

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/03/18/lawsuit-filed-against-solitary-confinement-of-800-seriously-mentally-ill-in-pennsylvania/>

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | March 18, 2013

The Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania (DRNP) has filed a [lawsuit](#) against John Wetzel, the Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, charging that the confinement of prisoners in Restricted Housing Units (RHUs) amounts to cruel and unusual punishment of those diagnosed as seriously mentally ill. The suit seeks an end to long-term segregation of such individuals and seeks an order that DOC prisoners receive constitutionally adequate mental health care.

According to the lawsuit, people in the RHUs are locked in extremely small cells for at least 23 hours a day on weekdays and 24 hours a day on weekends and holidays. Typically, the lights are on in the cell all the time. The prisoners are denied adequate mental health care and prohibited from working, participating in educational or rehabilitative programs, or attending religious services.

Prisoners in the RHU are generally held alone, notes the lawsuit, though even in cases when they are assigned a cellmate, this may be as deleterious to their mental health as solitary confinement if the cellmate is psychotic or violent.

Placing people in such conditions, can create a Dickensian nightmare, in which prisoners are trapped in an endless cycle of isolation and punishment, further deterioration of their mental illness, deprivation of adequate mental health treatment, and inability to qualify for parole.

The lawsuit provides profiles of 11 men and one woman housed in the RHU, which serve to illustrate the widespread use of solitary confinement against prisoners who have been diagnosed as having serious mental illnesses. A man identified as Prisoner #1 is described in the lawsuit as having been diagnosed with a delusional disorder with paranoid features and a borderline intellectual disability. Initially placed in a Special Needs Unit, in which prisoners receive psychiatric treatment, he was frequently placed in the RHU following incidents precipitated by delusions. Despite expressing suicidal thoughts before and during his confinement in the RHU, he remained in the RHU until he committed suicide by hanging on May 6, 2011.

Prisoner #8 is a 28-year old man at State Correctional Institution-Green (SCI-Green) who has been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, a psychotic disorder, a paraphilia, and a personality disorder. According to the lawsuit, he claims to receive messages from the television and from dead people. The lawsuit states that he has expressed suicidal ideation and has been placed in the RHU after being deemed by the Department of Corrections a danger to himself and others.

The lawsuit charges that Wetzel knows or is deliberately indifferent to the fact that the DOC's treatment of individuals with mental illness, including the practice of segregating them for long periods of time in RHUs, can cause grave harm to their mental health.

While it is unclear what DSM-Axis I mental disorders fall under the scope of serious mental illness, the lawsuit argues that the current disciplinary system within Pennsylvania prisons fails to consider a prisoner's serious mental illness and the impact of isolation in assessing whether to sanction the prisoners.

Pennsylvania prisoner Ricardo Noble, who has spent over five years in the RHU, has [written](#) to Solitary Watch about the nature of life in the isolation units: In the RHU life is intense. Especially in the beginning weeks or months. As time passes your mind begins to become clouded with mixed emotions, anger, guilt, hate, paranoia, hopelessness, loneliness, and other frustrations. Some who fail to productively channel their frustrations tend to take it out on those closest to them (mainly other prisoners) or even themselves because they can't lash out on the ones (the Administration) who can affect change of the physical aspects of their harsh condition.

Approximately 1/3 of those imprisoned in the RHUs, which as of [February 28th](#) housed 844 people in long-term Administrative Custody and an additional 1,417 in shorter term Disciplinary Custody, have been [described](#) by DRNP as seriously mentally ill. The DRNP cited the position of the American Psychiatric Association, which in December 2012 [declared](#) that prolonged segregation of adult inmates with serious mental illness, with rare exceptions should be avoided due to the potential harm to such inmates.

For more on solitary confinement in Pennsylvania, click [here](#) to read Solitary Watch's reporting.

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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@Russ

This makes part makes your earlier point.

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Placing people in such conditions, can create a Dickensian nightmare, in which prisoners are trapped in an endless cycle of isolation and punishment, further deterioration of their mental illness, deprivation of adequate mental health treatment, and inability to qualify for parole.

And this may have happened to my little brother after over a decade in the hole.

As time passes your mind begins to become clouded with mixed emotions, anger, guilt, hate, paranoia, hopelessness, loneliness, and other frustrations. Some who fail to productively channel their frustrations tend to take it out on those closest to them (mainly other prisoners) or even themselves because they can't lash out on the ones (the Administration) who can affect change of the physical aspects of their harsh condition.

First I'd like to say I believe many an inmate becomes mentally ill only after they go to prison. A form of PTSD takes place with all the tension and witnessing violent acts and fearing that your next.

The close living quarters is at times to blame. I consider myself to be a decent man but even a decent man can act indecently in such circumstances. I acted poorly after being sent to East Baton Rouge Parish Jail in 1969:

The cell block was comprised of ten four man cells measured approximately eight feet wide by nine feet deep with a stainless steel toilet/sink combo in one corner and nothing else. There was a walkway in front of the cells that lead to the multipurpose dayroom. Over the next four months we would pace many a mile up and down this walkway like zoo animals. On the other side of the bars lining the walkway was another walkway for the guards that lead to other cellblocks.

One of the hardest things to get used to was that our personal laundry (socks and underwear) had to be hand washed in the toilet bowl, however using the communal sink, from which we all drank water, to wash such items would have been even more disagreeable. One day the third roommate of mine was released and a new cellmate arrived with a bad case of diarrhea. Immediately the already tight quarters became unbearably small. After a full day of listening to this guy's bowel movements and the corresponding foul odor that they produced I snapped. I complained loudly about the mess he was leaving in the toilet and he responded by telling me to Fuck off. It was a big mistake on his part. I jumped up and assaulted him by punching him several times on top of his head so he rolled himself up into a protective ball and covered his face with his arms. The punches that I had landed sprouted several pulsating streams of blood from my victim's scalp so with each beat of his panicked heart blood shot up.

Seeing the blood I immediately regretted my action and sought to stop his bleeding with a towel. I had the towel in my hand when a guard appeared behind me, saw all the blood, so he immediately opened our cell's door and ordered the injured man to walk out, and then shut the cell door behind him. The main cellblock door was then opened and the injured inmate was taken away to the medics. It had been uncharacteristic of me to have assaulted this man and I can only attribute my actions to the overcrowded conditions that we were forced to live in.

I never saw the inmate again but the guard became my constant antagonist by daily trying to provoke me into doing something stupid. I however knew that he wanted an excuse to beat me down and then take disciplinary action against me so I never lost my cool.

However my assault on my fellow inmate has always bothered me.

This is so inhumane, not even an animal should live this way. what is wrong with america and the justice system? These are people, human beings. God have mercy on all who allow this to happen. Im ashamed of all of you.

I am on with this one Mental Health should be a priority for all folks in need.. Our problem is we do not want to spend the money for the care The justice system should have little business in this area We know it is a huge expense We do not want to pay for these poor folks (Not criminal in my mind)

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