

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/09/26/the-other-death-sentence-aging-and-dying-in-prison/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | September 26, 2012

The title of this post is the title of a new article by James Ridgeway that appears on [Mother Jones](#) and [New American Media](#). It begins this way:

William Lefty Gilday had been in prison 40 years when the dementia began to set in. At 82, he was already suffering from advanced Parkinsons disease and a host of other ailments, and his friends at MCI Shirley, a medium security prison in Massachusetts, tried to take care of him as best they could. Most of them were aging lifers like Lefty, facing the prospect of one day dying behind bars themselves, so they formed an ad hoc hospice team in their crowded ward. They bought special food from the commissary, heated it in an ancient microwave, and fed it to their friend. They helped him to the toilet and cleaned him up. Joe Labriola, 64, tried to see that Lefty got a little sunshine every day, wheeling his chair out into the yard and sitting with his arm around him to keep him from falling out.

But Lefty, who was serving life without parole for killing a police officer during a failed bank heist in 1970, slipped ever deeper into dementia. One day he threw an empty milk carton at a guard and was placed in a medical bubble, a kind of solitary confinement unit with a glass window that enables health care staffers to keep an eye on the prisoner. His friends were denied entrance, but Joe managed to slip in one day. He recalls an overpowering stench of piss and shit and a stack of unopened food containers. Lefty explained that he couldn't open the tabs. Joe also noticed that the nurses in the adjoining observation room had blocked the glass with manila folders so they wouldn't have to look at the old man.

Lefty Gilday was no ordinary inmate, but in one regard he typified a growing segment of America's inmate population: geriatric prisoners. The United States leads the world in incarceration, with more than 2.2 million people in its prisons and jails, and the graying of this population is shaping up to be a crisis with moral, practical, and economic implications for cash-strapped governments. In recent years, a growing number of advocates and even a handful of corrections officials and politicians have dared to suggest that we consider setting some of these old-timers free.

As of 2010, state and federal prisons housed more than 26,000 inmates 65 and older and nearly five times that number 55 and up, according to a recent [Human Rights Watch](#) report. (Both numbers are significant, since long-term incarceration is said to add 10 years to a person's physical age; in prison, 55 is old.) From 1995 to 2010, as America's prison population grew 42 percent, the number of inmates over 55 grew at nearly seven times that rate. Today, roughly 1 in 12 state and federal prison inmates is 55 or older.

The trend is worsening. A new report from the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) estimates that, by 2030, the over-55 group will number more than 400,000, about a third of the overall prison population.

The article goes on to tell what it is like to grow old in prison, through the story of a group of aging lifers in Massachusetts. You can read the full article [here](#), and view a powerful photo essay by Tim Gruber, shot inside a Kentucky prison's nursing unit, [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](#)

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October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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Is there any way they can come home to die?

Needless to say it hurt to read this as my beloved Edward died in prison this year at the age of 79. Funny too I just noticed the above comment by Tim Hurley was posted on what would have been Edwards 80th birthday.

I'll testify that being in prison after age 55 is REAL old. It sucked. Am grateful for the grace of freedom today.

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