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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Hannah Taleb](#) | July 20, 2012



On April 26 of this year, John Carter died in his solitary confinement cell at State Correctional Institution (SCI) Rockview in central Pennsylvania. According to accounts by othermen imprisonedon his cell block, Carters death followed a violent cell extraction in which corrections officers used pepper spray and stun guns, though the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections makes no mention of suchactions in its official statements, and state police have yet to interview inmate eyewitnesses.

In 1995, John Carter took part in a robbery that resulted in the murder of one man in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was sixteen at the time, and was convicted of second-degree felony murder. In Pennsylvania, which has more juvenile lifers than any other state, his conviction meant a mandatory life sentence without the possibility of parole.(Under theSupreme Courts June 25 ruling, in [Miller v. Alabama](#), that mandatory life sentences without parole for juveniles were unconstitutional, Carter would likely have had his sentence reconsidered, had he lived to see the day.)

At some point during Carters sixteen-year imprisonment, he was placed on whats called the [Restricted Release List](#), a form of indefinite solitary confinement that can only be ended with approval by the Secretary of the Department of Corrections. Jeffrey Rackovan, the Public Information Officer at SCI Rockview, admitted that this designation meant John could have spent the rest of his life in solitary confinement. Before his death Carter had spent the last ten to eleven years in solitary.According to prisoner reports he had been known to break the rules of his unit in order to share food, hygiene items, and writing utensils with newcomers to his block, and adamantly used both the grievance process and legal system to challenge acts of abuse and retaliation by prison staff.

On April 27, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections issued a [press release](#) announcing that John Carter had been found unresponsive in his cell the day before.Reports from the unit soon began to reach Carters family and the Human Rights Coalition, a Pennsylvania-based prisoner advocacy and abolitionist organization. The reports explained that Carter had been subject to a cell extraction on the day of his death after a dispute with guards who refused to issue him a food tray instead of nutraloaf, a dense, unpalatable substance issued as punishment in place of meals. The cell extraction was the second Carter had been subjected to that week, during which guards entered his cell in full riot gear, armed with OC spray and electroshock weapons.

The statements from prisoners explained a brutal scene, with excessive amounts of pepper spray being pumped into Carters cell so as to flood the whole tier with the choking gas. According to prisoner accounts, guards then broke down the door to the cell and proceeded to shock Carter seven times with electroshock shields and guns.Many of the reports end with Carter being dragged from his cell, paramedics arriving 10 to 15 minutes later, and an unresponsive Carter being removed from the block. He was pronounced dead at Mount Nittany Medical Center a short time later.

Andre Jacobs, a jailhouse lawyer housed on the same block as John wrote a five page [declaration](#) detailing the events of that day. Many others sent in the story as they heard and saw it, all of them asserting that John Carter was murdered . . . here in this RHU torture zone, where guards come on the tier calling people racial slurs.

The press statement released by the Department of Corrections made no mention of a cell extraction, or any confrontation at all occurring

on the day of Carters death. Reports from inside the prison claimed that superintendent Marirosa Lamas came to the Restricted Housing Unit tier the night of John Carters death alleging that he had committed suicide, an assertion never made to the public. But officials first claimed that no cell extraction took place the day of Carters death, then that there was an extraction but no video footage, and finally that an extraction took place but the footage may have been damaged.

Because Carter died from what was considered unnatural causes, the Pennsylvania State Police were brought in to investigate his death. By May 10th the police had released a statement that notes John Carter was found unresponsive in his cell, but goes on to describe that he had barricaded himself in his cell and refused numerous orders which precipitated the DOCs response to the inmates cell. The statement goes on to say that autopsy reports were inconclusive and evidence had indicated no foul play in Carters death. Once again no mention was made of the use of pepper spray or electroshock weapons.

Calls to the state police were met with the assurance that a thorough investigation would be carried out. However, according to statements from prisoners held on John Carters block, not one of them was ever questioned as to the events of April 26.

Jeffrey Rackovan told Solitary Watch that the prison had done its part in the investigation, handing over video footage and allowing investigators to enter the prison. Rackovan noted that investigators surely spoke to those they needed to the officers involved in the extraction. He also assured that John Carters cell had been inspected, though numerous prisoner reports claim that it was thoroughly cleaned shortly after Carter was removed.

According to advocates at the Human Rights Coalition, the investigation carried out by the state police fits within a general pattern of refusal by state authorities to investigate and prosecute the alleged crimes of prison guards and officials against the prisoners in their care. No statements have been made by the State Police since May 10. Toxicology reports from the coroners office are still forthcoming more than two months after John Carters death.

John Carters family is not satisfied with the investigation thus far and are resolved to find justice in his death. They arranged for a second autopsy, and filed a criminal complaint with the Center County District Attorney, Stacy Parks-Miller, in June. As a response the DAs office is now overseeing the investigation carried out by the State Police, but has released no further information on its progress. When contacted, Ms. Parks-Millers office would not respond with any comment on the investigation.

John Carters sister, Michelle Williams, explained in a May 7 interview with me for Rustbelt Radio that she wants justice not only for her family but for all of the other families with loved ones inside of Pennsylvania prisons. Just because they are in jail, she said, doesnt mean you can treat them as anything else but human. Listen to the [full radio report here](#).

Hannah Taleb was a research and reporting intern for Solitary Watch.

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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Folks are oblivious to the truth. The vast majority of inmates are housed in general population units. Also only a very small percentage of Restricted Housing Inmates are on long term status. Administrative staff do not just pick on certain individuals. We are talking about the worst, of the worst. The most assaultive, physically, mentally and verbally. So lets look at this situation, bit by bit. John Carter knew what a Cell Extraction was, as he just received one a week earlier. He knew his actions (assaulting staff members with his own feces) would inevitably result in an extraction. The medical department must approve all use of OC and Electroshock defensive weapons. For instance, inmates with heart, lung or nervous system disorders would not be approved for OC and Electroshock usage. John Carter was a healthy man, approved for usage. Next, Carter was disgruntled over being issued food loaf instead of a tray. Food loaf is only approved for 7 days max. In order to be placed on it, the inmate must break certain rules that are in place for Staff safety, thus receiving a food loaf for the security of the staff (IE assaulting staff with a tray full of the inmates feces and urine). Inmates know this and surely this wasnt Carters first placement on food loaf. As for the assumption that Carter was good person because he broke rules to pass the above named items to new Restricted Housing inmates, well this is misguided as well. Most of those items (such as pens, toothbrush, toothpaste, pre-paid envelopes, deodorant, soap, shampoo and combs) are all provided free of charge to every inmate in Restricted Housing. Some of the rest is provided for free to indigent inmates. The rest can be purchased through commissary. He most likely provided these items in exchange for future favors or influence and loyalty there. As for punishment, whether it is official doctrine or not, incarceration is inherently punishment. Carter is responsible for a man losing his life. Regardless of his age then, he was an adult when he had his numerous and documented assaults on staff. Staff do not in their free and evil time conspire to make up lies to pick on inmates

like Mr Carter. As to earlier ascertations that the DOC hires murderers and torturers. This is absurd. Those types of folks become inmates, not staff, and that is a slap in the face to the brave staff members who have to walk into work everyday knowing that they are working around murderers, rapists, pedophiles, arsonists and drug addicts. If a citizen in society threw urine and feces on you, attacked you with improvised weapons, pummeled you with a snow shovel, what would you want to happen to that individual? I can tell what happens to an inmate who does that. 7 days on a food loaf, with more nutrition per serving than most American children receive in a day, or restricted housing where they only get 5 hours of out-of-cell recreation a week and 1 outside visit a month. Everyone wants to believe in a cover up. Well I can assure you that everyday when I go to work, I get lied to constantly by inmates. Yet its there testimony you wish to believe. The whole affair and many dealings with Carter beforehand, have video with audio recordings. The police saw the video evidence, but people somehow feel the lies of other problem inmates are more reliable then video evidence. The key to this is personal responsibility. You folks do not want to hold a man in his 30s responsible for the events leading to his own death. You want to excuse his actions. Well I am here to tell you that the only person responsible for John Carters situation is John Carter. Had he been a quiet, behave inmate, he would have lived to see the abolition of life without parole for minors. He would have been able to go home to his family in less than a decade. But he chose to be a degenerate, assualtive individual displaying behaviors more common of monkeys then responsible, good human beings.

What perfect last line for a so-called Concerned Prison Staff.. referring to a human being as behaving more like a monkey then a human being Having read all of the comment, and while reading even starting to getting thoughts of understanding for the reasoning in the comment, the last line removed all understanding that you did build up!

Assuming you were not there, that you have had no access in the why of the extraction, also assuming that you area qualified member of staff of a prison and thus speaking with some experience, I feel that you have crossed the line with that last line!

Referring to a human as a degenerate is something that I do not accept as being fitting of a prison officer, even when that prisoner is throwing his (or her) feaces to and or over the guards! Prison guards know that people do things in despair, and that people will be able of acts that outside prison would be and are wrong. And I even agree that throwing feaces to and over other people is wrong, and should not be done, but referring to such a person as a degenerate, as member of prison staff, is utterly wrong, in my opinion!

Such people have lost all credibility in my opinion!

Has anyone thought about writing the President of the United States or Federal Judiciary Agencies, such as The FBI, who have (Federal) jurisdiction over the States??? I am sure the President would be interested and maybe even make sure that protection is provided for the witnesses somehow!!

How deplorable that human beings are subject to this treatment as part of a government rehabilitation justice system. This is not justice and the state and federal agencies refusal to seek the truth or to release actual facts to back up the assesment tht this was not foul play is scary. These guards should be held to the same standards of the law as everyone else and excessive force and use of unnecessary punishment and virtual torture of these people should be punishable by their own stay in prison alongside the people they abuse. People with this much unquestionable and unchallengeable power over others should be held to extremely strict guidelines and the public and human rights agencies should be allowed full access to video feeds within the walls to show what goes on and to keep these monsters in check. This is deplorable and the conditions that they subject their prisoners to are beyond inhumane. If they had cameras on them and watchdog organizations checking on the prisoners then this would never happen. If the guards could be thrown in jail alongside their prisoners for their actions, i guarentee we would see positive changes. Why would they not do this except for fear of the exposure of their actions that include rape, beatings, racist and harassing remarks, etc. these people should be held to higher standards, not given a free pass. I realize they endure verbal abuse and violent outbreaks, but they must show restraint and only use necessary force not beat the poor caged people to death. There should be murder charges brought and the state should be forced to pay for the life they took. If i believed in an afterlife, then these guards have a nice hot sauna in h3ll awaiting them

when the love of power overcomes the power of love..anyone who feels that ANY part of this is JUSTICE is . well, in need of a cell extraction themselves! If I AM not part of the solution then I AM part of the problem.PLEASE BE THAT VOICE OF CHANGE.

more info on this murder can be found on HRCs Justice for John Carter page: <http://hrcoalition.org/node/223>

this story is part of the larger pattern of extrajudicial killings of Black people documented by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement in an important new report that needs to be read and spread far and wide: <http://mxgm.org/report-on-the-extrajudicial-killings-of-110-black-people/>

I do not doubt the truth of this story whatsoever. The Horrors never end; the first being the initial sentence. Who puts children in jail for life? Now I know who

I live in Canada and our current government has jumped with both feet on the tough on crime bandwagon. Mandatory minimum sentences, harsher penalties for juvenile offenders. We are moving backward in the federal justice system And I am horror stricken when I read a story like this. My heart goes out to his family and to all men and women (and children!) in correctional facilities whose human rights are trampled on daily. Some states are coming to realize just how off the mark the tough approach is, keep the faith that malicious crimes against individuals in prison will become the exception rather than the rule. The so-called officers should be charged and sent before a judge. Peace to you all

Im in contact with an inmate in solitary confinement since 2001 in Texas. Im chocked how all the descriptions and reports coming out of solitary confinement blocks are similar. Sometimes I think my friend is just exaggerating or even lying but after reading the letters from inmates and testimonies from former inmates it is evident to me that all he is talking about is real and it is a hell on earth. But most people think that these inmates deserve what is happening to them forgetting that the treatments and abuses they are subject to are as illegal as the actions they did.

Please add Google Plus to your website and a G+ button to each article. I would really like to share this article and others on Google and with my circles. The more + clicks a post receives, the higher it will show in search results. The State of Pennsylvania hires killers and torturers for guard positions and the world needs to know it! Thank you.

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