

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/01/25/the-gray-box-must-read-article-plus-video-on-solitary-confinement-in-america/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | January 25, 2012

The Dart Society, which supports journalism covering trauma, conflict and human rights, has published an [essential new article](#) and [accompanying video](#) on solitary confinement in U.S. prisons. The story, called The Gray Box, is by Susan Greene, who as a columnist at the *Denver Post* often wrote about the widespread use of solitary in Colorado prisons and at the federal supermax, ADX Florence.

This is one of the most comprehensive articles ever written about solitary confinement in the United States, and is particularly noteworthy for including the voices of prisoners, obtained through correspondence with those buried in isolation. It is also passionate and personal. The opening follows but this piece needs to be [read in full](#).

A few weeks ago, on the fifteenth anniversary of his first day in prison, Osiel Rodriguez set about cleaning the 87 square feet he inhabits at ADX, a federal mass isolation facility in Colorado.

I got it in my head to destroy all my photographs, he writes in a letter to me. I spent some five hours ripping each one to pieces. No one was safe. I did not save one of my mother, father, sisters. Who are those people anyway?

Such is the logic of the gray box, of sitting year after year in solitude.

Whether Rodriguez had psychological problems when he robbed a bank, burglarized a pawn shop and stole some guns at age 22, or whether mental illness set in during the eight years he has spent in seclusion since trying to walk out of a federal penitentiary in Florida is academic. What's true now is that he's sick, literally, of being alone, as are scores of other prisoners in extreme isolation.

Among the misperceptions about solitary confinement is that it's used only on the most violent inmates, and only for a few weeks or months. In fact, an estimated 80,000 Americans many with no record of violence either inside or outside prison are living in seclusion. They stay there for years, even decades. What this means, generally, is 23 hours a day in a cell the size of two queen-sized mattresses, with a single hour in an exercise cage, also alone. Some prisoners aren't allowed visits or phone calls. Some have no TV or radio. Some never lay eyes on each other. And some go years without fresh air or sunlight.

Solitary is a place where the slightest details can mean the world. Things like whether you can see a patch of grass or only sky outside your window if you're lucky enough to have a window. Or whether the guy who occupies cells before you in rotation has a habit of smearing feces on the wall. Are the lights on 24/7? Is there a clock or calendar to mark time? If you scream, could anyone hear you?

In the warp of time and space where Rodriguez lives, the system not only has stripped him of any real human contact, but also made it unbearable to be reminded of a reality that has become all too unreal. It's ripping him apart.

Looking at photos of the free world caused me so much pain that I just couldn't do it any more, writes Rodriguez, 36. Time and these conditions are breaking me down.

This is what our prisons are doing to people in the name of safety. This is how deeply we're burying them.

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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Very touching. It's a shame that the people who run these prisons have crackerjack box degrees. Common people with no education at all, could tell you that this type of isolation does not help the offender nor society. If they are not rehabilitated, they are eventually released in worse condition than they were before they entered prison. Then, innocent people have to pay the price and sometimes face death, because the \$75,000 price we pay for prisoners in solitary confinement did not go towards treatment or rehabilitation.

A lot of their cases should be reopened like the IRS does when conducting an audit, because too many of them have been harshly sentenced by the justice system that had a lunch appointment with a court appointed attorney who needed their break in law. Too many of our family members made mistakes as youths who change as they age and can be rehabilitated and released, but some cannot be released.

Truth is, the DOC makes millions if not billions of dollars off of family members, because we still pay for their medical, dental, commissary and phone bills. We are TOTALLY ripped off, paying \$7 for a twenty minute phone call, yes, the prisons keep them in isolation because they are making money to house them. The love of money is the root of all evil and this country is becoming more evil by the second.

Keep exposing them. I'll be a voice!

@Carl watch this interesting interview which aired this morning on MSNBC Morning Joe program about a new book which warns of the possible misuse of surveillance, and censorship which could form the necessary elements of a modern-day Inquisition.

<http://video.msnbc.msn.com/morning-joe/46162232#null>

Perhaps ~~~ but we must never give up hope for hope is the only driving force for mankind to seek change in the affirmative and combat oppression and torture with the reality that it can be done through unity and support of the media, the public servant and those who care enough to get involved in this change and advocate for better conditions than we have today, whether here or elsewhere in the world.

@Carl yes it is indeed an international issue on the video you hear the concern of a lawyer fighting to prevent extradition to the US for her clients over this issue. As far as seeing light at the end of the tunnel, no I only hear and more importantly see support for further authoritative measures. Listen to the presidential debates when crime is mentioned.

Smarter people than myself see a tightening of the system rather than a losing. Soros believes the OWS crowd will turn violent and the government will respond with more force.

Zbigniew Brezinski also sees possible social unrest over inequality with much the same response from the government. Will they put the leaders of such movements into Communication Management Units? Look at Russia, Syria, Egypt, Israel for clues and the this list keeps growing. Many people no longer feel their leaders protect the common man/woman but rather serve their own interests.

Howard Zinn warned about this in his Peoples History of the United States in the last chapter.

Page 635: In a system of intimidation and control, people do not show how much they know, how deeply they feel, until their practical sense informs them they can do so without being destroyed.

In a highly developed society, the Establishment cannot survive without the obedience and loyalty of millions of people who are given small rewards to keep the system going. These people, the employed, the somewhat privileged are drawn into an alliance with the elite. They become the guards of the system, buffers between the upper and lower classes. If they stop obeying, the system falls.

That will happen, I think, only when all of us who are slightly privileged and slightly uneasy begin to see that we are expendable; that the Establishment, whatever rewards it gives us, will also, if necessary to maintain its control, kill us.

The new conditions make it less and less possible for the guards of the system to remain immune from the violence (physical and psychic) inflicted on the

black, the poor, the criminal, the enemy overseas. The internationalization of the economy, the movement of refugees and illegal immigrants across borders, both make it more difficult for the people of the industrial countries to be oblivious to hunger and disease in poor countries of the world.

Page 636: There is evidence of growing dissatisfaction among the guards. We have known for some time that the poor and ignored were the nonvoters, alienated from political system they felt didnt care about them, and about which they could do little. Now alienation has spread upward into families above the poverty line. These are white workers, neither rich nor poor, but angry over economic insecurity, unhappy with their work, worried about their neighborhoods, hostile to government combining elements of racism with elements of class consciousness, contempt for lower classes along with distrust for the elite, and thus open to solutions from any direction, right or left. We may, in coming years, be in a race for the mobilization of the middle-class discontent. The fact of the discontent is clear. The surveys since the early seventies show 70 to 80 percent of Americans distrustful of government, business, the military. This means the distrust goes beyond blacks, the poor, the radicals. It has spread among skilled workers, white-collar workers, professionals; for the first time in the nations history, perhaps, both the lower classes and the middle classes, the prisoners, and the guards, were disillusioned with the system.

Like I said smarter people than myself. I do not advocate this but fear the disruption it will bring for everyone. But most of all the violent reaction of the system.

I have heard all these words and thoughts before face to face with those in solitary confinement who wish to see the stars in the sky or smell the green grass instead of the gray matter and steel that surrounds them.. Along with the stench of human waste, these human beings are being exposed to elements of mankind that will rot their bones and flesh and ruin any creativity or hope in their minds. Strange how justice works in this country today.

Truly one of the best pieces on Solitary I have ever read.

@Alan can you see the trend both in CA and other states related to solitary confinement? A giant is awakening and I think its more international than most people realize I have been talking to the Amnesty International group in London and their conversations are very enlightening with a detailed report on solitary confinement coming soon. Curious on its content and findings ~~ maybe its the light we have been waiting for along with the works of the ACLU and other support groups addressing and fighting misconduct, torture and abuse in our prisons.

Solitary confinement should be limited to no more than three months. After that, mental deterioration sets in and the chance for success outside the walls goes down. There are better ways to achieve cooperation in a prison, as Maine is finding out. Prisons in Europe banned it long ago. It costs far more than regular prison cells, and is far more destructive.

I stand corrected they read from Silversteins declaration on the video.

Best article yet. Truly a passionate piece. She also wrote a good article on the Silverstein case last year. I am not sure why she didnt include him in this piece since he has been held the longest in isolation within the Federal system.

As long as the courts dont recognize the impairment these gray boxes create within our prison setting, we are beating our heads against the wall The media is the most powerful tool we have to educate the judges, the attorneys and the advocates for better prison management including solitary confinement; but dont expect it to come without a high price your credibility will be attacked and your reputation will be compromised when breaking the code of silence.. I know I have paid a dear price when I opened up my mouth about these lockdown units in Arizona. Now, its coming to the light and more people are speaking out but three years ago, it was taboo to whisper about it ~~~

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