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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | January 2, 2010

Some of the best reporting on solitary confinement last year came from Beth Hundsdorfer and George Pawlaczyk at the *Belleville News-Democrat*, a regional paper in southwestern Illinois. Their multi-part series on the state's twelve-year-old supermax prison, [Trapped in Tamms](#), appeared in the paper in August. Their expose was particularly damning on the treatment of mentally ill inmates at Tamms.

In a tribute to the power of good investigative reporting, the series fueled a series of responses, including statements from [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#) and hearings in the Senate Judiciary's [Subcommittee on Human Rights](#), chaired by Illinois Senator Dick Durbin. The following month, the Illinois Department of Corrections issued a [Ten-Point Plan](#) for reforming Tamms. (More information on Tamms, including a critique of the DOC's plan, can be found on the web site of [Tamms Year Ten](#), a grassroots coalition that protests misguided and inhumane conditions at the supermax).

A new story by Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk appeared this week in the *News-Democrat* and in the [Chicago Tribune](#). It focuses on the cost of housing Tamms's 250 high-security prisoners—some \$23 million annually, or \$92,000 per inmate—as well as continuing questions about the supermax's humanity and efficacy.

The annual cost of providing mental health care at Tamms, which critics, such as the New York-based Human Rights Watch, say causes mental illness by imposing years of solitary confinement, is \$1.2 million. Most of that expense goes into operating the Special Treatment Unit, which usually houses fewer than a dozen inmates. The Tamms staff psychiatrist is paid \$288,000 per year.

Five months after a *Belleville News-Democrat* investigative series reported abuses at the supermax, and nearly four months after prison system director Michael Randle announced limited reforms, 48 inmates have been cleared for transfer out of Tamms.

But as Randle struggles to find ways to keep costs down statewide, prison experts and attorneys who handle prison-condition lawsuits question whether Tamms actually works.

Supermax critics challenge the idea that confining 250 or so prisoners, half of 1 percent of the entire state prison-system population, does any good. They argue it is illogical to believe isolating fewer prisoners than are held in many county jails can have any real effect on reducing violence in a large, highly transient prison system.

The way Tamms officials handle inmates sent to the lockup, especially mentally ill prisoners, by locking them in solitary with little or no social contact, is far different than the policy at what is arguably the largest lockup in the United States: the 10,000-prisoner Cook County Jail.

The newspapers' Tamms series reported that mentally ill inmates reacted to being held for as long as more than a decade in solitary by mutilating themselves to the point of needing hospitalization, and by throwing feces and urine at guards and smearing bodily wastes on themselves.

Randle repeatedly said Tamms is reserved for the worst of the worst, although the newspapers' findings challenged that assumption. The series reported that more than half of Tamms inmates had committed no crimes inside prison and that others were seriously mentally ill and did not receive treatment.

Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart said during a November interview that about 250 mentally ill prisoners, including 50 who are seriously mentally ill, are treated in a special unit at the sprawling jail. There is no Hannibal Lecter treatment, he said. The jail isolates only actively psychotic inmates and even then, only for a few hours or a few days at a time. All but a few mentally ill Cook County inmates are out of their cells all day and mingle with other prisoners and staff.

As for long-term solitary confinement, Dart said, "That stuff doesn't really work."

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.

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