

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/03/26/the-lost-boys-of-westchester-countys-shu/>

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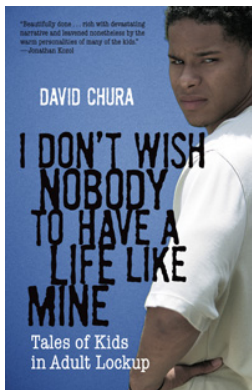
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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | March 26, 2010



Mother Jones this week ran a powerful two-part excerpt from a new book called [I Don't Wish Nobody to Have a Life Like Mine: Tales of Kids in Adult Lockup](#). The book is by David Chura, who worked for 10 years as an English teacher in the Westchester County Jail. The published excerpt focuses on the jail's Special Housing Unit (SHU), which is the euphemism New York State uses for solitary confinement.

As the editors' introduction puts it, These state-of-the-art, maximum-security isolation blocks became a trend during the late-1990s prison-building boom. And to accompany the construction spree, state and federal legislators enacted new laws that gave more kids adult sentences in adult institutions.

As we've [written before](#) on Solitary Watch, in addition to these converging trends, children in adult correctional facilities are disproportionately likely to be placed in solitary confinement either because they act up, or for their own protection. Large numbers of these kids have psychiatric or emotional problems to begin with, and the affects of isolation on their growing bodies and minds is usually [devastating](#). Cutting and other forms of self-harm are common among these incarcerated children, and [suicides](#) are far from rare.

[Part 1](#) of the two-part excerpt from Chura's book vital background by describing the opening of the then-new SHU, which was actually celebrated as a great improvement over the rest of the jail: cleaner, safer, quieter, and implicitly, more humane. Initially Chura's students even seemed better behaved: more attentive and less rowdy.

In [Part 2](#), the truth begins to emerge. We've included a sample here, but the excerpts and no doubt the book, as well, are worth reading in full. Chura has also started a [blog](#) on abuses of juveniles in the justice system.

It was only after I had been visiting the SHU for a while that I began to see things differently. At first, I thought the changes in my students' behavior were the result of the calmer, cleaner environment.

But more and more I realized that it was, in fact, the result of their total isolation. They listened, they studied my face, they begged me to return, and they watched me leave because they were hungry for words, sounds, the sight of people, any stimulation that broke their solitude.

In the months that followed, the SHU began to show this underbelly of deprivation. Conditions deteriorated. The walls got scuffed and nicked where inmates struggled against the emergency response teams carrying them in. Windows grew smeared from hands and faces pressed against the glass.

Gradually, the inmates stopped making their beds. They piled clothes on the floor. They left books and papers wherever they dropped. Now when I visited after class, some of my students would be sleeping. They'd bury themselves under the covers, their heads wrapped up in towels for warmth and to shut out the light.

If I was able to wake them, calling through the tray slot, they'd grumble and splutter to be left alone. Once they knew it was me and got up, they were still polite and appreciative, but they would stare, stunned and bewildered wondering if I was real or just part of some dream.

And they were dirty. Even the guys who were usually fastidious about grooming became sloppy and disheveled. Like Pinto, who used to arrive to class every day scrubbed, shaved, and smelling of Old Spice. His county oranges would be pressed, and his hair clipped short and brushed to a black lacquer.

But in the SHU, his eyes grew puffy and crusted from endless hours of sleep. His face was covered with a patchy, scruffy beard, and his hair was knotted and woolly. When he leaned down to talk to me his breath was sour, and the odor of his unwashed clothes and body rose out of the metal opening like a malevolent genie.

An update on conditions for at the Westchester County Jail can be found in a scathing report released last fall by the Justice Department, which among other things looked at the use of solitary confinement on juveniles. As summarized by *Mother Jones*:

At the Westchester lockup, investigators found that half of the inmates recently consigned to the SHU were 16 to 18 years old, and many were doing stints of a year or more in isolation. One 16-year-old got 510 days for assaulting a guard. Another teen, an 18-year-old, was simply thrown in the SHU indefinitely. Such sentences, the report noted, may inflict substantial psychological harm on juveniles.



James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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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i so sick of the usa but NY i live in i i will bust the state up to end it if i must dam NY do not go down this rode i will stop you if it means my owen life being taken in to the void to do so may it never come to that plesse lol

I have mixed feelings about placing them in solitary and here is why.

The following account of the events that took place while my brother, age 17, was being held in L.A.s County Jail in early 1966. This account of events was recited to me by a couple of his friends that were being held in its solitary confinement unit at the time.

Ever since the Watts Riots of August 1965 the black population in County Jail had been exploding and as a result attacks on whites were becoming an every night occurrence. One after another white inmates especially the younger, smaller and better looking ones were falling victim to these men. There were gangs of booty bandits beating and raping a different white guy in the dorm every night. But nothing was done to protect the most likely targets. The guards just carried the limp bodies out the next morning.

Your brother realized that it was just a matter of time until he was targeted so he took preemptive action and lured the leader of the group into a room. Mike was holding a mop handle behind his back and had a razor in his pants pocket.

The dude approached Mike confidently, convinced that Mike was no threat to him, but he was stunned when Mike cracked him across the face repeatedly with the mop handle. The handle soon splintered into useless toothpicks forcing Mike to take cover.

Mike dove under the bed to retrieve the blade in his pocket. The guy quickly recovered his composure then grabbed Mike by his two legs and tried to pull him out from under the bed in order to get at him. Mike held onto the leg of the bed with one hand and tried to get

his razor out of his pocket with his other before the guy could pull him out. The dude probably would have slammed your brothers head against the wall had he managed to get him out. Mike struggled to break free from the guys grip as he brought the razor up and began slashing at the guys face until blood flowed so heavily that it blinded the guy which forced him to release Mikes feet.

The bulls came running into the cell at about that point and took Mike away in shackles chained from the waist to his ankles. Mike was held in a separate room and questioned as the medics frantically worked on the other guys wounds in the clinic down the hallway. After stitching the mans wounds up on both his face and his arms the wounds were wrapped up in gauze. Then the bulls escorted him into solitary confinement unit.

Man, I mean, everyone gasped when they saw this dude, bandaged up like some kind of Egyptian mummy. Then the bulls went to get your brother and we all held our breath wondering who the fuck could have given this huge man such a horrific beating.

When your brother was brought in seemingly struggling against the weight of his shackles the whole unit burst out laughing because we had all expected to see some kind of fierce giant foaming at the mouth not some skinny teenage white boy.

Some weeks later we heard Mike yell out as he was being escorted out of the hole Hey guys catch you later. I am being sent up to Tracy. Keep the faith home boys. With that Mike was lead out and transported to Duel Vocational Institute an adult prison in Tracy, California.

Mike had attacked the man precisely in order to be placed into solitary and away from the sexual predators running amuck.

The obvious solution is to not place juveniles in these situations.

And a partial solution to all institutional violence is to separate the obvious prey from the obvious predators. The guards usually know who is what.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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