

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/10/08/voices-from-solitary-letter-from-calipatria-prison-hunger-strikers/>

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | October 8, 2011

The following letter is from inmates at Calipatria State Prisons Administrative Segregation Unit, who are taking part in the hunger strike that began September 26. It is believed that [200 inmates](#) in the prisons segregation units have participated in the strike so far. According to the [hunger strikers](#), the majority of prisoners in administrative segregation have been given indefinite terms in Security Housing Units, and are currently awaiting transfer to other institutions, most commonly Pelican Bay State Prison. Inmates awaiting transfer have been in segregation for an average of 3-4 years.

This letter particularly addresses the gang validation and debriefing processes, which place and keep many inmates in isolation units for an average of [6.8 years](#) at Pelican Bay.

We are currently housed in Calipatria State Prison, in Southern California, where hundreds of men are going on day 8 of a solid food hunger strike in protest of the cruel and unusual punishment and the abuse of authority this prison has been doing.

For over 20 years CDCR (California Department of Corrections and so called Rehabilitation) has been targeting all races amongst its prison population and handing out indeterminate sentences in segregation like its the thing to do. This means that were being placed in solitary confinement against our will secluded from the world; isolation. We are labeled as validated gang members who are alleged to have ties with prison gangs.

CDCR has their institutional gang investigators (I.G.I.) determine whether a persons a validated gang member or not. They have been known to be conspiring with one another and fabricating evidence to falsely prove a validation. Their main sources are debriefers (snitches) who will sale out their own mother if they had to once validated, one can only find their way out of this torturous and inhumane act of punishment by breaking people down by giving us three options Parole, Debrief, or DIE.

It costs tax payers \$56,000 to house an individual in segregation annually and theres over 3,000 clients confined in isolation., do the math. What we have here is CDCRs vague and misconstrued justification of their interpretation to their policies. Their objective to validating us as prison gang members isnt to protect the General Population, rather to insure and guarantee that Hotel Californias Segregation Units have no vacancies so CDCR can keep those fat checks rolling in.

Like we mentioned in the beginning, we write this with inspiration from reading about the men and women standing up in unity to peacefully protest for what they believe in. As the world revolves so does the generation of human rights. It doesnt always take war to get your point across, which is why we stand strong in solidarity on this hunger strike.

We have three options and if our voices arent heard the third option will be the likely one.

Respectfully,
Fellow hunger strikers at Calipatria State Prison ASU unit, 10/2/11

Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watchs 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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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ok i love the inmate words the so called cdc lol thats what i said befor they dare call them selfs by that word ya right they no where near it i just thout thats funny how the inmate said that as well bout them and there name lol glad they see it that way to lol still the wate time just to go to shu is unreal they need to clean up there state docs really badly they are shaming this nashion runing like this to day is my b day i am 22 now and sadly no rest for us fighting to bring light to the darknes of justice even on are b day lolo but it is cool i love what i do lol may there be light in the darknes of justice

@Alan I agree that is where the danger is for when the courts refuse to look at solitary confinement as a whole view of the practice, there will be wider doors open for abuse and neglect as the inaction by the courts will signal approval of those practices in places such as the SHU and other SMUs nationwide.

@Carl Good points as always.

But if Silversteins case of 28 years under a No human Contact ruling is so easily dismissed I fear for these men.

(Hopefully there are still no cases of women being held in a SHU for decades. Are there?)

But you know if nothing changes it is only a matter of time before it is so.)

And there lies the danger allowing it for someone like Silverstein who has apparently little public support, only opens the door wider for the rest to enter.

Like many other prisons throughout the United States, mission creep is a dangerous element of such places as a SHU or SMU. Through time, cultures develop and inconsistencies due to internal power struggles create sub-cultures that are difficult to understand and even harder to break. The mentality between the prisoner and the officer is one of us versus them with no wiggle room to negotiate a settlement or compromise. Management is expected to be by objectives but is much more driven by subjective commands or directives. This creates animosities and biases between the two groups that are often irreparable and create the type of physical conflict that often results in the use of force. In addition, this slanted type of management style leaves much to be left blank when orders are given as tacit approval to do what you need to do to fix it are common and leaving the power and control to subordinates who have a personal stake in the outcome. Although not condoning such a practice, the fact remains that many administrators allow their officers to run with this attitude to take care of business.

The peril of such inconsistencies results in chaos, violence and abuse within a controlled setting that is rarely revealed to anyone else in the unit as a code of silence allows the practice to exist without external resistance. Barring a whistleblower or investigative leak, this dark culture of staff, forming a solid team to oppose those incarcerated and resistive to the command, sees these uses of forces as opportunities to show and demonstrate their control over the environment. The prisoners often motivated to show they are still capable of being strong and independent will use this opportunity to demonstrate their gladiator skills to combat the officers in a brief contest of draconic warfare between humans and their ability to fight each other. This primitive style of combat has existed for centuries and is all about controlling the environment and showing other prisoners that in order to survive, one must be willing to stand up and defend in place your being and respect against those forces identified to be your nemesis by tradition and cultural definitions.

The shattering of the glass towers will reveal the intricate inside workings and dynamics that exists within these specialized units. It will expose the violence and vile conditions that survive without the knowledge of many and the memories of the small number of individuals who works or lived there and take an opportunity to express their own experiences or horrors of the events as they occurred inside those concrete masses. For many years of secrecy and stillness will soon be exposed to the world as those involved in this hunger strike express to those willing to listen all their private personal experiences and misfortunes during their stay inside this concrete jungle. The world, in return, must maintain a balanced view of the stories told and remember that inside this mass of concrete and steel, life hinges delicately on the ability to maintain control in a most unrestrained environment that pits man against man and creates a struggle nobody really understands unless they lived through the ordeal and calculated the risks and occasions to survive.

The recommendation to eliminate these SHU/SMU units is unacceptable. The SHU/SMU serves a specialized purpose that should remain in existence to manage those criminally minded incorrigibles that openly and covertly flaunt their anarchism to the administration and society. However, recommendations to implement better administrative tools to manage time spent inside a SHU/SMU to defend such a placement can be better done with specific management tools that allow flexibility in housing assignments, custody levels and durations of placements through a due process that is fair and equitable to those who operate these units and provide the prisoner incentives to work their way out of these lockdown units through positive behaviors rather than felonious misconduct that threatens the safety of others and staff. The administration should take into account the negativity of placing a human being inside these cement control boxes and understand the change in their psyche when isolated and deprived of those privileges they had in general population and must work on an incentive program that is behaviorally motivated to change their ways to comply with regulations and resist acts of violence or other illicit criminal conduct to express themselves while inside these confined units. Time spent inside these units must be controlled to allow a pressure relief valve to exist and give the prisoner a chance to breath fresh air in order to understand the comparison between the SHU/SMU and general population challenging them to conform and return back to an acceptable and methodical conduct and behaviors

approved and acceptable in prison. Never-ending or unlimited disciplinary sentences allow no chance for change or hope in the behavior and must be eliminated.

Recommendation should include specialized training for staff to recognize those who are mentally ill and behaviorally motivated to incite disorder; proposals to implement alternative self help in cell programs that allows the prisoner an opportunity to deal with their anger, their ability to free themselves from gang influence and the opportunity to think for themselves and gain back their self-respect to make better decisions.

Validated gang members must be educated to abstain from gang activities and learn to re-shape their conduct to be free from gang influence and behavior. A step down program can be offered in lieu of a debrief program that produces nothing but snitches in the eyes of other prisoners thus giving them a death sentence for wanting to get away from the gangs. Other states have successful programs that illustrate the value of having such a program in place as it allows a reduction in custody level and return to a lesser restrictive living environment while on probation to remain clear of any disciplinary conduct that is gang related. Since many already know that the SHU/SMU is a dead end street [in the manner it is operated today], this step down associated with personal incentives to succeed can bring hope to these SHU/SMU inmates to exit these units in a most acceptable manner and with dignity and respect that is so important to them and among each other. Time frames and good planning are in order to allow the existence of such a curriculum and the administration should challenge those who carry the unspoken qualities of power and influence to encourage others to participate and reform their gang like behavior into acceptable conduct both socially and administratively.

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