

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/03/05/maines-solitary-confinement-bill-another-test-of-our-tolerance-for-torture/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | March 5, 2010

For those of us who believe that long-term solitary confinement is cruel and unusual punishment and often qualifies as torture, what happens in the Maine State Legislature in the coming weeks matters just about as much as what happens in the U.S. Justice Department concerning the torture that took place the Bush Administration.

So while everyone seems to be talking about the fallout from the [OPR report](#), we have our eye on the hearings and legislative arguments being carried out in Augusta on [LD 1611](#). If passed, this bill would require safeguard on prisoners placed in isolation including 45-day limits, with period reviews and psych evaluations and ban the use of solitary confinement for inmates with serious mental illness. [As of today](#), the bill appears to be struggling to survive, and make its way out of committee.

One of the most powerful pieces on the subject has been a [guest column published last week in the Bangor Daily News](#), by two psychiatrists with expertise on the psychological effects of solitary confinement. They believe that the groundbreaking legislation in Maine could not only end a great deal of suffering, but also go a long way to correct a historic wrong turn in corrections. Doctors Terry A. Kupers and David Moltz write:

Back in the 1980s, explosive growth of the prison population combined with the closure and institutionalization of public mental hospitals resulted in massive overcrowding in the prisons and a large proportion of prisoners suffering from serious mental illness. Prison rehabilitation programs had also been drastically cut back.

There was good research showing that crowding and idleness result in sharp rises in the rates of violence, psychiatric breakdown and suicide in prisons. But instead of alleviating the crowding, re-instituting rehabilitation and finding somewhere that individuals suffering from mental illness could receive needed treatment, authorities took a wrong turn and reacted to the rising violence by locking down prisoners they castigated as the worst of the worst in their solitary cells. Recent research suggests that this kind of isolation fails to reduce violence in the prisons. But there are some harmful effects.

In solitary confinement, the prisoner is isolated from others in a cell nearly 24 hours per day. In Maine, the cell doors are solid metal, so the prisoner has to shout merely to be heard by staff or residents of adjacent cells. The prisoner eats meals alone in his cell and remains almost entirely idle with no programs to permit him to increase socially desirable skills. This is not the hole of yesteryear. Lights are on around the clock and the doors open by remote control. The isolation and idleness are near total. Staff pass by the cells and slide food trays through slots in the door, but meaningful communication rarely occurs.

It is stunning how pervasive a known set of serious symptoms in this population are, including massive free-floating anxiety, incessant cleaning or pacing in the cell, paranoid ideas, sleep disturbances, problems concentrating and remembering many prisoners said they have given up reading altogether because they cannot remember what they read a few pages back and mounting anger, along with fear the anger will get out of control and they will get into further trouble.

The isolation and idleness that cause psychiatric symptoms in relatively healthy prisoners cause psychotic breakdowns, severe affective disorders and suicide crises in prisoners with histories of serious mental illness. Stunningly, one half of successful prison suicides today occur among the 3 percent to 10 percent of prisoners in solitary confinement at any time.

The historic wrong turn of 80s penology must be remedied with a reduction of prison crowding (sentencing reform is critical here), enhanced rehabilitation programs to help prisoners succeed at going straight after they are released and an end to long-term solitary confinement. But meanwhile, the pending legislation in Maine begins the process of ending inhumane and psychiatrically devastating prison conditions.

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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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Sandileeb no one is forcing your husband to work as a guard. For every attack on a guard there are scores of rapes, assaults and murders of inmates some of which are even carried out by the guards themselves or with their full knowledge and blessings. Yes the guards are not all innocent of such things as numerous articles have pointed out. With 1% of the nations population in prison or 1 in 32 under some control of the system something has gone wrong. Such as the war on drug and the 3 strikes = a life sentence law regardless of how petty the crimes. Over the recent years our nation has been condemned by such organizations as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and others for these practices. Remember almost all of these inmates will get out one day so do we really want to mistreat them and drive them crazy first. Hopefully you or someone you know will not run into one on the street that has lost is ability to feel compassion for others by his experiences while incarcerated. But surely someone will with 10s of thousands of inmates being released due to over crowding with no job skills, or transitional programs to help them get established. Then we will regret not having provided rehabilitation programs but it will be too late. Lastly as the article points out isolation has not lower the risk to your husband but has only increased it as these inmates grow deranged, angry and fantasize of ways to inflict harm on these guards overseeing them in these SHUs.

From a wife of a man that works in a prison maybe these people should think before they break the laws that put them there. Let me ask this question the people that attempt to change these laws, would they be doing it if there husband, wife, sons or daughters were working in the prison. When people from Augusta who make these law visit the prisons the prisoners are aware of it and they are on their best behavior so you feel sympathy for them. Our family members risk their lives everyday when they go to work. When you have one guard in a pod with an average of 56 prisoners tell me they are not risking there lives everyday. If you do not like the way things are in prison there is an easy answer dont break the law!!!!

As a man that spent 80+ days in SC out of 114 days, as I should have NEVER been there as LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES misapply the statutes, laws & code for profit everyday. Frankly as a older fish it was better to be isolated & away from the general population I felt more secure! Note I was in county jail.

The main issue as I see it is We the People have NO IDEA what is going on in the legal system so we are easily abused & taken advantage by EVILDOERS, JOINT TORT FEASORS, aka STATE BAR UNION MEMBERS for their pleasure, profit & gain.

THE UNITED STATES has failed. Since 2.5M people are incarcerated & many more are on PROBATION this means that approx. 100M people are (e)affected by this EVIL INJUSTICE SYSTEM which is the BEST worthless FRNS (legal tender NOT lawful money) can buy.

I can go on & on one more thing learn legalese so you can defend yourself.
Did you know the word person means CORPORATION, LEGAL FICTION, et.al.?
Do you know the significance of this? Are you a man or a person?

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