



## Suffering in Solitary: The Plight of Prisoners with Mental Illness

By James Ridgeway and Jean Casella

"Dear America," reads a letter from Anthony Gay, who is being held in solitary confinement in Tamms supermax prison in Illinois, "It is like this place is designed to psychologically kill you. How could America be so cruel to its own people?" As reported in the *Belleville News-Democrat*, Gay's lawyers claim that a seven-year term in round-the-clock isolation damaged their client's mind so deeply that he routinely mutilates himself, and at one point cut off a piece of his genitals and hung it from a string on his cell door. Originally sentenced to seven years for robbery and assault, Gay is now serving 99 years for throwing his feces at guards.

Anthony Gay's case is extreme, but far from unique. Across the United States, countless numbers of inmates with mental illness are being held 23- to 24-hour solitary confinement. With state psychiatric hospitals closed and community mental health funds cut to the bone, prisons and jails are now our largest inpatient facilities for the mentally ill--and solitary confinement cells, in particular, have become America's new asylums.

While there are no national statistics to indicate how many prisoners with mental illness end up in solitary, a 2003 report from Human Rights Watch found that, based on available data from states around the country, one-third to one-half of prisoners held in "secure housing units" (SHUs), and "special management units" (SMUs) suffered from mental illness. Since the total population of inmates in solitary confinement is thought to number 70,000 or more, tens of thousands of prisoners with mental illness may be in isolation on any given day.

The Human Rights Watch report concluded that "persons with mental illness often have difficulty complying with strict prison rules, particularly when there is scant assistance to help them manage their disorders....Eventually accumulating substantial histories of disciplinary infractions, they land for prolonged peri-

ods in disciplinary or administrative segregation." In other words, they are placed in solitary precisely because they display the symptoms of untreated mental illness. Given that isolation has been shown to cause severe psychological trauma even in prisoners without preexisting psychiatric conditions, it would be difficult to imagine a more damaging place to incarcerate the mentally ill. As another Tamms prisoner suggested, "Lock yourself in your bathroom for the next 10 years and tell me how it will affect your mind."

At the all-solitary Colorado State Penitentiary, Troy Anderson has spent the last 10 years in isolation, never seeing the sun or the surrounding mountains. Anderson has been diagnosed with ADHD, bipolar disorder, intermittent explosive disorder, anti-social personality disorder, cognitive disorders, a seizure disorder and substance dependence, and he has attempted suicide many times, starting at the age of 10. His mental health treatment in prison has consisted largely of intermittent and inappropriate medications and scant therapy, most of it conducted through a slot in his solid steel cell door. By Colorado's own estimate, 37 per cent of the prisoners in its isolation units suffer from mental illness.

Other prisoners with mental illness do not survive their time in solitary confinement. Studies of prison suicides in New York and California found a vastly disproportionate number of them took place in isolation cells.

Terry Kupers, a professor at the Wright Institute in Berkeley and a nationally recognized expert on the psychological effects of solitary confinement, testified in a Wisconsin case that "confinement of prisoners suffering from serious mental illnesses, or who are prone to serious mental illness or suicide, is an extreme hazard to their mental health and wellbeing. It causes irreparable emotional damage and psychiatric disability as well an extreme mental anguish and suffering, and in some cases presents a risk of death by

suicide." A California judge put it somewhat differently: In a case concerning Pelican Bay State Prison, he said that placing prisoners with mental illness in solitary confinement was "the mental equivalent of putting an asthmatic in a place with little air."

Research indicates that even for prisoners without underlying mental health problems, long-term solitary confinement can alter neural and therefore psychological states. Wilbert Rideau, a renowned prison journalist (and now a free man), describes in his recent memoir *In the Place of Justice* the "bone-cold loneliness" of life in solitary confinement on Angola's death row—"removed from family or anything resembling a friend, and just being there, with no purpose or meaning to my life, cramped in a cage smaller than an American bathroom. The lonesomeness was only increased by the constant cacophony of men in adjacent cells hurling shouted insults, curses, and arguments—not to mention the occasional urine or faeces concoction. Deprivation of both physical exercise and meaningful social interaction were so severe...that some men went mad while others feigned lunacy in order to get transferred to the hospital for the criminally insane."

In recent years, lawsuits and grassroots movements in California, Illinois, Maine, New York, and elsewhere have spurred new policies or legislation limiting the use of solitary confinement on prisoners with serious mental illness. These changes represent an important step toward more humane treatment. Yet until a major shift in thinking and policymaking takes place, we will continue to see thousands of inmates with mental illness suffering in solitary.

*A version of this article is forthcoming in Fortune News, the publication of the Fortune Society. The mission of the New York-based Fortune Society "is to support successful reentry from prison and promote alternatives to incarceration, thus strengthening the fabric of our communities." See [www.fortunesociety.org](http://www.fortunesociety.org).*

## About Solitary Watch

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.

Solitary Watch produces a daily blog, as well as longer investigative articles and fact sheets on various aspects of solitary confinement, and maintains a comprehensive library of resources on solitary confinement. It also 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.

Solitary Watch is on the web at [www.solitarywatch.com](http://www.solitarywatch.com).

The print edition of Solitary Watch is produced quarterly, and includes a small selection of pieces from the site. It is available free of charge to current and former prisoners, to prisoners’ families and advocates, and to non-profit organizations. To receive a copy, send a request to the address or email below.

We also welcome accounts of life in solitary confinement, as well as stories, poems, essays, and artwork by inmates who have served time in isolation. Please send contributions to “**Voices from Solitary**” at the address below.

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## Santa Was in Prison and Jesus Got the Death Penalty

By Jean Casella and James Ridgeway

As Christmas is celebrated in Incarceration Nation, it’s worth remembering certain things about the two figures who dominate this holiday.

As more than 3,000 Americans sit on death row, we revere the birth of a godly man who was arrested, “tried,” sentenced, and put to death by the state. The Passion is the story of an execution, and the Stations of the Cross trace the path of a Dead Man Walking.

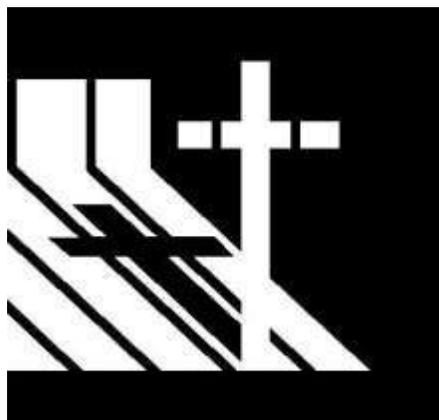
Less well known is the fact that Saint Nicholas, the early Christian saint who inspired Santa Claus, was once a prisoner, like one in every 100 Americans today. Though he was beloved for his kindness and generosity, Nicholas acquired sainthood not only by giving alms, but in part by performing a miracle that more or less amounted to a prison break.

Nicholas was the 4th-century Greek Bishop of Myra (in present-day Turkey). Under the Roman emperor Diocletian, who persecuted Christians, Nicholas spent some five years in prison—and according to some accounts, in solitary confinement.

Under Constantine, the first Christian

emperor, Nicholas fared better until the Council of Nicaea, in 325 A.D. There, after having a serious theological argument with another powerful bishop, Nicholas became so enraged that he walked across the room and slapped the man.

It was illegal for one bishop to strike another. According to an account provided by the St. Nicholas Center: “The bishops stripped Nicholas of his bishop’s garments, chained him, and threw him into jail. That would keep Nicholas away from the meeting. When the Council ended a final decision would be made about his future.”



Nicholas spent the night praying for guidance, and was visited by Jesus and Mary. “When the jailer came in the morning, he found the chains loose on the floor and Nicholas dressed in bishop’s robes, quietly reading the Scriptures.” It was determined that no one could have visited or helped him during the night. Constantine ordered Nicholas freed and reinstated as the Bishop of Myra, and his feat would later be declared one of many miracles performed by the saint.

Saint Nicholas lived on to serve the poor during the devastating famine that hit his part of Turkey in 342 AD. He is reported to have anonymously visited starving families at night and distributed gold coins to help them buy scarce food.

But here in the United States two thousand years later, Christians go to church to worship an executed savior and shop to commemorate an incarcerated saint. And most Americans give little thought to their 2 million countrymen who are spending this Christmas behind bars.

*To all those spending the holidays alone in a cell, we send wishes for peace and strength.*

# Voices from Solitary: The Meaning of “Life”

By Joseph Dole

*Editor’s Note: Joseph Dole is serving a life sentence without parole. For the past eight years he has been in solitary confinement at Tamms supermax in Illinois. His writing has been honored by the PEN Prison Writing Contest and appears in the book Lockdown Prison Heart. The following is excerpted from a longer essay.*

Rarely am I asked what it’s like to serve a life-without-parole sentence. Arguing for a death sentence for my first felony conviction, the State’s Attorney implored the judge not to allow me to spend the rest of my life on a virtual “vacation” in prison. I can unequivocally state that it is not vacation.

A life-without-parole sentence means a million things, because, as its name suggests, it encompasses a person’s entire remaining life.

It means enduring being reduced to a second-class citizen in the eyes of most people. It means decades of discrimination from the courts and public. “Prisoner” “inmate,” or “convict” each have a strictly pejorative use in the media or pop culture. Those terms become the sole defining characteristic of a man’s entire character.

It means that courts will turn a blind eye to any act against you unless it causes “atypical and significant hardship.”...So when you’re stripped naked and left in a concrete box with nothing but a toilet for four days without cause, as a prisoner you have no recourse in the courts. When you’re beaten to a bloody mess while handcuffed, as a prisoner you’re more likely to encounter a jury that will conclude you deserved what you got, regardless of the circumstances.

It means that after being “spared” the death penalty and receiving your life-without-parole sentence, you lack all the procedural safeguards against a wrongful conviction that a death sentence would have entailed, solely because you were found undeserving of immediate death. How ironic it is that the worse you are deemed to be, the better chance of proving your innocence and regaining your freedom.

It means a lifetime of censorship, where you’re told what books and magazines you can read, what movies can watch, even what hairstyles you can sport, and where every letter coming in or going out is subject to inspection.

It means a complete lack of privacy forever, and a complete indifference to your physical and medical health until someone fears being sued. It means a constant, heightened risk of catching a deadly disease...

It means three meals a day of the poorest quality food that the least amount of money can buy without killing the inmate population.

It means you’re constantly being told that you aren’t worth rehabilitation and thus are ineligible for nearly every educational or vocational program. Your life sentence disqualifies you from any state or federal grants to pursue an education and even the Inmate Scholarship Fund (founded by a prisoner) has no qualms about telling you that you’re ineligible for a scholarship because you’re never going to get out and contribute to society.

It means convincing yourself daily that your life has value even when the rest of the world tells you you’re worthless. It’s a lifetime spent wondering what your true potential really is, and yearning for the chance to find out...

It means that you’re especially vulnerable to incomprehensible punishments, such as a lifetime of disciplinary segregation. I was given indeterminate disciplinary segregation after being found guilty of my sole disciplinary infraction. That was 8 years ago, yet here I remain. I’ve been told (on more than one occasion) that I will never be allowed out of indeterminate disciplinary segregation. So I will continue to endure conditions for the rest of my life which are known to cause mental illness after just 3 months.

It means that I will never taste another Hostess cake. Nor play softball or any group activity ever again. More importantly, it means that I will never have physical contact with another

human being for the rest of my life, including my 11- and 12-year-old daughters.

It means being incapable of taking care of your grandparents and parents as they reach their final years. It means missing out on every important event in your children’s lives, unable to raise them; impotent to protect them or assist them in any meaningful way. It means they’ll grow up resenting you for the thousands of times they needed you and you weren’t there.

A life-without-parole sentence means constant contemplation of a wasted life. A continual despair as to your inability to accomplish anything significant with your remaining years. A life spent watching as each of your family members and friends slowly drift away from you leaving you in a vacuum, devoid of any enduring relationships.

It’s a persistent dashing of hopes as appeal after appeal is arbitrarily denied. It is a permanent experiment in self-delusion as you strive to convince yourself that there is still hope. It’s a compounding of second upon second, minute upon minute, hour upon hour, of wasted existence, and decade upon decade of mental and emotional torture culminating in a final sentence of death by incarceration.

These, though, are simply futile attempts to describe the indescribable. It’s like trying to describe a broken heart or communicate what it feels like to mourn the death of your soul mate. The words to convey the pain do not exist. When you’re serving a life-without-parole sentence it’s as if you’re experiencing the broken heart of knowing you’ll never love or be loved again in any normal sense of the word, while simultaneously mourning the death of the man you could have and should have been. The only difference is that you never recover, and can move on from neither the heart break nor the death because the pain is renewed each morning you wake up to realize that you’re still here, sentenced to life-without-parole. It’s a fresh day of utter despair, lived over and over for an entire lifetime.

# UN Torture Investigator Calls for Ban on Solitary Confinement

On October 18, the UN's chief torture investigator called on UN member nations to ban nearly all uses of solitary confinement in prisons. Juan Mendez, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment, warned that solitary confinement causes serious mental and physical harm and often amounts to torture.

Mendez presented a written report on solitary confinement to the UN General Assembly's Human Rights Committee, which singled out for criticism the routine use of supermax isolation in the United States. He also participated in a forum on the "dangerous overuse" of solitary confinement in U.S. prison and jails, along with American civil rights and human rights groups that included the American Civil Liberties Union, Human Rights Watch, and National Religious Campaign Against Torture.

Mendez stated that solitary confinement "can amount to torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment when used as a punishment, during pretrial detention, indefi-

nately or for a prolonged period, for persons with mental disabilities or juveniles." He continued, "Segregation, isolation, separation, cellular, lockdown, supermax, the hole, secure housing unit...whatever the name, solitary confinement should be banned by states as a punishment or extortion [of information] technique."

Mendez was precise in defining solitary confinement, and in outlining the limitations that should be placed on its use. He stated:

"I am of the view that juveniles, given their physical and mental immaturity, should never be subjected to solitary confinement. Equally, in order not to exacerbate a previously existing mental condition, individuals with mental disabilities should be provided with proper medical or psychiatric care and under no circumstances should they ever be subjected to solitary confinement. My recommendations are, first, to see if we can have a complete ban on prolonged or indefinite solitary confinement. And I

more or less arbitrarily defined that as anything beyond 15 days of solitary confinement, meaning someone being confined to a cell for at least 22 hours a day."

As Reuters reports, "Mendez told reporters he conceded that short-term solitary confinement was admissible under certain circumstances, such as the protection of lesbian, gay or bisexual detainees or people who had fallen foul of prison gangs. But he said there was 'no justification for using it as a penalty, because that's an inhumane penalty.'" Mendez also made reference to the case of accused WikiLeaks Bradley Manning, who spent over eight months in solitary at a military brig in Virginia before being moved to general population to await court-martial. Mendez said he "planned to issue a report on Manning and other cases in the next few weeks."

At a press conference, Mendez told reporters that he himself had spent three days in solitary in the 1970s in his native Argentina, then under military dictatorship, and they were "the three longest days in my life."

## Freed from an Iranian Prison, American Speaks Out Against Solitary

On November 6, the *New York Times* featured an op-ed titled "Tortured by Solitude." The author of the piece is Sarah Shourd, one of three Americans who were imprisoned in Iran beginning in the summer of 2009, after they were arrested and charged with espionage while hiking on the border with Iraqi Kurdistan. Her two male companions were jailed together, but Shourd was placed in solitary confinement in a 10-by-14-foot cell in Iran's notorious Evin Prison, and held there for more than a year.

"It's impossible to exaggerate how much the company of another human being means when you've been cut off from the world and stripped of your rights and freedom," Shourd writes. "After two months with next to no human contact, my mind began to slip. Some days, I heard phantom footsteps coming down the hall. I spent large portions of my days crouched down on all fours by a small slit in the door, lis-

tening. In the periphery of my vision, I began to see flashing lights, only to jerk my head around to find that nothing was there. More than once, I beat at the walls until my knuckles bled and cried myself into a state of exhaustion. At one point, I heard someone screaming, and it wasn't until I felt the hands of one of the friendlier guards on my face, trying to revive me, that I realized the screams were my own."

After describing the devastating psychological effects of isolation, Shourd decries its widespread use in the United States, which has "the most prisoners in solitary confinement in the world."

"Of the 14 and a half months, or 9,840 hours, I was held as a political hostage at Evin prison in Tehran, I spent 9,495 of them in solitary confinement," Shourd writes. "When I was released just over a year ago, I was shocked to find out that the United Nations Con-

vention Against Torture, one of the few conventions the United States has ratified, does not mention solitary confinement. I learned that there are untold numbers of prisoners around the world in solitary, including an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 in the United States." (The number is actually considerably higher.)

Shourd concludes: "You don't have to beat someone to inflict pain and suffering; the psychological torture of prolonged solitary confinement leaves no marks, but its effects are severe and long-lasting...It's wonderful to begin my life again, and every day I feel more free, but I can't help thinking about the thousands of others who are alone right now. I believe the excessive use of solitary confinement constitutes cruel and unusual punishment — that it is torture. The United Nations should proscribe this inhumane practice, and the United States should take the lead role in its eradication."