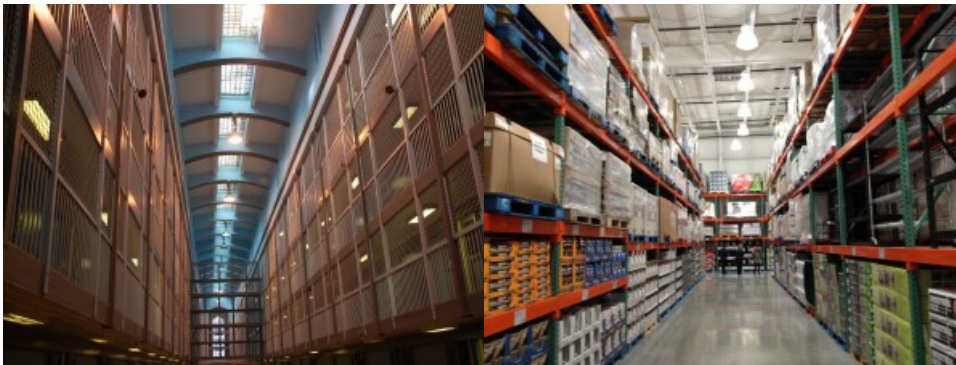
close

Search

close

close

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



Editors Note: Back in October, Solitary Watch received a request from cut-rate retail giant Costco, for a 450-word essay arguing that solitary should be eliminated. The piece was to be printed in the [Informed Debate](#) feature in the companys giveaway magazine, Costco Connection, which has a readership numbering 20 million people.

Pleased that such a large corporate entity had chosen to air the pros and cons of this controversial subject, Solitary Watch co-director James Ridgeway handed in his piece in November, and was told that the pro-solitary side would be written by an official from the NYSCOA, the New York State corrections officers union. A month of silence followed.

Two days ago, Solitary Watch received a message saying the entire debate section was being pulled from the January issue at the last minute, due to a decision by one of the key executives who took exception to the subject.

(An interesting fact: The behemoth retailer has earned a reputation for [taking care of its workers](#), who earn average salaries more than double those at Walmart. But it also has been [known to employ](#) subcontractors who use prisoner labor to package their goods, and its [Code of Conduct](#) bans only illegal prison labor.)

Requests for comment to Costcos corporate communications department yielded no response.

The offending commentary appears below.

.....

Imagine a room so small that you can stretch your arms out and touch the gray concrete walls. The only objects in the room are a bunk and a toilet, perhaps a few books and a photograph or two.

The rooms narrow window admits only a sliver of natural light, and the solid steel door contains a slot through which a meal tray can pass. You may catch a glimpse of a hand, or hear a voice shouting from nearby. Otherwise you have no contact with another human being.

Imagine spending a month in this room, 23 hours a day, with one hour to exercise alone in a small pen. Now imagine the month stretching to a year or ten, or twenty.

On any given day, some 80,000 men, women, and children live in conditions like these not in some far-off totalitarian nation or secret black site, but right here in Americas prisons and jails.

Senator John McCain, who spent two years in solitary confinement as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, later wrote: Its an awful thing, solitary. It crushes your spirit and weakens your resistance more effectively than any other form of mistreatment.

Human rights organizations, religious groups, and the UN have all condemned solitary confinement in excess of 15 days as a form of psychological torture. Other democratic nations have largely eliminated the practice. They separate only a handful of truly dangerous prisoners, and provide even them with opportunities for communication and rehabilitation.

In the United States, in contrast, solitary confinement is a control strategy of first resort. In New York's state prisons, for example, 5 out of 6 terms in solitary are for nonviolent misbehavior as minor as mouthing off to a corrections officer or having too many pencils or postage stamps.

The effects of solitary, however, are anything but minor. Studies have found that solitary confinement beyond two weeks alters brain function, and produces psychological symptoms ranging from anxiety and depression to full-on psychosis. For the many prisoners with underlying mental illness who end up in solitary, the suffering is even worse.

People in solitary often take to screaming, banging on cell walls, counting cockroaches, cutting themselves, and worse. Although less than 5 percent of all U.S. prisoners are in solitary confinement, 50 percent of prison suicides take place there.

In addition to its human costs, solitary confinement sucks up our tax dollars. Keeping an individual in a supermax prison triples the average annual cost of incarceration from \$25,000 to \$75,000. Research also shows that people released directly from solitary to the streets are significantly more likely to land back in prison.

Finally, solitary confinement serves no legitimate purpose whatsoever, since it fails to increase the safety of either prisoners or corrections officers. In fact, states that have reduced their use of solitary by up to 75 percent have seen notable *drops* in prison violence.

We must end this cruel, costly, and counterproductive practice before any more damage is done.

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.

Solitary confinement for the person that killed my child is cruel? Why? Because they can't talk to another human being? Because they start to mentally suffer after two weeks? Makes sense. Especially where the parent will suffer for the rest of their life. And never have contact with their child again.

With all due respect, 1) you simply can't imagine how cruel it IS when you can't talk to another human being for days, months, years at a time. I was put in solitary because my mom naively called and told the facility she was thought I might be suicidal. I enjoy being by myself, but after four days of talking to no one, doing nothing reading nothing seeing close to nothing, it really gets to you. I cannot imagine what happens after months or years. And 2) most of the people in solitary are not child killers or even murderers. In fact, many are children or barely legal adults themselves. I say this as a mother who's lost two of her sons as teenagers. However, if your son or daughter truly was a child, their killer would likely HAVE to be in solitary because the other inmates will enact their own justice.

DEFINITELY A PETITION TO COSTCO MANAGEMENT is called for, can anyone put it together I will also help distribute it!

If someone more savvy than I will start a petition asking Costco to print that article, I will sign it and distribute it!

Whats new for recent years? 2009-2012: Uneven recovery from the Great Recession From 2009 to 2012, average real income per family grew modestly by 6.0% (Table 1). Most of the gains happened in the last year when average incomes grew by 4.6% from 2011 to 2012. However, the gains were very uneven. Top 1% incomes grew by 31.4% while bottom 99% incomes grew only by 0.4% from 2009 to 2012. Hence, the top 1% captured 95% of the income gains in the first three years of the recovery. From 2009 to 2010, top 1% grew fast

and then stagnated from 2010 to 2011. Bottom 99% stagnated both from 2009 to 2010 and from 2010 to 2011. In 2012, top 1% incomes increased sharply by 19.6% while bottom 99% incomes grew only by 1.0%. In sum, top 1% incomes are close to full recovery while bottom 99% incomes have hardly started to recover. Note that 2012 statistics are based on preliminary projections and will be updated in January 2014 when more complete statistics become available. Note also that part of the surge of top 1% incomes in 2012 could be due to income retiming to take advantage of the lower top tax rates in 2012 relative to 2013 and after.¹ Retiming should be most prevalent for realized capital gains as individuals have great flexibility in the timing of capital gains realizations. However, series for income excluding realized capital gains also show a very sharp increase (Figure 1), suggesting that retiming likely explains only part of the surge in top 1% incomes in 2012. Retiming of income should produce a dip in top reported incomes in 2013. Hence, statistics for 2013 will University of California, Department of Economics, 530 Evans Hall #3880, Berkeley, CA 94720. This is an updated version of Striking It Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States, Pathways Magazine, Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality, Winter 2008, 6-7. Much of the discussion in this note is based on previous work joint with Thomas Piketty. All the series described here are available in excel format at <http://elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/TabFig2012prel.xls>. ¹Top ordinary income marginal tax rates increased from 35 to 39.6% and top income tax rates on realized capital gains and dividends increased from 15 to 20% in 2013. In addition, the Affordable Care Act surtax at marginal rate of 3.8% on top capital incomes and 0.9% on top labor incomes was added in 2013 (the surtax is only 0.9% on labor income due to the pre-existing Medicare tax of 2.9% on labor income). The Pease limitation on itemized deductions also increases marginal tax rates by about 1 percentage point in 2013. These higher marginal tax rates affect approximately the top 1%. Hence, among top earners, retiming income from 2013 to 2012 saves about 6.5 percentage points of marginal tax for labor income and about 10 percentage points for capital income. In words, for top 1% earners, shifting an extra \$100 of labor income from 2013 to 2012 saves about \$6.5 in taxes and shifting an extra \$100 of capital income from 2013 to 2012 saves about \$10 in taxes

Honestly, and not to sound too over-capitalistic-conspiracy-theory about it, but the conditions of solitary confinement, wherein a person loses all sense of perspective in regards to anything they have (nothing) versus anything they need (something) are not that dissimilar from what a place or state of mind that Costco needs from anyone that shops there. Its all based on deprivation of senses, so this should not be a surprise to anyone.

Of course solitary serves a legitimate purpose. It triples the amount of money the prisons can charge the govt for housing the prisoner. This is about PROFIT, and is another example of why private prison systems are unfair and dont work.

As a long time member of Costco, I am disappointed about their Informed Debate response to the issue of the inhumane practice of solitary confinement.

As a long time member, have always appreciated their business values. What is the best way to voice my opinion and concern about this to Costco?

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News