

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/03/07/prisoners-with-mental-illness-suffer-and-die-in-arizonas-solitary-confinement-cells/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | March 7, 2012

Yesterday we reported on the federal class-action lawsuit filed by the ACLU, Prison Law Office, and others on behalf of inmates in Arizonas state prisons. The suit claims that inmates are subject to cruel and unusual punishment due to lack of adequate medical and mental health care, and inhumane conditions in solitary confinement.

The *Arizona Republic's* Bob Ortega who has a track record of [strong reporting](#) on the states brutal prison system has a [lengthy article](#) on the subject. Drawing both from the lawsuit and from its own correspondence and interviews with prisoners and corrections staff, the article presents a devastating picture of what life in solitary confinement is like for prisoners with mental illness in Arizona.

In two decades of prison litigation, this is one of the most broken systems Ive seen, David Fathi, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Unions National Prison Project, said Tuesday. The indifference to the needs of desperately ill people is shocking. And the gratuitous cruelty we see in Arizonas SMUs (special management units, or solitary confinement) is unlike anything weve ever seen even in other states Supermax prisons.

While many states, including California, New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Ohio and Wisconsin, bar solitary confinement for inmates diagnosed with serious mental illness because extreme social isolation and sensory deprivation makes them deteriorate psychologically, Arizona routinely places mentally-ill inmates in long-term solitary confinement and uses solitary cells to house suicidal prisoners, according to the suit and inmates.

Dustin Brislan, one of the plaintiffs in the suit, is a seriously mentally ill inmate at the Eyman state prison who has repeatedly cut himself and been placed on suicide watch.

In a letter to The Republic, Brislan wrote: Not only are the mentally ill forced to spend up to 24 hours in small windowless cells, but (we) are subject to harassment. Here at SMU-1 watch pod, the lights are left on all night long. At Browning Unit watch pod, the suicide watches arent given mattresses to sleep on. They sleep on cold steel. I know this because Ive been on watch 6-7 times.

He wrote that the conditions make prisoners mental illnesses worse. Weve got nowhere to turn for help, he wrote. Several people have committed suicide.

Seven of the 10 most recent suicides reported by the department were by prisoners in solitary confinement, even though those prisoners make up only one-tenth of the state prison population. One of those was Karot Phothong.

While in isolation at the Florence prison, he repeatedly asked to be seen by mental-health staff because he was suicidal. According to the suit, nothing was done for him, and he committed suicide by hanging on Jan. 28. Five other deaths in solitary in the past year remain under investigation.

The lawsuit alleges that prisoners on suicide watch are forced awake by correctional officers every 10 to 30 minutes, round-the-clock, and that the watch cells are filthy, the walls and food slots so routinely smeared with blood and feces that they are referred to as the feces cells.

Prisoners in solitary receive two cold meals a day and are allowed to leave the cells no more than three times a week for a shower and a maximum of two hours exercise in a windowless, empty concrete rec pen cell, according to the lawsuit.

These conditions are gratuitously cruel and lead to self-injury and deteriorating mental conditions, the ACLUs Fathi said. There are no penological nor security justification for those kinds of conditions.

Corrections officials told attorneys that it doesnt keep records of mental-health programming provided to prisoners in solitary confinement. But it appears to be minimal.

According to the suit, one mentally ill prisoner in isolation at the Eyman prison, Robert Gamez, wasnt seen by a psychiatrist in four

years, despite numerous referrals. As of November, four of the six prisons housing seriously mentally-ill prisoners, including Eyman, had no psychiatrist on staff.

On her last day of work last June, the only psychiatrist at the Perryville prison e-mailed Ryan after staff at the Florence prison, 90 miles away, asked her to prescribe or renew medications for patients there that she had never met or treated. She refused.

Read the [full article here](#).

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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@murtle One can imagine the quality of your work given your feelings toward those in your care. If I felt that way about my clients I would change my job. Then again it is most likely a profitable cake walk for you for I'm sure you avoid your nursing duties.

@flounder Pedophiles and rapists are taken care of by the inmates themselves for they too have family.

Only about 3-4% have murder convictions. Most are in prison for drug related charges. People take drugs because they have lost hope of a better life.

Crime should be punished but no one should be tortured and by doing so it only makes the person worse. Do you really want to encounter their anger when they are finally released? It is in your interest and everyone else that they exit better than when they entered.

Fed hope. Maybe you should feed hope to the baby the mother or grandmother they raped. Or the guy who was minding his own business on the way to work but got shot in a robbery. Why are you so concerned about low life human beings that do nothing but inflict damage on society. SMU is for real dirt bags these are not guys who go caught shoplifting they are real killers murders and pedophiles etc.

I am a nurse the conditions there are fine not as bad as everyone thinks.

The hole is really not a hole like people think.

These inmates are dirtbags and so are the people that support them.

They get free TV, free meals, free religion, free medical.

They have done the most horrible crimes ever and want to be treated like movie stars sorry you are an inmate and prison is not made to be comfortable but humane and the conditions are humane so everyone stop bitching!!!

This is torture plain and simple

Looks like for the first time, there are going to be many questions asked about Arizona prison and what goes on inside including solitary confinement. I have been contacted by numerous reporters to talk about the conditions but so far, the political climate is still wait and see since this ACLU lawsuit will drag out for years.. This is a repeat of the CA lawsuit and some of the same attorneys involved ~ interesting days ahead but one thing is for sure, there are a lot of prisoners dying inside Arizona prisons today and more in the future if this isn't resolved soon.

sick AZ state just sick well done thanks for wiping your but with the dignity of the USA safe to say you flushed the bill of rights down the crapper with good name of our nation's humanity just sick may there be light in the darkness of justice

Well, something should be fixed about this, these guys need to be fed hope or something.

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