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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/04/19/solitary-confinement-leads-to-suffering-and-suicide-in-pennsylvanias-prisons/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | April 19, 2012

The latest issue of *The Nation* includes an excellent [article by Matt Stroud](#), about the common practice in Pennsylvania of placing prisoners with serious mental illness in solitary confinement where, unsurprisingly, they sometimes resort to suicide. The article begins:

By the time John McClellan Jr. was found dead inside Pennsylvanias State Correctional Institution (SCI) at Cresson last May, he had long been categorized as special needs for his history of addiction and mental instability. Yet prisoners and staff say the 42-year-old inmate was not living in one of the facilities treatment units but in the Restricted Housing Unit, or RHU otherwise known as solitary confinement.

Two months earlier, McClellan had written a letter to his father, a Philadelphia police officer, saying that five correctional officers had assaulted him, then filed false charges against him. John McClellan Sr. had already contacted an attorney; threats and abuse from guards were allegedly so frequent his son kept a makeshift calendar on legal-sized notebook paper to keep track. A former SCI Cresson prisoner, Tim Everard, who says he spent time in a neighboring RHU cell, recalls seeing guards kicking the younger McClellans cell door, calling him names and goading him to kill himself. When Everard told the manager of the ward that McClellan seemed suicidal, Everard says she brushed him off, saying of the impulse to commit suicide, If hes going to act on it, hes going to act on it.

On December 1 the Justice Department announced an investigation into SCI Cresson as well as SCI Pittsburgh in response to allegations of prisoner abuse. Since then, another inmate, who reportedly asked repeatedly for and was denied mental health treatment, has committed suicide inside SCI Cresson. An investigation by *The Nation* uncovered details of the claims at the center of the probe, through interviews with current and former Department of Corrections (DOC) employees, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal. At least three sources with knowledge of the mental health procedures at SCI Cresson have provided corroborating evidence to the Justice Department, claiming that they were threatened with physical harm or false charges by prison authorities if they raised concerns.

Stroud goes on to detail the grim history of SCI Cresson and the allegations of abuse and suffering that have gone on there and throughout the Pennsylvania system, which historically been at the forefront of the use of solitary confinement, and has continued to experiment with new forms of isolation.

The article is particularly important in parsing the systems attempts to deal with mentally ill inmates by placing them in various forms of solitary confinement. They have euphemistic names like the Secure Special Needs Unit (SSNU), but critics argue that with inadequate treatment and staff training, they in effect are just slightly less noxious torture chambers. And not all prisoners with mental illness even make it to the SSNU, instead remaining in regular solitary cells which is where John McClellan Jr. killed himself.

Stroud points out that the current DOJ investigation could have important implications beyond Pennsylvania.

In addition to determining whether it provided inadequate mental health care to prisoners who have mental illness [and] failed to adequately protect such prisoners from harm, according to the DOJ's official release, investigators will also consider the practice of subjecting mentally ill prisoners to excessively prolonged periods of isolation, in violation of the Eighth Amendment, with its ban on cruel and unusual punishment. Even if the particular abuse leveled at McClellan is found to be an aberration, holding mentally unstable prisoners in solitary confinement is a common practice in prisons and jails across the country. With major studies showing that prolonged isolation can aggravate and even contribute to mental illness and a small number of states moving to reduce their reliance on the practice, the DOJ investigation could be a significant step toward banning solitary confinement for mentally ill prisoners.

In addition, while the federal courts record on limiting solitary confinement has been pretty dismal, some civil rights advocates believe that now is the moment to take on solitary confinement in court.

The DOJ probe could lead to such a case. Federal investigators have toured SCI Cresson and interviewed current and former SSNU prisoners. Although the DOC has said it will cooperate fully, it may object to a basic claim: solitary confinement, in the hairsplitting definition of one DOC press secretary, means an individual has no contact with other individuals. By that logic, none of the inmates at SCI Cresson qualify, given their regular contact (abusive or not) with guards.

A legal clash could be significant. Human Rights Watch has estimated that up to 19 percent of US prisoners have psychiatric disorders and another 15 to 20 percent require some form of psychiatric intervention in prison. A 2010 HRW report gave similar estimates for those in solitary confinement.

It is often estimated that about 25,000 prisoners are living in solitary confinement, but Jean Casella and James Ridgeway, who run SolitaryWatch.com, have noted that this number counts supermax prisons without including the many different isolation units in state prisons, like the RHU and SSNU at SCI Cresson. They put the nationwide total closer to 80,000.

The DOJ investigation has the potential to further expose the utter depravity of the prison system, says Bret Grote of the Human Rights Coalition. The use of punitive isolation at SCI Cresson, he says, fits squarely within the norm for how solitary units are run throughout [Pennsylvania], where instances of cruelty and insanity are deliberately multiplied by government employees as a matter of policy.

The [full article](#) is a must-read for anyone concerned with solitary confinement in general, and solitary confinement and mental illness in particular.

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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They do not treat their inmates with medication, son has been fighting since Jan 2012 for blood work and med for his hep c. My visitations were terminated due to the fact that I show up 3 times hot for heroin, never did it in my life, take fentanyl patch plus ten perscribed medications, got two notes stating from my doctor that fentanyl is an opioid and that is why I am showing up. Gave them a list of my medications from my pharmacy and still am denied visitation for 180 days at any state facility. I am very hurt by this, it is stated that I am a danger to the staff and inmates, I don't even drink, my rights have been violated along with my sons. I faxed paper work to Kenneth Cameron on June 8th and no response. I was told personally by Ms Reefer on May 31, 2012, my last visit in the visiting room that my son would get blood work done and get medication. Not a damn thing has been done.

Total scum bags

Thanks Solitary Watch for reporting the truth. This is the cruelest worst case I have seen which is saying a lot as I have spent 10 years in California prisons where we've seen almost everything. I turned my life around writing novels about the drug war and prison injustice. My novella, Underdog, is about solitary confinement in regards to the validation process. I had been involved in riots to survive and was falsely assumed a gang leader so I am able to show the flaws through a storyline so the public can understand better.

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