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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | February 6, 2013

A [comprehensive new article](#) on the treatment of prisoners with mental illness in the New York City jail system appears on The New York World, a site run by the Columbia Journalism School. The piece, by Maura R. O'Connor, opens with the story of Jason Echeverria, a pre-trial detainee who was being held in a special solitary confinement unit on Rikers Island for people with psychiatric problems.

Last summer, a 25-year-old robbery suspect at Rikers Island took a ball of concentrated soap meant to clean his jail cell and swallowed it. Jason Echeverria had been held for two months inside the Department of Corrections Mental Health Assessment Unit for Infracted Inmates, where the confined typically spend 23 hours a day on lockdown. By swallowing the soap, [Echeverria hoped](#) to spring himself from his confinement; instead, for 20 minutes a corrections supervisor ignored his condition as he became violently sick and eventually died from the poisoning. The city's medical examiner has [found](#) that the lack of immediate medical treatment constituted a homicide.

While Echeverria was being held in punitive segregation, New York City Department of Correction Commissioner Dora Schriro was assuring the city's Board of Correction, which monitors her agency, that a long-awaited blueprint for dealing with the growing ranks of mentally ill at Rikers was nearing completion.

The study, undertaken by the well-respected Council on State Governments in conjunction with a special task force convened by the Mayors Office, set out to remedy one of the most disturbing trends facing the city's jail system. Even as New York City's jail population reaches [historic lows](#), the number of mentally ill people in jails has ballooned, turning Rikers Island into a virtual psychiatric ward run by the Department of Correction. Today a record one in three residents at Rikers has some form of mental illness more than 4,000 at a given time and a population up 26 percent since 2005.

The Department of Correction reports that the mentally ill at Rikers Island are involved in at least half of all jail incidents, including assaults on corrections officers. Its response has been to crack down hard on infractions and increase the number of punitive segregation beds. Since she became commissioner in 2009, Schriro has overseen the largest increases in punitive segregation units in the department's history, spurring a rate of solitary confinement among the jail population that is projected to reach five times the national average this year. Punitive segregation for the mentally ill is also increasing. Rikers now has hundreds of designated cells, including the one where Echeverria died. In 1990, the jail had just a dozen.

Conditions are so severe that even the medical director at Rikers for Department of Health and Mental Hygiene has felt compelled to speak out. During a Board of Correction meeting last year, Dr. Homer Venters called the segregation units parking lots for people with mental illness and described the Rikers mental health segregation unit as a complete failure in meeting the needs of patients and the needs of DOC.

Rikers Island is one of the top three mental health facilities in the country, said Bonnie Sultan, a sociologist and criminal justice expert who has monitored treatment of mentally ill inmates in New York City jails. While the Department of Correction has [experimented](#) with a pilot program that offers cognitive-behavioral therapy for inmates, and assigns mental health clinicians for the punitive segregation unit, most of what it can offer is punishment. What we're seeing, said Sultan, is the system is further debilitating these people.

The article, which should be read in full, goes on to detail some efforts to improve the torturous treatment of prisoners with mental illnesses as well as the many broken promises on the part of the City of New York and its Department of Corrections.

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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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 fiance recently was beat up by JOs and left without medical attention over 48 hrs. All this because he has been requesting his physic meds which he has not received in over 2 weeks. Rikers Island abuses their power of authority.

Tommy has been on the list for breathing and chest pains they dont care

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