

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/04/26/report-documents-abuse-in-pennsylvania-prisons-lockdown-unit/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | April 26, 2011

A [report](#) released yesterday by the [Human Rights Coalition](#), a nonprofit organization concerned with prisoners rights, provides a vivid and grim picture of life inside the solitary confinement unit of the State Correctional Institution at Huntingdon in south-central Pennsylvania. The report describes what it calls a culture of terror in the prisons Restricted Housing Unit (RHU).

For purposes of this report, a culture of terror is defined as a set of assumptions and practices that divide a community into those with absolute power and those who are absolutely powerless. This dynamic is inherent within the logic of prisons, and is at its most intense in the solitary confinement units. Those with power in this culture reinforce their rule through a strict code of silence whereby they refuse to inform on one another to those higher up or outside of the prison hierarchy. Prison guards enforce their rule through threats and use of force, along with deprivations of basic necessities such as food, water, hygienic items, cleaning supplies, clothing, and bedding. Prison administrators and top officials of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) adopt an informal though strictly enforced policy of turning a blind eye to reports of torture and abuse.

Those without power—prisoners—are more often than not divided against one another, enticed to assault and inform on one another in exchange for more favorable treatment. Those individuals who strive to cultivate an ethic of solidarity amongst the oppressed are viewed as the system's greatest threat and consequently made an example of via relentless abuse and indefinite, potentially permanent placement in solitary confinement.

The core elements of this culture of terror include:

The report does an exceptional job of explaining and documenting the mechanics of the process by which prisoners are placed and held—sometimes indefinitely—in solitary. Inmates end up in solitary largely on the say-so of guards, against which they have virtually no recourse. The threat of solitary confinement and the ability to impose it upon a prisoner arbitrarily creates a predictable and intentional stifling of grievances, the report argues. Intimidating prisoners into not pursuing grievances discourages them from filing lawsuits as well, since federal law mandates that prisoners must exhaust administrative remedies prior to filing a lawsuit under the Prison Litigation Reform Act. When an inmate does go ahead and file a grievance, it is likely to go nowhere. According to the report, 97.89 percent of the 43,853 grievances filed by prisoners [in 2008] were rejected for various reasons, based on the Department of Corrections' own records.

Prisoners who file grievances or otherwise protest their conditions are also subject to retaliation. The HRC report provides several examples, including withholding food, water, showers, and mattresses as well as forced cell extractions and the use of pepper spray and restraint chairs. It calls retaliation the lynchpin holding together the culture of terror in the solitary units at Huntingdon, as it involves the targeted application of violence and the deprivation of basic necessities with the deliberate intent of silencing protest, public exposure, and legal action. One prisoner who says he was punished for trying to report abuse in the RHU asks in a letter, "Are we worthy of the same rights as a civilian witness who is being intimidated not to testify or are we unworthy of protection due to the fact that we are convicts?"

What makes the depth and detail of this report remarkable is the extreme difficulty of obtaining information about what goes on in solitary confinement. It is generally close to impossible for journalists, researchers, and advocates to gain access to these units. HRC based its report largely on what it describes as a review of more than a thousand pages of letters, affidavits, grievances, misconducts, other prison documents, legal paperwork, and conversations with family members over the past year. Critics of the report will no doubt raise questions about the veracity of the prisoners' accounts, but they have the ring of truth and echo what we have heard from and about prisoners in other facilities. More importantly, they represent the public's only window into a deeply hidden world about which we know virtually nothing but for which we are, ultimately, responsible.

If nothing else, this report should lead to other investigations and eventually some form of meaningful action and oversight by the state legislature, Pennsylvania Attorney General's office, and Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice. HRC ends the report with a series of recommendations that include such investigations. The group has sent the report to state and federal officials, and provides their addresses [here](#).

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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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newjack:_Guarding_Sing_Sing

time to send in covert investigators to prisons everywhere like Ted Conover did at Sing Sing

only lets not make this for purely journalism, but for legal action.

sad that this nashion that siad to be so grate would runthare prisons like it was the plane of justice then agan it may be but eather way it is no correshon going on in this so called correshonal it be time time to put the coret back in correshons for a nashion so in hate of gitmo and torcher and saying we are the sane hunamme nashion is but a lie if we do it to are owen or anyone how can we clame the best justice on the planet when we are just as sick in the head as those we call tarest sher we go to other countrys to save them from thare cruil rulers but it is ok if we are cruil to are owen no thats not how it works we as a nashion seeing this should be inbarested to be a parrt of the usa when it dose things that it ses it dose not stand for let alone to the vary men and women who are a part of it what dose that say bout we the usa i want be proud but all i see is a shame this nashion need rember it is usa not poj or at least not yet and hope to god it never is lol but all i can say is may thare be light in the darknes of justice

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