

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Lisa Dawson](#) | November 10, 2013



The following roundup features noteworthy news, reports and opinions on solitary confinement from the past week that have not been covered in other Solitary Watch posts.

Lance Tapley of *The Portland Phoenix* provides readers with a [look inside Maine State Prisons Special Management Unit](#), which he describes as a physical manifestation of the banality of evil.

In a must-read story reporting on the [abuse of isolation in U.S. prisons](#), *GQ* states that [s]olitary confinement has become the United States next great human-rights scandal.

In a segment featured on *Katie*, Katie Couric [talks with death row exoneree Anthony Graves](#) about his 18 years time on Texas death row, 12 of which he spent in solitary confinement.

AlterNet reports on [sentences to solitary confinement in the state of California](#), where people are held in prolonged isolation for months, years, even decades, writing that the only evidence needed to get someone thrown in solitary is a tattoo, letter, photo or piece of political material.

The American Public Health Association (APHA) adopts a [new policy statement opposing solitary confinement](#), asking corrections officials to discontinue solitary confinement as a punishment and to create alternatives for prisoners living with mental and chronic illness.

In *The Atlantic*, Andrew Cohen reports on a hearing held by the Senate Judiciary Committee on oversight of the federal Bureau of Prisons. The senators posed a few tepid questions on solitary confinement to BOP chief Charles Samuels, but nothing in the way of true accountability and transparency, Cohen writes.

According to Jeff Kaye, writing for *Firedoglake's The Dissenter*, A task force of medical, legal, and ethics experts has denounced portions of the Army Field Manual on interrogations as abusive and torturous. These promote the use of prolonged solitary confinement, along with sensory deprivation, sleep deprivation, dietary and environmental manipulation, and the exploitation of fear.

The *Los Angeles Times* offers a profile of a formerly incarcerated Berkeley student struggling with a long-term and possibly permanent effects of spending eight years in solitary confinement.

[Live from Lockdown](#) a site that publishes authentic & uncensored voices from inside maximum security & supermax prisons & control units sends a message about what's really happening with regard to solitary confinement inside federal prisons:

@lockdownlive Comrades are happy 2 hear of talk around #solitary but are quick 2 point out- inside it appears no one cares & things are getting worse

@lockdownlive For example, in all the real deal fed spots, not Camp Cupcake, #solitary aint solitary any more

@lockdownlive Now picture 2 and 3 people in a 5 x 9 cell 23 hours or more a day, yea we might be out of #solitary but shit aint get better

Lisa Dawson served as an assistant editor, social media manager, and contributor at Solitary Watch. She continues to support prisoners and their family members who need help navigating re-entry. She is on Twitter [@endsolitary](#).

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 [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 26, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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... nothing has changed for inmates since 1869. Right. What sort of New World are we living in? Consider the roots, and the spiritual/churchly leaders contribution since. Oppression in dictatorial surrounding for correction in World Leading Jailer Land!

The concept of s.c. is bizarre. I only understand the use of this when a danger to self or others. Whats the point beyond this. Thank you for the research; interesting.

I was struck by the consistent line of the BOPs defense over 144 years.

Compare the following account of the 19th century policy with that of Charles Samuelss recent testimony before the senate as reported by Cohen in the Atlantic.

In 1829 the elite opinion in the United States was firmly behind the idea of solitary confinement. The debates of the day focused largely on whether the system at Eastern State was cost effective.

The arrogance of the system can be heard in the annual report of 1869, which lists the arguments against the solitary system, refutes them, and concludes, We are justified in unequivocally asserting that the Pennsylvania system of penitentiary discipline understood and properly applied, is not injurious to the health, has no injurious influence on the mind, is neither inhuman nor cruel and that if properly administered, it is now the most philosophic and effective system for the treatment of crime as an actual condition of persons in all societies.

Flash forward to June 19, 2012.

During his first eight months in BOPs top job, Samuels had been busy responding to several issues within the prison system, including the budget and criticisms over the treatment of inmates.

On June 19, Samuels testified on the issue of solitary confinement before a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary.

That committee began looking at the issue after complaints and lawsuits were filed about the mental effects solitary confinement has on prisoners including reports of suicides.

Samuels defended the BOPs use of different levels of confinement within the prisons and emphasized that the most restrictive form had been used with a small percentage of inmates within the system. The use of restricted housing, however limited, remains a critical management tool that helps us maintain safety, security, and effective reentry programming for the vast majority of federal inmates housed in general population, he stated in prepared remarks to that committee.

Samuels also testified in March before the U.S. House of Representatives appropriations subcommittee regarding the BOPs 2013 budget request and the prisons steadily growing population.

For many years now, the BOP has stretched resources, streamlined operations, and constrained costs to operate as efficiently and effectively as possible, Samuels testified.

Of the inmates in BOP custody, more than 177,000 inmates are housed in 117 prison facilities that were built for a capacity of 127,236. Overcrowding is the worst at the BOPs highest security facilities 53 percent over capacity, Samuels had testified.

The prison system has more than 36,000 employees to staff the prisons around the clock. But the number of inmates has grown at a faster pace.

In an article on the meeting by Solitary Watch on October 18, 2013 by James Ridgeway and Jean Casella they reported:

The federal government has completed the purchase of a prison meant to house still more isolation cells. The purchase was celebrated by

two unlikely elected officials.

Senator Dick Durbin, who held the Congressional hearing on solitary and whose protégé Cheri Bustos represents the district that includes Thomson told the local Rockford Register-Star:

I hope we'll see before the end of the year the transfer of the prison to the federal government.

Illinois Governor Pat Quinn, who closed down Joliet state supermax earlier this year, said at a news conference:

I want to thank President Obama and Senator Durbin for their strong support throughout this process. We look forward to Thomson being a fully operational facility that will drive major economic growth in the region in the near future.

To carry out the sale, the administration had to make an end run around Virginia's Republican Congressman Frank Wolf, who heads the House Appropriations Committee and refused to sign off on the purchase of Thomson, where Republicans believe Obama will try to place detainees from Guantanamo.

During his November 6, 2013 reappearance, before the Senate Judiciary Committee Senator Richard Durbin, asked the Bureau of Prisons Director:

What has the Bureau of Prisons done since June 2012 to study the relationship between solitary confinement and mental illness among federal inmates?

In an evasive response Samuels told the Committee that there are approximately 4,000 fewer inmates in restricted housing today but he did not even mention the mentally ill federal prisoners under his supervision in his response.

The senator, for his part, did not press the BOP chief for a clarification but went on to talk about the relative costs of confinement at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as opposed to confinement on the American mainland.

Considering his earlier end run around Congressman Frank Wolf to purchase Thomson, one can speculate about the hidden motives behind Durbin's interest in his response. Obviously it is cheaper to house inmates domestically in Thomson.

As for the 4,000 fewer inmates in SHUs there is this disturbing possibility.

When asked what had happened to the 25 percent of prisoners who had been removed from the SHUs, a Bureau of Prisons spokesperson had no concrete numbers, but said that they either were put into general population, sent to state prisons, or possibly dispatched to Special Management Units, or SMUs.

On the later, this is a distinction without much of a difference.

The truth is this is nothing that has changed for inmates since 1869.

Only the administrations.

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