

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/05/02/the-ten-worst-prisons-in-america/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | May 2, 2013



The Ten Worst Prisons in America, our eleven-part article, premiered yesterday over at [MotherJones.com](#) with the notorious ADX Florence federal supermax. A new worst prison will be published each weekday (with some dishonorable mentions at the end), so please check in from time to time for new postings. What follows is the introduction to the series.

If you can't do the time, don't do the crime. So goes the old saying. Yet conditions in some American facilities are so obscene that they amount to a form of extrajudicial punishment.

Doing time is not supposed to include being raped by fellow prisoners or staff, beaten by guards for the slightest provocation, driven mad by long-term solitary confinement, or killed off by medical neglect. These, however, are the fates of thousands of prisoners every year: men, women, and children housed in lockups that give Gitmo and Abu Ghraib a run for their money.

The United States boasts the world's highest incarceration rate, with close to 2.3 million people locked away in some 1,800 prisons and 3,000 jails. Most are nasty places by design, aimed at punishment and exclusion rather than rehabilitation; while reliable numbers are hard to come by, at [last count](#) 81,622 prisoners were being held in some form of isolation in state and federal prisons.

Thousands more are being held in solitary at jails, deportation facilities, and juvenile-detention centers. Nearly [1 in 10 prisoners](#) is sexually victimized, by prison employees about half of the time: more than 200,000 such assaults take place in American penal facilities every year ([PDF](#)), according to estimates compiled under the federal [Prison Rape Elimination Act](#). Suicides, meanwhile, account for almost a third of prisoner deaths, per the [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#), while an unknown number of fatalities result from substandard nutrition and medical care.

While there's plenty of blame to go around, and while not all of the facilities described in this series have all of these problems, some stand out as particularly bad actors. We've compiled this subjective list of America's 10 worst lockups (plus a handful of dishonorable mentions) based on three years of research, correspondence with prisoners, and interviews with reform advocates concerning the penal facilities with the grimmest claims to infamy. We will be rolling out profiles of the contenders over the next 10 days, complete with photos and video.

Read the rest at [MotherJones.com](#).

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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Maybe the only way to deal with the worst of the worst is solitary, but even that's arguable. In my opinion, there are very few beyond reform. In England, they have approx. 40 people in solitary..we have (well) over 80,000.

Although the United States is a generous and well-ordered nation in many ways, there can be a baffling punitive mentality that obstructs our efforts to treat each other humanely not just in our criminal justice system, but generally. If we spent the energy and resources that we spend on extreme forms of punishment on building our communities, we wouldn't have so many disaffected people turning to crime in the first place.

Keep treating them like animals for years on end. Keep promising them parole then making it impossible to maintain. You are going to have to release most of them at some point. Damaged, mad, and so stigmatized they can't find a job to feed themselves. Do be surprised when they Kill, or beat you damn near to death. Want to give them all life sentences, good, just move the decimal over on what you paid in taxes last year.

My question is always; then what do you do with someone who is bent on killing others? We don't want the death penalty? A life for a life? We don't want solitary for the protection of others? For some reason we think we have the Right to place others in harm's way so our conscience can say we do not torture.. Why should less offender be placed where there are combative, rapist? Seems to me we don't know what to do with bad guys

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