

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2015/01/07/for-solitary-confinement-in-u-s-prisons-a-year-of-incremental-reform/>

Campaign and Advocacy

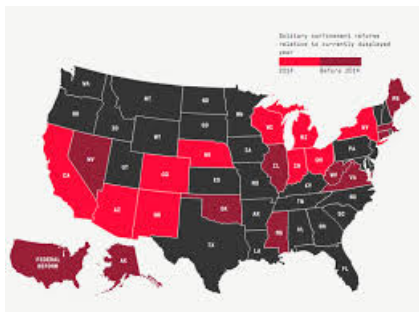
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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | January 7, 2015



As the year ended, The Marshall Project provided a [comprehensive roundup](#) of reforms to solitary confinement practices across the country. Eli Hager and Gerald Rich write: In 2014 one of the most controversial practices in criminal justice, solitary confinement, faced unprecedented challenges. As a result of legislation or lawsuits, ten states adopted 14 measures aimed at curtailing the use of solitary, abolishing solitary for juveniles or the mentally ill, improving conditions in segregated units, or gradually easing isolated inmates back into the general population. The article goes on to describe each of the measures adopted in 2014, and in several previous years.

Reform is not synonymous with abolition, and the forms it takes are almost always incremental. These changes have, or will, improve the day-to-day lives of perhaps several thousand individuals who have been suffering in solitary. The reforms stand as a tribute to the thousands of activists and advocates including many currently or formerly held in solitary confinement themselves who have worked to bring this domestic human rights crisis to the attention of the nation after it had languished in the shadows for decades.

Still, it's worth noting that this Shifting Away from Solitary has not been a seismic shift, and to date has affected only a small number of the more than 80,000 individuals who, according to the best available data, are in isolation in the nation's prisons any given day.

For example, in California which is second only to the federal prison system in the use of solitary confinement about [6,000 people](#) are in solitary confinement, with thousands more locked down in double cells. Of these, 400 have qualified for a pilot program to transition them back to the general prison population, and 150 have actually made the transition.

In many other states, the focus has been on children under the age of 18 in adult prisons, or people with mental illness. These are both highly vulnerable groups, and the latter is in many states quite a large group as well, and their removal from solitary is significant. It also demands some scrutiny, since many are being moved to new special units with problems of their own.

All such reforms also risk dividing the incarcerated into [two groups](#) those who deserve to be in solitary confinement, and those who do not. For advocates who believe that solitary is a form of torture, and therefore not acceptable for anyone, the road ahead remains a long one. So, too, for opponents who object to solitary as a sentence within a sentence, handed down by prison officials without due process of law since these same prison officials are usually involved in initiating, negotiating, or formulating the reforms.

Despite such reservations, there is ample change to fortify enemies of solitary for the struggle ahead. For decades, the use of solitary confinement grew with a virtually complete absence of attention from the media, policymakers, and even major activist groups. It depended upon its own invisibility to sustain itself. To penetrate the walls of secrecy and ignorance surrounding solitary confinement is only a first step but it is one that can never be undone.

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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