

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/08/22/washington-post-takes-a-stand-against-the-invisible-brutality-that-is-solitary-confinement/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | August 22, 2011

An [editorial in Sunday's Washington Post](#) decries widespread use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons and jails. This is the second *Post* editorial on the subject (the [first appeared in 2009](#)) and follows close upon a [similar editorial in the New York Times](#). Both of the recent editorials are direct responses to the hunger strike in Pelican Bay and other California state prisons.

The editorial, which appears below, contains a link in its opening line to Solitary Watch's [Fact Sheet on the Pelican Bay hunger strike](#), written by our intern Sal Rodriguez.

Dozens of inmates at California's [Pelican Bay facility went on hunger strikes](#) for several weeks this summer for what seemed like pitifully modest demands: Allow one photo per year. Allow one phone call per week. Allow wall calendars.

What would prompt such drastic measures in the quest for such modest goals? Answer: The protest was an exasperated and understandable reaction to the invisible brutality that is solitary confinement. Some of the Pelican Bay inmates have been held in security housing units for years; those tagged as gang members can expect to stay there for six years, with no certainty that they will be reintegrated into the general population even if they renounce gang membership.

When an inmate is holed up alone in a cell for up to 23 hours a day with no meaningful human contact, a photograph of a loved one or a weekly telephone call can help to forge a connection with the outside world. With little or no exposure to natural light, a calendar can help forestall losing all track of time, all sense of reality. These simple privileges, in short, can help ward off insanity.

California prison officials accepted some of the inmates demands. But the concessions are minor. Elimination of the prolonged use of this tool is the better option.

At any given time, 25,000 to 100,000 inmates are held in solitary confinement throughout the nation. Contrary to popular belief, these inmates are often not the worst of the worst; some are in solitary confinement to separate them from fellow gang members. While in solitary, most are kept from participating in group educational programs or counseling sessions.

Short periods of isolation are unlikely to cause serious or permanent damage. But stays of months or years can trigger psychosis and debilitating depression. Inmates kept in solitary confinement for long periods also display higher levels of hostility than those in the general prison population and tend to carry this hostility with them after they are returned to the prison population at large or released back into the community.

There may be times when segregating an inmate is necessary for the safety of others or to protect the inmate. Keeping an inmate away from the general population may at times be appropriate discipline. Such an approach may be required in extraordinary cases to prevent convicted terrorists or gang leaders from devising plots or communicating with comrades.

But solitary confinement costs roughly twice as much as housing in less restrictive conditions an expense that California and other fiscally challenged states can't afford. Subjecting the average prisoner to the trauma of prolonged solitary confinement is inhumane. It comes perilously close to the lock em up and throw away the key mentality that has been long discredited as a legitimate prison management tool.

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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.

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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thats right yet they all sit on thare asses and still do nothing bout this injustice odd that wich has become of are grate usa how fast it is becomeing justice i allways joked with my frends the day this nashion rases the tribunals simbel as thare flag is the day i run like hell at this rate we are going i fear i may live to see it the day the usa becomes poj i be damed if thats hapening on my wach CA is out of line doing this no one should be put thow the hell that is solitary may thare be light in the darknes of justice

I live in New Mexico. I have a twenty six year old son who has been in solitary confinement in a county jail for 4 1/2 years. The state of New Mexico refuses to believe that my son is mentally ill he weighs 120 lbs on his 6ft 2 inch fame. They say he refuses to eat he doesnt trust the personal at the county jail. He is mentally ill from the confinement. He was placed there after the judge called in to complaint three years ago at 11:30 pm. Today I look at my son I could see his hip bone clear back to his spine. In January of 2011 he was moved to the New Mexico behavioral Center in Las Vegas they think 6 month can fix years of being in solitary. Once he was returned to the county jail the eating stopped he was placed back in solitary the small gains on his mentality that were made were lost. I fear my son will perish alone in a box.

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