

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/07/12/new-yorks-black-sites-new-article-about-solitary-confinement-in-state-prisons/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | July 12, 2012

The latest issue of *The Nation*, which went up on the web today and hits newsstands in a week or so, includes a [long story](#) by us on solitary confinement in New York State prisons. The article includes information on how, in this blue state, the system works to maintain the highest level of disciplinary confinement in the country, and one of the highest levels of isolated confinement overall. It includes interviews with current and former prisoners, a former corrections officer, lawyers, and advocates. Be sure to read through to the end for some remarkable writing by an inmate who has been in solitary in New York for close to 25 years. The piece begins this way:

Johnny Tremont's trip to solitary confinement started with having too many postage stamps. Until then, he'd been a model prisoner. When Tremont (whose name in this article has been changed at his request) entered the New York prison system at age 20, he was a well-spoken kid from an upstate college town who excelled at pretty much anything he put his mind to. In high school, he'd put his mind to dealing cocaine. Once he was sent to Five Points Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in the Finger Lakes region, he put his mind to keeping his nose clean and getting what he could out of his fifteen-year sentence. He enrolled in every program available, quickly earned his GED and then started tutoring other prisoners working toward theirs.

To relieve the monotony, Tremont sometimes bet on sports with other inmates, using the common prison currency of postage stamps. I was on my way to pay the guy who won a pool between a few friends, he recalls, when he was caught with 200 stamps, well over the allowable number. This earned him a month in keeplock—round-the-clock confinement to his own cell. His cellmate was also on keeplock, and when Tremont could no longer stand the crowding and idleness, he talked a guard into letting him out to go to his prison job. Caught playing basketball instead, he was sent to twenty-eight days in the Box.

The Box is how New York prisoners refer to solitary confinement. Less colloquially, it's the SHU (pronounced shoe), for Special Housing Unit, the states' euphemism for its isolation cells. Officially, New York places prisoners in disciplinary or administrative segregation, but regardless of the label, the conditions are the same as in prisons across the country: twenty-three hours a day in a cell the size of the average suburban bathroom.

A common misconception is that solitary confinement is a punishment of last resort, reserved for inmates who present a threat of violence or escape. The reality, especially in New York, which has the highest generic xanax-not-working rate of disciplinary segregation in the country, is that it's very much a punishment of first resort, doled out for minor rule violations as well as major offenses. In New York, the most common reason for a stint in solitary is creating a disturbance or demonstration. This can mean anything from mouthing off to guards to fomenting a riot, and it often involves inmates with psychoses or other psychiatric problems. Second is dirty urinetesting positive for drugs of any kind. In a prison system where 85 percent of inmates are in need of substance-abuse treatment, drug use alone can get you up to ninety days in solitary, and a year if it happens multiple times. Other infractions include refusing to obey orders, interfering with employees, being out of place and possession of contraband—not only a shiv but a joint, a cellphone or too many postage stamps.

With some 80,000 prisoners in solitary, the United States leads the world in isolating its citizens as well as incarcerating them. Though growing local and national movements are fighting solitary confinement as costly, dangerous and fundamentally inhumane, and though states from Maine to Mississippi have taken steps to reduce its use in this bluest of states, the prison system is in effect rigged to keep its plentiful isolation cells filled, and thousands of inmates spend weeks, months, years, even decades in solitary. On any given day, there are about 4,500 men, women and children in some form of isolated confinement in New York State prisons. (In New York City's jails, run under a separate system, there are close to 1,000 more.)

Twenty-eight days is a relatively short sentence in a state where prisoners can spend decades in the Box. But either way, conditions are so extreme, says Tremont, there's more of a difference between being in solitary confinement and being in general population than there is between being in prison and being in the free world. In general population, he says, you do your programming, go to meals, talk to people, and you can still manage to feel like a human being. In the Box, you're like an animal in a cage.

We call it no-touch torture, says Bonnie Kerness, who heads the American Friends Service Committees Prison Watch Project. No one who has ever experienced more than the briefest time in solitary would call it anything else, because it was designed to destroy the mind and break the spirit. While a lot of New Yorkers are concerned with the torture that's gone on in Iraq and Afghanistan or at Guantanamo,

she adds, they're living with black sites in their own backyards.

Read the rest [here](#). (Special thanks to our wonderful editor [Liliana Segura](#).)

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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Fred, you have to pray!

WHAT DO I DO TO SEEK HELP FROM MENTAL ILLNESS FROM SOLITARY CONFINEMENT, I WAS IN NEW YORK PRISONS 3 TIMES AND EVERY TIME WAS WORSE THAN THE LAST NOW AT 49 I CAN NOT FIND A JOB I AM ALWAYS ANGRY AND DEPRESSED AND FEEL THERE IS NO WAY TO HAVE A NORMAL LIFE, MY DRIVERS LICENSE IS REVOKED WHICH MAKES IT EVEN MORE DIFFICULT TO FIND A JOB AND I AM ALWAYS PARANOID AND FAIL AT EVERYTHING I DO AND CAN NOT COMPLETE ANY TASK IN A TIMELY MANNER THERE IS CLOSE TO NO HELP FOR PEOPLE LIKE MYSELF AND I AM STUCK LIVING ON FOOD STAMPS AND WELFARE AND THIS IS NOT ENOUGH FUNDS TO DO ANY THING TO MOVE FORWARD IN LIFE, AND PUT THE PAST BEHIND ME, BECAUSE THE SYSTEM DOESNT ALLOW YOU TO DO SO THIS WILL ALWAYS HAUNT YOU IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER, IF YOU HAVE THE ANSWERS PLEASE CONTACT ME ASAP, I FEEL I HAVE NOTHING TO LIVE FOR ANY LONGER SO THE NEW YORK PRISON SYSTEM HAS SUCCEEDED IN TAKING ANOTHER LIFE THIS IS HOW THIS SYSTEM IS DESIGNED TO WORK, I AM BEAT DOWN AND HAVE LOST ALL HOPE AND MY SPIRIT IS LIKE A GHOST

Once religious people on their own will lived in a cell in order to find God and to put things straight within their soul. This might have been the original idea when religious people wish an offender should remorse publicly. Both ideas have been turned into the wrong by the great hidden persuader. Only if people recognize society loses one way of fairness and truth, nation with world wide highest prisoner rate will change one's opinion.

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