

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/02/21/aclu-urges-un-to-take-action-on-solitary-confinement-in-the-united-states/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | February 21, 2011

The American Civil Liberties Union last week filed a [statement](#) with the United Nations Human Rights Council, urging it to address the widespread violations of the human rights of prisoners in the United States associated with solitary confinement and call for the adoption of appropriate measures to protect their human rights. The ACLU calls on the Council to urge the United States to take concrete and appropriate measures to end the egregious violations stemming from solitary confinement of prisoners.

After providing background on the widespread use of solitary confinement in the United States today, the statement includes a concise and well-documented section titled Harmful Effects of Solitary Confinement. (See the original for citation of sources):

There is a broad consensus among mental health experts that long-term solitary confinement is psychologically harmful. Indeed, the damaging effects of solitary confinement, even on persons with no prior history of mental illness, have long been well known. Over a century ago, the United States Supreme Court described the effect of solitary confinement as practiced in the nation's early days:

A considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi-fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others became violently insane; others still, committed suicide; while those who stood the ordeal better were generally not reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community.

In 2002, a California prison psychiatrist told Human Rights Watch: Its a standard psychiatric concept, if you put people in isolation, they will go insane. . . . Most people in isolation will fall apart.

Prisoners exhibit a variety of negative physiological and psychological reactions to solitary confinement, including: (1) hypersensitivity to external stimuli; (2) perceptual distortions and hallucinations; (3) increased anxiety and nervousness; (4) revenge fantasies, rage, and irrational anger; (5) fears of persecution; (6) lack of impulse control; (7) claustrophobia; (8) severe and chronic depression; (9) appetite loss and weight loss; (10) heart palpitations; (11) withdrawal; (12) blunting of affect and apathy; (13) talking to oneself; (14) headaches; (15) problems sleeping; (16) confusing thought processes; (17) nightmares; (18) dizziness; (19) self-mutilation; and (20) lower levels of brain function, including a decline in EEG activity. EEG changes were observed after only seven days of solitary confinement. In a 2005 submission to the United States Supreme Court, a group of psychologists and psychiatrists concluded that no study of the effects of solitary or supermax-like confinement that lasted longer than 60 days failed to find evidence of negative psychological effects.

The statement, which should be read in full, also contains sections on Solitary Confinement and the Mentally Ill and Solitary Confinement and Physical Abuse. It ends by laying out a set of principles for limiting and monitoring the use of solitary confinement, and asks the HRC to call on the United States to adopt policies and practices for the use of solitary confinement consistent with the following principles:

Read the full statement here: [ACLU statement on solitary confinement to UN Human Rights Council](#)

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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

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September 29, 2022

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Good article on the effects of solitary confinement.

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