

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/04/02/solitary-watch-watches-solitary-experiment-from-national-geographic/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | April 2, 2010



As we [wrote earlier](#), it's hard to say whether the National Geographic Channel's treatment of solitary confinement will do more harm than good. In addition to an [upcoming episode of Explorer](#) on the subject, the NG Channel is hosting an experiment that promises to



provide a [live window into the solitary experience](#): Three subjects spend a week in faux lockdown cells (unless they want to leave earlier), with cameras streaming live video to the public and the prisoners providing [updates on Twitter](#).

The potential good comes from the evidence of [psychological damage](#) that will probably surface even in the fresh-faced young volunteers who spend a mere week in the pristine cells. (And to its credit, the NG Channel's site makes an effort to put their experience in [broader context](#).) The potential harm comes from the audience thinking what they watch on the live video stream bears any resemblance to the actual experience of prisoners in solitary confinement, which is far worse, in ways too numerous to count. After observing the NG experiment for a week, viewers could easily conclude that solitary confinement is extremely unpleasant, but falls short of constituting cruel and unusual punishment and is far from the [torture some critics say it is](#). If so, they would be basing their conclusions on faulty evidence.

First of all, hardly anyone spends just a week in solitary. Used for disciplinary purposes, spells in solitary can last anywhere from several weeks to several years. Many of the inmates who end up in solitary are [mentally ill](#); others (including [many children](#)) are there for their own protection, but nonetheless endure the same cruel conditions. In addition, some 25,000 American prisoners live in long-term or permanent lockdown, which often stretches to decades: [Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox](#), of the Angola 3, have spent most of the past 37 years in solitary; [Tommy Silverstein](#) has spent an uninterrupted 27 years in solitary under a no human contact order; [Syed Fahad Hashmi](#), who is accused of offering material support (in the form of clothing) to terrorists, has spent nearly three years in ultra-isolation under Special Administrative Measures, though he has yet to be convicted of a crime.

Second, the [faux cells](#) where the three National Geographic volunteers are living, though cramped, look cleaner, homier, and less dehumanizing than most solitary confinement cells. The furnishings—bed, shelves, chair, lamp—are recognizably from IKEA, whereas in many [supermax cells](#) everything is made of poured concrete, with the exception of stainless steel sink and toilet. Compare the rooms where NG volunteers James, Laura, and Rich are living to Laura Sullivan's photos from [Pelican Bay](#), which accompanied her excellent 2006 [NPR series on solitary confinement](#) in the United States, or to drawings by prisoners Herman Wallace and Tommy Silverstein of them appearing at the end of this post.

More significantly, there are realities that cannot be captured visually (or on Twitter), some of which are described in a comment on our previous post by Alan, who also has first-hand knowledge of life in the hole:

Without experiencing the most disturbing elements of solitary confinement, notably:

- 1) Being surrounded by other mentally ill inmates howling and banging on doors and walls, resulting in sleep deprivation.
- 2) Viewing or rather listening to the brutality of prison guards reacting to these outbursts.
- 3) The uncertainty of when, or if, you will ever be released and the hopelessness that this feeling of loss of control over your own destiny instills.

the true horror of the solitary experience is lost.

Finally, of course, there's the profound fact that theNG prisoners are volunteers who can decide to leave at any time. They are in their cells by choice, presumably because they think the experiment serves a larger purpose. In this sense, they are truly in control of their own destinies.

In addition, the volunteers can communicate with the outside world; they can Tweet at will, and they know hundreds of people will be watching them. While that communication is one-way (they are not receiving any messages), their experience is being witnessed, thought about, and talked about. This alone sets them apart from the tens of thousands of prisoners who, on any given day, languish in solitary confinement in the United States because for the most part, nobody notices them at all.



Security Housing Unit, Pelican Bay State Prison, California.
Photos by Laura Sullivan, NPR.



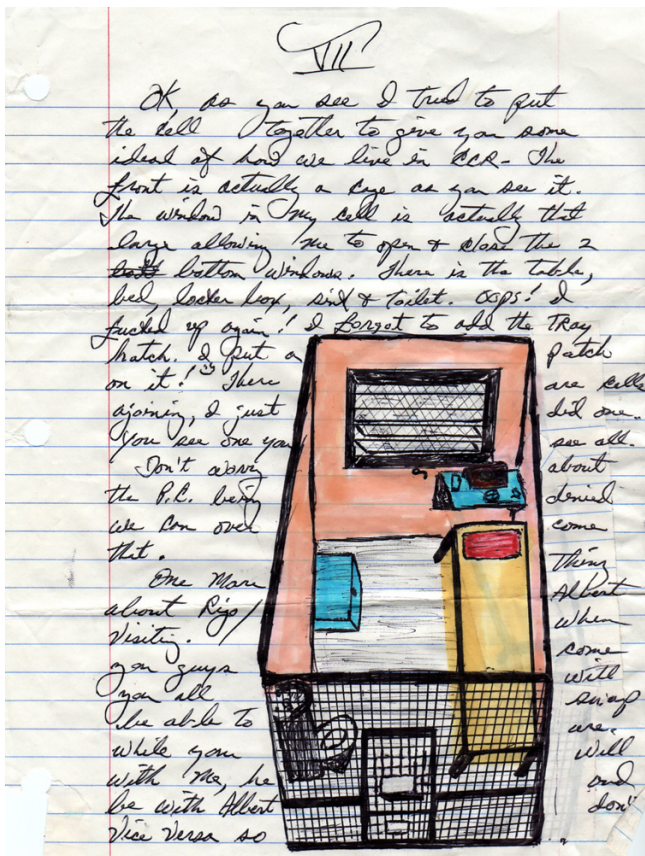
Hallway of "pod" in the SHU, Pelican Bay



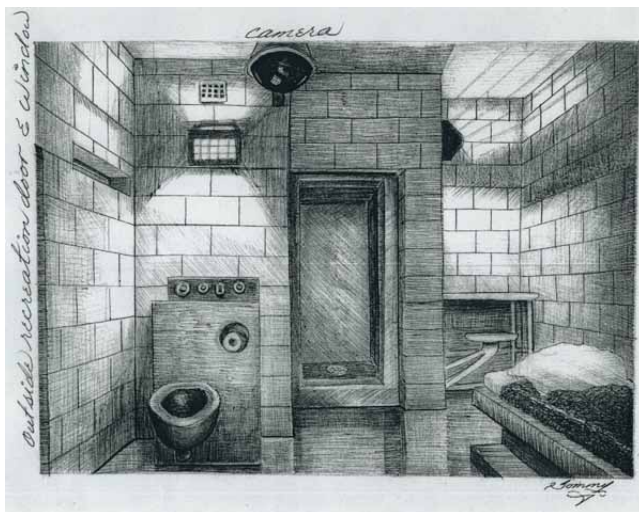
Cell search, Pelican Bay



Exercise area, Pelican Bay



Herman Wallace's drawing of his cell at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola.



Tommy Silverstein's drawing of his cell at ADX federal supermax, Florence, Colorado

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Jean Casella and James Ridgeway

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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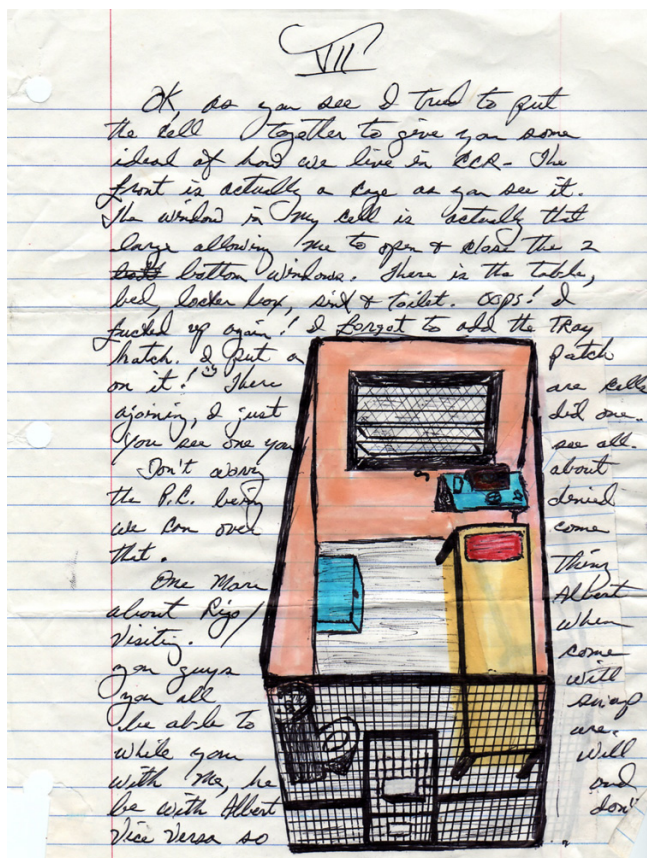
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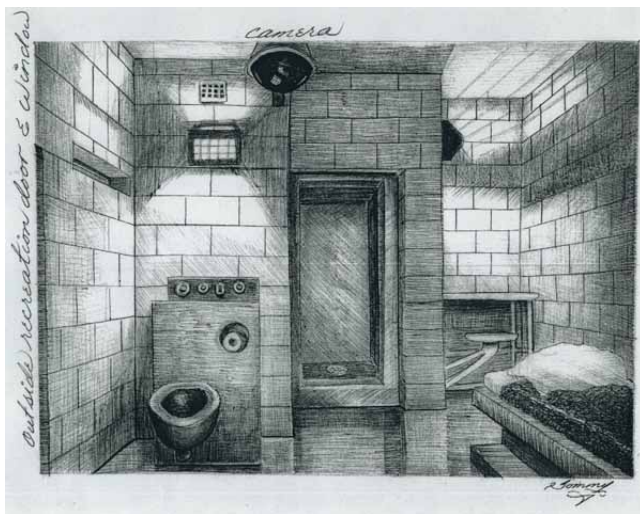
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by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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I thought I heard President Obama say, The United States DOES NOT TORTURE! I could swear he said that. oh maybe he only meant not in AMERICA. There's too much profit (\$\$\$\$\$\$\$) in this way of doing their business. who dares hope for change, anymore? Prison is big business. But the people with the power are bordering on sociopathy and criminality!

hell they can call me anytime lol i be honored to show the world the dark side of the void all i can say is they can not touch my time i did no matter how fames they get i do not brog to be rude i do so to show i proud i made it thow it and dam i going to end it i hopeing my store will be in news one day hope to make a inflens to the sa to end it ending solitary is what i was put on this earth to do and i intend to do it

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Solitary Watch

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