

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/01/19/inside-the-american-supermax/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | January 19, 2011

An [article by Sharon Shalev](#) in the latest issue of the UK's *New Humanist* magazine, provides one of the best descriptions we've seen of the contours of daily life inside an American supermax prison. Shalev, a fellow at the London School of Economics, is author of the book [Supermax: Controlling Risk Through Solitary Confinement](#) and of a [Sourcebook on Solitary Confinement](#). Her piece begins by describing a visit to a supermax:

To enter you must pass through several gates and a highly sensitive metal detector. Once you finally get to the windowless, bunker-like prison building you need to walk through seemingly endless CCTV-monitored corridors and numerous electronically controlled gates each gate needs to lock behind you before the next one opens before you even make it to the cell-block. You are then made to wear a protective vest and eye goggles, warned not to get too close to the cell gates and reminded that the prisoners confined there are extremely dangerous individuals.

The appearance of the prison, security arrangements, stories of extreme violence and the accompanying props (goggles, protective vest, and combat uniforms worn by guards) immediately place a barrier, physical as well as psychological, between yourself and the prisoners confined behind the thick metal doors.

If visiting a supermax is unpleasant, it's hard to imagine what it must be like to live in one. Prisoners in a typical supermax will spend their days confined alone in a windowless seven-square-foot cell which contains only a concrete slab and a thin mattress for a bed, a small table and stool made of tamperproof materials, and a metal combo unit of a wash basin and an unscreened toilet, located at the cell front within full sight of prison guards.

Prisoners are confined to their cells for 22 and a half to 24 hours a day. They will only leave it for an hour's solitary exercise in a barren concrete yard or for a 15-minute shower on alternate days. Technology and design allow for these two activities to take place with a flick of a switch and without direct staff contact. Food, medication, post and any other provisions will be delivered to them through a hatch in their cell door, with little communication or time-wasting.

The regime of relentless solitary confinement and tight prisoner control in a typical supermax is made possible by prison architects. Without their professional knowledge and careful calculation and assessment of every design detail, it would not have been possible to hold hundreds of prisoners in complete isolation from each other within a single, relatively small, building for prolonged periods.

And it is this extreme functionality, calculated to design out human contact and enable maximum prisoner isolation and control, that makes supermax prisons so chilling. As one senior supermax officer put it, Do we have an obligation to take care of them? Yes. But do I have an obligation to provide him touching, feeling contact with another human being? I would say no. He has earned his way to [supermax] and he's earned just the opposite. He's earned the need for me to keep him apart from other people.

The article, which deserves to be [read in full](#), goes on to describe the control of every aspect of prisoners' daily lives, and to challenge the reasoning behind the creation and growth of supermax confinement. Such conditions, she argues, can only serve to dehumanise and debase prisoners, and cannot be said to be founded in necessary or legitimate security considerations. Supermax prisons are a highly excessive administrative response to exaggerated perceptions of dangerousness. They are about power, retribution and reinforcing perceptions of the dangerous other.

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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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Let one of these killers murder a member of your family then your concern for their daily life and welfare statements will mean something.

Be sane. Be kind. Execute.

@nickg: I did a survey in 1970 of Lifers in Walpole and Norfolk prisons. I was a prisoner myself; it was for a school project, ninety-nine percent of the guys helped me and participated. I cannot now remember the exact percentage; however, I was shocked for it was over ninety-five percent, that would have preferred the death penalty to their life sentence. They had a Lifers group in Walpole and in Norfolk I understand this today, at that time I did not

Your post is sane, and kind. Liberals are monsters.

they would be better off dead its more humane

Right. Life in prison is a life of torture. Execution is the more humane as you say.

It is my understanding that a prisoner in a supermax style prison has been placed there because of continued difficulties in less restrictive prisons. I have also read that in many supermax prisons, prisoners can earn their way to less restrictive levels with good behavior. This system of rewards for good behavior can help move a prisoner out of solitary confinement. However, there are some individuals that, because of their crimes, are not eligible for rewards.

It is better to execute. It is more kind to execute.

Eddie Griffin's portrait of Marion is also very chilling. This short, well written piece is from the inmates perspective thus especially worth reading. If you take the time to read it your jaw will drop in disbelief as he explains the cold calculated torture of Marion's inmates. Some will say they deserve all of this and more but most will say I just had no idea!

http://www.jpp.org/documents/forms/JPP4_2/Griffin.pdf

OK let me start this off by saying ESP is not the berth of supermaxes but of TRYING TO HELP INMATES BE GOOD ONES MORE now it is actraza or marion IL that is the fierst supermax BLAME THE BOP for supermax prisons now as for this day and age ANYONE WHO KNOWINGLY BUILD A PRISON FOR SOLITARY NEEDS TO live in it for a year tell me well if i knowen intets of the bop i would not build them a supermax i would be pained with the knowing of what my hands and my crashion are doing the others MY BLAME IS NOT ESP BUT THE FBOP may thare be light in the darknes of justice

I HAVE BEEN TOLD BY OFFICIALS AT THE ARIZONA STATE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS THAT WE DO NO KEEP PRISONERS IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT. I GUESS THE ONE HOUR A DAY THAT AN INMATE GETS TO GO TO THE PEN IS HOW THEY CAN JUSTIFY THEIR STATEMENT WHICH I BELIEVE TO BE FALSE. OUR PRISONS WERE USED TO MODEL EVEN PELICAN BAY AFTER. I ALSO KNOW THIS IS THE WAY WE ARE HOUSING MANY OF OUR MENTALLY ILL, IN SUPERMAX. BY THE WAY, I WAS TOLD THAT SUPERMAX DID NOT EXIST IN ARIZONA EITHER. I GUESS WITH NO TRANSPARENCY OR ACCOUNTABILITY THEY THINK WE WILL BELIEVE ANYTHING.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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