

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/09/28/abu-ghraib-on-the-allegheny-sexual-and-physical-abuse-at-pennsylvania-prison/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | September 28, 2011

A story out of Pennsylvania reveals the extreme abuse to which some U.S. prisoners are subjected. Yesterday, a suspended prison guard from the State Correctional Institution (SCI)-Pittsburgh was arrested on charges that he sexually or physically assaulted more than 20 inmates and the district attorney has signalled that there are more arrests to come. As [the AP reports](#):

The 92 criminal charges filed Tuesday include several counts each of institutional sexual assault, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse, and official oppression which amounts to covering up the crimes or allegedly threatening others to do so. The criminal charges mirror allegations contained against [corrections officer Harry] Nicoletti and officials at the state prison in Pittsburgh in two civil rights lawsuits filed by inmates in recent months

The lawsuits, one filed in 2010 and another on behalf of an anonymous inmate last week, allege the systematic abuse of inmates especially those convicted of child sex-crimes, or believed to be homosexual by Nicoletti and other inmates at his direction. The lawsuits say the abuse occurred over the past two years in the prisons F Block, a reception area where new prisoners are housed for a few days for medical testing and to receive other supplies before they're moved to permanent cells.

Among other things, Nicoletti is charged with raping inmates, threatening them with other sexual acts, and with having inmates contaminate the food and bedding of his alleged targets with urine and other bodily fluids.

According to the criminal complaint, one of Nicoletti's victims was a transsexual male who developed female breasts due to hormone treatments. Nicoletti fondled that inmate before raping him, while shouting racial and sexual epithets, including calling him a weird freaky monkey, the complaint said.

In another instance, Nicoletti singled out an inmate for abuse by announcing the man's conviction for a child-sex offense and saying "Make way for the mole," according to the complaint.

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections professes to be shocked and appalled. But while Nicoletti's conduct may represent the extreme, this is clearly not a case of a single rogue prison guard. The AP notes: In April, corrections officials suspended eight guards at the prison, including Nicoletti, and four top prison officials were removed and have since left the department, although officials have declined to say whether they were fired or resigned. Today, the [Pittsburgh Tribune-Review](#) reports that Allegheny County District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala Jr. said this morning that at least 11 other Department of Corrections employees will be charged after a wide-ranging investigation into sexual and physical abuse at SCI Pittsburgh.

As Matt Stround reported last week in the [Pittsburgh City Paper](#), one of the inmate lawsuits, filed in July by transgender prisoner Rodger Williams, contains the assertion that [Nicoletti's] abuse occurred with the full knowledge of the superintendent and other high ranking staff at SCI-Pittsburgh. Williams lawsuit names as defendant former SCI-Pittsburgh superintendent Melvin Lockett and other prison administrators. In May, the DOC replaced Lockett and three other high-ranking officials at the prison. All three were named in Williams lawsuit; none are currently employed by the DOC. At the time, DOC press secretary Susan McNaughton would neither confirm nor deny to CP that the staffing changes had anything to do with the suspensions or grand-jury investigation.

According to the Pittsburgh-based [Human Rights Coalition](#), which tracks abuse in Pennsylvania's prisons, the second inmate lawsuit, just filed on behalf of an anonymous prisoner at SCI Pittsburgh, depicts a situation of intimidation, coercion, and physical assault wielded against inmates who tried to refuse the guards or to expose the abuse. Beatings, filing of false charges against inmates, and retaliatory time in solitary confinement were common. All of this transpired with the full knowledge and inaction of the prison management, including Superintendent Lockett. John Does parents made repeated calls to the DOC and the Commonwealth while their son was incarcerated at SCI Pittsburgh, to no avail.

Prisoner abuse is not limited to SCI-Pittsburgh. Earlier reports by the Human Rights Coalition, based on extensive inmate testimony as well as prison records, show a pattern of what the group calls institutionalized cruelty in the solitary confinement Restricted Housing Units at [SCI-Dallas](#), [SCI-Huntingdon](#), and throughout the Pennsylvania prison system.

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.

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/8739461/toxic_conditions_inside_prisons_that.html

I think this explains the happening here in America a little bit better except for those who have lived the abuse, the torture and the neglect.. Peace

Maybe somebody already let you know, but the posting today is only half there. The right hand side of the page is missing.

Although this case is bad there are worse. In L.A. they beat this prisoner and fed him to a gang to do the raping. It is only one case of many.

<http://www.thecrimereport.org/archive/2011-09-dangerous-jails>

This is the NY Times take on it. Excerpts:

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/28/us/aclu-suit-details-wide-abuse-in-los-angeles-jail-system.html?intemail=1&y&_r=1&emc=tnt&pagewanted=all

The Los Angeles County jail system, the nations largest, is also the nations most troubled, according to lawyers, advocates and former law enforcement officials.

This situation, the length of time it has been going on, the volume of complaints and the egregious nature are much, much worse than anything Ive ever seen, said Tom Parker, a retired F.B.I. official who led the agency's Los Angeles office for years and oversaw investigations into the Rodney King beating and charges of corruption in the Los Angeles Police Department. They are abusing inmates with impunity, and the worst part is that they think they can get away with it.

Mr. Eliasberg and Ms. Lim said that inmates who were beaten were routinely placed for several days afterward in isolation, known as the hole, and were often accused of assaulting the guards.

The A.C.L.U. plans to call for a wide-ranging federal investigation, and for Sheriff Baca to resign.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



