

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/11/06/freed-from-an-iranian-prison-sarah-shourd-speaks-out-for-u-s-inmates-in-solitary-confinement/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | November 6, 2011

The *New York Times* today features an op-ed titled Tortured by Solitude. The author is Sarah Shourd, one of three Americans who were imprisoned in Iran beginning in the summer of 2009, when they were arrested and charged with espionage while hiking on the border with Iraqi Kurdistan. Her two male companions, Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal, were jailed together, but Shourd was placed in solitary confinement in a 10-by-14-foot cell in Iran's notorious Evin Prison, and held there for more than a year.

In her op-ed, Shourd describes the devastating psychological effects of isolation, and decries its widespread use in the United States, which has the most prisoners in solitary confinement in the world. An excerpt follows; the full piece can be read [here](#).

It's impossible to exaggerate how much the company of another human being means when you've been cut off from the world and stripped of your rights and freedom.

After two months with next to no human contact, my mind began to slip. Some days, I heard phantom footsteps coming down the hall. I spent large portions of my days crouched down on all fours by a small slit in the door, listening. In the periphery of my vision, I began to see flashing lights, only to jerk my head around to find that nothing was there. More than once, I beat at the walls until my knuckles bled and cried myself into a state of exhaustion. At one point, I heard someone screaming, and it wasn't until I felt the hands of one of the friendlier guards on my face, trying to revive me, that I realized the screams were my own.

Of the 14 and a half months, or 9,840 hours, I was held as a political hostage at Evin prison in Tehran, I spent 9,495 of them in solitary confinement. When I was released just over a year ago, I was shocked to find out that the United Nations [Convention Against Torture](#), one of the few conventions the United States has ratified, does not mention solitary confinement. I learned that there are untold numbers of prisoners around the world in solitary, including an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 in the United States. According to the United Nations special rapporteur on torture, Juan Mendez, the practice appears to be growing and diversifying in its use and severity.

Amy Fetting at the American Civil Liberties Union told me: In the U.S. we use solitary as a routine prison administrative practice. It's not something that's used as a last recourse, as it should be. Last summer, prisoners at Pelican Bay prison in California went on a hunger strike to end the practice of isolating some prisoners for more than 22 hours a day. The strike spread until thousands of prisoners were participating. Only when officials agreed to review the use of solitary confinement did the prisoners [accept food](#).

Such a review is needed for prisons everywhere, and particularly in the United States, the country with, according to Ms. Fetting, the most prisoners in solitary confinement in the world. One of the problems, according to Mr. Mendez, is that there is no universally accepted definition of solitary confinement. Mr. Mendez and his staff defined it as more than 22 to 24 hours isolated from anyone else except for guards. They are calling for clearer standards regarding what is disciplinary and what moves into the category of severe pain and suffering, either physical or mental, which is definitely prohibited under international law. He has called for a ban on prolonged solitary confinement, and I very much agree. Any case that lasts more than 15 days should be carefully investigated.

You don't have to beat someone to inflict pain and suffering; the psychological torture of prolonged solitary confinement leaves no marks, but its effects are severe and long-lasting.

It's wonderful to begin my life again, and every day I feel more free, but I can't help thinking about the thousands of others who are alone right now. I believe the excessive use of solitary confinement constitutes cruel and unusual punishment that is torture. The United Nations should proscribe this inhumane practice, and the United States should take the lead role in its eradication.

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

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My husband and I attended the Search for Common Ground Awards Ceremony to honor our friend, Bill Miller, who was deeply involved in the negotiations to free these hostages.
Very moving evening.

ya thats bout the be3st way i could say it that you dont need to beet a person to do harm that solitary will do worse then any beeting ever could and still the scars you can never see but they are life long scars all the same may thare be light in the darknes of justice

The words of Sarah Shourn are so important and I hope she will keep advocating for prisoners who are being tortured by solitary confinement in the US. I decided to advocate for an innocent prisoner in 2002. We were married in 2005. What I have experienced as I have lived these years is beyond words. Sadly, families, who are the most able to relay these horribles tortures, are forced to keep quiet. If we complain or try to expose injustices, our loved ones are swiftly punished and tormented as well as separated from all human contact. My husband is no longer the strong, confident and healthy person that I fell in love with. Neither of us will ever be the same. I have never broken the law and have no record, yet the invisable punishment I have recieved has been excruciating. Please, Sarah, keep speaking for us!

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