

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | January 9, 2012

For anyone who missed it, [this front page article](#) in Sunday's *Washington Post* gives excellent coverage to the widespread use of solitary confinement in Virginia's state prisons. It begins with a glance at one of the nation's most notorious supermax prisons, Red Onion, and then goes on to discuss efforts to limit the use of solitary in Virginia which include both a lawsuit and a possible legislative initiative.

At Red Onion State Prison, built on a mountaintop in a remote pocket of southwest Virginia, more than two-thirds of the inmates live in solitary confinement.

In a state where about 1 in 20 prisoners are held in solitary, Red Onion, a so-called supermax prison, isolates more inmates than any other facility, keeping more than 500 of its nearly 750 charges alone for 23 hours a day in cells the size of a doctor's exam room.

As more becomes known about the effects of isolation on inmate health, public safety and prison budgets, some states have begun to reconsider the practice, among them Texas, which, like Virginia, is known as a law-and-order state.

Now critics have set their sights on Virginia, where lawyers and inmates say some of the state's 40,000 prisoners, including some with mental-health issues, have been kept in isolation for years, in one case for 14 years.

The [Legal Aid Justice Center](#), which represents 12 inmates in isolation in Virginia, has requested an investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice, which recently [launched](#) a probe into a [1,550-bed Pennsylvania prison](#) where inmates complain of long periods of isolation and a lack of mental-health treatment.

A group of legislators have been visiting prisons, including Red Onion, to examine how their most violent inmates are treated. Del. [Patrick A. Hope](#) (D-Arlington), who is leading the effort, said he will urge the General Assembly to study ways to limit the use of solitary confinement and offer more treatment before inmates are released.

The story does a good job of explaining how solitary confinement became common practice in Virginia and throughout the United States. Factors include the explosion in sentencing and with it the boom in prison building as well as the increasing criminalization of the mentally ill.

Although solitary confinement has long been a tool of prison discipline (and a staple of pop culture depictions of prison life), the use of solitary became increasingly common in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, many legal and medical experts have argued that inmates in isolation for long periods suffer from higher suicide rates, increased depression, decreased brain function and hallucinations.

Virginia opened Red Onion deep in coal country and about 400 miles from Richmond a dozen years ago as part of a [major prison-building effort](#) after the abolishment of parole and the lengthening of prison sentences. Like many other supermax prisons, Red Onion was designed to confine but not necessarily rehabilitate the most-dangerous criminals.

As of October, 505 of 745 inmates at Red Onion were in solitary, according to the state. When legislators toured Red Onion on Sept. 1, prison officials told them that 173 inmates in solitary there were considered mentally ill.

State officials said they do not keep statistics on the length of isolation stays, but they told Hope in a recent memo that Red Onion inmates have been isolated from two weeks to almost seven years, with an average stay of 2.7 years.

Unsurprisingly, Post reporter Anita Kumar encountered resistance and obfuscation when she sought information for the story: Virginia officials were reluctant to answer questions from The Washington Post about the practice of solitary confinement. In some instances, they provided contradictory information to The Post and legislators; at other times, they declined to talk about the use of solitary confinement.

Read the full article [here](#).

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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I have passed on comments off here to a friend of mine held in ADX, Tommy Silverstein, he was interested to read comments made by Carl and Alan.

What doesn't the state get that with excessive use of solitary that it's very likely it's causing more problems than it's solving?

I fully support more oversight by media & the states legislatures in reducing the use of solitary confinement. I don't advocate abolishing it as it is needed for some convicts that give the state no choice but to lock them up to keep staff & other inmates safe, or to keep the convict from escaping. I don't doubt that it's over-used & that in many cases there are other alternatives to discipline of unruly inmates than long-term solitary confinement.

Solitary Confinement is disguised as administrative segregation and never called solitary confinement by those in charge of the prisons. It's not a politically correct phrase and they will deny the existence by merely using words that alter the meaning but say the same thing = the hole.

Been there and done that PR stuff to avoid too much digging by the media. Code of Silence is strong when it comes to this practice as is the practice itself.. Keep digging and you will find abuse, neglect and mentally ill persons suffering under this most restrictive housing method widely used by all states whether they admit it or not..

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