

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/04/02/solitary-confinement-coming-live-to-a-screen-near-you/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | April 2, 2010

In what its hosts promise will be a [Live Window Into the Solitary Confinement Experience](#), three everyday volunteers will place themselves in model solitary confinement cells, where the public can watch them on live streaming video. This experience, which begins today at 8 a.m., is taking place in conjunction with the upcoming broadcast of *Explorer: Solitary Confinement*, an episode of National Geographic documentary series.

After [seeing this subject exploited](#) on Fox's creepy reality show [Solitary](#), and in the UK's even stranger [Man in Box](#), it's tempting to write this off as another stunt. And certainly, there are elements of phony spectacle for example, the fact that the inmates in this lockdown unit will be tweeting the entire time. (And then of course, there's the fact that they're volunteers who are staying for just a week if they don't go nuts and ask to leave sooner.)

That said, the advance materials on the show and the experience are reasonably serious and well-informed. They are also surprisingly sympathetic for a mainstream media project in a country that rarely shows anything close to compassion for its prisoners, regardless of the tortures they might endure. So we are keeping an open mind. Here's a portion of the [press release](#):

Alone in a cell for years or even decades, more than 80,000 Americans are estimated to be in solitary confinement. Cut off from human contact in an 8 x 10 cell: Some say solitary is the only way for correctional officers to safely handle the worst prisoners, but others claim it amounts to psychological torture. In an age when we are all hyperconnected, when rapid-fire interpersonal communications are routine, what's it like to be suddenly cut off from social contact and experience the claustrophobic isolation of solitary confinement?

On April 2, three volunteers will open a window into that experience when they occupy re-creations of solitary cells constructed in the greater Washington, D.C., area for up to one week. They will inhabit 80-square-foot cells with a sink, toilet, bed, desk and chair. Initially, the contents of each cell will replicate the lowest level of solitary in many prisons: no TV, no computer or reading material, and minimal human contact. Meals are served through a slot in the door; participants are allowed one hour of solitary exercise and a brief shower daily. Their experiences will be shared in real time via outgoing tweets (they will receive no incoming communications), while a camera in each cell will stream 24/7.

This is not meant to be an authentic replication of punitive solitary confinement, with one profound departure being that participants stay as long as they choose, up to one week, and can opt out anytime. The intent is to provide an everyday perspective specifically into the experience of social and claustrophobic isolation that are key hallmarks of solitary confinement. The goal is to spark greater conversation on this widely used and controversial penal practice as a complement to the April 11 premiere of *Explorer: Solitary Confinement* on the National Geographic Channel.

The promo on the National Geographic Channel web site [describes the episode](#) this way:

Explorer looks at the science of solitary and discovers what it means to be absolutely alone. We go inside Colorado State Penitentiary (CSP) and witness prisoners on the edge and the guards who watch over them. Then, we look at experiments on whether isolation dramatically alters behavior and ongoing new research on how solitary actually could cause long-term mental problems like paranoia, disorientation and delirium.

Colorado State Penitentiary is a good place to view the realities of solitary confinement. It has over 750 inmates in its administrative segregation unit [including a number of teenagers](#) serving life without parole for crimes committed as juveniles. And despite a cash-strapped state budget and a falling prison population, Colorado is spending over \$10 million to [open a new lockdown unit](#) this year.

The streaming video of the three participants in faux solitary will be at <http://ExplorerSolitary.com>, beginning Tuesday at 8 a.m., and the Twitter feed will be at <http://twitter.com/ExploreSolitary>.

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've been living in solitary confinement for most of 17 yrs. I am not in an official prison-but discovered that I have less human contact than people in solitary. Sometimes I'm more than a month with no human contact. because i have no friends or family im in extreme poverty and seriously ill. u bet this takes a toll and i have lost the will to live. altho i go outside its rare for anyone to talk to me

Without experiencing the most disturbing elements of solitary confinement, notably:

- 1) Being surrounded by other mentally ill inmates howling and banging on doors and walls, resulting in sleep deprivation.
- 2) Viewing or rather listening to the brutality of prison guards reacting to these outbursts.
- 3) The uncertainty of when, or if, you will ever be released and the hopelessness that this feeling of loss of control over your own destiny instills.

the true horror of the solitary experience is lost.

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