

Solitary confinement, also known as segregation or restrictive housing, is the extreme isolation inflicted upon incarcerated individuals who are held in cells for up to 24 hours a day with little to no human contact. A 2023 report by Solitary Watch and Unlock the Box revealed that in 2019, at least 122,840 individuals were locked in solitary confinement daily in prisons and jails across the United States.<sup>1</sup>

**Solitary confinement is widely used on migrants at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers across the country, often violating international human rights standards and even the U.S. government’s own policies. The practice is used as a method of control and punishment and is frequently applied arbitrarily. This not only enables physical abuse and racial discrimination against detainees, but also causes or worsens mental health damage, often leading to lifelong trauma or even suicide. Though ICE has employed solitary for years, its use has skyrocketed under the second Trump administration.**

## Use of Solitary Confinement in ICE Facilities

ICE detention is technically civil detention, meaning captivity within ICE’s numerous detention facilities is not supposed to be punishment, but rather a means to ensure that individuals undergoing lengthy immigration proceedings appear at their court hearings. Because the U.S. government doesn’t grant individuals in civil detention cases the same legal protections given to criminal defendants, detained immigrants are not afforded the right to court-appointed counsel, a speedy trial, or protections against cruel and unusual punishment.<sup>2</sup>

Detainees are typically held within ICE facilities until they are legally permitted entry into the United States or, more often than not, deported back to their countries of origin. Despite the fact that detainees within ICE facilities are solely accused of being in the United States without legal permission, detention conditions can be as bad as or worse than those of typical prisons.<sup>3</sup>

According to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) at Syracuse University, as of February 2026, ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Patrol detained approximately 68,289 individuals in detention facilities, a figure that had increased by nearly 30,000 since the end of the Biden administration.<sup>4</sup>

According to *Cruelty Campaign*, a report published in September 2025 by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), ICE placed over 10,500 individuals in solitary confinement between April 2024 and May 2025 alone, with placements nearly doubling from

551 in November 2024 to 986 in January 2025. Detainees were held in isolation for 38 consecutive days on average in early 2025, a figure that had more than doubled when compared to late 2021.<sup>5</sup>

The same report found that in December 2024, following the enactment of a rule requiring ICE to document every individual segregation regardless of the reason, the average number solitary confinement uses within ICE facilities increased on average by 80%, indicating prior underreporting.<sup>6</sup>

The report also found that uses of the practice have continued to increase even after the update in policy, with the number of individual segregations growing by 6.5% per month on average from February to May 2025, a rate that had jumped over 50% when compared to 2018 through 2023.<sup>7</sup>

## Solitary Confinement as Punishment

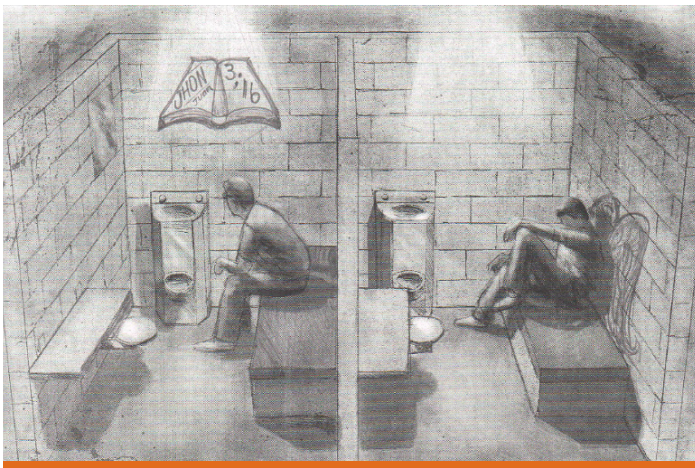
*“The guards would punish me for any little thing... One time, they locked me in a solitary cell for an entire day because I didn’t have my shirt on when I stood up during the [detainee] count. I felt like the guards were more strict about the rules with us Hispanics. It just felt like the guards punished us more often with solitary confinement.”*

—Kevin, previously detained individual<sup>8</sup>

ICE’s policy directs officers to consider other options before placing detained individuals in solitary confinement. According to the agency’s Segregation Directive, isolating detainees is a “serious step that requires careful consideration of alternatives.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite these guidelines, an analysis by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Office of the Inspector General (DHS OIG) of 474 segregation cases from 2015 to 2019 found no evidence that ICE considered alternatives to solitary in 72% of solitary placements in which alternatives may have been applicable. This same report found that officers often threatened detainees with solitary, and sometimes used the punishment as retaliation for filing abuse complaints against ICE officers or participating in hunger strikes, with many individuals being unaware as to why they were being isolated.<sup>10</sup>

PHR’s 2024 report, *Endless Nightmare*, found that in addition to retaliation, ICE officers often utilized solitary as punishment for extremely minor disciplinary infractions. These infractions included but were not limited to consensual kissing, providing others with haircuts, being sick, experiencing a mental health crisis, and belonging to the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>11</sup>



Adolfo Aguillon added a bible and angel wings to this drawing of solitary confinement cells at the jail originally published in the *Orange County Register*.

In fact, a 2024 survey of 41 LGBTQ+ and HIV-positive migrants held in ICE detention, conducted by the National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC), found that nearly half of the survey participants had been placed in solitary confinement.<sup>12</sup>

Kelly, a transgender asylum seeker, was placed in solitary for almost four months at the Pine Prairie ICE Processing Center in Louisiana. “The only thing they told me was that it was because of the way I looked,” she said. “They claimed it was for security reasons... Every time I closed my eyes... I began to have nightmares, horrible memories, things that I didn’t want to remember ... It’s still happening to me.”<sup>13</sup>

A 2024 survey of 77 detainees held within Pennsylvania’s largest ICE facility found migrant detainees were routinely subject to racism, abuse, and solitary confinement. Over 30% of interviewed migrants said they regularly faced racial or derogatory slurs from facility staff, with over 6% facing physical abuse.<sup>14</sup>

A 2024 study in the *Harvard Law Review* found individuals were often subject to solitary by facility staff for trivial cultural differences. Detainees were “thrown in the hole” for communicating in Spanish, requesting Spanish-language programming on the television, and fasting during Ramadan. The report attributes ICE’s mistreatment in part to punitive bipartisan anti-immigration legislation, which, by “criminaliz[ing] and dehumaniz[ing]” migrants, effectively rationalizes their abuse through methods such as solitary confinement.<sup>15</sup>

A 2020 study revealed that between 2013 and 2017, Black immigrants were six times as likely to be placed in solitary than other ethnic groups while detained by ICE.<sup>16</sup>

## Damage to Mental Health

*“I tried to commit suicide...by cutting my wrists. The other girls in detention helped me by putting pads on my wrists. I didn’t tell the guards because I knew they would put me in solitary confinement, and I didn’t want that... I was terrified of being in solitary confinement.”* —Maria, previously detained individual<sup>17</sup>

Many detainees are placed in solitary confinement at ICE detention centers as a response to mental illness and mental health crises. In a 2017 investigation of Adelanto detention center in California, the Project on Government Oversight (POGO) noted that individuals with mental disorders were “in alarmingly high numbers in the segregation unit, obviating the need for specific mental health housing.”<sup>18</sup> PHR reported in 2024 that ICE often utilized solitary on individuals who were experiencing a mental health crisis. It also cited a 2018 study showing that despite making up 15% of ICE’s detained population, over 57% of individuals placed in segregation struggled with mental illness.<sup>19</sup>

ICE’s reports indicate that in recent years, there has been an increase in the placement of people with vulnerabilities into solitary confinement, which includes individuals with mental health issues, medical illnesses, and disabilities to name a few. PHR’s 2025 report found that the average number of individuals with vulnerabilities who were segregated increased around 56% each quarter in FY 2025 when compared to FY 2022.<sup>20</sup>

Solitary confinement is known to aggravate pre-existing

mental health conditions, which may often lead to self-harm or suicide.<sup>21</sup> In an interview with POGO, psychiatrist Dr. Terry Kupers stated, “There’s no debate that for people with a mental illness, it’s very clear that solitary exacerbates the mental illness.”<sup>22</sup> A 2015 study found that suicide was among the leading causes of death within ICE facilities between 2003 and 2015, citing the agency’s overreliance on placing patients with mental illness in detention rather than treating them with community-based methods.<sup>23</sup>

“Being in solitary worsened my mental health symptoms. I came to feel in a way that I’d never felt before,” explained Kevin. “Everything came to my mind. I felt so depressed. I cried whenever I was in solitary. I couldn’t sleep at night. We didn’t have the right to do anything. I never seriously thought about taking my life, but I did feel like I didn’t want to live anymore.”<sup>24</sup>

“Paul tried to end his life twice when he was in solitary confinement. He did not understand why he was detained and lived in constant fear,” said Alma, the mother of a detainee. “It was such a happy moment when a judge ordered Paul’s release. But Paul was never able to heal... Ultimately, it was all too much for Paul and he took his life... Paul couldn’t recover when he was released because of all the harms he suffered from being detained for so long. For not receiving treatment. For being alone.”<sup>25</sup>

## Conditions in Solitary Confinement

*“I was basically naked in the cell. The two pieces of cloth they gave me didn’t even cover my private parts. I had to use them together as a small blanket because it was cold inside the cell. They also removed my sleep pad, so I had to sleep on the floor. I remained naked, with no bed, for several days or about a week. I begged the guards to give me my clothes back for days because I was so cold. I felt humiliated like I wasn’t even a human. I was an animal to them.”* —Carlos, previously detained individual<sup>26</sup>

Periods of solitary confinement extending longer than 15 days constitute torture and qualify as a violation of international standards for the treatment of prisoners and detainees, as outlined in the UN’s Nelson Mandela Rules.<sup>27</sup>

PHR’s 2024 report described conditions in solitary within ICE facilities as “dehumanizing,” with temperatures said to be freezing and bright lights constantly kept on 24 hours a day. “Being placed in solitary confinement meant experiencing substantially worse living conditions than those in the general population at those same facilities,” the report explains. “While specific descriptions of each cell differed, almost every [interviewee] described minimal furniture, uncomfortable bedding, small room sizes, and small windows... [some] reported... that the ‘bed was made out of cement with no cushion, only a blanket’...or just steel surfaces.”<sup>28</sup>

The DHS OIG hotline received 1,200 complaints and allegations from detainees about solitary confinement conditions within ICE facilities between 2015 and 2019. Detainees reported being denied access to essential services and resources while in segregation, such as medical attention, showers, and food.<sup>29</sup>

A man known as Carlos testified to the NIJC that while in segregation, guards attempted to handcuff him through the food hole after denying him food. When Carlos resisted, guards pepper sprayed him in the eyes and shot him in the leg

with pepper spray balls. “I already felt like I was being punished by being in the hole. Why did they keep on punishing me? I quickly went to hide in the corner so they could not keep shooting me, but then four guards came in with shields as if they were a SWAT team. Each grabbed my arm or leg and took me out of my cell.”<sup>30</sup>

Another man, known as Monte, was subject to nearly a month of solitary confinement and abuse while detained in Massachusetts. According to PHR’s 2025 report, officers pepper sprayed Monte, dragged him out of his cell, cuffed him, strapped him to a restraint chair, and placed him in segregation, where he remained until he was transferred to another facility. While in solitary, Monte was denied access to an inhaler for his asthma. He was forced to strip naked and wait in isolation for five days before seeing a nurse for the force and pepper spray-related injuries, for which he received no follow-up treatment despite being told he required X-rays. Monte experienced incessant bright lights and cold air from vents in his cell for the entirety of his isolation, in addition to only two hours of out-of-cell time a day.<sup>31</sup>



The cell where a detainee named Efraim Romero de la Rosa took his own life at the Stewart Detention Facility in Georgia. (GBI Investigation Photo)

## Unreported Cases of Solitary Confinement

*“ICE does not know the full extent of detention facilities’ use of segregation, which hinders its ability to ensure compliance with policy, and prevent and detect potential misuse of segregation.”*

—Office of the Inspector General, Department of Homeland Security<sup>32</sup>

According to ICE policy, ICE must notify their headquarters whenever an individual with a special vulnerability is placed in solitary confinement or when any detainee has been placed in solitary confinement for 14 or more days. Despite these guidelines, the DHS OIG found no reports were filed with ICE headquarters in more than one in ten cases. The agency could not provide the OIG with nearly 10% of the detention files requested, mostly because the files had either been lost or unlawfully destroyed, despite a lawsuit initiated by various government organizations and historians to prevent ICE from destroying these records.<sup>33</sup>

The Trump administration’s gutting of the DHS’s Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) has left multiple ongoing cases in limbo and opened the door for abuse toward migrants. In March 2025, *Bloomberg Law* reported that DHS was dismantling the special office, which investigates civil rights violations within DHS’s operations.<sup>34</sup> Though the agency reversed the decision two months later, according to

*Mother Jones*, CRCL has reduced its staff by around 85%, leaving just two full-time employees to oversee the complaints from ICE facilities nationwide.<sup>35</sup> A report from the Government Accountability Project found that DHS brought over 500 investigations into complaints of abuse and neglect to a halt when it shuttered the special office.<sup>36</sup>

## The Future of Solitary in ICE Detention

*“Despite repeated, loud calls to end solitary confinement over the last decade, nothing appears to have changed. Solitary confinement continues to be used in ICE detention, inflicting serious and sometimes irreparable harm, including death, on people within our borders and in your custody. ...[DHS] must end the practice of solitary confinement (“segregation”) in all immigration detention centers.”*

—Excerpt from letter to the Department of Homeland Security signed by 475 medical professionals<sup>37</sup>

Following the release of PHR’s 2024 report *Endless Nightmare*, 475 medical professionals called on the Biden administration to immediately cease its use of solitary within immigration detention. Katherine Peeler, co-author of the report, wrote: “In line with their ethical and professional obligations, health care professionals are calling out the severe physical and psychological impacts of solitary confinement and demanding that ICE end this heinous practice.”<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, in March 2024, 12 Senate Democrats sent a letter to DHS and ICE leadership, demanding ICE halt the “misuse” of solitary confinement across their facilities. The letter suggested that ICE implement a set of “meaningful alternatives” to gradually replace solitary confinement, while ensuring detainees in segregation were guaranteed the same rights as other detainees in ICE detention, such as “the same access to counsel, telephones, visitation, food, and hygiene.”<sup>39</sup>

However, no action was taken to reduce solitary within ICE facilities. Instead, since the beginning of Trump’s second term, the number of individuals in ICE detention has skyrocketed, and along with it, the use of solitary confinement within its facilities.

A report by the Marshall Project found that the number of people in immigration detention grew by 56% between December 2024 and August 2025. The number of people reported to have spent at least a day in solitary within this time grew by 41%.<sup>40</sup>

In July 2025, Congress allotted an unprecedented \$45 million in federal funds to ICE for immigration detention. Around the same time, a leaked internal report from the agency outlined a plan to expand detention capacity to over 107,000 beds across facilities nationwide by the end of 2025.<sup>41</sup>

Since that time, internal documents from ICE have revealed that the agency intends to transition to a system in which it owns and operates 34 facilities nationwide by fall 2026. To do this, ICE has already spent \$700 million purchasing warehouses across the country to convert into ICE facilities, with capacity of up to 10,000 beds.<sup>42</sup> Communities around the country are resisting the opening of these warehouses, some successfully.<sup>43</sup> Yet, it is highly likely that as the immigration detention system continues to grow, so will ICE’s use of solitary—and the fight to stop it.

## Notes

- 1 Solitary Watch and Unlock the Box, *Calculating Torture: Analysis of Federal, State, and Local Data Showing More Than 122,000 People in Solitary Confinement in U.S. Prisons and Jails*, May 2023, <https://solitarywatch.org/calculating-torture/>.
- 2 Emily Ryo and Ian Peacock, “The Landscape of Immigration Detention in the United States,” *American Immigration Council*, December 2018, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/the-landscape-of-immigration-detention-in-the-united-states.pdf>.
- 3 Hanna Johnson, “The Questions You Probably THINK You Know the Answer to—But Likely Don’t—About ICE Detention,” American Civil Liberties Union, November 30, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/the-questions-you-probably-think-you-know-the-answer-to-but-likely-dont-about-ice-detention>.
- 4 Transitional Access Records Clearinghouse, “Immigration Detention Quick Facts,” February 2026, <https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/quick-facts/>.
- 5 Physicians for Human Rights, *Cruelty Campaign: Solitary Confinement in U.S. Immigration Detention*, September 17, 2025, <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/cruelty-campaign-solitary-confinement-in-u-s-immigration-detention/>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 National Immigrant Justice Center, “NIJC Calls on U.S. to Eliminate Solitary Confinement in Immigration Detention,” April 16, 2024, <https://immigrantjustice.org/staff/blog/nijc-calls-us-eliminate-solitary-confinement-immigration-detention>.
- 9 Office of the Inspector General, “ICE Needs to Improve Its Oversight of Segregation Use in Detention Facilities,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security, October 13, 2021, <https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2021-10/OIG-22-01-Oct21.pdf>.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Physicians for Human Rights, *Endless Nightmare: Torture and Inhuman Treatment in Solitary Confinement in U.S. Immigration Detention*, February 6, 2024, <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/endless-nightmare-solitary-confinement-in-us-immigration-detention/>.
- 12 National Immigrant Justice Center, “No Human Being Should Be Held There: The Mistreatment of LGBTQ and HIV-Positive People in U.S. Federal Immigration Jails,” June 18, 2024, <https://immigrantjustice.org/research-items/report-no-human-being-should-be-held-there-mistreatment-lgbtq-and-hiv-positive>.
- 13 Tara Tidwell Cullen, “ICE’s Use of Solitary Confinement Has Gotten Worse,” *National Immigrant Justice Center*, May 21, 2019, <https://immigrantjustice.org/staff/blog/ices-use-solitary-confinement-has-gotten-worse>.
- 14 Christina de Arana, et al., *In the Shadow of the Valley: The Unnecessary Confinement and Dehumanizing Conditions of People in Immigration Detention at Moshannon Valley Processing Center*, Center for Social Justice, Temple University Beasley School of Law, September 2024, <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn%3Aaaid%3Aascds%3AUS%3A0551b5d-811e-3597-90cf-c77436a5eb93>.
- 15 Felipe De Jesús Hernández, “Extrajudicial Segregation: Challenging Solitary Confinement in Immigration Prisons,” *Harvard Law Review*, February 2024, <https://harvardlawreview.org/forum/vol-137/extrajudicial-segregation-challenging-solitary-confinement-in-immigration-prisons/#footnote-76>.
- 16 K. Franco, C. Patler, and K. Reiter, “Punishing Status and the Punishment Status Quo: Solitary Confinement in U.S. Immigration Prisons, 2013-2017,” *Punishment & Society* 24, no. 2 (October 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474520967804>.
- 17 National Immigrant Justice Center, “NIJC Calls on U.S. to Eliminate Solitary Confinement in Immigration Detention.”
- 18 U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Memorandum on Review of Adelanto Correctional Facility Complaints, April 25, 2018, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6331345-CRCL-Adelanto-Docs-Part-1.js#document/p47/a520498>.
- 19 Physicians for Human Rights, *Endless Nightmare*.
- 20 Physicians for Human Rights, *Cruelty Campaign*.
- 21 Physicians for Human Rights, *Endless Nightmare*.
- 22 Katherine Hawkins, et al., “ISOLATED: ICE Confines Some Detainees with Mental Illness in Solitary for Months,” *Project on Government Oversight*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.pogo.org/investigations/isolated-ice-confines-some-detainees-with-mental-illness-in-solitary-for-months>.
- 23 Megan Granski, et al., “Death Rates among Detained Immigrants in the United States,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 12, no. 11 (2015): 14414-19, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph121114414>.
- 24 National Immigrant Justice Center, “NIJC Calls on U.S. to Eliminate Solitary Confinement in Immigration Detention.”
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Patrick Taurel, “Internal Watchdog Finds ICE Violations of Solitary Confinement Policy,” American Civil Liberties Union, October 21, 2021, <https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/internal-watchdog-finds-ice-violations-of-solitary-confinement-policy>.
- 28 Physicians for Human Rights, *Endless Nightmare*.
- 29 U.S. DHS OIG, “ICE Needs to Improve Its Oversight of Segregation Use.”
- 30 National Immigrant Justice Center, “NIJC Calls on U.S. to Eliminate Solitary Confinement in Immigration Detention.”
- 31 Physicians for Human Rights, *Cruelty Campaign*.
- 32 U.S. DHS OIG, “ICE Needs to Improve Its Oversight of Segregation Use.”
- 33 Patrick Taurel, “Internal Watchdog Finds ICE Violations of Solitary Confinement Policy.”
- 34 Ellen M. Gilmer, “Trump Aides Shutter Homeland Security Civil Rights Office (1),” *Bloomberg Law*, March 21, 2025, <https://news.bgov.com/bloomberg-government-news/civil-rights-advocates-brace-for-cuts-in-homeland-security-unit>.
- 35 Julia Métraux, “DHS Axed Its Civil Rights Staff—And Opened the Door to a Major Lawsuit,” *Mother Jones*, February 18, 2026, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2026/02/dhs-axed-its-civil-rights-staff-and-opened-the-door-to-a-major-lawsuit/>.
- 36 Government Accountability Project, *DHS Halted 500+ Civil Rights Investigations When It Shut Down Oversight Office*, *Whistleblowers Say*, May 15, 2026, <https://whistleblower.org/press-release/dhs-halted-500-civil-rights-investigations-when-it-shut-down-oversight-office-whistleblowers-say/>.
- 37 Physicians for Human Rights, “Letter: 475 Medical Professionals Demand an End to Solitary Confinement in U.S. Immigration Detention,” May 31, 2024, <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/letter-medical-professionals-demand-an-end-to-solitary-confinement-in-u-s-immigration-detention/>.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Patty Murray, “Senator Murray, Colleagues Urge ICE and DHS to End Misuse of Solitary Confinement in Immigration Detention,” news release, April 1, 2024, <https://www.murray.senate.gov/senator-murray-colleagues-urge-ice-and-dhs-to-end-misuse-of-solitary-confinement-in-immigration-detention/#:~:text=DHS%20should%20discontinue%20the%20use,solitary%20confinement%20and%20follow%20them.%E2%80%9D>.
- 40 P. Clarembaux & C. Thompson, “‘Unbearable’: How ICE Is Locking More Immigrants in Solitary Under Trump,” *The Marshall Project*, September 16, 2025, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2025/09/16/trump-ice-mexico-louisiana-detention>.
- 41 Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, “ICE’s Warehouse Purchases Herald New Model for Immigration Detention,” *American Immigration Council*, February 24, 2026, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/ice-buys-warehouses-immigration-detention/>.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Erica Bryant, “A Blueprint for Resistance: How Residents and Local Governments Are Shutting Down ICE Detention in Warehouses,” Vera Institute of Justice, March 2, 2026, <https://www.vera.org/news/a-blueprint-for-resistance-how-residents-and-local-governments-are-shutting-down-ice-detention-in-warehouses>.



Fact sheet by Francisco Rodriguez. Revised May 2026. © 2026 Solitary Watch. Please cite Solitary Watch and the original sources when quoting from this document. To download this or other fact sheets from this series, visit [solitarywatch.org/fact-sheets](https://solitarywatch.org/fact-sheets).

Solitary Watch is a nonprofit watchdog organization that works to uncover the truth about solitary confinement and other harsh prison conditions with high-quality investigative journalism, information, and storytelling from both sides of prison walls. Our mission is to generate public debate and policy change on an underreported humanitarian crisis by promoting awareness, creating accountability, and shifting narratives.

Solitary Watch, PO Box 11374, Washington, DC 20008  
[solitarywatch.org](https://solitarywatch.org) | [info@solitarywatch.org](mailto:info@solitarywatch.org) | [@solitarywatch](https://twitter.com/solitarywatch)