Prisoners are one of the groups in the United States most vulnerable to human rights abuses. Held in institutions largely outside of public scrutiny, prisoners often have very little recourse when those rights are violated. Those that do manage to capture the attention of the judicial system virtually always find that their claims are met with a highly critical, highly unsympathetic eye.

Prisoners held in solitary confinement are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses. Indeed, many would posit, as I do in this article, that exposure to prolonged solitary confinement is a violation of human rights in and of itself. Forced to reside in tiny cells with no natural sunlight, no books or writing materials, little to no human contact and little, if any, opportunity for exercise or recreation, prisoners held in such confinement for more than short periods of time experience extreme emotional and psychological strain and distress. Many even begin to mutilate themselves in desperate attempts to compel prison administrators to move them into less severe conditions. Despite this knowledge of what solitary confinement does to individuals, however, it is not unusual for prisoners in the United States to be held in solitary confinement for months and even years at a time.

This article explores the use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons and examines the failure of the judiciary to protect the human rights of prisoners exposed to such conditions. It
then assesses the extent to which international human rights laws-- or, more specifically, international laws against torture-- might be a source of relief for those prisoners held in solitary confinement for extensive periods of time. It concludes that prisoners may indeed find recourse in such laws and that they offer an alternative and hopefully more effective course of relief than those already existing under U.S. law.

1 T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men* (1925) (“We are the hollow men/We are the stuffed men/Leaning together/Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!/Our dried voices, when/We whisper together/Are quiet and meaningless/As wind in dry grass/Or rats’ feet over broken glass/In our dry cellar/Shape without form, shade without colour,/Paralysed force, gesture without motion;/Those who have crossed/With direct eyes, to death’s other Kingdom/Remember us—if at all—not as lost/Violent souls, but only/As the hollow men/The stuffed men….“).