

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/08/05/pennsylvania-legislators-hold-hearings-on-solitary-confinement/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | August 5, 2010

On Monday, members of the Pennsylvania House Judiciary Committee hosted public hearings on solitary confinement in Yeadon, a western suburb of Philadelphia. As reported in the local [Delaware County Daily Times](#) (and nowhere else):

A public hearing on the effectiveness of solitary confinement in state prisons drew cheers from the audience for two former inmates and jeers for state corrections officials at Borough Hall Monday afternoon.

Led by state Reps. Ronald Waters, D-191, of Philadelphia, Thomas Caltagirone, D-127, of Berks County, and Vanessa Lowery Brown, D-190, of Philadelphia County, Monday's hearing was one of many being conducted by the House Judiciary Committee over the past 10 months, Waters said.

This is for us right now to see what kind of policy changes need to be made in order to make solitary confinement more humane and make it so that people come out of there better and not worse than when they went in there, said Waters. We're seeing too many people re-offending and re-victimizing.

The hearings are part of an initiative led by Judiciary Committee chair Caltagirone and Black Caucus chair Waters, among others, to look into [possible reforms](#) for Pennsylvania's prisons, which are [so overcrowded](#) that they are shipping out prisoners to other states. But it seems especially significant that Pennsylvania is reconsidering the effectiveness and the effects of solitary confinement, since the practice was more or less [invented there](#).

In what was supposed to be a humane reform, Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, which opened in 1829, eliminated corporal punishment in favor of penitence in extended solitary confinement. Prisoners were kept completely alone in their cells to read the Bible, and contemplate their crimes. To ensure that they did not know precisely where they were and did not catch sight of other inmates, their heads were covered with hoods whenever they were taken from their cells. Instead of repenting, many prisoners were driven insane. After Charles Dickens visited the Eastern State Penitentiary in 1842, [he wrote](#):

I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers; and in guessing at it myself, and in reasoning from what I have seen written upon their faces, and what to my certain knowledge they feel within, I am only the more convinced that there is a depth of terrible endurance in which none but the sufferers themselves can fathom, and which no man has a right to inflict upon his fellow creature. I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body; and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear.

Conditions in Pennsylvania's present-day Long-Term Segregation Units (LTSUs) were described in the 2006 Supreme Court decision in [Beard v. Banks](#).

The LTSU is divided into two levels. All inmates are initially assigned to the most restrictive level, level 2. After 90 days, depending upon an inmate's behavior, an individual may graduate to the less restrictive level 1, although in practice most do not.

The [3 units] all seriously restrict inmates' ordinary prison privileges. At all three units, residents are typically confined to cells for 23 hours a day, have limited access to the commissary or outside visitors, and (with the exception of some phases of the SMU) may not watch television or listen to the radio.

Prisoners at level 2 of the LTSU face the most severe form of the restrictions listed above. They have no access to the commissary; they may have only one visitor per month (an immediate family member), and they are not allowed phone calls except in emergencies. In addition, they (unlike all other prisoners in the Commonwealth) are restricted in the manner at issue here: They have no access to newspapers, magazines, or personal photographs. They are nonetheless permitted legal and personal correspondence, religious and legal materials, two library books, and writing paper. If an inmate progresses to level 1, he enjoys somewhat less severe restrictions, including the right to receive one newspaper and five magazines. The ban on photographs is not lifted unless a prisoner progresses out of the LTSU.

altogether

At Monday's hearings, two former inmates described their own experiences in isolation in Pennsylvania prisons.

A Philadelphia native, Abdullah said he spent five of his 23 years incarcerated in solitary confinement. Abdullah, formerly known as Leonard Hayes, said he was frequently assaulted by guards, stripped of clothing and tied to a metal bed frame with cold air blowing on him constantly.

Darby resident Nathaniel Lee gave similar testimony regarding his experiences in what he said prisoners and staff alike call the hole. Though it can be a useful tool if used appropriately, Lee said too often isolation was used to punish minor infractions.

When used for these minor reasons, isolation has had the nefarious effect of contributing to the resentment against authority so many prisoners have come to adapt, he said. It creates bitterness and hostility among those being punished, and may affect the likelihood of rehabilitation.

The following video of the hearings was provided by Pennsylvania's [Human Rights Coalition](#), which exposes and protests abuses in the states prisons. For another account of life in one of Pennsylvania's solitary confinement units, based on testimony collected by the HRC, see this recent [Voices from Solitary post](#).

[youtube=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RlrrnF1QwPM&feature=player_embedded]

(h/t to [this post on The Dream Antilles](#) for the material from *Beard v. Banks*.)



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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Nathaniel Lee's testimony regarding his experiences in the hole was right on.

Though it can be a useful tool if used appropriately, Lee said too often isolation was used to punish minor infractions.

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This is an excellent point for in order to be effective the inmate must first believe that he has committed an act worthy of this punishment and then to contemplate how he could avoid repeating it in the future. After all this was the original intent of this flawed policy in the first place as you aptly pointed out here.

In what was supposed to be a humane reform, Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, which opened in 1829, eliminated corporal punishment in favor of penitence in extended solitary confinement. Prisoners were kept completely alone in their cells to read the Bible, and contemplate their crimes.

The trouble today, besides the misuse and overuse of Solitary Confinement by the authorities, is that the majority of inmates believe that

they are just political prisoners of a racist system. No matter what form of punishment they receive they view it as just more evidence of racism. This is fueled continually by well meaning authors on this subject.

Of course this view is eagerly accepted by these inmates who like most people in our society look to justify their misdeeds by placing the blame on someone else. This reinforces their hostility and therefore any form of punishment does nothing to rehabilitate the inmate.

We could of course question the whole idea of punishment in the first place but that would take too long.

I was lucky as a white prisoner I did not question the reasoning behind my isolation. While in the hole I only thought about how I got there and how to avoid it in the future. I never once protested my isolation. Some might say I was naive but I could see from the examples around me it would not improve my condition only prolong it. I bent in the wind and did not break.

Prison is a cruel gauntlet, with guards on one side and prisoners on the other. Punishment is melted out by some truly evil men on both sides of the restricted space that you must run between.

We definitely need to reform the system but we also need to avoid feeding a script of pure victimization to these prisoners so they will look inward to their own involvement in their continual punishment.

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