

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/10/02/unlock-the-box-the-fight-against-solitary-confinement-in-new-york/>

## Campaign and Advocacy

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | October 2, 2012

An important new report on solitary confinement was released today by the New York Civil Liberties Union, titled [Boxed In: The True Cost of Extreme Isolation in New York's Prisons](#). Based on a year of research, correspondence with more than a hundred prisoners, and multiple open records requests, this report offers a detailed and powerful picture of how solitary confinement is used and abused in New York; it is a must-read for anyone concerned with this issue. A new [Boxed In website](#) also features video and documents, and a [listing of events](#) happening in New York City this week (including a Town Hall meeting in Harlem with elected official, advocates, and survivors of solitary, moderated by SWs Jean Casella).

To mark the release of the report we published an article today on the [website of The Nation](#), which discusses not only *Boxed In*, but also the rise of activism around solitary confinement in New York on both the state and city levels. Some excerpts from the article appear below.

On the first chilly morning in September, several dozen demonstrators [gathered](#) in front of a limestone skyscraper on Chambers Street in Lower Manhattan. Some wore orange jumpsuits, and two of them held a broad banner with the hand-painted words, Solitary Is Torture.

The subject of the protest was the abuse of prisoners not at Guantanamo, Bagram, or some distant black site, but on Rikers Island, less than ten miles away. The protesters, members of a new advocacy group called the New York City Jails Action Coalition (JAC), argue that conditions there particularly solitary confinement constitute [torture](#) in their own backyard. The target of the protest was the New York City Board of Correction, which oversees conditions for the 13,000-odd men, women, and children who inhabit New York City's jails on a given day, and whose monthly meeting was taking place inside.

According to the City's own figures, the number of isolation cells at Rikers has risen to more than 1,000 and is still growing. The JAC also points to the existence of special solitary confinement units on Rikers Island, designed to hold teenagers and people with mental illness.

This type of treatment is cruel and inhumane to any human being, especially growing adolescents, said Lisa Ortega, mother of a 18-year-old with psychiatric disabilities who was placed in 23-hour-a-day solitary confinement on Rikers for weeks at a time, amounting to several months, when he was 16. The damage done is irreversible.

Until recently, it seemed like New York's penchant for solitary confinement might be irreversible too. But a growing number of activists are working to combat the overuse of solitary in both the city's jails and the state's prisons. (New York City and New York State isolate their prisoners at the rate of about 10 percent and 8 percent, but clonazepam uk respectively both rates more than double the national average.)

In addition to JAC, which focuses on city jails, an informal coalition of prisoners rights groups and civil liberties organizations has formed to fight for change at the state level. Critical to both efforts are that they involve directly affected individuals, survivors of solitary and their families. And both draw on the work of an older organization, Mental Health Alternatives to Solitary Confinement, which has led a ten-year campaign to limit the use of solitary confinement on people with mental illness.

Today the New York Civil Liberties Union released a report that provides New Yorkers with more information than ever about solitary in their state and which should provide a powerful boost to current organizing efforts. Titled *Boxed In: The True Cost of New York's Dependence on Isolation*, it documents the use of extreme isolation as punishment on an unprecedented scale and for extraordinary lengths of time.

Nearly 4,500 New York State prisoners live in extreme isolation at any given time, on 23-hour lockdown in the small, barren cells that most refer to as the Box, either alone or with one other person. The report calls it a world of unrelenting monotony, marked by isolation and idleness, where all extrinsic purpose and structure slowly unravels. Confined to this world for months, years, and even decades, many of the men in Special Housing Units (SHUs, New York's label for solitary confinement) unravel as well. Prisoners are locked down on the say-so of corrections officials, with little semblance of due process.

The SHU sweeps in a wide swath of prisoners, the report states, including those uniquely vulnerable to conditions of extreme isolation,

such as juveniles, the elderly, and people with mental illness or substance abuse issues. This same discretion permits bias to corrupt the disciplinary process, assuggested by the disproportionate number of black prisoners in the SHU.

According to the report, DOCCS characterizes prisoners in extreme isolation as disruptive, dangerous or violent, whose isolated confinement prevents their assaulting inmates, attacking staff or endangering prison operations.' But in fact, a majority land in the SHU and even in the states two supermax prisons, where all prisoners are on lockdown for nonviolent offenses like disobeying an order or testing positive for drugs. And 2,000 of them are released every year directly from the box to the streets with no extra support services to help them readjust. For these reasons, the central finding of *Boxed In* is that New York's use of extreme isolation is arbitrary, inhumane and unsafe.

Read the rest of the article [here](#).

For our earlier reporting in *The Nation* on solitary in New York, see our article [New Yorks Black Sites](#).

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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P.O. Box 11374  
Washington, DC 20008

[info@solitarywatch.org](mailto:info@solitarywatch.org)

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