

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | September 16, 2010

An article about solitary confinement appears in the current issue of *Psychiatric News*, a publication of the American Psychiatric Association, [Psychiatrists Decry Punishment That Isolates Prisoners](#). Its encouraging to see this issue at least being discussed in a forum for the leading professional organization of American psychiatrists which has never undertaken an official review of mental health professionals possible role in torture in U.S. prisons, as it has on [interrogations at Guantanamo](#).

As politically popular supermax prisons and extended solitary confinement have become widespread in the United States in recent decades, mental health advocates, including psychiatrists, have begun to push back because of concerns about the mental health sequelae of this type of incarceration. However, divisions remain among psychiatrists over whether extended solitary confinement causes mental illness and how best to reform such prison practices.

The extensive use of solitary confinement has drawn growing criticism from mental health advocates. That's because prisoners with mental illness are often relegated to this type of detainment when they fail to follow rules, which they may be unable to do because of their illness.

Although there has been no comprehensive examination of all supermax or other solitary-confinement populations, some research indicates that the prevalence of psychiatric illness among supermax inmates can reach over 50 percent, said forensic psychiatrist Paul Appelbaum, M.D., a member and former chair of APA's Council on Psychiatry and Law and a past APA president.

The data are not very good, he commented. However, it doesn't take a lot of evidence to see it's not good for people with serious mental illness.

The article is especially valuable for presenting a summary of different kinds of challenges to solitary confinement, through both lawsuits and legislative efforts. It is scrupulously balanced, presenting opinions from some who think that prolonged solitary confinement may exacerbate pre-existing mental illnesses, but does not drive sane people crazy. (They might wish to conduct the experiment suggested by one prisoner in [Illinois Tamms supermax](#): Lock yourself in your bathroom for the next 10 years and tell me how it will affect your mind.)

However, the piece also includes statements from some of solitary confinement's sharpest critics in the psychiatric community. Henry Weinstein, chair of the APA Caucus on Correctional Psychiatry and a clinical professor of psychiatry at New York University, believes that solitary confinement can have mental health impacts on both healthy people and those with psychiatric illness, according to the article. Its effects are likely similar to the mental health consequences of torture, which leave some permanently mentally impaired and others relatively unscathed.

Terry Kupers, who teaches at Berkeley's Wright Institute and has written extensively on the effects of supermax confinement, told *Psychiatric News* that people with no previous history of mental illness can become ill in extended solitary confinement, which he defines as longer than three months. He said this is especially true of people with earlier traumatic episodes, who are also more likely to self-medicate by abusing drugs, be arrested, and be attacked while in prison, which lands them in solitary confinement [as punishment]. (Look for a guest post from Terry Kupers next week on Solitary Watch.)

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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.

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i know the leading expert on solitary effects met him grassian nashions leading one to he was in the pe;can bay case grate man got in on my rusme to shu sindrum is realy in prison or not i know it is lol like that hang over but it never gos all gone it comes and gos not fun at all solitary will mess yo up badly reading on shu sindrum let me understand what was happening to me at least then i got in to my love of trying to end it may thare be light in the darknes of justice

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