

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | January 23, 2010

A number of recent stories in the Canadian media have challenged the use of solitary confinement on mentally ill prisoners. A December editorial in the [Ottawa Citizen](#), titled Prisons Are Not Asylums, notes that the number of mentally ill inmates is on the rise, while health services to treat them are deteriorating. Prison staff, it says, often resort to isolating these inmates, in order to get them under control. Isolation is not treatment.

The media coverage has been spurred by the release of the annual report from Howard Sapers, Canada's federal corrections investigator (a prison watchdog who has no equivalent in the United States), which was highly critical of the treatment of mentally ill prisoners. It also follows upon investigations into the suicide of a teenager held in lockdown at a Kitchener, Ontario prison.

Ashley Smith had originally entered the prison system at age 15 after throwing apples at a mail carrier, and remained there for four years for a series of minor offenses in custody. In October 2007, the 19-year-old strangled herself inside her cell in view of seven guards. According to the local newspaper, [The Record](#):

Smith died inside a windowless cell the size of a small sedan at Grand Valley Institution for Women. Senior staff ordered guards to not intervene as long as she appeared to be breathing. They thought she was playing games and wanted to avoid filling out the paper work that would be required if they removed the ligature around her neck.

At the time of her death, Smith had been in federal custody for nearly 11.5 months. She was transferred 17 times among nine institutions and across five provinces during that period. She served most of that time confined to a segregation unit 23 hours a day wearing only a padded suicide gown. Ashley filed numerous complaints about her treatment, which were ignored or rejected. Her family claims her mental health deteriorated with each institutional transfer and that her escalating attempts at self-harm were a direct result of her mistreatment.

By moving Smith every few weeks, [according to the CBC](#), corrections officials actually skirted limits on the use of solitary confinement. The report by Howard Sapers concluded: There is reason to believe that Ms. Smith would be alive today if she had not remained on segregation status and if she had received appropriate care.

An article on solitary confinement this week in [Maclean's](#) cites studies showing that up to one-third of Canada's prisoners held in isolation are mentally ill. But many of them are not officially in solitary confinement, according to Sapers:

His annual report talks of various forms of segregation called transition units, special needs units and other names that are popping up across the country. They operate much like solitary confinement cells, minus some built-in safeguards, such as the requirement for a report on why an offender is being transferred there, for one, or what he must do to get out. Increasingly, says Sapers, we're seeing mentally ill offenders held in units that aren't called segregation, but sure look like it.

In response to the report, the Canadian Correctional Service said it would launch a study of long-term solitary confinement in federal prisons. Though it won't help Ashley Smith, it's more than the U.S. Bureau of Prisons has ever done. (Canada's prison population is, of course, minuscule in comparison to ours, even as a percentage of the overall population: The U.S. incarceration rate is more than [seven times higher](#) than Canada's.)

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 had read through Ashley Smith case written over the news. I am very upset and sadden by her story. It is an clearly neglect and mistreat her and weight too much , beyond imagination inhumane to her. She just convicted by only threw apple to post worker and she ended up high security prison !!! come on get real this is too much ., awful., correction officer was woman how come they do that teenager and lead her, probe her to suicide!! this people should convicted as well., Every body would go insane and angry and feel suicidal defenseless after this kind mistreat, inhumane. just for THREW AN APPLE and end up treated like that aahhh so upsetting., just go there grab that low life correction stuffs hair ., threw them to prison treat them same way did to her and i bet if those people treated like her that even can not bear a month. AWFULL., Ludicrous , conspiracy.mean!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! i will pray and wish those correction officer B****es rest of their life would be in hell!!!!

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