

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/01/25/as-california-implements-some-solitary-confinement-reforms-prisoners-remain-skeptical/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | January 25, 2013

Earlier this month, the Los Angeles Times [reported](#) that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) had begun the process of implementing reforms the Department has crafted over the past year addressing the long-term solitary confinement of gang members in the California prison system.

California currently holds over 3,000 inmates in segregation units due to being identified by prison officials as being members of security threat groups, or, criminal prison gangs. In California, prisoners validated as members of the Aryan Brotherhood, Texas Syndicate, Mexican Mafia, Northern Structure, Nuestra Familia, Black Guerilla Family, or the Nazi Lowriders have until recently been subject to indeterminate terms in segregated housing units. Three prisons in California Pelican Bay State Prison, Corcoran State Prison, and California Correctional Institution (Tehachapi) contain Security Housing Units, where validated prison gang members are subject to at least 22 1/2 hours of isolation in their 810, often windowless, cells a day. Until the recent reforms are fully implemented, in order to be released from the SHU, inmates must either engage in snitching on other gang members and renounce gang activity or serve six years in the SHU without any evidence of gang activity before being considered inactive and can be returned to the general population. Inmates in these units have significantly greater chances of committing [suicide](#) and the deleterious effects of sensory deprivation and isolation on inmates mental health has been [heavily documented](#).

CDCR argues that these units are critical in maintaining security in prison institutions and preventing criminal activity in the prison system. However, critics of the current system of dealing with gang members, including [Amnesty International](#), have argued that reforms to the system are needed. The [National Religious Campaign Against Torture](#), among others, has argued that prolonged solitary confinement amounts to torture. The conditions of the SHU prompted two large scale hunger strikes in California in 2011, in which thousands of California SHU and general population prisoners refused food for three weeks in July and September/October. The strikes prompted the California Assemblys Public Safety Committee to hold a [hearing](#) on solitary confinement. In February 2012, in a smaller scale hunger strike at Corcoran State Prison, one inmate, [Christian Gomez](#), died.

In [March 2012](#), the California Department of Corrections announced a package of reforms to the Security Housing Unit. Among them was the creation of a Step Down Program, in which SHU inmates could transition out of solitary confinement and back into general population housing within four years, in a system of gradually lessened restrictions and greater incentives (e.g., greater property and out-of-cell time).

The CDCR also indicated that as part of reforms there would be a review of inmates in the SHU as to whether or not continued SHU placement was appropriate. According to the LA Times reporting, 88 inmates thus far have been reviewed as of January 4th. Of them, 51 were to be immediately removed from the SHU and placed in general population. Twenty-five others were to be placed in the Step Down Program, and the remaining dozen inmates were to remain in status-quo segregation.

Despite these reforms, there remains significant criticism of the CDCR, particularly from people in prison themselves. [Inmate leaders](#) of the 2011 hunger strikes have insisted that the reforms are inadequate, arguing that placement in segregation amounts to torture and that segregation should only be used as response to behavioral problems, not simply involvement in prison gangs. In a letter dated December 3rd, from inmates in the Pelican Bay SHU, it is stated that failure to address inmate concerns will be deemed to be just cause for our collective resumption of our non-violent, peaceful protest action(s).

This echoes letters written to Solitary Watch in prior months, among which one inmate in Corcoran SHU, who participated in the 2011 hunger strikes, wrote: The reality is there is a significant number of us for whom death holds no real fear, in fact, in some ways as an alternative to another few decades of this it holds some appeal. If it becomes necessary to take up peaceful protest again and its unfortunately looking that way you may be writing a lot more Christian Gomez articles

Pending in federal court is a lawsuit filed in May 2012 by the [Center for Constitutional Rights](#) on behalf of prisoners held for longer than 10 years in California SHUs. Over 500 inmates in California have been in the SHU for longer than 10 years, and 78 for over 20 years.

The CDCR reforms can be read in full [here](#).

Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watch's first and most prolific intern. Based in Los Angeles, he served as an editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register and the Press-Enterprise, and is now the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

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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yes! The workers, guards, wardens must be in the mix to resolve this. They are after all, the shot callers when all is said and done. That said, I have been in correspondence with thousands of inmates across the state over decades and I can tell you, that some of the guards take great pleasure in harassing and tormenting inmates and they get away with it. So how do we fix that? This is very important. As long as the actions and behavior of prison officials remains abusive and toxic and nothing happens to them, (like abusive priests in church for example) these immensely important reforms/ changes will be far in the distance, I worry.

I write inmates in Greenbay, Wisconsin and Crescent City, California and the brothers at Pelican Bay are the most optimistic, alert, full of fire of any group of men I have ever met. They are well read, active with painting, drawings, educating themselves about the struggle inside and outside of the prison system. Their hunger strike and their call for peace and cooperation between different factions in the prison and a call for truce among the street families in California and working together to create a better America is a message I bring to the attention of the NYC Council members and when I appear on TV shows sponsored by Fortune Society and NAMI National Alliance for Mental Illness. All world revolutions began in the prisons of Russia, France and in a country where 1 percent control the wealth of 99 percent of the people, democracy is threatened. I have brought the unjust criminal system to the attention of the Department of Corrections, the board of corrections, government officials, and I finally realize I have to have a face to face meeting with correction officers union leadership. The violence must end between inmates on inmates and correction officers ruling by brute force. Some common ground has to be found between advocacy groups to end solitary and correction officers unions. allanfeinblum@aol.com

I am one that believes one should only be in seg due to behavioral action; belonging to your community, or snitching is no reason for isolation and torture

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