

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/07/26/prison-heat-hunger-strike-highlights-summers-deadly-toll-on-u-s-inmates/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | July 26, 2010

As heatwaves swept the Northeast earlier this month, 30 inmates in solitary confinement at New Hampshire State Prison went on hunger strike to protest stifling temperatures inside the prison's Special Housing Unit. According to the [Concord Monitor](#), inmates in SHU cannot open windows and must remain in their cells, usually alone, for 23 hours a day. Unlike inmates in the prison's general population, they also can't go outside. One visitor to the prison said that inmates were sitting in pure sweat, and had begun flooding their cells with a few inches of water in order to cool off.

A Department of Corrections spokesperson told the *Monitor* that inmates were refusing to eat until fans were installed, either in cells or in nearby hallways. According to the paper, fans had recently been removed due to safety concerns: Many prisoners, the DOC claimed, were tearing them apart and fashioning them into weapons. Yet the prison also refused to place fans in the units' hallways, where they might have benefitted both staff and inmates.

When purposefully used against prisoners in the so-called War on Terror, extreme temperatures including high temperatures reaching 100 degrees have been [widely decried as torture](#), or at least as cruel and inhuman treatment. Yet temperatures at this level are not unusual in many U.S. prisons, especially in the South, and rarely arouse resistance from anyone but the prisoners themselves. The New Hampshire hunger strikers gave up after about a week. But their protest highlights the brutal and sometime deadly conditions that persist in America's prisons every summer.

In one high-profile case in 2009, Marcia Powell, a 48-year-old inmate at Arizona's Perryville Prison, was baked to death in the midday sun. Powell, whom court records show had a history of schizophrenia, substance abuse, and mild mental retardation, was serving a 27-month sentence for prostitution. On a day when the Arizona sun had driven the temperature to 108 degrees, she was [parked outdoors](#) in an unroofed, wire-fenced holding cell while awaiting transfer to another part of the prison. A deputy warden and two guards had been stationed in a control center 20 yards away, but nearly four hours had passed when she was found collapsed on the floor of the human cage. Doctors at a local hospital pronounced Powell comatose from heat stroke, and she died later that night after being taken off life support. ([Two local churches](#) stepped in to provide a proper funeral and burial.) The Maricopa County Medical Examiner [ruled the death an accident](#), caused by complications of hyperthermia due to environmental heat exposure. This despite the fact that Powell had blistering and first and second degree thermal injuries on face, arms, and upper body.

Following Powell's death, the Arizona Department of Corrections [banned most uses](#) of unshaded outdoor holding cells in Arizona, except in extraordinary circumstances. Most Southern states already restrict their use. But baking in the sun is only one of many ways to die in America's prisons in the summertime. Recent years have seen scattered reports of heat-related prison deaths in [California](#) and [Texas](#), among others. The prevalence of mental illness among the victims may be linked to anti-psychotic drugs, which raise the body temperature and cause dehydration, and at the same time have a tranquilizing effect that may mask thirst.

In 2006, 21-year-old Timothy Souders, another mentally ill prisoner, [died of heat exhaustion and dehydration](#) at a Jackson, Michigan prison during an August heat wave. For the four days prior to his death, Souders had been shackled to a cement slab in solitary confinement because he had been acting up. That entire period was captured on [surveillance videotapes](#), which according to news reports clearly showed his mental and physical deterioration.

The vast majority of U.S. civilian prisons and jails are not air conditioned. In contrast, the U.S. made a point of [building new air-conditioned facilities](#) for prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, and phasing out the older structures. In Texas, only 19 of 112 prisons have air-conditioning. Earlier this summer, the chair of Texas State Senate's Judiciary Committee, John Whitmire (D-Houston), [told the Houston Chronicle](#) that enduring the heat is part of the reality of going to prison. There are a lot of inconveniences to serving time. There's no question it's hot. He said he thought few Texans would be sympathetic to the prisoners suffering.

Apparently anticipating a similar lack of sympathy, the Florida Department of Corrections [proudly advertises](#) the absence of air-conditioning in most of its prisons. On a web page that debunks a host of misconceptions that might indicate soft treatment of Florida's prisoners, it assures readers that the majority of inmates live without air-conditioning or cable television.

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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A man died in June in solitary in Menard Prison here in Illinois. He was locked in a cell with a solid steel door, and virtually no ventilation, for many days. Prisoners housed nearby state that the water in his cell was also cut off shortly before he died. Menard is located steps from the Mississippi river in far southern Illinois (about 60 miles south of St. Louis).

The problem of over-heated cells is national.

You write; The vast majority of U.S. civilian prisons and jails are not air conditioned. In contrast, the U.S. made a point of building, new air-conditioned facilities for prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, and phasing out the older structures.

This is not an aberration, when Truman desegregated the armed forces after WWII it was in an effort to bolster our international image abroad. People of color viewed our segregated arm forces with askance. Since the US was in direct competition with the expansion of communism it was necessary to project a more inclusive image abroad.

Now that we have another ideological adversary we want to appear to the Muslims of the world as being above the mistreatment of their Islamic brothers. When we do so, we are not doing it because we are more humane we are doing it to improve our image abroad.

It is not about taking the moral high ground because if it was our own countrymen would not be left to bake in the summer, then shiver throughout the winter, in total darkness or constant light, in deafening silence or in the sleep deprivation inducing noise of the mentally ill inmates howling and banging twenty-four, seven.

Blame all this on the uncommonly vindictive nature of many US citizens when compared to the rest of the civilized world. To be elected to public office in this country you must show that you're tough on crime. Therefore little attention is ever given to correcting the causes of crime in the first place and the get tough rhetoric of politicians ratchets up every election cycle all across the country.

This then translates to the proud proclamations of the authorities on the harsh conditions prisoners must endure under their care.

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