

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | April 11, 2010

Colorado's \$18.2 billion budget, which state lawmakers [passed this week](#) after contentious debate, makes substantial cuts to public education, colleges and universities, and tax breaks for small businesses and senior citizens. In the face of shrunken revenues (and dwindling federal stimulus funds), Colorado even reduced its overall corrections budget. But in the midst of all these deep cuts to vital services, the Colorado legislature managed to find \$9.37 million to open one wing of a new supermax prison, containing 316 additional administrative segregation cells where prisoners will live in 23-hour-a-day solitary confinement.

Colorado already has more than 1,100 solitary confinement beds throughout the prison system, according to the [Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition](#) (CCJRC). As a percentage of total prison beds, this is more than three times the national average. The state's existing supermax facility, the Colorado State Penitentiary (CSP-I), is less than 20 years old and holds more than 750 prisoners in solitary confinement. Yet in 2003, the state initiated construction of a second supermax, CSP-II, at the cost of \$208 million.

CSP-II was delayed by lawsuit, and by the time it was completed last year, Colorado governor Bill Ritter put its opening on hold because of budget shortfalls. But Ritter changed his mind, and despite [resistance from a coalition](#) of state civil liberties, human rights, and criminal justice reform groups, lawmakers voted through the funds to open one tower of CSP-II.

At the same time, Colorado has cut funds for inmate vocational training, re-entry programs, and mental health care despite the fact that close to 40 percent of the prisoners in administrative segregation are believed to suffer from mental illness. Corrections department officials and others who support the opening of CSP-II [say it is needed](#) to protect guards and inmates alike from violent and unruly prisoners. But statistics do not support the contention that greater use of solitary confinement reduces risk. As CCJRC argues, Colorado can not segregate its way to safety.

In a strange confluence of events, the vote came just days before Sunday nights airing of [Explorer: Solitary Confinement](#), an episode of the popular National Geographic documentary series that focuses on prisoners in solitary at CSP-I. While it takes pains to present a balanced view, the show manages to convey something of the cruelty of Colorado's liberal use of administrative segregation. On Sunday, [Denver Post](#) columnist [Susan Greene](#) wrote about the documentary:

Solitary Confinement follows inmates through the 23 hours they spend each day locked down in cells, their food pushed through slots in their door. The 24th hour is for exercise, also alone.

The film debunks conceptions that these guys are all Hannibal Lecters. One is doing time for identity theft. Another stole a car. The average stint in isolation or ad-seg, short for administrative segregation, as officials call it is two years. Prisoners end up there not because of the crimes they committed, but for violations that corrections officials say threaten their administrative efficiency. It's an attempt to modify behavior.

Colorado has no limit on how long the system can keep inmates in conditions that many experts call torturous. When you move into a cell, you look on the floor and you'll see where cement wore out from the last person who did the same thing you'll be doing walking from the bunk to the door, bunk to the door. Turn. Turn. Turn. ... It does seem to break something inside you, says Josue Gonzales, who has spent seven of his 29 years alone in CSP-I.

Greene quotes Dr. Stuart Grassian, a psychiatrist who has done extensive research on solitary confinement, and is [featured in the National Geographic documentary](#). Its virtually guaranteed to make people worse, Grassian says. Ninety-five percent of these people will get out and be released back on the streets. All isolation will have done is make them as violent, crazy and dangerous as possible when they get out, he continues. This isn't getting tough on crime. It's getting tough on the community.

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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.

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Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

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October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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rose i like your thingking i the same way i mean warden i got thout go spend a mouth in one your cells then tell me if your all right i have my self met Dr. Stuart Grassian i told him he should study and look up ESP the prison and holy cow thare he was tacking a bout it not just the fackt it was start of solitary but more in deth i like he took my addvise i new somthing he did ent and was abal to teach the nashions leading expert something i felt honnered i tell you i be the grassian of my time the man is a grate wise man he inspes me i will end solitary befor i die i know this is my perus and csp is sick and rong warden ses in 50 years thare know if they did the right thing all she needs to do is look at esp it the only prue shard of light in the hole nashion of prisons it is what it inteded to be and was unknowingly not a good thing thare for it is not to blame it but to blame those who did not lern from it i mean if you put a drug out for canser your not going to put it out if it dose not work but makes it worse that is what we have done but we siad lets make it stronger then tell the world it cures it but it dosent it just makes it worse i know SHU sindrum fist hand it is a BICH never goins a wat compleetly and dam it solitary is in are schools as well i mean those who hate us i do not blame them it makes me sick to know i part of the usa when we do this to anyone end solitary i will end it pray for those who have fallen under the care of the tribunal pray for those who are cast into the void may they live to tell and live to fight a nuther day may they see the end of this cruilty

IT IS SAID THE DIFFERENENCE BETWEEN ANIMALS AND HUMANS IS THAT ANIMALS EAT THERE YOUNG AND WHAT BRINGS SORROW TO A MOTHER IS THAT WE ALLOW THE MEN WE HAVE VOTED INTO OFFICE TO SENTENCE OUR CHILDREN TO LIFE IN PRISON AND TORTURE OUR CHILDREN IN A 23-HOUR A DAY SOLITRY CONFINEMENT. THEY SENTENCE OTHERS FOR LOCKING THEIR CHILDREN IN A CLOSET I ASK WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE? THESE MEN WE VOTE IN TO OFFICE TAKE THE TAXES WE PAY TO TORTURE OUR CHILDREN AND TAKE THE MONEY FROM THE GOOD THEY SHOULD BE DOING WITH IT FOR OUR CHILDREN AND WE STAND STILL AND ALLOW IT DO WE NOT. I ASK WHAT HAPPENED TO THE HEARTS OF MEN? I SAY NEVER SAY NEVER.

They say ones priorities can be determined by where the money is spent. That must be doubly true during these harsh economic times. Ive heard from one of CDCs prison wardens that 30% of those in ad-seg suffer from serious mental illness. If we pay for our sins in the afterlife, there must be a special place in hell for those who torment the ill, especially those who do so at great public expense.

How about coming up with some decent food and medical for the prisons that are already there? I have been an advocate for prisoners and ex convicts for years. They come out of prison so unhealthy that many cant even work. They cant find a place to live, because they have no money and no skills. These are the people you need to start worrying about. We dont need another CSP. Many of the people in there could be in general population. However, after years in CSP, they need mental health care and I doubt if they get that. I have known people who have been paroled directly to the streets from CSP. We need more re-entry programs. I wont vote for any kind of tax raises in this state as long as we keep building prisons. CSP makes a non-violent man violent. Do we need more violent prisoners parolling to the streets?

The tragedy continuesBuild new prisons; set aside more segregation cells; do anything but face the futility of our out-of-control criminal justice systemHave we really reached the point where the public is willing to sacrifice education to house more drug offenders and DUIs the failures of our education and social services industry?

We are in danger of Corrections and Justice collectively becoming the largest governmnetal budget itemWhen that happens, we will be devising novel ways of incarcerating all of us who object

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