

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/11/07/controversial-colorado-study-shows-prisoners-improve-in-solitary-confinement/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | November 7, 2010

When we [visited Colorado recently](#), prisoner advocates were awaiting the results of a year-long, federally funded study on how solitary confinement affects mental health. The study was conducted in the Colorado State Penitentiary, a supermax prison where all 700+ inmates live in long-term isolation. CSP, which is located outside prison-laden Caon City, was the subject of a recent National Geographic documentary on solitary, as well as an earlier Frontline special on children in adult prisons. (Clips from both can be found in our video feed, in the sidebar of this site.)

Information from a leaked early copy of the study report had [already outraged](#) prison reformers, since it seemed to say solitary confinement had no detrimental psychological effects. The [final report](#), released a week ago, goes even further, claiming that in many cases solitary was good for prisoners' mental health. Today, the *Denver Posts* Susan Greene, who writes frequently about prison issues, provided an [excellent summary of the controversy](#) surrounding the study's findings.

A controversial study by Colorado's Corrections Department claims to debunk the widely held theory that solitary confinement harms prisoners.

Findings seem to show not just a lack of deterioration in mental health after long periods with virtually no human contact, but also, incredibly, some slight improvement.

The report is being ripped for its methodology. Detractors fear it will prompt Colorado and other states to warehouse more inmates in prolonged isolation.

Its garbage in, garbage out, says Stuart Grassian, the psychiatrist internationally recognized for describing the crippling effects of solitary confinement. Their approach is fatally flawed.

Others including some notable critics of isolation defend the study.

I was certainly surprised by its findings. We all were. But this is a serious piece of research, says Jamie Fellner, a top lawyer with Human Rights Watch who serves on the state's advisory board.

State Corrections chief researcher Maureen O'Keefe has said her office launched the project largely because her department was concerned about being sued for civil-rights violations. Colorado houses 6.2 percent of its prisoners in so-called administrative segregation, far more than the national average.

The state snagged federal funding to spend a year researching the psychological effects of keeping human beings locked up 23 hours a day with almost no social interaction, their food pushed through slots in their doors. The 24th hour is for exercise and showers, also alone.

The expectation was that prisoners would get worse.

Instead, the report claims to show the opposite effect: a slight improvement in psychological well-being across all study groups. It doesn't discount emotional distress, yet concludes that solitary confinement didn't cause it.

Critics deride researchers for starting mainly with inmates experiencing mental health crises at the beginning of their study. In other words, they say, their base line was slanted.

Detractors question the truthfulness of inmates' responses. If you're trying to earn your way out of isolation, the argument goes, you wouldn't admit mental health problems.

Critics also cite the so-called Hawthorne Effect: the phenomenon of modifying behavior simply by being studied. In this case, researchers have dubbed it the Alysha Effect after the attractive grad student sent to interview the lonely inmates. Two participants were

thrown out of the study because they made sexual advances.

In any study, there's always plausible alternative explanations, says O'Keefe, who has referred to the study as her baby.

Colorado relies too heavily on prisons as its mental health safety net. Isolation costs far more than general prison housing. The Corrections Department recently got \$9.37 million to open 316 new solitary cells.

It's unlikely that Colorado prison officials wanted their study to show that their current practices are extremely damaging, says David Fathi, director of the ACLU's National Prison Project.

The fact that it's not driving every healthy person nuts doesn't mean it's a good thing, adds Fellner from Human Rights Watch.

Grassian is seeking to discredit the report among mental health experts and with the National Institute of Justice.

We need to realize that 95 percent of these inmates will eventually be released back onto the streets, he says. Housing them in these conditions ensures that when they do leave they'll be as violent and as out of control as we could possibly have made them.

In a recent documentary, even Colorado State Penitentiary Warden Susan Jones questioned how history will judge Colorado's experiment in human isolation:

Twenty, thirty, fifty years from now, they may be looking back at us and saying that wasn't a great answer, a great response, we should have known better.

Although the study's intentions and methodology are being sharply criticized and although there are several compelling studies that came to the opposite conclusion, the Colorado report will no doubt be quoted by defenders of solitary confinement for years or decades to come.

We couldn't find the full report anywhere on the web (though it was funded by our federal tax dollars and yours), so we are posting it here. (If you tried to download it earlier and failed, try again; this is a new and improved link.)

[Colorado Administrative Segregation Report Final](#)



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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I feel the answer to how this could happen is contained in this excerpt from

Death Of The Liberal Class

By Chris Hedges

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=131166027&ps=cprs>

In a traditional democracy, the liberal class functions as a safety valve. It makes piecemeal and incremental reform possible. It offers hope for change and proposes gradual steps toward greater equality. It endows the state and the mechanisms of power with virtue. It also

serves as an attack dog that discredits radical social movements, making the liberal class a useful component within the power elite.

But the assault by the corporate state on the democratic state has claimed the liberal class as one of its victims. Corporate power forgot that the liberal class, when it functions, gives legitimacy to the power elite. And reducing the liberal class to courtiers or mandarins, who have nothing to offer but empty rhetoric, shuts off this safety valve and forces discontent to find other outlets that often end in violence. The inability of the liberal class to acknowledge that corporations have wrested power from the hands of citizens, that the Constitution and its guarantees of personal liberty have become irrelevant, and that the phrase consent of the governed is meaningless, has left it speaking and acting in ways that no longer correspond to reality. It has lent its voice to hollow acts of political theater, and the pretense that democratic debate and choice continue to exist.

The liberal class refuses to recognize the obvious because it does not want to lose its comfortable and often well-paid perch. Churches and universities in elite schools such as Princeton, professors can earn \$180,000 a year enjoy tax-exempt status as long as they refrain from overt political critiques. Labor leaders make lavish salaries and are considered junior partners within corporate capitalism as long as they do not speak in the language of class struggle. Politicians, like generals, are loyal to the demands of the corporate state in power and retire to become millionaires as lobbyists or corporate managers. Artists who use their talents to foster the myths and illusions that bombard our society live comfortably in the Hollywood Hills.

The media, the church, the university, the Democratic Party, the arts, and labor unions the pillars of the liberal class have been bought off with corporate money and promises of scraps tossed to them by the narrow circles of power. Journalists, who prize access to the powerful more than they prize truth, report lies and propaganda to propel us into a war in Iraq. Many of these same journalists assured us it was prudent to entrust our life savings to a financial system run by speculators and thieves. Those life savings were gutted. The media, catering to corporate advertisers and sponsors, at the same time renders invisible whole sections of the population whose misery, poverty, and grievances should be the principle focus of journalism.

In the name of tolerance a word the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., never used the liberal church and the synagogue refuse to denounce Christian heretics who acculturate the Christian religion with the worst aspects of consumerism, nationalism, greed, imperial hubris, violence, and bigotry. These institutions accept globalization and unfettered capitalism as natural law. Liberal religious institutions, which should concern themselves with justice, embrace a cloying personal piety expressed in a how-is-it-with-me kind of spirituality and small, self-righteous acts of publicly conspicuous charity. Years spent in seminary or rabbinical schools, years devoted to the study of ethics, justice, and morality, prove useless when it comes time to stand up to corporate forces that usurp religious and moral language for financial and political gain.

Universities no longer train students to think critically, to examine and critique systems of power and cultural and political assumptions, to ask the broad questions of meaning and morality once sustained by the humanities. These institutions have transformed themselves into vocational schools. They have become breeding grounds for systems managers trained to serve the corporate state. In a Faustian bargain with corporate power, many of these universities have swelled their endowments and the budgets of many of their departments with billions in corporate and government dollars. College presidents, paid enormous salaries as if they were the heads of corporations, are judged almost solely on their ability to raise money. In return, these universities, like the media and religious institutions, not only remain silent about corporate power but also condemn as political all within their walls who question corporate malfeasance and the excesses of unfettered capitalism.

Unions, organizations formerly steeped in the doctrine of class struggle and filled with members who sought broad social and political rights for the working class, have been transformed into domesticated negotiators with the capitalist class. Cars rolling off the Ford plants in Michigan were said to be made by UAW Ford. But where unions still exist, they have been reduced to simple bartering tools, if that. The social demands of unions in the early twentieth century that gave the working class weekends off, the right to strike, the eight-hour workday, and Social Security, have been abandoned. Universities, especially in political science and economics departments, parrot the discredited ideology of unregulated capitalism and have no new ideas. The arts, just as hungry as the media or the academy for corporate money and sponsorship, refuse to address the social and economic disparities that create suffering for tens of millions of citizens. Commercial artists peddle the mythical narrative, one propagated by corporations, self-help gurus, Oprah and the Christian Right, that if we dig deep enough within ourselves, focus on happiness, find our inner strength, or believe in miracles, we can have everything we desire.

Such magical thinking, a staple of the entertainment industry, blinds citizens to corporate structures that have made it impossible for families to lift themselves out of poverty or live with dignity. But perhaps the worst offender within the liberal class is the Democratic Party.

The party consciously sold out the working class for corporate money. Bill Clinton, who argued that labor had nowhere else to go, in 1994 passed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which betrayed the working class. He went on to destroy welfare and in 1999 ripped down the firewalls between commercial and investment banks to turn the banking system over to speculators. Barack Obama, who raised more than \$600 million to run for president, most of it from corporations, has served corporate interests as assiduously as his party. He has continued the looting of the U.S. Treasury by corporations, refused to help the millions of Americans who have lost their homes because of bank repossessions or foreclosures, and has failed to address the misery of our permanent class of unemployed.

Populations will endure the repression of tyrants, as long as these rulers continue to manage and wield power effectively. But human history has demonstrated that once those in positions of power become redundant and impotent, yet insist on retaining the trappings and privileges of power, their subject populations will brutally discard them.

Such a fate awaits the liberal class, which insists on clinging to its positions of privilege while at the same time refusing to play its traditional role within the democratic state. The liberal class has become a useless and despised appendage of corporate power. And as corporate power pollutes and poisons the ecosystem and propels us into a world where there will be only masters and serfs, the liberal class, which serves no purpose in the new configuration, is being abandoned and discarded. The death of the liberal class means there is no check to a corporate apparatus designed to enrich a tiny elite and plunder the nation. An ineffectual liberal class means there is no

hope, however remote, of a correction or a reversal. It ensures that the frustration and anger among the working and middle classes will find expression outside the confines of democratic institutions and the civilities of a liberal democracy.

i read the report today biggest load of crap i have ever read in my life i mean the countrys leading expert comes to them and they may have well given him the finger by saying shu sindrum dose not happen you know how i know thats bull shit i was not even in prison and i got parts of shu sindrum from it onlything is schools call it suclushion same dam thing in the end and i love to see them tell me it dose not happen after what it did to me thanks a lot but i know grassian is telling the hole trueth and nuthing but that i be willing to state that on record if CO state would like to who ever did this bull shit study plesse if you think solitary so good for you plesse feel free to do a year in the shu your selfs note to those in CO state correshions time to get your head out of your asshole go any more up it the jaws of life will not get your head out who knows maby you find the BOP up thare to things to tell your kids are bad drugs crime govement in some cases smoking drinking guns and moest of all SOLITARY CONFINDMENT!

The whole idea is to talk directly to inmates to shed light on the dark side of sexual violence.

Well, book *The Church Of The Second Chance, A Faith-Based Approach to Prison Reform*, by Jens Soering, Lantern Books 2008, is written by VA inmate. By keeping an offender in absolute solitude and silence, the Quakers hoped to bring him to repentance. (p 60) And within short a Faith-Based Incarceration Nation believes inmates live in celibacy upon splendid islands run by moneymakers.

It appears you get what you pay for. If you want a certain outcome pay someone willing to give it to you. Take this recent example. My own comments are in ()

<http://californiawatch.org/watchblog/prison-officials-dispute-study-sexual-violence-behind-bars-4723>

State prison officials are disputing findings from a new federal study that identified two California prisons as having some of the highest rates of sexual violence in the nation.

The report gave the California Medical Facility a prevalence rate of 5.8 percent and Pleasant Valley State Prison a rate of 5.5 percent. The national rate for adult male inmates was 1.9 percent.

The Pleasant Valley facility had 5,097 inmates at the time of the survey, and the California Medical Facility had 3,067 inmates.

(That is  $296 + 169 = 465$  inmate victims.)

Our position here is that it (the report) didnt accurately reflect the true numbers, said Debra Herndon, an associate director at the CDOC&R.

Herndon pointed to the departments analysis of its own data, which found a total of 13 incidents of sexual violence in the two facilities during 2008 and 2009.

(13 vs 465 someone is really off the mark.)

Taking a look at all our numbers, I think were doing a pretty good job, she said, citing Californias early adoption of legislation aimed at ending sexual violence behind bars. We have a zero-tolerance approach.

But some experts were puzzled by the states apparent use of official data to challenge findings from the Bureau of Justice Statistics report, which relied on an extensive confidential survey of inmates.

It is widely accepted that official reports of sexual violence in prison do not reflect the reality of how many assaults are occurring, said Linda McFarlane, deputy executive director of Just Detention International, a human rights group that is developing pilot programs in three California prisons. Sexual violence is one of the most under-reported crimes in society. Barriers for reporting are even greater in prison.

Allen Beck, lead author of the Bureau of Justice Statistics study, said the data showed remarkable consistency among survey responses and the findings closely cohered with an earlier federal report on sexual violence in Americas prisons.

You dont have to take this data as the gold standard of truth, but you should take it seriously to look more closely at what is happening in some of these facilities, he said.

The whole idea is to talk directly to inmates to shed light on the dark side of sexual violence.

ok if solitary is good for you then 911 must have ben good for us to  
and we all know thats not true grassian knows what he is saying he is true to his word CO state is blowing it out thare but tell you what if it is so good for you CO DOCS go be good to yourself and put your self in solitary for a year then tell me what your study ses i love to see that plesse tell the world what are you high on up in those mountins may god let grassian uncover your lies solitary sucks

Solitary Confinement belongs to the very special sort of confinement James Ridgeway named Incarceration Nation. Ive classified in *Prison and the Character of Nations*. However, independent from nation with world wide highest prisoner rate a society must decide about the objectives when fellow citizen commit a felony. Will the community fight back in developing a culture of punishment, happy sentencing, merciless possibly based on emotions and Old Testament, or consider how to heal individual and social deficit.

To me there is no new Research necessary when common sense teach different of humans biographical processes. Theres a recognition that tough-on-crime policies hurt us. If kids are worse off when they return [from detention], then were worse off as a whole. From Executive Summary (Out of the Shadows: GETTING AHEAD OF PRISONER RADICALIZATION under the leadership of The George Washington Universitys Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) and The University of Virginias Critical Incident Analysis Group (CIAG), Prisoner Radicalization Task Force is a new approach in understanding but one corner of the many problems:  
The potential for radicalization of prison inmates in the United States poses a threat of unknown magnitude to the national security of the

U.S. Prisons have long been places where extremist ideology and calls to violence could find a willing ear, and conditions are often conducive to radicalization. With the worlds largest prison population (over 2 million ninety-three percent of whom are in state and local prisons and jails) and highest incarceration rate (701 out of every 100,000), America faces what could be an enormous challenge every radicalized prisoner becomes a potential terrorist recruit. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales recently stated that [t]he threat of homegrown terrorist cells radicalized online, in prisons and in other groups of socially isolated souls may be as dangerous as groups like al Qaeda, if not more so. They certainly present new challenges to detection. The London transit bombings of 2005 and the Toronto terrorist plot of 2006, to name just two incidents, illustrate the threat posed by a states own radicalized citizens. By acting upon international lessons learned, the U.S. may operate from a proactive position. (Cit end)

For kind remembrance: What happens when you put good people in an evil place? Does humanity win over evil, or does evil triumph? These are some of the questions we posed in this dramatic simulation of prison life conducted in the summer of 1971 at Stanford University. (<http://www.prisonexp.org/>) Indications of an ongoing inhuman brutalizing process: LWP of Juveniles, The Hole, Board members denied 81-year-old woman sat in a wheelchair release from her prison (By LARRY WELBORN, Chowchilla 2009-11-25).

Grassian is right and even if some how this was right it is one in a millyon dose not a judge way the facks of each case after all you can not say this study outways the others in the end one oddball in a group of 20 cases or studys is not a nuff to say solitary is good sens overwelming this one oddball is 19 others that say it is not good after all it should not be the bace line for any judge to way the facts of the case of solitary there is more to show it is a bad thing then there is showing that it is a good thare for any right mind needs to know this study means crap in the end but you kick some but grassian may you take the sord of lady justice and ram it up that states @\$\$

The problem with this study is its duration. In my experience, many prisoners initially find supermax confinement quite calming. It is quiet, safe, and without the tension caused by having a cellie. The fact that the researchers found an increase in stability in the first 3 months is not at all surprising.

The harm done by solitary confinement becomes apparent as prisoners realize (1) that the solitude may last for the rest of their lives, and (2) that release is completely beyond their control (e.g., where there are no established criteria for relase from solitary). As they become increasingly isolated, and lose more and more control over their futures, despair (at best) and psychosis (at worst) sets in. This point comes at different times for different men, and depends on a variety of factors such as number of family visits, access to audio/visual, regularity of contact with the outside world via the mail, whether the prisoner can read, and generally how arbitrary punishment is perceived.

Studying a fluid population for a year shows nothing about the impact of solitary on a mans mind over the course of decadeswhich has become the norm in supermax prisons.

Ill stick with the Griffth document breaking mens minds.

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