

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | April 23, 2011

Solitary Watch was among the manyco-sponsors of a publicpanel discussion on Isolation Units within U.S. Prisons, organized and hosted by the Center for Constitutional Rights, which was held in San Francisco on April 5. The [following report](#) on the event comes from David Id, a reporter and editor forSan Francisco Bay Area Indymedia. You can listen to the full audio of the panel [here](#) on Indymedias site.

At the Womens Building in San Francisco, the Center for Constitutional Rights gathered a panel of experts to discuss the history and the ramifications of solitary confinement and experimental isolation units in the U.S. prison system. The panel featured Zahra Billoo, Executive Director, Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)-San Francisco Bay Area; Dr. Terry Kupers, M.D., the Wright Institute; Keramet Reiter, JD, PhD Candidate Berkeley Law; Nahal Zamani, Education and Outreach Associate, Center for Constitutional Rights; and Eddy Zheng, former inmate and prisoner rights advocate. The panel was moderated by Sara Norman, attorney, Prison Law Office.

Panelists explain that it was without public involvement that supermax prisons began to be built in the United States in the late 1980s. The first was in Arizona, to be followed by Pelican Bay in California and a federal supermax in Colorado in 1994. Today, a majority of states have at least one supermax prison or penitentiary, several having up to four, and virtually every prison now includes Security Housing Units (SHUs) which specialize in sensory deprivation.

While virtually all jails and prisons in the United States have historically contained isolation units of one form or another, the newer style of prisons known as supermax, along with SHUs, consist entirely of segregated, solitary confinement, isolation units, where prisoners are generally allowed outside of their individual cells no more than one hour per day. The ill effects of sensory depravation in these prisons can be devastating for inmates, even more so for those previously suffering from any mental health issues. On a societal level, isolation units are counterproductive to prisons being institutions for rehabilitation when inmates are psychologically tortured while behind bars.

In California and some other states, monitoring prison conditions and inmate health is made especially difficult due the the secrecy enforced through gag rules against reporters interviewing prisoners. Panelists note that the U.S. Constitution is being mooted by rules such as these and other denials of basic civil rights in supermax prisons. Solitary confinement for years without trial, or while awaiting trial, is used to break Muslim prisoners. Minors are being held in solitary as well, charged as adults after the passage of Proposition 21 in California.

In 2006, a new type of isolation unit in federal penitentiaries was established called Communications Management Units (CMUs), despite objections from civil liberties organizations. These new facilities offer no contact visits and only four hours a month with family and friends. Due to public pressure, the time allowed was increased to two four-hour visits in January of 2010. Additionally, visits are often difficult as prisoners can be sent hundreds if not thousands of miles from where they live. CMU inmates are allowed two fifteen-minute calls per month, in which family members must be as succinct as possible and pass the phone quickly to everyone who wants to speak.

Over 65% of inmates in CMUs are Muslim. The next largest populations are political prisoners, either environmental and animal activists who are now classified as terrorists by law enforcement agencies and those who have become prison civil liberties activists while behind bars. Given who is currently being held in isolation units, there are obvious parallels between the growth of supermax prisons, SHUs, and CMUs domestically and notorious U.S. military prisons abroad such as Abu Ghraib in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

Panelists field questions from the audience for about twenty minutes at the conclusion of their talk. The event was co-sponsored by the Civil Liberties Defense Center, Solitary Watch, Freedom Archives, Arab Resource and Organizing Center, National Lawyers Guild San Francisco Chapter, National Lawyers Guild Boalt Hall Chapter, California Prison Focus, Animal Legal Defense Fund-Stanford University, California Coalition for Women Prisoners, Anti-Racism Committee of the National Lawyers Guild-San Francisco Chapter, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children and Hastings Prisoner Outreach, Stanford Criminal Law Society, ACLU of Northern California, Prison Legal News, All of Us or None, Critical Resistance Oakland Chapter and Green is the New Red.

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

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People need to wake up! These prisons are built this way so it takes less guards to run them. That's how for-profit prisons work. And as for the one that was told her brother committed suicide. He was close to his release date, you have to remember he is a source of revenue approx. 800 dollars a week or 40,000 per year. They have prisons all over the country with solitary confinement 24/7 NO OUTSIDE CONTACT. Didn't you find it odd that you were not contacted about making arrangements on how his family would like to inter him. No body no questions and the human money machine continues. You don't really believe there is a shred of decency in the corporate owners. It's not about rehabilitation it's about internal government greed. Judges get kickbacks. Without your brother they don't make money. ..Why would a lawyer become a judge? they only make a fraction of what a good lawyer makes. The answer is all judges are corrupt.

About time this was taken up with out light regard of it solitary does no good for anyone in long term that is and for some even short term is too much I feel much work still needs to be done in this field yet it seems like nothing gets done sadly in the end all this talk but what about really getting something done I must say if there is so much to show how bad this is why do they not get it yet lol sick is it not may there be light in the darkness of justice

@Diana my mother used to protest the beatings and abuse of my brother. In fact she walked into the Gov office in person and complained. My brother asked her to not visit because he would receive abuse afterward. Your right to wonder if your actions are causing more problems for your son. I also took a tour (on a prison bus as a 17yr old prisoner) to Vacaville and Atascadero. Believe me they are intimidating. Camarillo and LA County mental hospital are also gross. I recently read Edward Bunker's memoir and he spent time in Folsom and San Quentin but he said the mental hospital he was sent to nearly killed him after they beat him severely. I am not sure it would be much of an improvement based on my observations and what I have been told. My brother after 12-13 yrs in solitary was about to be released and was said to have hung himself. Why after so long would he commit suicide within months of being released? I believe they choked him out and told us he committed suicide. His body was cremated before we saw him. Tossed into the Pacific without our knowledge.

Good luck helping your son! I mean that sincerely.

My son, as well as the family members of thousands of other people in the U.S., is mentally ill and has been sent to prison, even though he has been found to be NGI, not guilty due to insanity. He had been in mental hospitals since 2005, but because he hit a psych tech, he was deemed dangerous and was sent to prison under Welfare & Institutions Code Section 7301, which I understand is being used more and more by the state mental hospitals to get rid of persons they believe they can't take the time to handle. My son already tried to commit suicide twice in 4 months of being in prison; immediately upon being transferred to the prison PSU (Psychiatric Services Unit) he was placed in segregation. 4 showers a week, group meetings where he is held in a single-man module or cage, exercise in a caged area like an animal. My son is becoming more ill by being sent there. I complained and insisted, because of the suicide attempts, that he be transferred to a hospital run by the CA DMH, which they did. However, I have been told that he may not stay there long; as soon as he becomes stable he will be returned to the prison! where he will probably become suicidal again! He is doing much better at the DMH facility (Vacaville Medical Facility) but all this will be taken from him as soon as they believe he is stable. When I met his social worker, she told me that she saw in his file that he was recently sentenced to 2 years in state prison! I said to her that that was impossible as there hadn't been any charges pressed, no written notice, no hearings, no courts, nothing. She was perplexed and has avoided my calls since then. Under section 7301 of the CA W & I Code, there are certain things the prison cannot do to my son. I believe that the prison is

attempting to turn my son into an inmate category so that they can have complete control over him. I am afraid that my sending letters and complaints to them have made them angry and they might try to hurt my son, or worse, when he is returned to Folsom. This is an abuse of my son and his constitutional rights and I can only pray that the attorney can do something before its too late. My son does not belong in a prison, he belongs in a hospital where he can obtain the medications and treatment, many of which he cannot obtain in the prison because of the CA Dept. of Corrections rules and regs. I dont want him anywhere that is run by CDCR, but we are not sure how to stop this action by the state.
Diana.

I found the following book very useful in understanding the early CA history behind SHUs.

The Rise and Fall of Californias Radical Prison Movement by Eric Cummins

Excerpt:

The California Right had from the very first reacted with intense fear to the Marxist language in which the Left had chosen to couch its prison ideology. Fired by the bogeyman of communism, conservatives had generously contributed to committees funding police unites to investigate California radicals. By the time of George Jacksons death, multiple local, state and federal agencies had infiltrated the California prison movement.

In hearings before a congressional subcommittee investigating San Quentin in October, Moe Camacho, President of the CCOA, called for the creation of separate, maximum security prisons for revolutionary inmates and demanded stricter treatment for the remaining maximum security prisoners.

In 1970 Warden Nelson had served on the Committee on Riots and Disturbances of the American Correction Association. The first firm decision the group came to was that convict ringleaders must be removed and isolated from the general population before an opportunity to carry out their plans presents itself. In other words, troublemakers were to be identified and punished before they committed any offenses.

Not every inmate in these units is a Muslim, or communist revolutionary. My own non-violent younger brother, fell into none of these categories, but died in one of these CA units under suspicious circumstances a few years back.

The book shows in a balanced way both sides of this issue.

Sensory deprivation in our prisons, being used on thousands of inmates with mental illness is definitely beyond the pale and is cruel and unusual punishment. Davids Hope is committed to securing treatment not incarceration for those living with a serious mental illness. When incarceration can not be circumvented ,we need settings which will not make the inmate sicker. We need accountability in our public mental health system along with transparency in our criminal justice system. Decency demands it.

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