

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/11/28/the-solitary-men-of-texas-death-row/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | November 28, 2010

We don't want to overlook a powerful article called [Solitary Men](#) that appeared in the *Texas Observer* earlier this month. The author, Dave Mann, spent time talking with inmates on Texas's death row, who are housed in a prison within a prison at the Allan B. Polunsky Unit near Livingston in southeast Texas. The unit, which holds more than 300 men in 23-hour-a-day solitary confinement in 60-square-foot cells. As Mann writes, inmates endure this isolation an average of 10 years, though some have been on death row more than 30 years until their appeals are exhausted and their sentences are commuted or carried out. Or until they're killed by disease, old age or another inmate. Or until they kill themselves.

The article includes detailed descriptions of the daily lives of the men on death row, and a rundown of the growing body of research [that] suggests this kind of extreme isolation amounts to torture. Mann does a particularly good job of debunking any notion that this is how death row has always been or has to be:

Prison isolation is a recent development in Texas as well. Until 1999, death row inmates were housed at the Ellis Unit outside Huntsville, where they enjoyed more freedom. They could work morning and afternoon shifts at the prison garment factory and had several hours a day of group recreation. They could play board games with each other. They could watch television. They were alone in their cells only at night. They received education programs. They were occasionally permitted contact visits, meaning they could be in the same room with visitors.

That all began to change on Thanksgiving Day 1998, when seven condemned prisoners escaped from the Ellis Unit. Six were quickly captured and the seventh committed suicide soon after leaving the prison, but the security breach led the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to crack down. Prison officials suspected the seven planned their escape during work duty. So in 1999, when the agency moved death row about an hour east from Huntsville to the more modern Polunsky Unit in Livingston, department officials eliminated the work program and ensured that death row inmates were isolated.

Texas has perhaps the harshest death row conditions in the country. Most states keep death row prisoners in permanent solitary confinement. But Texas is one of two states—Oklahoma is the other—that doesn't allow death row inmates to watch television, according to a survey by the Northwestern University Law School. Eleven states permit contact visits with death row prisoners. In Texas, contact visits are never allowed.

Mann interviewed three current and former death row inmates: a long timer who has spent more than 20 years and experienced the move to the Polunsky Unit; a short timer who says he wants to be executed immediately; and the free man who spent 18 years on death row before he was exonerated. Most interesting is the fact that all of them suggested subtle reforms: more hours outside the cells, group recreation, replacing the cells' solid steel doors with bars that would ease the isolation. Mann concludes: Death row will never be enjoyable. It's not supposed to be. But it could be more humane. As one prisoner, who's been on death row more than 15 years, put it, It's Hell. It really is. The profiles of the three prisoners make the article well worth [reading in full](#).

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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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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

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September 29, 2022

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i am from NY but let me try and say this so that you down in texes will understand me hay dar yee all dummer then ah tubbel weed in other words hay you brout back all the ones that got out the one time not everyone should suffer for six inmates fuck up realy i mean then thares the thout of have you ever done time in one your SHUs i have herd some realy big shit bout your prisons you need to keep to your state modoe frendship if your thout of frends if to thow someone in the shu then i not your frend they say everythings biger in texes sept common sens it seems stop thinking with your dick and start using your dam head

I would like to point out these lines from the article:

Prison is a loud place, and sound can cause the most torment. The constant yelling and taunting and clanging doors what one inmate describes as prison ruckus never ceases. Occasionally there are dull thuds of beatings and the screams of nearby prisoners descending into madness.

Of all the U.S. enhanced interrogation techniques utilized on detainees in Iraq and Afghanistan, the most devastating were psychological; prolonged isolation and blaring music eroded prisoners' sanity.

After being moved from his total isolation onto a PC unit in ADX Thomas Silverstein wrote:

Aside from the isolation, it was actually better to be alone than put up with unbearable racket and flesh eating parasites day in day out!

Mentally ill: I've slept in some of the worst pens in America has to offer but I've never seen so many guys gone stir crazy as I've witnessed here at ADX! It's daunting to see people lose their mind and knowing it's inevitable. Everything they do here is designed to literally break us! All their security mumbo jumbo is whitewash used to conceal their real covert mission.

And most recently:

You just can't confine a human being in conditions that I've endured 27 YEARS without it causing irreversible psychological, emotional, and physical ailments. I'm composing a dossier in another venue that I'll share with you all once completed that describes my inflictions in more detail.

In my thankfully very limited experience I wrote in the Voices From Solitary on this site of my 1962 experience in solitary as a 10 year old:

In solitary I passed the day reading comics with frequent interruptions from others locked up nearby. There were the Please let me out! type crying and banging on their doors to no avail. Then there was the occasional angry inmate cursing and threatening the guards while also banging on the door or throwing his bedding about.

At times the guards would feel the need to rush into a cell to subdue an inmate and the sounds of their keys rattling on their hips would mix with the sounds of the struggle to subdue the inmate. One could hear the demands of the guards countered by the shouts of defiance by the inmate.

With these sounds and a little imagination you could then visualize the struggle in your head without ever being able to see it. The struggle would invariably arouse other inmates to yell in support of their fellow inmate like babies in a nursery are lead to cry in support of one another.

It was as if I was in a mad house and I'm sure that a good percentage of the inmates did indeed have mental problems that were only being aggravated by their surroundings.

What is the death penalty telling us? That if the state says you've killed someone, then the state kills you, which means the state is as guilty as those who have been charged with murder!!

Killing is wrong WHOEVER carries it out!

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