

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/02/13/kids-languish-in-solitary-while-awaiting-trial-in-colorado/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | February 13, 2010

An article by Joseph Boven in the [Colorado Independent](#) exposes the plight of juveniles who have been charged as adults, and often spend months in solitary confinement as they await their trials. As [we've written before](#), kids in adult prisons are highly likely to end up in solitary, either because they are considered disciplinary problems or because they have to be isolated from adult offenders for their own protection.

These children have not yet been convicted of any crime and even if they never are, their lives are often ruined by the time they get out. In part, this is because they receive no education while they sit alone in their cells. One Colorado state senator is trying to change that situation but predictably, neither the state nor local school districts want to take on the expense of educating these kids. The state will pay to keep them in solitary confinement, though which [according to one study](#) costs up to \$75,000 a year.

Juvenile suspects awaiting trial as adults in Colorado jails languish without education, sometimes held in solitary confinement while they wait for their day in court. The harsh conditions come partly as a fact of the state's more generally overcrowded prison facilities, where the young people are held in adult prisons, shunted into solitary confinement in order simply to keep them segregated from the adult population. State Sen. Evie Hudak, D-Westminster, told the *Colorado Independent* that young people held in these conditions have committed suicide.

Kids are in a jail cell all day long for months and months and months, she said. They're entitled to receive an education but no one has worked out how to provide that education.

State law requires juveniles in detention receive education. An estimate puts the number of students awaiting trial as adults at more than 130. Hudak said the Colorado Department of Education is aware of the problem but has yet to work out how to address it.

Nobody knows where to [hold instruction], who is going to provide the instruction and how are you going to pay for it. It's very important for these kids to get an education. Most of them don't end up serving life terms. They're going to come back out into society at some point, she said.

Hudak has introduced legislation that attempts to address the issue but, given the historic strained budget crisis facing the state, the odds are high it will fail to gain sufficient support to pass. The Colorado Association of School Boards, for example, has already opposed the bill, arguing that school districts do not have the money and that the state would have to pick up the tab.

Hudak said that a quarter of the cases where juveniles are charged as adults are dismissed. A number of them are acquitted and the rest pretty much go to the youth offender system for three to seven years and then they are out.

Hudak said the resulting gap in education leads to recidivism. She also thinks it increases the likelihood of deep depression and suicide. In the last year, two juvenile suspects have committed suicide while awaiting trials as adults. Hudak says that in part it is a result of an inability to see a future for themselves.

They sit there in an empty cell for weeks and weeks thinking about how they ruined their lives. They are children. I see this [legislation working] to not only educate these students but to allow them to have some hope and vision of a future.

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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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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Let me say the only solution is to not send these children to an adult facility until they are an adult. This should be obvious but I would like to share a couple of lines about my experience with the school system in California juvenile facilities as well as being around adult inmates as a juvenile.

School:

There were never any lectures or classes per-se but with much of the inmate population functionally illiterate paradoxically all the materials at school were self study. We were each given assignments based on our school records. The materials to complete each assignment came with little or no explanation. With little assistance from the assigned teachers or a more accurate description would be the custodians of the materials few inmates ever advanced their educational standing. Therefore most inmates fell further and further behind their peers on the outside which diminished their chances of a successful reintegration to their community schools upon their release.

To be fair to the system the different levels of competency of the wards would have made it very difficult to hold classroom lectures that would benefit everyone unless the wards could be assigned to classes according to their needs. This of course would be a logistical nightmare involving the shuffling the entire institutions inmate population and expose many nonviolent or younger inmates to older more violent wards.

The choice of the only educational film shown to us while I was incarcerated surprised me since the racial tension was so high. The film was a WWII documentary film showing the Nazi occupation of North Africa. First the film depicted how Hitler sought to build an invincible army by emphasizing the stature and discipline of his soldiers. Then the film showed these soldiers marching in unison during mass rallies and finally it showed how native African warriors attempted to repeal the invading German tanks with only wooden spears. This method of counter attack resulted in the natives being unexpectedly burned alive by the tanks flame throwers. Seeing the wide eyed frightful expressions of the natives witnessing their brethren set ablaze made the mixed race crowd watching it very uncomfortable and embarrassed. Thus the choice of the film seemed to me to be either an effort to incite a riot or just plain ignorance on the teachers part.

While traveling to court we stopped at every major California penitentiary:

I hopped onto the large bus where a dozen or so adult prisoners were waiting my arrival. Once on board I was instructed to go further back and sit by myself after all at the age of 17 I was still a minor. That was just fine with me, so I moved towards the rear and as I did so, I could feel the inmates sizing me up as I walked down the aisle. Was I a punk or was I a threat? Predators like water follow the path of least resistance. I also took this chance to size each of them up as I passed them by careful to use only my peripheral vision (its not good to make eye contact as it may appear to be a challenge ironically this is the same advice animal trainers give for handling an aggressive dog).

This treat assessment was a necessary process in order to identify those around me that were most likely to present a problem if I was confronted by them. I felt a sense of relief in the belief that I could probably hold my own with this first batch but then again there would be many more stops to be made down the road.

I noticed an inmate sitting next to another speaking rather softly but intensely. The other looked intimidated and it appeared a classic example of coercion. Later on in the day we arrived at a downtown jail somewhere in farm country. A chain was run through a loop in our cuffs so that we were all now daisy chained together and then we were unloaded under armed guard. Once we were all off the bus we were made to walk a short distance to the jails entrance where more guards waited. It was an embarrassing few moments as pedestrians and the inhabitants of cars stared at all of us with expressions of disdain and concern on their faces.

Once inside I was placed in a cell by myself and all the others were in a larger cell within ear shot of mine. Later during the wait for the guards return I heard an attack taking place on an inmate. I assumed it was the two men that I had witnessed talking earlier. Later when the guards returned and we were all loaded back on the bus along with one new prisoner the body language of the two inmates confirmed my suspicions. Submission had been established and my heart sank a little for the man that had been made to submit. I convinced myself that it was better for me to pretend I didnt know so I looked away as the victim raised his eyes to mine. Now the trip was beginning to be a concern for me.

The new arrival had a wild look on his face as he asked the others who I was since I was sitting alone. They explained that I was a C.Y.A. inmate. Satisfied he began to tell the others of how he had escaped from Atascadero State Hospital for the criminally insane. I

listened as he described his escape. He had overpowered a guard then took him and another guard hostage. One guard was forced to drive off in a marked car while he held a gun in the mouth of the other guard. The inmate was delighted that the guard had wet his pants as he was forced to repeat that he was the inmates bitch. To prove that he was indeed his bitch the inmate forced the guard to perform fellatio on him. This all took place with the gun held to the guards forehead as they traveled down the road.

I imagined the scene and wondered what the pay back would be when the inmate was returned to the facility. Most inmates think that a real man would never submit to such an act. If someone has been forcibly raped it requires the quick gruesome murder of the offender by the victim in order to prevent any further exploitation. This is the minimum that will regain even a small measure of respect of those around you. This need to be respected is the root cause of prison violence and the slightest sign of disrespect can get you killed.

We next stopped at a state building of some kind. First one of the guards then the other went inside. We were alone for the first time since I had first been placed on the bus. The story teller from Atascadero, as if to confirm his bravado, quickly jumped to his feet and began going up and down the aisle looking for a weak spot on the bus. Finding an open window the man laid face up on the seat and began kicking at the bars outside the window. He had to do this with both feet since we all wore ankle cuffs as well as handcuffs. Bang bam nothing, bang bam nothing, pausing he asks to be notified if the guards reappear. Bang bam nothing, I begin to ask myself if he succeeds and gets out and the others follow what would happen if the guards return and see a massive prison escape. The thought of the guards firing on us now worried me.

And then it all hit me Im here with a bunch of hardcore desperate men. Yes I wanted to be free but I also knew that I didnt have years to do and although doing time was rough I felt I could make it.

The inmate soon tired and just as he took brief rest the guards exited the building carrying bag lunches. Once the guards boarded they began to distribute the bag lunches unaware of the drama that had preceded their return. We all were required to eat while handcuffed and bouncing up and down as the bus maneuvered down the road. It was difficult to eat while holding on to our drinks so either we raised our drinks along with our sandwich to our mouth or the drinks had to be squeezed between our legs. The rest of our meal rested freely on our lap all of this took awhile for the inexperienced like me to figure out so you would hear men cuss as they spilled their drinks or dropped their food.

Our next stop was to be Atascadero to return the escapee.

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