

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2014/11/07/voices-from-solitary-pettigrew/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

close

Search

close

close

by [Voices from Solitary](#) | November 7, 2014

The following comes Ryan Pettigrew, who spent most of his eight years at the supermax Colorado State Penitentiary (CSP) in solitary confinement. Diagnosed with bipolar II disorder, Pettigrew, like an [estimated 57 percent](#) of prisoners confined in isolation in Colorado, suffers from mental illness. Recalling his response when asked by his parole officer if his time in isolation legitimately qualifies as torture, he writes, [P]rison staff had me strip celled for 24 hours in a cold cell that had someone else's puke and piss all over the floor. I was stripped of clothing. Eventually I had to take a bowel movement but was denied toilet paper and soap, yet forced to eat with my bare hands. The following entry, entitled Effects of Solitary Confinement, comes from Pettigrew's blog, [A Madmans Path To Reason](#).

Pettigrew, now 35, was released in August of 2012 from CSP. While there, he befriended Evan Ebel, who was released directly from solitary in January 2013 after making threats to torture and kill correctional officers and others. Ebel went on to murder corrections chief Tom Clements two months after his release. In an [interview](#) following Clements' death, Pettigrew shares a series of revealing text messages he exchanged with Ebel in the weeks approaching the murder. Apparently growing increasingly distressed as he adjusted to life outside his solitary confinement cell, Ebel stated in one message that he felt peculiar, adding that he knew of no other remedy for this other than violence. Lisa Dawson

The California hunger strike and Evan Ebels rampage have shed light on the solitary confinement problem in American prisons. Citizens are now starting to realize that how we treat our prisoners directly affects them since most will be released, with a direct correlation between prisoners released who return to crime and their treatment while in prison. Common sense proves that the more ignorant and angry a released prisoner is, the more likely it will be that he/she returns to crime.

Solitary confinement has become the most grossly overused and ineffective program in American prisons, with the ACLU estimating over 80,000 American inmates in solitary confinement. Most of the inmates in prison will be released one day but figures show how those in solitary confinement return at a higher rate than those in general population (64% versus 41%), proving the effects of solitary confinement translate to re-offending.

Prison officials argue that solitary confinement is needed for the worst of the worst but when investigated, those claims are found false almost every time. It has become the modern day mental hospital even though it's known to increase the symptoms of mental illness and a place to house those who break petty prison rules such as having too many stamps. Less than 25% of the inmates housed in solitary confinement in the Colorado Department of Corrections were accused of any institutional violence.

Humans need social interaction and sunlight but can be denied both for years in solitary confinement, resulting in serious issues that may become permanent. Add that to the psychological effects that manifest from having too much time to think in an environment where the guards have complete control of all basic necessities. Absolute power absolutely corrupts and it becomes a daily fight just to get food and toilet paper.

The data collected from experts speaks for itself but I prefer to give a personal account of how I suffered while in solitary confinement for eight years at the Colorado State Penitentiary (CSP). Prior to this, I was a very social person, preferring time spent around people but now have to consciously force myself to leave the house. A year removed from prison and that hasn't changed.

Being treated as sub-human and forced to act out just to get basic necessities created a deep rooted hatred that hasn't gone away; I just choose to use it to fuel progress since the best revenge for those who tried to break me is success. I was poked with a stick for years but refused to bite; tortured and punished for studying, now working to overcome the demons.

After my interview with local news stations, my parole officer asked me if torture was too strong of a word. I responded with my story about when prison staff had me strip celled for 24 hours in a cold cell that had someone else's puke and piss all over the floor. I was stripped of clothing but shackled for the first four hours even though I had no access to people and had to exercise for warmth while the shackles dug deep into my ankles. Eventually I had to take a bowel movement but was denied toilet paper and soap, yet forced to eat with my bare hands. It was too cold and bright to sleep, the sleep deprivation tactics increasing the emotional suffering. I ended my story with a question, is torture too strong of a word?

During solitary confinement I had too much time to think which increased the anxiety I already had as a result of the Type 2 Bipolar

Disorder CSP staff already diagnosed me with towards the beginning of my stay, yet they decided to keep me in there for eight more years despite solitary confinement being known to exacerbate the symptoms of mental illness. Anxiety turned to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and I became obsessed with whatever my brain became locked on, even petty things such as labels facing forward. Eventually, I became plagued with homicidal nightmares but the bad part was they didn't bother me; I was slowly turning into a monster and didn't know how to handle it. The last six months in there, I was constantly breaking out in cold sweats but even my psychologist didn't have any answers. Then, the first day in the sun, it immediately stopped but memory of the misery they inflicted will always haunt me.

My first week out of prison was the toughest time of my life. After being used to a thin mattress, noise and constant light; a dark and quiet room with a Tempur-Pedic mattress was too much, making sleep impossible. Food wouldn't digest correctly and I panicked around people. However, the worst part was the fact that I had learned to embrace misery so positive emotions were too much to handle. I was in a state of shock for a week then would burst out crying over the smallest positive situations. I didn't know how to be happy and that was a scary thought.

I was plagued with panic attacks brought on by anything that reminded my subconscious of where I had been, except my flight or fight response was all backwards. Rather than wanting to flee, I'd want to attack, and those urges would last all day. It was hard enough to adjust but this made it nearly impossible. To top it all off, the years spent in isolation had destroyed my immune system so I was sick more than I was healthy the first nine months after my release. I can't imagine how I could've survived without my family's help.

The million dollar question is: Is this how we want prisoners released? I struggled to make it even with every resource made available to me by my loving family but most prisoners don't have that and stand no chance of success if released from solitary confinement. When they panic, how do you think they'll react? Should we continue as-is or increase safety for society? You can't keep them locked up forever, so safety requires humane treatment. It's your choice.

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 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.

@Ryan Pettigrew

Have you heard that Eric Williams, a former Texas justice of the peace, was convicted Thursday of capital murder in the revenge plot against Kaufman County District Attorney Mike McLelland, his wife Cynthia and assistant prosecutor Mark Hasse?

He is now likely to face the death penalty for the 2013 murder of Cynthia McLelland and will also stand trial for the other two murders.

The reason I am asking is I've always been puzzled as to why Ebel crossed into Texas when at this time the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas (ABT) was suspected of these same murders in the belief that they were seeking revenge for the federal indictment of 34 of its members for everything from racketeering to murder, kidnapping, conspiracy, and distributing meth and cocaine.

Although the 211 Crew is not to my knowledge affiliated with the ABT law enforcement was still on a heightened state of alert for members of white gangs.

You're quoted in the interview above as stating that Ebel and several gang members recently had broken with the 211 Crew over disagreements that Pettigrew, who is still a member, would not discuss. Ebel's apparent suicide-by-cop was motivated by his own struggles, he said, not out of allegiance to his former gang.

Could it have been as simple as suicide-by-cop or was Ebel lured to Texas?

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/04/04/the-aryan-brotherhood-of-texas-brutal-deadly-and-effective.html>

In a Daily Beast article one Texas prisoner is quoted as saying,

The ABT will have THE COPS put you in dangerous situations to see how you react. If you fight, you're good. They will bring you in, try to recruit you. If you don't fight, they will throw you to the wolves.

On your blog you also claim law enforcement has committed other corrupt acts. One case you sight is against your brother and the other was the conspiratorial theory that the federal government was behind the crack cocaine epidemic.

You'll be happy to know others agree with you. In an article in the Orange County Weekly on October 16, 2014 titled Pariah No More which references the book Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion by Gary Webb. which is also the basis for the Motion Picture starring Jeremy Renner, titled Kill the Messenger, which was just released in the of Fall 2014 they make your case.

I don't believe this was a top down affair as suggested but I do know there are corrupt individuals like Williams in positions to make things happen.

One commentator on the news during this time period wrote, Not far away here in Kaufman, Texas the county Sheriff a decade or so ago ran the entire methamphetamine distribution business!

Sad if true.

@thom prentice phd

Although I am not sure your comment applies to this article I was just reading an article on North Carolinas Eugenics program and thought about your comment.

I quote from:

For the Public Good
By Belle Boggs

People generally have two reactions when they hear about American eugenics programs for the first time: the first is shock, and the second is distancing. How could those people have done that to them?

Most have heard of the program in Nazi Germany, in which more than 400,000 people considered unworthy of life those with hereditary illnesses, but also the dissident, the idle, the homosexual, and the weak were targeted for forced sterilization beginning in the 1930s. Few realize that some of the inspiration for Germany's eugenics program, and even the language for the Nuremberg racial hygiene laws, which among other restrictions banned sexual intercourse between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans, came from eugenicists who had been practicing for years in the United States. Some 60,000 American citizens were sterilized, often under coercion or without consent.

The first state to enact a eugenics-based sterilization law was Indiana, in 1907; it was followed 2 years later by Washington and California.

Eventually 33 states would pass such legislation. Internationally, the list of countries with a history of forced sterilization includes Canada, Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, Denmark, Japan, Iceland, India, Finland, Estonia, China, Peru, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland, and Uzbekistan.

Though North Carolina did not sterilize the greatest number of people (that distinction belongs to California, where 20,000 were sterilized), the states Eugenics Board was notorious for its aggressiveness.

The 1948 manual of the North Carolina Eugenics Board repeats the claim, made in the 1935 manual and derived from the California legislation, that sterilization is not a punishment but a kindness.

You can find above the article on Longreads dot com.

And in recent news about California you'll find this idea was not lost in history.

In the video near the end of the article you'll find a report which begins with the recent sterilization of female inmates without consent in California and ends with California's excessive use of Solitary Confinement.

<http://www.nbcnews.com/health/womens-health/california-bans-sterilization-female-inmates-without-consent-n212256>

This is EUGENICS. It is EUGENICS population control. Eugenics did NOT go out with the Nazis. Rather it was an American enterprise creating a master super American race using the science of animal breeding and control and Hitler stole the science of it to prop up his racial hatreds. But the fact is that Eugenics was Made in America WE BUILT THAT does not in the LEAST MASK the bare fact of American racial hatreds. And hatred of the deformed like the bipolar people. See WAR AGAINST THE WEAK: Eugenics and Americas Campaign to Create Master Race by Edwin Black.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News