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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | December 17, 2010

Not to be missed by Solitary Watchers is a [new article on supermax confinement](#) published in the *Boston Review*. The piece is by Lance Tapley, known for his investigative reporting on the subject from Maine in the *Portland Phoenix*. This comprehensive piece, which deserves to be read in full, makes a strong case for identifying solitary confinement and the abusive practices that accompany it as torture. Tapley points to an irony in the negative reaction of many Americans to the mistreatment of war on terrorism prisoners at Guantanamo:

To little public outcry, tens of thousands of American citizens are being held in equivalent or worse conditions in this country's super-harsh, super-maximum security, solitary-confinement prisons, or in comparable units of traditional prisons. The Obama administration somewhat unsteadily plans to shut down the Guantanamo detention center and ship its inmates to one or more supermaxes in the United States, as though this would mark a substantive change. In the supermaxes inmates suffer weeks, months, years, or even decades of mind-destroying isolation, usually without meaningful recourse to challenge the conditions of their captivity. Prisoners may be regularly beaten in cell extractions, and they receive meager health services. The isolation frequently leads to insane behavior including self-injury and suicide attempts.

Tapley's reporting has helped make public the brutality of cell extraction—the act of removing a prisoner from his cell, which is often done with excessive force, regardless of whether the prisoner resists. In the *Boston Review* article, he describes one prisoner's experiences, and includes a leaked video of a cell extraction in Maine:

They beat the shit out of you, Mike James said, hunched near the smeared plexiglass separating us. He was talking about the [cell extractions](#) he'd endured at the hands of the supermax-unit guards at the Maine State Prison.

They push you, knee you, poke you, he said, his voice faint but ardent through the speaker. They slam your head against the wall and drop you on the floor while you're cuffed. He lifted his manacled hands to a scar on his chin. They split it wide open. They're yelling Stop resisting! Stop resisting! when you're not even moving.

James experienced frequent cell extractions on one occasion, five of them in a single day. In this procedure, five hollering guards wearing helmets and body armor charge into the cell. The point man smashes a big shield into the prisoner. The others spray mace into his face, push him onto the bed, and twist his arms behind his back to handcuff him, connecting the cuffs by a chain to leg irons. As they continue to mace him, the guards carry him screaming to an observation room, where they bind him to a special chair. He remains there for hours.


A scene such as this might have taken place at supposedly aberrant Abu Ghraib, where American soldiers tormented captured Iraqis. But as described by prisoners and guards and vividly revealed in a leaked video (the Maine prison records these events to ensure that inmates are not mistreated), an extraction is the supermax's normal, zero-tolerance reaction to prisoner disobedience, which may be as minor as protesting bad food by covering the cell door's tiny window with a piece of paper. Such extractions occur all the time, not just in Maine but throughout the country. The principle applied is total control of a prisoner's actions. Even if the inmate has no history of violence, when he leaves the cell he's in handcuffs and ankle shackles, with a guard on either side.

But he doesn't often leave the cell. In Maine's supermax, which is typical, an inmate spends 23 hours a day alone in a 6.5-by-14-foot space. When the weather is good, he'll spend an hour a day, five days a week, usually alone, in a small dog run outdoors. Radios and TVs are forbidden. Cell lights are on night and day. When the cold food is shoved through the door slot, prisoners fear it is contaminated by the feces, urine, and blood splattered on the cell door and corridor surfaces by the many mentally ill or enraged inmates. The prisoner is not allowed a toothbrush but is provided a plastic nub to use on a fingertip. Mental-health care usually amounts to a five-minute, through-the-steel-door conversation with a social worker once or twice a week. The prisoner gets a shower a few times a week, a brief telephone call every week or two, and occasional no-contact access to a visitor. Variations in these conditions exist: for example, in some states TVs or radios are allowed.

[youtube=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jUfK5i_lQs]

The article also debunks the myth that prisoners in prolonged solitary confinement are the worst of the worst.

When supermaxes were built across the country in the 1980s and 1990s, they were theoretically for the worst of the worst, the most violent prisoners. But an inmate may be put in one for possession of contraband such as marijuana, if accused by another inmate of being a gang member, for hesitating to follow a guards order, and even for protection from other inmates. Several prisoners are in the Maine supermax because they got themselves tattooed. By many accounts mental illness is the most common denominator; mentally ill inmates have a hard time following prison rules. A Wisconsin study found that three-quarters of the prisoners in one solitary-confinement unit were mentally ill. In Maine, over half of supermax inmates are classified as having a serious mental illness.

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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

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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My son is in a CTC unit. (medical) They tell me it is for his protection. Due to what I believe to be delayed medical treatment he is now medically disabled. has a hard time talking as well. Locked down for 23 out of 24 hrs a day. How is this safer for him. Isolation is destroying him. At least when he was in general population his cell mate was a better care giver then what he is receiving now. If the system has crippled him the least they can do is send him home so I can take care of him.

It is sad that it is still necessary to keep documenting that Solitary is torture. Should be a no-brainer. Massachusetts Department of Correction newest acting commissioner is Ronny Duval. He's just one of the recycled good old boys. He was part of a MA entourage to the first U.S. SuperMax to learn how to replicate it back home. The facility, spurred on by Gov. William Weld, opened in 1998. It is the Souza-Baronowski Correctional Center.

Several years ago, a former MA DOC warden told me directly, Ronny can kill a prisoner without leaving a mark. And he has.

Ron was a high school drop-out driving a truck for the old Grossmans Lumber before he was hired by the Department. Soon he was fully acculturated. He brutalized prisoners, caused folks to die, and saved tens of thousands of dollars by slashing the meager food budget at MCI- Walpole. Then the DOC helped him earn his G.E.D. So Mr. Duval has taken a path that some prisoners have made, but in a different sequence! Ron killed as an employee, not an inmate. He was never punished. He was promoted instead.

Susan Mortimer

this is true we speak more on those in Cuba then what we do to are vary Owen pepel hear in the USA i ben told from reading it you can judge a nation on how well it treats its inmates or if you wish to see how well a nation treats it pepel you need only look at there prisons i hate to say yes we have more rights then most and thats what makes the US grate but if your to judge us on this standard that Winston Churchill said then we be no better then those we call tarests in the end we have a need to stop this sick use of solitary may there be light in the darknes of justice

Nothing is more important to me than ending this barbaric practice of placing those who are seriously mentally impaired in solitary confinement. This is against all reason and common sense. These individuals will return to us sicker than before they went in and this is not a good return on our tax dollars. You would think even the fiscal conservatives would agree. We are living like it was 1810. Decency demands treatment rather than cruel punishment for our mentally ill.

i have heard this from a cousin which prison not sure but he watched as they deliberated jumped on the inmate driving his ribs into his heart and lungs killing him the inmate down and subdued so murdered. and just drag the body out of the unit, I think it was FCI Williamsburg but not sure

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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