

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/06/19/report-from-senate-hearing-on-solitary-confinement/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | June 19, 2012

Our report on today's hearing was published by [Mother Jones](#). It starts out this way:

The cell placed at the back of the hearing room in the Dirksen Senate Office Building was a pretty accurate replica of a real isolation cell—the kind that exists in supermax prisons and solitary confinement units all over the country. It measured about 7 feet by 10 feet, with a tiny covered window too high to see out of and nothing inside but a bunk and a toilet. The door contained a slot through which a guard slides a food tray; for many prisoners, this represents their only human contact for the day. These are the conditions in which some 80,000 inmates live on any given day in American prisons and jails. They spend at least 23 hours a day in their cells, and some remain in solitary for years or even decades.

Solitary confinement in our prisons and jails may be the most pressing domestic human rights problem to which most Americans remain largely oblivious. But today, supporters and foes of the practice descended on Capitol Hill for a [hearing](#) of the Senate Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights, convened by subcommittee chairman Dick Durbin. An overflow crowd of some 200 spectators came there to witness what was somewhat amazingly the first-ever congressional hearing on solitary confinement.

Durbin opened the proceedings with a surprisingly strong indictment of solitary confinement as it is practiced in US prisons. The senator, who had visited the notorious Tamms supermax in his home state of Illinois and was apparently much-affected by the experience, called on his colleagues to visit prisons in their states and witness the conditions for themselves. America has led the way with human rights around the world, Durbin said. But what do our prisons say about our American values?

You can read the rest on [MotherJones.com](#).

A full transcript of the hearing has been added to our [Resources section](#), along with an archive of over 70 pieces of written testimony submitted before the hearing.

Opponents of solitary confinement are urging concerned citizens to follow up on this historic hearing by writing to Chairman Durbin and other members of the subcommittee to thank them for holding the hearing and urge them to further investigate and institute reforms of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons and jails. For more information, see Petitions and Letter Writing on our [Action page](#).

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 flickering light of hope coming out of the darkness ..change is coming

Dick Durbin, thank you for shedding light on all issues dealing with Solitary Confinement. It is my opinion that solitary confinement does not punish people, it destroys them. It is shameful that our government allows this treatment. VERY Shameful!!!

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Thank you for your excellent service Senator Durbin!

Wonderful to have the report and the record. THANK YOU!!
George Swanson

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