

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2020/12/01/social-distancing-is-difficult-self-quarantine-can-be-painful-solitary-confinement-is-torture/>

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This #GivingTuesday, Please Support the Crucial Work of Solitary Watch.

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | December 1, 2020



Dear Readers, Supporters, and Friends:

In the past nine months, **those of us on the outside have been given just a glimpse of the isolation, idleness, and deprivation faced by the thousands of incarcerated men, women, and children held in solitary confinement.** Unlike them, most of us have been confined along with loved ones, and with access to multiple sources of entertainment, outdoor exercise, and electronic communications with the outside world. In spite of all this, COVID-related isolation is [expected to produce](#) substantial increases in anxiety and depression, substance use, loneliness, and domestic violence in the U.S. population.

For individuals in solitary confinement, both the conditions and the effects are far more extreme. Most are confined to cells that measure about 6 x 9 feet (smaller than the average parking space) without work, education, or treatment. Many are denied visits or even phone calls with loved ones. Rates of suicide and self-harm are exponentially higher among people in solitary, and these deadly effects follow them even after they are released. For these reasons, the UN has condemned prolonged solitary confinement as torture. **Yet since the pandemic began, the use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons has exploded,** despite the existence of more safe and effective alternatives for containing the spread.

If an inmate has a fever, they put them in segregation instead of the health care unit. They are not testing us for COVID, so I'm not even sure if those guys have the virus or not. We are on 24-hour lockdown, no movement. B, held in solitary confinement during lockdown of an Illinois prison, from a March 2020 letter to Solitary Watch

Drawing on our deep knowledge of the prison system, and our connections to hundreds of people living inside it, **Solitary Watch has been a leader in responding to this crisis.**

We were the first to report on the [500 percent increase](#) in the number of people held in solitary confinement in prisons across the country, to at least 300,000 people. Our research and analysis formed the basis of a [groundbreaking report](#) that received widespread [media attention](#) and helped change the terms of debate around COVID response in prisons.

As the pandemic spread through prisons and jails, we were also the [first to document](#) how solitary confinement was being used to **punish and silence incarcerated people** who refused to follow rules that put them at risk, protested unsafe conditions, or expressed their fears to the media or the public.

We were alone in [reporting on the connection](#) between the federal Bureau of Prisons first total lockdown in 25 years, which confined nearly 160,000 people to their cells, and Attorney General William Barrs deployment of key BOP staff to confront protesters on the streets of Washington, D.C.

Working closely with incarcerated journalists, we have published [numerous inside accounts of life inside COVID-infected prisons](#). At San Quentin, our contributing writer Juan Moreno Haines [continued to send dispatches from a solitary confinement cell](#) after he contracted the virus. (Later, we helped him run a [mock presidential election](#) inside the prison, among men ravaged by the virus and by years of incarceration, and denied the vote yet determined to make their voices heard.)

[YOUR DONATIONS MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO CONTINUE THIS CRITICAL WORK.](#)

While COVID has further devastated the lives of incarcerated people, we also believe it has helped open a window for the public into the

realities of life behind bars, and the deep harms caused by mass incarceration in general, and solitary confinement in particular. If we can keep this message alive and growing, **there is a chance it will lead to real change** that extends far beyond the end of the pandemic.

This is the kind of work you will support by making a donation to Solitary Watch on this #GivingTuesday. As our first COVID winter approaches, please think of the thousands of people enduring months or years of far more extreme isolation and deprivation. Help us give a voice and we hope, someday, an end to their suffering.

Right now, thanks to NewsMatch, **every donation made through December 31st, 2020, will be matched**, up to \$5,000 per donation. If you choose to make your gift recur monthly or quarterly, your donations will be matched every time throughout the year. Every donation at every level is deeply valued and appreciated. **Thank you for your support.**

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Society is in an uproar over having to isolate themselves in their homes for [a few weeks or months]. I wonder, after this is all over with, will they take into consideration that inmates have been in administrative segregation (solitary) for years, if not decades, in rooms the size of their closets? Will they cry for change? S, held in solitary confinement in Texas for 21 years, from an April 2020 letter to Solitary Watch

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 [Jean Casella](#)

December 29, 2021

by [Jean Casella](#)

December 23, 2021

by [Events and Announcements](#)

December 3, 2021

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P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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