

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/09/30/new-video-aclu-launches-stop-solitary-campaign/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

close

Search

close

close

by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | September 30, 2011

The American Civil Liberties Union's National Prison Project has initiated a national campaign against what it calls the dangerous overuse of solitary confinement in U.S. prison and jails. The Stop Solitary campaign's web page, which launched earlier this year, describes its mission:

The ACLU, together with our state-based affiliates, scholars, activists, mental health experts, and faith-based organizations around the country, is engaged in a campaign to challenge the use of long-term solitary confinement in the courts, in the legislatures, in reforms of correctional practice, and in the battle for public opinion. The goal of the Stop Solitary campaign is to limit and abolish the use of long-term solitary confinement in U.S. prisons, jails and juvenile detention centers.

In service of this goal, the Stop Solitary site includes [advocacy campaign tools](#), resources for [state-specific legislative efforts](#) and for [litigation](#), and various [resources on solitary confinement](#).

Solitary Watch's James Ridgeway and Valeria Monfrini recently interviewed National Prison Project Director David Fathi. In this video, Fathi discusses why the ACLU has made solitary confinement a priority, and what steps it is taking to challenge the practice.

[youtube=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZfCa222Mfc]

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

i was locked up there in the early 70s,i havent been right sense,for years icouldnt eat in a resturant,go to a movie,go to the mall,ride

elevators,i have to use the stairs and i make sure doors dont lock on me. im 56 and still have alot of phobias
was forced to take meds,now im afraid of any drugs
wont let the denist put me to sleep,last time i left before he could do anything
things are getting worse as i get older

We are ALL Prisoners of casualty.

To lock people up for what they might do is called dictatorship.

So what is to stop them from doing the same thing?Let them out for a brief while and then send them right back.
They are spending twice as much to house the shu inmates and the evidence is that it does NOT reduce overall violence in prisons.
In most countries,such treatment is considered torture and if people would read about the long term affects,they would be frightened to know most of these inmates will be back on the streets at some point and very volatile after prolonged confinement with minimal human contact of any kind,sometimes for decades.
Who wants to de-brief when not only you,but your loved ones are in danger,if you do?
Does corrections care about the loved ones of convicts?
Do they care about those innocent people the inmates may encounter upon release?
Are these worst or the owrst inmates so bad they cant even be allowed to have small groups to socialize with,while still maintaining control?
Why are their packages so restricted?Their canteen? Their visiting time?Their clothes?They are in tiny little cages 24-7 so how much danger can they really pose?If they are not in shu as a disiplinary action,why restrict their access to things that in no way pose a danger to anyone?Is Top Ramen really a danger?
Why allow validation off a snitches word if that de-brief was done under prolonged duress?
Why try and force inmates to de-brief and tell about their own activities.That is not even consitutional to force someone to tell on themself in order to stop the suffering.
The prisoners are being treated worse than the prisoners at Gitmo,who are alloed sunlight,human contact and social activities and who can even worsip in a group setting.

Bunker was born on New Years Eve 1933 and he was sent to Preston when

Page 23: I had barely turned fourteen.

So even in 1947 he and others were being held in long term isolation!

The fact that people are placed in solitary before they have done anything wrong is confirmed by this quote in Eric Cummings The Rise and Fall of Californias Radical Prison Movement on page 233:

In 1970 Warden Nelson had served on the Committee on Riots and Disturbances of the American Correction Association. The first firm decision the group came to was that convict ringleaders must be removed and isolated from the general population before an opportunity to carry out their plans presents itself. In other words, troublemakers were to be identified and punished before they committed any offenses.

As far as housing juveniles in solitary beginning over the last 30 years it goes back even further than that.

In his memoir Education of a Felon, Edward Bunker writes about his experience in the CYA at Preston School of Industry, a juvenile facility in the 1940s or fifties:

Page 23: I was assigned permanently to G Company, a unit with a three-tier cell block. It was dark and gloomy and a carbon copy of a prison cell block

Page 24: they were not allowed to keep a youth under sixteen in a lockup cell for more than twenty-nine days at a time.So on the thirtieth morning, they took me out of G Company after breakfast. I checked into the regular company and went to lunch. After lunch they took me back to G Company.

In the 60s my older brother spent 90% of his time in solitary. It permanently scared him.

I wrote about Preston under Voices from Solitary on here:

<http://solitarywatch.com/solitary-voices/memoirs/in-solitary-at-las-juvenile-hall/>

When I read about the long term isolation that inmates endure today my own experience seems to pale in comparison. Back in the 1960s we were allowed a nightly shower, and on at least one occasion, Christmas Day 1968, we even ate dinner together in small groups. The dinning hall on the first floor of Preston School of Industrys Solitary Confinement Unit was a smaller version of its other dinning halls. The dinning room consisted of a half dozen, four person, square, stainless steel tables in two rows of three. It was primarily used by the guards except on this very special occasion.

The smaller number of inmates eating allowed the guards to keep a closer eye on this potentially troublesome bunch that the system found necessary to confine inside this jail within a jail for disciplinary reasons.

I sat with three other inmates on one of the four backless metal stools bolted to the concrete floor and painted over with grey epoxy paint. My eyes scanned the face of each inmate appraising their probable social status in the pecking order of institutional life.

The one directly across from me was a slightly built dirty blonde around sixteen years old with even younger boyish features. His face however seemed tired as though he had been under extreme stress for way too long. I knew the look well; it is the same expression one sees on fallen prey in a National Geographic Magazine when the animal realizes there is no way to escape their fate.

I didn't know this particular inmate but I knew others like him so I felt a profound sadness for him. I imagine that this feeling is similar to how a soldier on a battle field might feel as he passes fallen combatants.

The inmate to my left was of a different lot I imagined him to be still holding his own but only by the narrowest of margins.

Now the guy on my right had the look of a career criminal a true survivor of the system that would be willing to use any means necessary to survive even if it meant stepping on top of the first inmates head to keep his own above water.

Even with this unflattering appraisal of my dining partners after days of isolation I was eager to swap stories with each of them.

The conversation followed the normal pattern of conversations between inmates Where are you from? What are you in for? What unit are you in? How long do you have to go? Why were you sent to hole (solitary)?

I found the story of the inmate across from me to be incoherent as his eyes darted around the room wildly. He kept saying that he was going to be released and was flying back home. I took this with a grain of salt as the wishful thinking of a desperate boy for how could he ever hope to be released so soon after being placed in the hole?

I swapped stories with the others as well then it was back to our isolation upstairs.

Later that evening after I had taken my shower I heard the blond teenager shout I can fly, I can fly, and you can't keep me here no more. Then a guard said in a panic Grab him he's going to jump. I heard the young man repeat I can fly, I can fly then a loud sickening thud like a melon hitting the floor. He had jumped over the railing.

I had heard the jail house rumors of inmates that had died after being thrown over such rails so I surmised that the jumper was probably dead or at least seriously injured.

After the commotion downstairs subsided, a short interval of relative quiet followed. As I sat alone pondering the youths words over dinner a guard opened the slot in my cell door and tossed in a wad of hard candy wrapped in tissue paper. The candy landed unceremoniously onto my now dimly lit cells floor and slid to a stop somewhere in the middle. This candy was probably meant to bring us a little Christmas cheer by who ever had the idea in the first place but its delivery was carried out with such callous disregard for our feelings that it had done little to raise our spirits.

I immediately jumped up and asked the guard What happened to the guy that jumped? I had dinner with him you know. Is he OK? The guard scoffed Don't speak unless spoken to! So reluctantly I sat back down on my bed and opened the twisted piece of paper holding the candy together then tried to break a piece free. The pieces had become stuck together and were now just one large piece covered with bits of the wrapping tissue. I turned to look out my window and wondered what the scene had been like on the first floor. The smell of spit and mucus (much like the smell of a persons sneeze in a closed car) emanated from the protective screen which was meant as an additional barrier to the bars on the window and I asked myself how I could eat candy under such circumstances. I hesitated but tried a piece anyway. The candy had a familiar taste but one in which under normal circumstances I would not have eaten. I needed some distraction however and so I continued breaking off pieces until it was all gone.

I then laid back and watched the eerie shadow of Preston School of Industrys original building from the 1890s on my rooms walls. I had passed this now vacant building on the way to solitary and it has always reminded me of a haunted castle from a horror movie. (In fact it has since been used as a haunting back drop in movies.)

As we had passed the building the guard had pointed out a wood platform that he said was part of the old gallows from which they hung inmates in its heyday. I wondered how many young men had lost their lives over the years from acts of desperation, murder or execution. I wondered how the jumper became so disturbed and what had been his fate. How his parents would react to learning of his action and on Christmas Day no less. I wondered if the guard had been truthful about the purpose of the platform. I wondered if the jumper had been trying to tell me of his plans at dinner. Did I miss an opportunity to warn the guards? I tried to put these thoughts out of my head for there was nothing I could do now. So I tried to sleep to avoid having to think about him but his face at dinner would greet me whenever I closed my eyes. It was early morning before I fell to sleep.

During the remainder of my time in solitary I did thousands of sit ups and push ups to exhaust myself in order to sleep. Sleep I found was the most effective means of escaping the reality of my confinement. But my sleep was often interrupted by the desperate screams of those even less able to endure their isolation. The Catch 22 here is these unruly inmates were then viewed by the staff as not having learned their lesson so they were forced to endure even longer terms of isolation in a vicious circular cycle.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News