

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/06/21/congress-unlocks-americas-hidden-shame-of-solitary-confinement/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | June 21, 2012

The title of this post is the title of an op-ed by us, published in the *Guardian* on Tuesday. An excerpt follows; click through to the [Guardian site](#) to read the full piece.

Imagine a place filled with closed, windowless cells. Each cell may be so small that you can extend your arms and touch the side walls. It may contain a bunk of poured concrete, a toilet, perhaps a small table and stool. A few personal possessions books, family photos may be permitted, or they may not. The door to the cell is solid steel.

Three times a day, a food tray slides in through a slot in the door; when that happens you may briefly see a hand, or exchange a few words with a guard. It is your only human contact for the day. Five times a week, you are allowed an hour of solitary exercise in a concrete-walled yard about the same size as your cell. The yard is empty, but if you look straight up, you can catch a glimpse of sky.

Imagine that a quarter of the people who live in this place are mentally ill. Some have entered the cells [with underlying psychiatric disabilities](#), while others have been driven mad by the confinement and isolation. Some of them scream in desperation all day and night. Others cut themselves, or smear their cells with faeces. A number manage to commit suicide in their cells.

You may remain in this place for months, years, or even decades. The conditions in which you live have been [denounced as torture by UN officials](#) and by a host of [human rights](#), civil liberties, and religious groups. And yet you remain where you are.

This place is located not in some distant authoritarian nation or secret black site abroad, but here on US soil. In fact, there are places like it in nearly every state in the union, within sight of our own cities and towns. On any given day in the [United States](#), supermax prison and solitary confinement units [hold at least 80,000 men, women, and children in conditions of extreme isolation](#) and sensory deprivation.

Most of them have committed nonviolent offenses against prison rules or have been categorically branded as high risk. A large and disproportionate percentage suffer from serious mental illness. [Some of them are children](#). Condemned to solitary by prison officials, they spend 23 hours a day in their cells without work, rehabilitative programming, or human contact of any kind.

These prisoners live out of sight of the public and the press. Their conditions have, with few exceptions, been condoned by the courts and ignored by elected officials. As a result, over the past three decades, the use and abuse of solitary confinement in US prisons has grown into one of the nations most pressing domestic human rights issues yet it also remains one of the most invisible.

On Tuesday, for the first time, the [US Congress](#) has taken a look at these domestic black sites. The Senate judiciary subcommittee on the constitution, civil rights, and human rights [held a hearing](#) in which corrections officials, lawyers, and mental health experts along with one lone survivor of prison isolation testified to the human rights, fiscal, and public safety consequences of solitary confinement.

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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I hope they stop this nonsense. People with authority must understand that everything can not be controlled.

God Bless us all for finally accepting that our correctional facilities are really not to correct, but to break down a human soul as we did in 1865 (watch the movie SLAVERY BY ANOTHER NAME). America should be an example for the world. We cannot tolerate abuse, set up of human being, not allowing them to shower for 4 days in roaches infested cubes, torture, and so much more. Let's respect our constitution and help those individuals instead of breaking them down. I am willing to volunteer to better the system, but placing cameras in the facilities as you place them for us the voters out here would be nice. Giving community and public relation to the staff will do a lot of good too. Thanks. Silvy

Dear James Ridgeway and colleagues,

Many years ago it was my privilege to hear you speak at SUNY Cortland and have you as a guest in our house to meet with students and faculty. Bravo for staying the course over the years in the struggle for justice.

Sincerely,

John Marciano
Professor Emeritus, SUNY Cortland
Santa Monica, CA

Great piece. Being against torture, I don't see much for solitary in almost any circumstance. Dehumanizing prisoners produces social harm, it doesn't prevent it.

Finally the lies and denial are being exposed, could this be the beginning of the end to long term Solitary Confinement!

This is great news, now we will see where it goes, as everything else. This is a great start.

For the first time, a light flickers in the darkness bringing along with it hope and justice for those in the darkness for so long

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