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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Policy Issue Resources

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella](#) | February 6, 2017

The film [Solitary: Inside Red Onion State Prison premieres on HBO](#) tonight at 10 pm ET. More than three years in the making, it is the first feature-length documentary and one of the only films of any kind to penetrate the hidden world of solitary confinement. Filmed entirely in and around Red Onion, a [notorious supermax](#) in southwestern Virginia, the film captures the chilling environment of a place designed specifically for extreme isolation, and includes in-depth interviews with half a dozen men held in solitary for years, as well as with staff who work there.

Solitary Watch interviewed the film's director, [Kristi Jacobson](#), about her motivations for making the film, her experiences inside Red Onion, and her hopes for the impact her work will have on the growing debate over solitary confinement. (A viewing guide to the film, authored by Solitary Watch, is available [here](#).)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2eAOzxZNjyE>

SW: *You began working on this film in 2012, when the issue of solitary confinement was even less talked about than it is today. What made you decide to make a film about solitary, despite the obvious challenges of using a visual medium to document a largely invisible practice?*

KJ: I think its invisibility is what drew me to it. As a documentary filmmaker, we are often faced with challenges of the medium, and its those challenges that lead to the most creative solutions. In this case, I wasn't expecting to gain the access we ultimately gained, but once we began filming inside the prison, it informed our creative and visual approach: Rather than creating a film that presents a comprehensive report on solitary across the U.S., the film takes place exclusively in and around this one prison, and is ultimately a more evocative film that explores our punitive penal criminal justice society, and what it means to be human, and a part of humankind.

SW: *With only a few exceptions, filmmakers (along with journalists and the public) have been banned from supermax prisons and solitary confinement units. How did you gain access to Red Onion Prison and the men held there? What conditions, if any, were placed on your access?*

KJ: Yes, I learned quickly that supermax prisons were dubbed domestic Black Sites because for decades they have denied access to both journalists and the public. I became aware of several states that had begun to take various measures to reduce the number of prisoners held in solitary confinement, or segregation. At the time I reached out, Virginia had implemented a step-down program and because they were making changes, they may have been more open to the request. The initial ask was to film for a few days inside the prison, and then, subsequent requests over the course of a year were granted. In terms of restrictions, other than those relating to security, there were none.

SW: *The film immerses viewers in the sights and sounds and everyday routines of a supermax prison: the bright lights and sterile design, the constant screaming and banging, the rituals of cuffing up and receiving meals through a food slot. How much time did you yourselves spend inside the prison, and what were your own reactions and responses to being inside that world?*

KJ: We spent two to four days in the prison at a time, and returned multiple times to the prison. My own reaction to being inside that world is difficult to put into words. It's a place where there is a lot of pain, surrounding you on all sides. Although I could never truly understand what it's like to be locked in isolation, or what it's like to work there, I gained some understanding of the toll it must take. I began to feel the place had an impact on me that I didn't anticipate. For example, the sound of the placethe yelling and the banging remained so clear and present in my head for days following our first few shoots, and later, I felt myself begin to become desensitized to those same sounds.

SW: *The incarcerated men featured in the film have, for the most part, committed some serious and violent offenses, both outside and inside of prison. As such, they are not necessarily representative of the majority of people in solitary, who are there for nonviolent rule violations, for acting out due to untreated mental illness, or even for their own protection. How do you reconcile this disparity, and how do you hope viewers will respond to the people featured in the film?*

KJ: I feel the condition itself causes irreparable harm. No one could spend a night in jail or solitary and ever understand what its like to be there without any certainty youll ever get out. Whether you deserve it or not, the harm is really difficult to repair, if not irreparable. Human beings are forever changed by it, and not for the better. People talk about how juveniles, the mentally ill, and pregnant women shouldnt be in solitary confinementand they absolutely should notbut the question should be whether any one should be locked up that way at all.

SW: *You also interview corrections officers, who spend up to half their waking hours inside the supermax. How do you think solitary confinement affects the people who work in these sites, and how do you hope viewers will respond to their situation?*

KJ: Studies have shown that those working in supermax prisonsoften experience high incidence of PTSD, depression, and shorter life spans. After spending a few days filming at the prison, and getting to know some of the men and women working there, it struck me that theirs is an untold story, and I hoped to shed some light on it. I hope that viewers will see that we are all affected by this system, and this includes those working in prisons designed to dehumanize inmates.

SW: *Youve now shown the film at several festivals, as well as screenings for Congress and the Virginia Department of Corrections. Tonight millions of people will see it on HBO. What have responses been like so far? What impact do you believe the film can have?*

KJ: I hope that those who watch the film will come into it with an open mind, and experience the film in its entirety. I hope the film will ultimately move those audiences to see that our shared humanity should be paramount, and this includes what happens inside our prisons. I hope that the film could give those in positions of power and influence a new perspective, to see the importance and necessity of reforming the systemnot by band-aiding it, but but truly looking at its intention and outcomes and creating a system that is human and restorative-driven rather than punishment-focused.

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.

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