

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | March 22, 2012

The issue of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons has lately received prominent coverage in the *New York Times*. First, a front page article ran on March 10 with the (somewhat overly optimistic) title [Prisons Rethink Isolation, Saving Money, Lives and Sanity](#). The article touched on the troubled history and harmful effects of solitary confinement, and focused on successful efforts by a handful of states most prominently Mississippi to reduce their use of prison isolation.

Five days later, a strongly worded *Times* editorial called [The Abuse of Solitary Confinement](#) denounced the practice as counterproductive and as futile and cruel. It, too, held up the example of Mississippi, and noted that Colorado, Illinois, Maine, Ohio and Washington are working to reduce the number of prisoners in solitary, and other states are considering making this shift. But others remain blind to the evidence.

Both are comprehensive and powerful pieces, and both emphasize the harm multiple harms caused by solitary confinement, and the benefits found in reducing its use. (Though they arguably give too much credit to Mississippi corrections officials, rather than to the prisoners, the ACLU, and other advocates whose lawsuit forced their hand). Together, they no doubt brought this issue to the attention of tens of thousands of readers who had previously given it little thought.

Conspicuously absent from both the article and the editorial, however, was any mention of the gross overuse of prison isolation that is taking place on the *New York Times* own patch. According to the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, some 4,500 prisoners are in some form of isolated confinement in the states prisons. This consists of approximately 8 percent of its total prison population, and is more than twice the national average. In New York City, the rate is, if anything, even higher: On Rikers Island, which is [dramatically expanding its use of solitary confinement](#), there are now nearly a thousand isolation cells, some of them specifically designated for juveniles and people with mental illness.

In response to this omission, John Boston and Sarah Kerr of the Legal Aid Society's Prisoners Rights Project wrote a letter to the editor of the *Times*, which was published on March 13 under the heading [How New York Practices Solitary Confinement](#):

Rethinking Solitary Confinement (front page, March 11) reports on the Mississippi prisons drastic reduction in the use of solitary confinement. Similar successful efforts are under way in other states, including Maine and Colorado.

In contrast, New York City is going backward: the Department of Correction is carrying out a drastic increase in solitary confinement cells (pretrial detainees held in 23-hour lock-in, with only an hour a day for exercise and showers).

The jail population has been falling for years, yet the department plans an expansion that will give New York City one of the highest rates of punitive segregation in the country.

New York City's jails notoriously chaotic, unruly and brutal need reform, but simply locking up more and more prisoners is not the solution. New York should follow Mississippi's lead.

A response appeared in the *Times* letters column yesterday, from Dora B. Schriro, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Correction, arguing that This city's Department of Correction is exceptionally well run. Its policies are progressive and highly effective. As for the use of punitive segregation, Schriro states: When an inmate seriously injures another inmate or assaults a correction officer in jail, there are consequences, just as there are consequences when an individual breaks the law in the community and is arrested by the police and sent to jail by the court. She does not mention that sentences in the Bronx are often doled out for nonviolent offenses, or that prisoners receive these sentences without the benefit of due process.

In response to the abuse of isolated confinement in New York, former prisoners, family members, and advocates have organized two coalitions: one focusing on [New York State prisons](#) and the other on [New York City jails](#). (Both welcome new members at their ongoing meetings; click on links for contact information.) Keep an eye on Solitary Watch for more reporting on this subject in the near future.

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

I am 72, married 50 years, two grown children and four grand children. I was a combat engineer in Army Reserve 1962-68, worked 30 years for major brokerage house. I have been bipolar 1 since 1980 and when I learnt 30 percent of inmates mentally ill in prison, I became involved in JAC jail Advocacy Coalition and my wife and I participated in DOC protest on Chambers Street. The public must become aware that solitary confinement is torture and that 95 percent of inmates eventually are released, most without treatment for their mental illness or skills for coping with life on the outside. We met with the Commissioner who never discussed how we can unite with her, the Corrections Officers Benevolent Association to secure safety of both the prisoners and the guards. We also want the public to think of these guards as correction officers who are well trained, and deal with prisoners on a human basis. If fear between officers and inmates exist, both parties will think of them and us instead of we. The turnover rate for officers is high, and the stress associated with their work leads them to drinking. allanfeinblum@aol.com

@Carl I wish we had a like button on here! Good background info I hope it is put to use.

Hmmm Dora B. Schriro, where have I heard that name before?? Oh yes, she ran the Arizona state prison system before Chuck Ryan took over in 2009. She didn't do a very good job here in my honest opinion and I can attest to the fact she never made it down to the SMU except for visiting death row area in a very controlled dog and pony show manner. In one way and out the same within less than fifteen minutes on the average except when she was touring her legal students around but still never entered the short corridors or GP, just death row.

The other areas were never visited by her and her knowledge about solitary confinement is limited to the advice she got from her most trusted and not from those who ran the place ~~ hence since she never once asked me about SMU II and I was there for over 18 months as the unit deputy warden.. so she probably has the same advisors today.. I don't think much of her management style and how she operates prisons including solitary confinement.

Way to get it out there NY Times and Solitary Watch! I spent 10 years in prison on drug charges, some of in the SHU-Solitary. I had many people and religious groups writing me and it helped me turn my life around by writing novels. I now have 7 published on Amazon with great reviews. We need to focus on helping the prisoners turn their lives around and use them as examples of positive change. Part of what the inmates involved in the hunger strike is to get more access to rehabilitative programs, self help and religious group involvement.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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