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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | August 2, 2010

At the [massive Reeves County Detention Center](#) in Pecos, West Texas, a [riot began two years ago](#) when prisoners in solitary confinement in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) started a fire. They were protesting the lonely death of one epileptic inmate, who died after repeated pleas for medical help from his family and others on the unit.

One prisoner who says he tried to help negotiate an end to the riot has since faced punishments that include placement in solitary confinement. Now that prisoner, Paul Ohaegbu, has brought suit in federal court against GEO, the private prison contractor that runs Reeves, claiming that prison officials retaliated against him and violated his civil rights.

According to a story in Texas's [Odessa American](#):

Paul Ohaegbu claims GEO Group jail officials reneged on a promise that he and other prisoners involved in negotiations to resolve a hostage situation would not face prosecution. Last year, a federal grand jury indicted Ohaegbu and about two dozen of his fellow prisoners on federal riot charges.

While several of Ohaegbu's co-defendants pleaded guilty and were sentenced to additional prison time, prosecutors dropped the charges against Ohaegbu, citing insufficient evidence. Ohaegbu claims jail officials became angry when the charges were dropped and fabricated an incident report to convict Ohaegbu of disorderly conduct at a disciplinary hearing and strip him of good time and privileges.

Ohaegbu denied any role in the rock throwing and vandalizing that resulted in about \$1 million damage to the prison during the 24-hour standoff. Rather, Ohaegbu claims he acted as an arbitrator between the Spanish-speaking inmates and the jail administration.

Since neither the warden nor the deputy speaks Spanish, the Mexican inmates requested the assistance of plaintiff, an African inmate, to communicate their request to the Geo administrators, the suit states. To alleviate inmate fear, the Geo Group, Inc. warden, Dwight Sims, promised before the officials that no inmate would be retaliated for the riot.

In November, Ohaegbu was sanctioned for conduct that disrupts the orderly running of the institution. According to the suit, Ohaegbu was stripped of 40 days good conduct time and 200 days of telephone and commissary privileges. The prisoner claims he also was ordered to spend 30 days in disciplinary segregation and given a disciplinary transfer to a federal prison in Beaumont.

It's worth revisiting the [story of the riot](#) that took place at Reeves in December 2008, eventually involving more than 1,200 prisoners at the immigrant detention center. The riot began after the death of Jesus Manuel Galindo, a 32-year-old epileptic prisoner. The inmates housed in segregation became irate and started a fire in one of the cells, Ohaegbu said in the suit he filed on his own behalf. The general population inmates saw a body bag being removed from segregation and became aware of the death.

Galindo's death was the subject of a lengthy investigative piece by Tom Barry in the December 2009 [Boston Review](#). Before his death, Barry reports, Galindo had been in solitary confinement for nearly a month:

During that time, fellow inmates and his mother, who called the prison nearly every day, had warned authorities that Galindo needed daily medication for epilepsy and was suffering from severe seizures in the security housing unit, which the inmates call the hole. [They say they] repeatedly urged prison officials to give Galindo his medication and to get him out of the security housing unit (SHU) solitary confinement where he had been placed for medical observation in November after an emergency stay at an area hospital due to a severe seizure. [Galindo's mother] Graciela mailed the prison her son's medical records, but they sent them back, instructing her not to send them again.

The doctor said Jesus had an attitude problem because he was complaining about the lack of medical treatment that killed him three days later, [family lawyer Miguel] Torres told a reporter. When they found him at 7 a.m., December 12, rigor mortis had set in, which meant he had been dead for three to five hours.

Galindo's father broke down as he discussed the conditions in which his son was kept: We don't understand how there can be so little

humanity there in the prison. Animals aren't even treated as badly as they treated our son, keeping him locked up in the hole so sick and without any company. It was so cruel, and he died sick and afraid.

In fact, lockdown in the SHU was Reeves policy for all ailing inmates. The prison does not have an infirmary.

Negotiators promised to consider the prisoners demands for better conditions and medical care. But just seven weeks later, they placed another inmate in solitary confinement after he complained that he was not being provided with needed medical attention. This time the riot lasted nearly a week and part of the prison was burned down. No one was seriously injured, but more than 20 inmates were later indicted on various charges for their involvement in the riots. No criminal charges were brought against the private prison contractors who allowed Galindo to die alone in his cell, though his family is filing a [wrongful death suit](#).

The mammoth Reeves County prison complex is run by one of the world's largest private prison corporations, GEO, formerly a division of the giant security firm Wackenhut, which also runs a dozen other facilities in Texas, as well as nearly three dozen more across the country. According to an [article on GEO](#) by Peter Gorman, published the *Fort Worth Weekly* earlier this year, several more inmates appear to have died from inadequate medical at Reeves since 2008, while others have committed suicide. Just a month after the second riot at Reeves, an inmate named Jose Manuel Falcon allegedly committed suicide while in solitary confinement, by self-inflicting numerous lacerations with a disposable razor blade, according to prison records. His family believes there was foul play involved, and is suing GEO.

Gorman's article includes numerous other accusations against GEO, which he says has one of the world's worst track records in inmate care.

The horror stories range from rapes to suicides to murders to deaths due to inadequate medical care. The company, which declined to respond to questions for this story, once hired a convicted sex offender as a guard in a facility for juvenile females. It's not as if something goes wrong occasionally at GEO-run prisons something goes terribly wrong on a regular basis at one or another of their facilities. Texas alone has twice removed all its inmates from a GEO-run facility because of deplorable conditions. And yet the company is still supported by the state and federal governments, a testimony to GEO's deep connections and deeper pockets when it comes to lobbying expenditures.

GEO's work in Texas, according to many observers, has been some of the company's worst. They have simply been horrendous, said Bob Libal, coordinator of the Texas division of Grassroots Leadership, an organization bent on eliminating private prisons.

For comprehensive coverage of private prisons in Texas, see the blog devoted to the subject, [Texas Prison Bidness](#).



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.

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