

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/06/30/hunger-strike-in-the-supermax-pelican-bay-prisoners-protest-conditions-in-solitary-confinement/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | June 30, 2011



As Americans prepare to celebrate Independence Day, inmates in solitary confinement at California's Pelican Bay State Prison are standing up for their rights in the only way they can by going on a [hunger strike](#). The prisoners, who are being held in long-term and often permanent isolation, have sworn to refuse food until conditions are improved in Pelican Bay's Security Housing Unit (SHU).

Built in 1989, [Pelican Bay](#) is the nation's first purpose-built supermax prison, and remains one of its most notorious. Constructed to house 2,280 of California's most serious criminal offenders, Pelican Bay [currently holds](#) more than 3,100. Over a third of them live in the X-shaped cluster of buildings known as the SHU, which CDCR [describes as](#) a modern design for inmates who are difficult management cases, prison gang members, and violent maximum security inmates.

NPR's [Laura Sullivan](#), one of the rare reporters to be granted entry to Pelican Bay, described the SHU in a 2006 report:

Everything is gray concrete: the bed, the walls, the unmovable stool. Everything except the combination stainless-steel sink and toilet. You can't move more than eight feet in one direction. The cell is one of eight in a long hallway. From inside, you can't see anyone or any of the other cells. This is where the inmate eats, sleeps and exists for 22 1/2 hours a day. He spends the other 1 1/2 hours alone in a small concrete yard.

Although all the inmates are in isolation, there's lots of noise: Keys rattle. Toilets flush. Inmates shout to each other from one cell to the next. Twice a day, officers push plastic food trays through the small portals in the metal doors.

Those doors are solid metal, with little nickel-sized holes punched throughout. One inmate known as Wino is standing on just behind the door of his cell. It's difficult to make eye contact, because you can only see one eye at a time. The only contact that you have with individuals is what they call a pinky shake, he says, sticking his pinky through one of the little holes in the door. That's the only personal contact Wino has had in six years.

When conditions at Pelican Bay were challenged in a 1995 lawsuit ([Madrid v. Gomez](#)), the judge in the case found that life in the SHU may press the outer borders of what most humans can psychologically tolerate, while placing mentally ill or psychologically vulnerable people in such conditions is the equivalent of putting an asthmatic in a place with little air to breathe. Yet since that time, the number of inmates in the SHU has grown, and their sentences have lengthened from months to years to decades. Hugo Pinell, a former associate of George Jackson who is considered by some a political prisoner, has been in Pelican Bay's SHU for more than 20 years.

Many residents of the SHU have been sent there on questionable grounds and have little hope of ever leaving. A majority of the men in solitary confinement in California are there because they have been [validated as gang members](#), and given indeterminate sentences in the SHU. According to [Corey Weinstein](#), a physician and prisoners rights advocate, the single way offered to earn their way out of SHU is to tell departmental gang investigators everything they know about gang membership and activities including describing crimes they have committed. The [CDCR] calls it debriefing. The prisoners call it snitch, parole or die. The only ways out are to snitch, finish the prison term or die. The protection against self-incrimination is collapsed in the service of anti-gang investigation.

In April, prisoners in several corridors of the SHU announced their intention, on July 1, to begin an indefinite hunger strike in order to draw attention to, and to peacefully protest, 25 years of torture via CDCR's arbitrary, illegal, and progressively more punitive policies and practices. In a notice authored by inmates Todd Ashker and Danny Troxell on behalf of themselves and similarly situated participants, the group of prisoners which supporters say cuts across racial lines issued [five core demands](#). The demands are remarkable for having been penned by a group of prisoners whose communications with one another and with the outside world are severely limited. They are also far from radical.

The hunger strikers are asking for individual accountability to replace group punishments, and for an end to the system of debriefing. According to the prisoners, Debriefing produces false information (wrongly landing other prisoners in SHU, in an endless cycle) and can endanger the lives of debriefing prisoners and their families.

In outlining their desired changes to conditions in the SHU, the strikers turned to the recommendations of the US Commission on Safety and Abuse in Prisons, a bipartisan, blue-ribbon commission which issued a 2006 report on conditions of confinement in U.S. prisons and jails. Among its primary findings, the commission recommended that prisons make segregation a last resort, end conditions of isolation within segregation units, and avoid long-term solitary confinement.

Beyond this, the strikers want the CDCR to provide adequate food, and provide constructive programming and privileges for indefinite SHU status inmates. Among the modest privileges the prisoners want are one phone call per week, longer visiting hours, exercise equipment, art supplies, wall calendars, and more TV channels.

Nevertheless, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation seems already to have dug in its heel when it comes to responding to the hunger strikers. It's appropriate for the CDCR to review the demands, but they're not going to concede under these types of tactics, CDCR spokesperson Terry Thornton told [California Watch](#). It remains yet to be seen whether they're actually going to initiate a true hunger strike, she said; if they do, the prison will monitor their health, but if an inmate decides he's not going to eat, we can't force him to eat.

In preparation for the start of the strike on July 1, [California Prison Focus](#) and other members of the [Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Coalition](#) have hosted a rally and [press conference](#) in the Bay Area and issued an [online petition](#). Among the groups expressing support of the strikers' demands is the [Prison Law Office](#), known for mounting the lawsuit that resulted in the recent [Supreme Court decision](#) mandating a reduction of California's prison population.



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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

These low lives did not ask their victims do you want food before I kill or victimize you? Poor cry babies! Waaaaa boooooo hooooooo hooooooo!

None of these low lives cared about who they were killing or victimizing. Why should we care for them? Did they ask themselves that question? No because they are selfish.

Bill the resource section of this blog has tons of material from sources other than prisoners. You should check them out. But here are a few links that will help correct your assumptions.

From the Ex-Chief Justice of Texas.

http://members.tripod.com/lst_007/stillcruel.html

Cruel and Unusual Still
BY WILLIAM WAYNE JUSTICE

April 2, 1999

How about a doctors view. There are several others that have done studies and are quoted on this blog.

Atul Gawande (2009). Hellhole: Is Long-Term Solitary Confinement Torture?

The New Yorker, March 30:

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/30/090330fa_fact_gawande.

The following Judge probably believed as you do until he landed in prison himself.

http://blogs.houstonpress.com/hairballs/2010/08/judge_samuel_kent_i_obstructed.php#Comments

On the day Sam Kent resigned his position as U.S. District Judge, BOP [Bureau of Prisons] staff locked Sam Kent wearing only a smock and carrying only a single sheet in a filthy, completely empty cell where the temperature was kept at 60 degrees.

In Florida during a transfer, he says, state guards forced Sam Kent to strip naked and perform a painful and repetitive series of humiliating exercises.

Once he reached his cell, he was forced to try to sleep the first night helplessly listening to the continuous screams of a man being violently raped in the next cell.

That is what a cell mate means for too many prisoners held in solitary. Many times the guards know whats happening but just laugh. Who is the bigger monster then?

This guard had a change of mind after he took a fall.

<http://www.westword.com/content/printVersion/227330/>

Ex-Correctional Officer at ADX Joseph Principe experience.

A month later, the feds took him out of Arkansas Valley and flew him to California. They put him in the special housing unit at Terminal Island. Hed spend most of the next two years in the hole awaiting trial.

Principe scarcely slept during his first eight days in the hole.

The murky case against Principe relied almost entirely on the snitches in H Unit.

Hed seen hardened cons crack up in places like this. He was a rookie and knew it. How was he going to endure it?

These concrete cages can birth geniuses and madmen, monks and monsters, if strong wills prevail, he wrote.

He meditated. He prayed.

For the first year, I was focused, Principe says. I was intact. Then it started to change.

There are stages a person goes through when suffering sensory deprivation SHU syndrome, as its known in special housing units. At one point, everything the staff did seemed to annoy Principe. He began to believe they were going out of their way to mess with him. He became angry at the slightest provocation. The walls closed in.

The extraction teams were called. Principe took the pepper spray and shouted defiance. He did his best to wear them out. He was turning into one of the crazies he used to dread dealing with.

It is not a time he wants to talk about now. You have no idea what it was like, he says. They break you down to the point where youre ready to make a deal.

After two years in the hole, Principe was presented with a global plea agreement.

I wanted to go to trial, Principe insists, It was one of the most grueling decisions of my life.

In February he pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit racketeering. He got fifteen months, The only thing I got going for me is I held my mud through this, he says.

He looks around him, at the guards, the prisoners, the red line, as if seeing it all for the first time.

Im ready for a break, he says.

I would venture to bet that many of the homeless on the street are there because of their prison experience and know how stupid your

view is.

If your tired of your job at the prison you can take your own advice. No one that has experienced prison thinks it was a positive experience. These abusive practices only make prisoners worst and when they are released they reap havoc upon us.

Explaining it to someone like yourself is difficult because you have never experienced life on the other side of the cell door. That is why this site posts comments from those that have. To help understand what it is like.

I noticed something. All of these claims are from prisoners. Prisoners said this, prisoners said that. So we are to take their word for it? If they said the guards were pulling them out of their cells every hour and beating them for being on a hunger strike would this be taken as gospel? I have yet to see an article from a non- prisoner who has seen the prison conditions for themselves. These individuals are not in prison for being honest, kind, gentle, moral, etc. If being in a cell with meals brought to your door, free television, the best medical money can buy, the best psychological help money can buy, social interaction with at least 6 other people you are housed with, if that is what we call torture now, then most of the world is being MORE than tortured. Our military does not eat as well as these prisoners. If homeless people on the street knew how well they would be taken care of in prison they would commit a crime just to get there. Should I live on the street going through dumpsters or should I go to prison with a roof over my head, and meals brought to me? Probably 50% of the world live in worse conditions than these prisoners, and most people in America cannot have surgery for a \$5 copay. Most people in America do not have the luxury of having a psychologist standing by to be able to talk to. Most people do not have guards standing by to protect them (even if it is from themselves). Inside prison you do not hear the cries of ones being tortured you hear laughter and lively banter in the pods. You hear cheering as their sports team score on the television. You hear conversations of life on the streets etc. Most people in the world would say, If this is torture, sign me up!

Final note.. how can you have a cell mate in solitary confinement? SHU is NOT solitary confinement.

Murders, rapist, child molesters refusing their food wow we need to get right on that! What are they not telling you is that these inmates get canteen every month (up to \$130) and it is stuffed or sewn in their mattresscharade. They are only refusing state food, not the twinkles and hoe hoes they bought what a joke. Ok so if you libs really want to help try thiswhen they parole meet them at the gate feed them, cloth, care for them, and then go to work and let them watch your children and house. Then you will know what it is to be a victim and find something other to do when you hear these guys whine.

Too bad. So sad.

Thanks for sharing this info & please check out: <http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com> for updates & ways to show support from the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalitionthese folks are in contact w/ prisoners on a weekly basis & working to build support for prisoners at Pelican Bay and Corcoran. Were also organizing international solidarity actions on July 9thcheck the site for more info!

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions.](#)



Solitary Watch News