



About Solitary Watch

News from a Nation in Lockdown
www.solitarywatch.com

Solitary Watch is a web-based project aimed at bringing solitary confinement out of the shadows and into the light of the public square. Our mission is to provide the public—as well as practicing attorneys, legal scholars, law enforcement and corrections officers, policymakers, educators, advocates, and prisoners—with the first centralized source for background research, unfolding developments, and original reporting on solitary confinement in the United States.

The use and abuse of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons is one of the most pressing domestic human rights issues in America today—and also one of the most invisible. The routine isolation of prisoners has grown dramatically in the past three decades, outpacing even the growth in the general prison population. Today, at least 25,000 prisoners are being held in long-term solitary in the nation's "supermax" facilities. According to available data, the total number of prisoners living in solitary confinement in all prisons and jails exceeds 80,000.

Far from being a last-resort measure reserved for the "worst of the worst," solitary confinement has become a control strategy of first resort in many prisons. Today, inmates can be placed in complete isolation for months or years not only for violent acts but for possessing contraband, using drugs, ignoring orders, or using profanity. Thousands of prisoners are held in indefinite solitary confinement because they have been named as gang members by other inmates who are rewarded for the information. Others have ended up in solitary because they have untreated mental illnesses, are children in need of "protection," are gay or transgender, are Muslim, have unsavory political beliefs, or report rape or abuse by prison officials. In Virginia, a dozen Rastafarian men have been in solitary for ten years because they refuse to cut their hair on religious grounds.

For the inmates who endure it, life in solitary confinement means spending at least 23 hours a day in a cell that measures, on average, 6 x 9 feet, within prisons that have made a science out of isolation. Their meals generally come through slots in the solid steel doors of their cells, as do any communications with prison staff. Some are permitted to exercise one hour a day, alone, in a fenced or walled "dog run." Prisoners in solitary confinement may be denied visits, telephone calls, television, reading materials, and art supplies. And they can

remain in isolation for months, years, or decades. In Louisiana, two prisoners now in their sixties have been in solitary confinement for more than 39 years.

Numerous studies have found evidence of the psychological damage caused by solitary confinement. As little as a week in solitary has been shown to affect EEG activity, while longer stretches produce psychopathologies at an alarmingly high rate. For those prisoners already suffering from mental illness, solitary confinement can cause irreparable psychological damage as well as extreme mental anguish. Studies have shown that a highly disproportionate number of prison suicides take place in solitary confinement.

Polls show that a clear majority of Americans oppose the use of torture under any circumstances, even on foreign terrorism suspects. Yet conditions in U.S. prisons and jails that transgress the boundaries of humane treatment, have produced little outcry. The widespread practice of solitary confinement, in particular, has received scant media attention, and has yet to find a firm place in the public discourse or on political platforms.

Founded in response to this death or information and advocacy, Solitary Watch produces a daily blog, as well as longer investigative articles and fact sheets on various aspects of solitary confinement. It maintains a comprehensive library of resources on solitary confinement. A quarterly print edition is sent free of charge to prisoners, and Solitary Watch publishes "Voices from Solitary"—firsthand writing and video testimonies that give a human face to the facts and figures, and to a subset of inmates that is even more invisible than the prison population at large. Finally, Solitary Watch is developing an ambitious data bank on solitary confinement, in cooperation with Washington and Lee University Law School and other academic partners.

Recent challenges to the use and abuse of solitary confinement by the ACLU, American Friends Service Committee, and National Religious Campaign Against Torture, as well as grassroots groups and prisoners themselves, clearly show that this is an issue whose time has come. The goal of Solitary Watch is to support and inform these efforts, and to help place solitary confinement on the public agenda as an undeniable issue of basic human rights.