

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/04/03/cruel-isolation-amnesty-international-report-blasts-conditions-in-arizonas-prisons/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | April 3, 2012

A [report](#) just released by Amnesty International documents and denounces conditions in Arizona's state prisons, including their gross overuse of long-term solitary confinement. A cogent summary of the report's findings appears this morning in the [Arizona Republic](#), in an article by Bob Ortega (who has [written before](#) about Arizona's brutal prisons and jails):

Arizona's state prisons overuse solitary confinement in cruel, inhumane and illegal ways, particularly for mentally ill prisoners and juveniles as young as 14, the human-rights group Amnesty International charges in a report to be released today.

According to the report, which is to be delivered to the governor and state lawmakers, Arizona prisons use solitary confinement as a punishment more than most other states or the federal government.

The group found that some inmates are held in isolation for months and sometimes years, and it called on the state to use the practice only as a last resort and only for a short duration.

In addition, it asked that the practice not be used against children or people who are mentally ill or have behavioral disabilities. The group also called on state officials to improve conditions for prisoners in solitary confinement and to act to reduce the high number of suicides in Arizona's prisons.

Arizona Department of Corrections officials said they had not read the report Monday and were unable to comment.

According to the DOC, 3,130 inmates, or 8 percent of the state prison population, were being held in the highest-security, maximum-custody units as of Friday, and most were confined alone.

Although maximum-security inmates include those who are violent and may represent a threat to other inmates or staff, Amnesty noted that Arizona's own figures show that 35 percent of inmates in maximum security were committed for non-violent crimes.

Amnesty International's report cited sources who said prisoners are regularly assigned to maximum security for relatively minor rule violations or disruptive behavior, often because they have mental-health or behavioral problems.

The report noted cases of Arizona inmates who have been in solitary confinement continuously for 15 years. Amnesty said that various international human-rights treaties and experts, including the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, have called on states to limit the use of solitary confinement to exceptional circumstances, for short periods and to prohibit solitary confinement of children 17 and younger.

Amnesty's report found that 14 children 14 to 17 years old had been held in maximum custody at the Rincon unit in the Tucson state prison, under conditions similar to those of adults: 22 to 24 hours a day in their cells, limited exercise alone in a small cage and with no recreational activities.

Because children and adolescents are not fully developed physically and emotionally, they are less equipped to tolerate the effects of isolation, according to studies cited in the report.

Some charges in the Amnesty report echo those raised in a federal lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Prison Law Office last month, alleging that Arizona's Department of Corrections doesn't provide adequate mental-health and medical care.

The state has not responded to that suit, and the Corrections spokesman said the department wouldn't respond to any parts of the Amnesty report that related to that litigation.

Last July, Corrections officials declined to meet with Amnesty representatives from London who were visiting Arizona, nor allow them to visit the Eyman state prison, which houses about 1,950 maximum-security inmates.

A spokesman said Corrections Director Charles Ryan had other commitments. In a letter to Amnesty, Ryan cited security concerns in

declining their visit request. On that same tour, Texas and California correctional officials met with Amnestys representatives, and California permitted them to visit maximum-custody units

Most Arizona maximum-security inmates are isolated in special management units, windowless cells that, contrary to the U.N. Standard Minimum Rules for Treatment of Prisoners, have no direct access to sunlight or fresh air, and have lighting that is dimmed at night but left on 24 hours a day, the Amnesty report said.

Inmates in SMU units are not allowed to work. They typically receive two daily meals in their cells, have no contact with other inmates and are allowed out of their cell no more than three times a week for two hours for exercise and showers, in many cases in a windowless room with nothing except tall walls and a mesh over the roof.

Amnesty cited allegations that the cells are no longer steam-cleaned between inmates, so that food, urine and feces are stuck on the walls and food slots.

Both Amnesty International and inmates contacted by *The Arizona Republic* expressed concern that the conditions in solitary may contribute to Arizonas high prison suicide rate, which was double the national average last fiscal year. Seven of the 10 most recent suicides in state prisons were by inmates being held in solitary in maximum-security cells, according to Corrections death reports

While many states, including California, New York, Massachusetts, Vermont, Ohio, Mississippi and Wisconsin, bar placing seriously mentally ill inmates in solitary because the social isolation and sensory deprivation can lead to further psychological deterioration, Arizona does not.

Amnesty cited reports that serious mental illnesses often go undiagnosed in Arizona prisons because of a lack of mental-health staff and inadequate screening and monitoring.

Amnesty reported that mental-health staff dont have weekly rounds, visiting maximum-security inmates only when theres a crisis, and consulting with them at their cell door.

It noted the ACLU lawsuit, which alleges that prisoners in solitary wait an average of six to eight months to see a psychologist, with some waiting more than a year. One prisoner diagnosed with serious mental illness spent two years in solitary without seeing a psychiatrist despite repeated requests and referrals by staff, according to the suit.

Amnesty noted 43 suicides listed by Corrections from October 2005 to April 2011 and said that of the 37 cases in which it was able to collect information, 22 or 60 percent took place in maximum-custody solitary units. There have been at least eight more suicides since April 2011 and 16 other deaths that the department described only as under investigation.

In letters to *The Republic*, inmates have raised concerns similar to those in the Amnesty report. While on suicide watch here at SMU-1, the lights stay on all night and make it impossible to sleep all day, all night, wrote Dustin Brislan, an inmate with a serious mental illness in solitary confinement at Eyman.

Lack of contact, of seeing the outside, seeing any bit of sunlight, smelling fresh air, all of that has increased my mental illness. Im only allowed recreation every other day, where Im put in a windowless cell off area.

The Eyman prison is the only one in Arizona not accredited by the National Commission on Correctional Health Care, which requires that prisoners being held in solitary confinement have at least weekly contact with mental-health staff

The Amnesty report also questioned why Arizonas Corrections Department requires all prisoners sentenced to life to spend at least their first two years in solitary confinement, regardless of whether they pose a threat to other inmates or guards.

There appears to be no valid reason, the report said. American Bar Association standards call for prisoners to be kept in solitary more than a year only if the prisoner poses a continuing, serious threat.

Amnesty International said Arizona should:

- ☐ Reduce the number of prisoners in isolation to only those who are a serious and continuing threat.
- ☐ Improve overall conditions, provide more out-of-cell time, better exercise facilities, meaningful education and rehabilitation programs.
- ☐ Introduce measures to allow some group interactions and association to benefit inmates mental health and provide incentives for better behavior.
- ☐ Remove all serious mentally ill prisoners from solitary and prohibit them from being placed in solitary.
- ☐ Improve mental-health monitoring; take steps to reduce suicide, including more humane conditions in suicide watch cells; and prohibit solitary confinement of prisoners under 18.

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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This is a domino effect that has begun to rock our world ~ more people are becoming aware of what is happening behind the walls and high fences.. ~ Someday, this will all be addressed and better conditions will exist within the SHU the SMU and the AD SEG everywhere but people need to stand up and shout

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