

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/11/02/solitary-confinement-in-north-carolina/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | November 2, 2012

An excellent article on solitary in North Carolina the first of its kind, that we know of appears in the current *Indyweek* of Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill. [What Life Is Like in Solitary Confinement at North Carolina's Central Prison](#), by Billy Ball, describes conditions in the intensive control unit, or ICON, at the prison in Raleigh.

The piece focuses on the story of Chris McBride, who was placed in isolation in ICON after he and a group of other prisoners held a work-stoppage to protest their long hours. The prisoners worked in the kitchen for 10-hour shifts, seven days a week, without breaks. They were paid between 70 cents and \$1 per day, writes Ball. After being promised better hours, the eight striking prisoners returned to work but they were rounded up by guards even though we had went back to work without incident, says McBride. No force was used, no mace was sprayed. We went. No problem.

The article quotes at length from McBride's letters, in which he describes life in ICON:

Solitary confinement is hell. I agree with the public it is a form of torture. It is a tiny cell about 6 feet by 8 feet. It has a steel toilet, with a sink built in the top. There is a steel bed, with an extremely thin mattress. There is a small shelf to put your things, and a very small little desk hanging off the wall, but no chair. There is a window, that is about 5 inches wide and about 4 feet tall, but you can't see out of it. It's fog/clouded glass. Plus it's covered by steel with little holes in it. The door window is the same. The light stays on 24 hours a day. At 11 p.m. 6 a.m., a smaller light comes on but it's still bright.

We are in this cell 23 hours a day. We are allowed to come out for recreation five times a week for one hour. The rec is a cage. They just stick us in a little cage and we can walk around. That's it. We are only allowed to take three showers a week. Only three! And we can only take 5 minutes. If we are lucky, we get 10 minutes.

So if you add up five 1-hour recs, and three 10-minute showers, that's 5 hours. Let's round that up to 6 hours. That's your answer. Out of the 168 hours in a week, we are out of our cell 6 hours. If that ain't a form of torture, I don't know what is.

If the officers are mad at you, they buy clonazepam china spit in your food. They lose or throw away your mail, amongst other things. And that's only the beginning. The cells are filthy. We hardly ever get to clean them, and when we do, we only get to sweep and mop. No toilet brush or nothing. Then the medical is ridiculous. An inmate can die in solitary and wouldn't be found for hours because no one even comes by and checks on us. If we ask to see a nurse, we are ignored. I have seen inmates have seizures, faint, as well as try to kill themselves, and the officers pay no attention. Then if the inmate tells on the officers, they jump on him and beat him. Normal rules don't apply to solitary. They are supposed to, but they don't.

The piece, which should be read in full, also provides comprehensive context on the use of solitary confinement in American prisons in general, and in North Carolina in particular. In 2011, Ball writes, the N.C. Department of Corrections issued a blistering report in June 2011 stating that [inmates with mental illnesses](#) were sometimes isolated for weeks or found alone in cells splattered with human waste, and the warden resigned. In July 2012, a group of prisoners held a [hunger strike](#) to protest conditions at Central. Officials have promised reform, but there are few signs of change.

Ball also notes that, as is typical in most states, North Carolina maintains a press ban on access to solitary confinement units and their residents. Corrections officials denied an *Indy* request to interview McBride in person, so we corresponded via handwritten letters. Administrators also denied our requests to visit a solitary cell and interview an ICON prisoner in person. His article ends with another quote from McBride, about why it is important to break the silence that surrounds the use of solitary in American prisons:

The public should care about this because we are all human. No, they may not think about prison life on a daily basis, but in the blink of an eye, they could be part of it. I want the public to know about the inhumane conditions we as inmates have to deal with. I want them to know about the mental and physical abuse we have to endure on a daily basis. Just because we are in prison doesn't make us any less human. There are plenty of criminals not locked up. Look at our government. We still have feelings, and deserve to be treated as people. Not animals.

(h/t to @brookpete at <http://prisonphotography.org/> for alerting us to this story.)

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

Give me a break These criminals were not concerned with compassion or basic human respect when they committed their crime against other humans, so while they are in jail, serving their time they do not get any in return. And complaining about wages? Be thankful you have something to do that might actually prepare you for life on the outside
You should have thought about how terrible it will be before you committed your crime. Or maybe, you should have thought about how your actions would affect a fellow human in the first place, along with their family and friends, and even your own.

Indeed, people who have committed a crime and who have been found guilty of that crime, and sentenced in a just and correct way and manner should serve their time, and thus pay for the crime(s) they committed! Agreed!

BUT were no judge has ever sentenced anyone to SOLITARY CONFINEMENT (as far as I know at least, and please do correct me if I am wrong here!), solitary confinement is inhuman, illegal and is no legal punishment for a crime!

And THAT is what is under discussion here!

The principle of putting people in solitary confinement!

Not the fact that people who have committed a crime should be given lighter circumstances, or that the suffering of a victim or its family is to be left out!

I agree, the most heinous crimes deserve severe punishment, and those committing the most heinous crimes must serve their sentence (provided the proceedings were fair, just and legal, and no errors or anything doubtful about for instance evidence, and or statements is at hand!), but were people serve their time an extra adding punishment in the form of solitary confinement is inhuman, illegal and should not be allowed under any circumstance! Not even when an inmate (strange word btw! A mate being in.) turns violent or is not living according to rules of the prison. In such cases an addition to the given sentence should be the solution, in my opinion.

My opinion.

Our treatment is unconstitutional, and grossly goes against principals this country was founded on somehow we have to get our voices heard. there are many places like this to at least have a chance of outcry against the prisons intolerant and grossly misused system thank you.

<http://www.cnbc.com/id/44762286>

Billions behind Bars

In many depressed areas, new prison complexes have revitalized the local economy. Americas prison system employs more than three-quarters of a million workers that's more than the auto manufacturing industry. Many small towns are trying to get in on the boom.

If that ain't a form of torture, I don't know what is

Support the international statement to end isolation and solitary confinement

<http://www.stopisolation.org/en/>

I am 73 years old and in the sixties even though i was a combat engineer in the united states army Reserve my family protested against

the vietnam war. But the battle to end solitary confinement at rikers island through the efforts of JAC Jail Advocacy Coalition and RIPPD Rights for Imprisoned People with Psychiatric disabilities has been the most rewarding. Just as slavery was ended I am positive the cause i am working for will be sucessful. Martin L. King jr , in his I Have a dream speech said With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struugle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, Knowing thaat we will be free one day. We cant accept reforms like 22 hours in solitary instead of 23 hours in cells or ending solitary confinement just for mentally ill. We believe as does the united nations that solitary confinement is legal torture. I write mentally ill prisoners who are serving decades in solitary inorder to give them human contact and encouragement and to reaffirm to myself and them that despite the crime they are alleged to have committed , they are human beings. Ending solitary , ending the stigma of mental illness will change americas view about inequality for women , poor people , exploited immigrants. Ending solitary will show america is ready to make hard decisions and no longer maintain the status quo for the one percent. allanfeinblum@aol.com

Ive always wondered why it costs so much per year to house an inmate when they work for just about nothing. In fact while I was incarcerated I received nothing for my work in the laundry. Others working in the kitchens, landscaping, farming etc etc also received nothing. Many items are sold for a profit such as uniforms, furniture, shoes licence plates the list is long.

Here is a site on N. C. Correctional industries.

<http://www.doc.state.nc.us/EPRISE/about/work.html>

As for the rest it is all too familiar by now.

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