

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | July 30, 2013

Over the weekend, news came out that a hunger strike participant at California State Prison, Corcoran had committed suicide. Billy Michael Sell, 32, killed himself on July 22nd, two weeks after the launch of an on-going statewide hunger strike against long-term solitary confinement and related prison conditions. While the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) initially made a point of claiming that Sell was not on hunger strike at the time of his death, it [confirmed](#) last afternoon that Sell had been on strike from July 8th until July 21st while in the Security Housing Unit (SHU). The Kings County Coroner confirmed on Monday that Sell died as a result of hanging while in solitary confinement. Sell, unlike most California hunger strikers, was in the SHU since December 2007 for murdering his cellmate. Approximately 3,000 of the 4,500 men held in the SHU are there for alleged gang affiliation, and the remaining 1,500 are generally there for set terms for disciplinary infractions.

Sell, nicknamed Guero by those who knew him, had been incarcerated since 1999 on a life-sentence for attempted murder. Regardless of what one thinks about the conduct of people in prison, the suicide of prisoners and the desperation that has prompted three statewide California prison hunger strikes is indicative of a system in crisis. California remains under federal court supervision to ensure that California reduces its overcrowded prison system, delivers Constitutionally acceptable health services, and protects those diagnosed as mentally ill. In his review of the 34 suicides in CDCR facilities in [2011](#), Dr. Patterson found that:

Things were more or less the same in his review of the first 15 suicides in 2012:

As is clear from this data, the suicides in California prisons disproportionately occur in segregation units, and particularly with inmates in solitary confinement. Solitary Watch has previously reported on suicides in solitary confinement units. In 2011, prisoners [Armando Cruz](#) and [Alex Machado](#) committed suicide in California State Prison, Sacramento Psychiatric Services Unit and Pelican Bay State Prisons Administrative Segregation Unit, respectively. Both had spent years in segregation units, both had a history of self-harm and threatening to commit suicide. Cruz had entered the prison system at the age of 17 with a heavily documented history of psychosis, and his hallucinations are documented to have become worse while being placed in and out of segregation units. Machado was known as an intelligent jailhouse lawyer with no history of psychological problems until being placed in segregation at Pelican Bay following his validation as an associate of the Mexican Mafia prison gang. Machado would attempt suicide and exhibit bizarre behavior and paranoia in the months before committing suicide.

In August 2012, Armando Morales committed suicide in Corcoran's SHU. [Morales](#), a Watts, California native, had spent years in the SHU. Morales, according to individuals on his cell block, reported that he committed suicide amidst pressure to debrief (or, snitch) on fellow prisoners.

Meanwhile, over 561 prisoners in nine prisons were on hunger strike as of yesterday. According to CDCR, 322 have been on hunger strike the entire three weeks. CDCR has previously said that hunger strikers who have accepted drinks such as Kool-Aid were not going to be considered on hunger strike, so the 561 figure may reflect individuals who have accepted Kool-Aid but then rejected anything else since and are now once again considered on hunger strike. According to CDCR policy, an individual is only counted on hunger strike after refusing nine consecutive meals. Solitary Watch has also received reports that individuals at Pelican Bay who had ended their participation have stated that they may resume striking should guards move hunger strike participants to Ad Seg.

With the death of Sell, and the hunger strike now over three weeks, there has been a growing spotlight on California, with Hollywood stars even [announcing](#) their support for reforms. With thousands in solitary confinement and the prison system driving dozens a year to suicide, increasing attention at least raises the possibility of meaningful policy review and reforms.

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

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.

R.I.P. my big cousin! Billy Michael Sell you will always be missed!

R.i.P Billy Sell! <33 Yu are truly loved & missed by the Dominquez's & Barragan Family!!

This other article has the actual demographics of those that committed suicide.

<http://solitarywatch.com/2013/04/08/systemic-failures-persist-in-california-prison-mental-health-care-judge-rules/>

The demographics of Californias Prison Population is 38 percent Latino, 27 percent, white, and 29 percent African American which leaves 6% other.

Yet the 2011 suicides are 37% white (of 27%), 30% Hispanic (of 38%), 18% other (of 6%) and 15% African American (of 29% of the total population).

How do we interpret these numbers and what are the implied reasons behind them?

John wrote in a comment above:

Most inmates committed suicide because they are pressured and black mailed by other inmates. And that is the truth!

This made me take another look at the statistics in this and one other article on this site.

From these statistics on suicide I noted that the majority of suicides, 64.7%, occurred outside of solitary confinement, and of those committed in some form of solitary confinement, 35.3%, the majority, 26.5%, were being held in AdSeq at the time, which is short term.

Suicide in prison thus appears to be, for the majority committing it, unrelated to solitary confinement.

The numbers do suggest however, that mental illness is a huge factor when 30 of 34, (88.2%), had a history of mental health treatment.

The American Psychological Association noted that:

Scientists studying the developmental roots of mental illness have zeroed in on the bodys stress response. When the body reacts to stressors, it produces stress hormones responsible for the heart-pounding, sweaty-palms sensation known as the fight-or-flight response.

<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/02/mental-illness.aspx>

Stress then being a prime factor in the onset of mental illness begs to suggest that the majority were under extreme stress before they committed suicide.

I have often written that:

Incarceration is a cruel gauntlet with one side lined with rouge guards and the other with predatory inmates.

These natural adversaries, both consciously and unconsciously, collude in order to mete out societies punishment.

As Justice Justice of Texas wrote in 1999:

Texas prison inmates continue to live in fear a fear that is incomprehensible to most of the states free world citizens. More vulnerable inmates are raped, beaten, owned, and sold by more powerful ones. Despite their pleas to prison officials, they are often refused protection. Instead, they pay for protection, in money, services, or sex. Correctional officers continue to rely on the physical control of excessive force to enforce order. Those inmates locked away in administrative segregation, especially those with mental illnesses, are subjected to extreme deprivations and daily psychological harm. Such practices and conditions cannot stand in our society, under our Constitution.

And here is a quote from the Supreme Court.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun, Farmer v. Brennan:

The horrors experienced by many young inmates, particularly those who are convicted of nonviolent offenses, border on the

unimaginable.

These justices have described a punishment so severe suicide is preferable.

And those of us that have run this cruel gauntlet understand and appreciate what it took to survive incarceration.

This is not necessarily what we want to present on here in opposition to Solitary Confinement but facts are facts.

Inmates placed in SHU & Ad/Seg can develop mental illness such ,Distress,Anxiety & Psychosis. This Units are Psychotic themselves which caused loss of reality and prevent this People from contacting with other human beings I rather die than to take the cruelty reality of become of living in Solitary Confinement.

R,I,P BILL SELL ,YOU ATE IN A BETTER PLACE

The black mail policie is used by CDCR Guards,pressuring inmates to debrief Putting the Inmates lives and Their families in danger, because CDCR Stuff Cant do their jobs by doing their own investigations!!!!.

The

I wish just for one day one CDCR officials tried to live in a cell like this. How a human being can become so cruel and heartless to pains and sufferings of another human being? Are there any special schools in this country that teach sadism, racism, torture and violation of human rights to those who work at CDCR? Do they go through a mutation process before they start working at CDCR? What the hell is happening with people? How can those monsters sleep at night when their hands are soaked in inmates blood? We are paying CDCR monsters so they can torture and kill our loved ones? Somebody pinch me! Am I having a nightmare or this is true?

He was probably pressured by his fellow gang members to commit suicide or else his family will be killed if he will not continue to participate in hunger strike. Gang leaders who are behind bars use these kind of black mail to other inmate to commit suicide. Solitary confinement has nothing to do with these suicides. Most inmates committed suicide because they are pressured and black mailed by other inmates. And that is the truth!

R.I.P.Billy SELL.

having had sons go through the prison system for years my heart hurts for all the families
wee of these i call just done with it all. god bless

Bill Sell was tired of living in solitary confinement,Governor Brown left to Germn on aget away vacacion totally ignoring Prisoners on Hunger STRIKE. He felt hopeless and prefered to died!!!! R.I.P. handsome Young man. God wont forget about You.

My heart goes out to Billys family along with the others that lost their loved ones. My brother was Armando Morales who we lost almost a year ago to the same situation. It is with disbelief that these things continue to happen in the SHU but most importantly the shock and and heartache we as a family and society have to continue to face. A mother, father, sister, brother should never have to receive a phone call that their loved one took their own life. Its a pain that no one could ever understand especially when you know that he was strong and incapable of such a thing. Getting answers from the prison is like pulling teeth and unfortunately to this day we are still unclear as to why hes gone. Im so sorry for your lose and hope you find strength to move forward. Its an extremely harsh reality to face and know that I will pray for his loved..

Shame on California CDCR Ad /Seg AND SHU SYSTEM!!!!!

This is Armando Moraless sister, does anyone know if he was moved to PC? These are all sad stories. Im still not 100% that Armando did that to himself. My condolences go out to Billys family.

Because of his hair color, small statue, and dress my older brother Mike passed as a Mexican while our family lived in Pacoima, CA.

At 13 years of age Mike was given the honorary nickname of Little Guedo (Little Whitey) by a clica (clique or gang) there.

Because of his association with this clique Mike was under continual threats from his white classmates, the authorities, and even our mother if he didnt disassociate himself.

A few years later he entered LA county jail still a teenager shortly after the Watts Riots of 1965. By passing himself off as a Chicano he may have saved his own life.

Why did this man kill his cellmate? Was it an order? Was he defending himself? Or did he just lose it? Those that have run this cruel gauntlet, understand, and appreciate, what it took to survive it.

As for his suicide, I cant but wonder if some of these are actually assisted suicides.

When Mike was in solitary in Los Angeles Central Juvenile Hall he exchanged words with a guard. Later as he laid on his bunk the rather large guard soaked a towel with urine and ran in and jumped on top of my 13 year old brothers chest and suffocated Mike with the wet towel until he lost consciousness. Who knows what else the guard did to Mike while he was unconscious.

Should we call this urine boarding?

What if Mike had died that day what would the report have said?

My younger brother Victor was about to be released after over a decade in the hole when he died in the Salinas Valleys SHU. Why did he

wait until he was about to be released to hang himself? Why indeed?

My regards to the two families involved in this case, Guedos and his victims.

Sells death should not be definitively characterized as suicide. This is the story that CDCR is giving, but Sells co-prisoners say that suicide would have been completely out of character. <http://striketheprisons.com/post/56614906869/the-first-death>

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