

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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At Last, Real Change Is Happening But We Still Have a Long Way to Go. Please Support Our Work Today, and Your Donation Will Be Doubled.

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | December 7, 2018

Dear Readers, Supporters, Colleagues, and Friends:

We started Solitary Watch, nine years ago this month, simply because we felt we had no other choice. Through our reporting on the [case of the Angola 3](#), we had learned about the best-kept secret of the U.S. criminal justice system: In prisons and jails across the country, tens of thousands of men, women, and children were living in concrete boxes for months, years, and decades, in conditions that were driving them to madness and suicide. But media coverage of the practice was nearly non-existent, and most Americans—even those deeply concerned about Guantanamo and other torture sites abroad—had no awareness of the human rights crisis happening in their own backyards.

Once we knew about this hidden world and once we began to receive letters from the forgotten souls who lived there, it no longer felt possible to just look away. The least we could do, as journalists and as human beings, was to shine a light into this world, in the hope that solitary confinement would become a subject of public debate, and the lives of the people who endured it would cease to be invisible.

We honestly had no idea whether our modest endeavor—a homemade website with a staff of two, dedicated to telling the truth about solitary confinement—would have any impact at all.

But the years since our founding have in fact brought widespread change. Mainstream news outlets have embraced the subject of solitary confinement, in turn creating a more conscious and educated public. The ACLU and other major advocacy groups have committed themselves to working against solitary, and grassroots movements have sprung up on both sides of the prison walls. Solitary confinement was denounced by a [President](#), a [Pope](#), and [more than one Supreme Court Justice](#). In a handful of states, lawsuits, legislation, or progressive leadership have yielded meaningful decreases in the use of solitary. This year, Colorado became the first prison system in the nation to effectively [eliminate the use of solitary confinement](#) beyond two weeks, in compliance with the UN's Mandela Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

And this year, perhaps for the first time, we believe we might see the day that solitary confinement has become a thing of the past.

With at least 70,000 people still in solitary in state and federal prisons alone, and thousands more in local jails and immigrant and juvenile facilities, **the road ahead is still long and difficult.** But today, instead of being a lone voice in the wilderness, **Solitary Watch is at the heart of a diverse and dynamic movement.** This past year, we became one of four national organizations behind [Unlock the Box](#), a new national initiative that seeks to end long-term solitary confinement in the next ten years by supporting state and local campaigns across the country. Our first strategic convening of state advocates, held last month, included an inspiring group of solitary survivors, along with families of individuals in solitary, community organizers, attorneys, artists, and others.

Last year, Solitary Watch also launched the [Solitary Confinement Resource Center](#), a searchable collection of more than 3,000 articles, reports, court cases, advocacy tools, and other resources on solitary. In the new year, we will collaborate with Unlock the Box to release our report on **Alternatives to Solitary**, which will provide a detailed roadmap for change, as well as a report on the use of **Solitary Confinement in Louisiana**, where 15 percent of the prison population is held in isolation, and where we are partnering with the ACLU of Louisiana, MacArthur Justice Center, and Loyola University.

In another important new initiative, Solitary Watch will be selecting a group of journalists to receive [Grants for Reporting on Solitary Confinement](#). At the same time, we plan to **expand the impact of our own in-depth advocacy journalism** by partnering with progressive media venues to bring our stories to hundreds of thousands of readers. Among our areas of focus in the new year will be local jails, which operate with even more impunity than state and federal prisons, and which are responsible for hundreds of deaths each year of people with mental illness, from suicide, medical neglect, and brutality—most of them in solitary confinement.

We have never been more busy, more determined, more hopeful, at the same time, more fearful that the momentum toward change, built over so many years, could be lost due to a shortage of resources needed to keep moving ahead. That is why we shared

all of this with you, and why we are asking you, once again, to become part of the change by lending your support to our work.

There has never been a more important time to support Solitary Watch or a better time, either. That is because through the end of the year, your donation will have twice the impact. For the second year in a row, thanks to the NewsMatch program to support independent, nonprofit journalism, **every donation to Solitary Watch will be doubled up to \$1,000, between now and December 31st.**

With your help, we can stay the course, and see an end to the torture of solitary confinement.

[su_button url=https://www.newsmatch.org/organizations/solitary-watch target=blank style=flat background=#2ed992 color=#000000 size=10 center=yes radius=5 icon_color=#000000 class=font-family: Arial !important; font-size: 16px !important; font-weight: bold !important;]Donate Now[/su_button]

With gratitude for your support,

Handwritten signatures of Jean and Jim in cursive script.

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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