

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/05/01/inmates-in-solitary-confinement-in-california-respond-to-prison-policy-reforms/>

Campaign and Advocacy

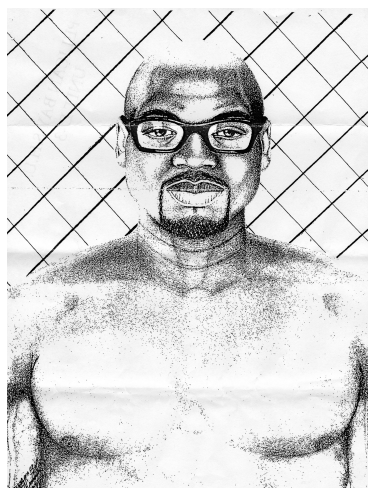
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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | May 1, 2012



Prisoners in California's Security Housing Unit (SHU) have offered their opinions of the [recent reforms](#) of the California prison systems [controversial gang validation](#) policies. In correspondences with Solitary Watch, people held in SHU at Pelican Bay and Corcoran prisons have consistently been critical of the reforms, which among other things reform the gang validation point system and introduce a step-down program in which prisoners can transition out of the SHU. Last month, a group of [SHU prisoners](#), all of whom are labeled as either members or leaders of prison gangs (Aryan Brotherhood, Mexican Mafia, Black Guerilla Family), released a counter proposal in response.

The following are excerpts from letters written by prisoners currently in California's SHUs.

From Kijana Askari (self-portrait above), who has been in the SHU since 1994 after being validated as a member of the Black Guerilla Family:

With regards to the revisions that were done to SHU management gang policies, well, that is exactly what has taken place (revisions (e.g. reform). Hence, more of the same in that, the revisions have only strengthened CDCR officials' power and ability to label and validate every prisoner in CDCR as belonging to a Security Threat Group (e.g. prison gang). At the crux of the revisions is a lack of a definitive and behavioral-based criteria on what actually constitutes gang activity, meaning that any and everything can and will still be considered as gang activity, in spite of how innocuous the activity may be.

In addition to this, we still have untrained and unqualified CDCR officers/officials determining and assessing what is gang activity. And this point is critical for two very important reasons: 1) There are no qualitative oversight mechanisms in place, meaning there is absolutely nothing to prevent CDCR's prison guards, gang unit, etc., from being vindictive, retaliatory, punitive, etc., via the application of these revised gang management policies; and 2) it has been proven that CDCR's prison guards and their IGI gang unit staff do not properly investigate the evidence used in each prisoner's gang validation (see [Lira v. Cate](#)).

And the new revisions do not do anything to correct this.

Kijana Tashiri Askari (Marcus Harrison) #H54077, Pelican Bay State Prison D3 122 SHU, PO Box 7500, Crescent City, CA 95531

From a Pelican Bay SHU prisoner who has been in solitary confinement for five years and is currently appealing the gang validation that placed him there:

We were recently afforded a copy of this proposal. Many of us are getting the chance now to read through and evaluate it. I read through it once and will go through it again. There are many aspects of the step down program that at face value seem to provide far better

alternatives to the over 20 year long policy of implementing indeterminate SHU programs. Many of the program objectives and privileges outlined in the proposal at first glance look to be very good and beneficial to a lot of SHU prisoners. However, the gang validation/identification aspect of the proposal continues to present an ongoing issue and problem for many individuals who have been validated and will be validated. Under the criteria that is set forth, it continues to target and identify individuals for long-term SHU placement based on gang affiliation rather than actual gang activity or criminal/illegal conduct. Which is, has been, and under this proposal will continue to be a significant hardship for many who the CDCR looks to place and keep locked away in the SHU for little to no reason.

From a Corcoran SHU prisoner who has been diagnosed with severe depression:

We did have an opportunity to see and speak to a couple of representatives from Sacramento who are responsible for crafting language that will reflect the policy change. As we understand there are changes being made to the policy. And the CDCR is in the process of implementing the step down program here at Corcoran SHU. And it is anticipated, according to what we were told, that something would be in place within 60-90 days. At least that's a target date or time frame.

There was a couple of areas of concern for us. We believe that four years is much too long to be in the step down program. It's a four year step program, each step is one year. It's basically an observation program in which you graduate to the next step if you have not been documented as having been involved in gang activity. Just what constitutes gang activity is still being determined.

A lot of guys in Pelican Bay and here have already been in isolation for the past 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35 years. Many have been disciplinary free and most were placed in isolation for non-disciplinary reasons. It does not make any sense for guys to have to remain in the SHU.

We believe that those guys that the CDCR (genuinely) intends on placing in general population or non-SHU setting should be placed directly into one.

In light of the struggle (and loss of life) it will be extremely difficult for the CDCR to justify not allowing guys to be released to general population. Or at least be provided some kind of meaningful program in a non-SHU setting.

I was diagnosed with severe depression several years ago.

I don't know which is worse.

At some point you know that the isolation has affected you. Perhaps permanently. It involves so many different factors. Particularly the isolation itself.

Over the years you have seen other people snap. Human beings cutting themselves. Eating their own waste. Smearing themselves in it. And sometimes throwing it at you. Human beings not just talking out loud to themselves but screaming at and cursing themselves out.

How could you not be affected by this kind of madness?!

From a Pelican Bay SHU prisoner who has been in solitary confinement since 1988 and participated in the 2011 hunger strikes:

I fail to see how it is any different from my current SHU term. It did not address the fact that there are prisoners who have been in PBSP-SHU for over 20 years without any kind of serious rule infraction. It is written like every single short corridor prisoner is starting from scratch. In other words, no prisoner should even entertain the idea of leaving SHU for the next four or five years. It sounds like a poorly modified version of the six year inactive status program to me. And the IGI still has control of prisoners' fate through what is decided through classification, telling them when and where to place us.

Nothing has been gained. They've put a different name on the same repressive/torturous measures that have been in effect since the state started locking us up for administrative convenience in extreme solitary confinement isolation. There is absolutely nothing about the step down program that allows a SHU prisoner to work their way out of SHU without the expressed approval of the IGI. The whole program as laid out at present is a bunch of clever words seemingly giving prisoners a way to work our way out of SHU. It's not! I've already been in SHU since 1988, what do I need to work on? What exactly are they going to see in my attitude and actions during the four phases of the step-down program that they haven't already seen in the past twenty plus years during my extreme isolated confinement for administrative convenience? It just does not make sense.

I feel like the CDCR is clowning us!

The following is from a Pelican Bay SHU prisoner who has been incarcerated for 40 years, 35 of which have been spent in the SHU.

Being a labeled outcast makes it easy to see us no more than a farm animal or dog. Which morally assuages the conscience and culpability of individuals' roles in our vilification. We are living in the times of the Bogeyman syndrome. The power of fear and mistrust. Suspicion which clouds people's judgment and common sense. Choosing to be ignorant, unable or unwilling to filter out irrelevant noises and views, they transform into parrots that merely mimic the latest tidbit of information.

I don't have a positive opinion of the impending SHU policy changes. The basic framework, premise and argument is faulty because phantoms are still used as a justification to subject people to punitive action. I am in SHU for non-disciplinary reasons and have been subjected to punitive isolation based on presumption and fantastic tales sown from the chronicle of the Bogeyman. I have spent 35 years in SHU and I should be unconditionally released to the mainline, especially since I haven't had any serious rule violation in even twenty-five years except for participation in a hunger strike.

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.

The riot at WC and the injury of the inmate named Mike in the article reminded me of the 1967 riot at DVI Tracy, CA of which my own brother Mike received a similar blow to the head. 45 years of progress. I also was struck by the fact the guy was from California and was sent by his mother to his father's house. I was released from Preston and sent to Baton Rouge, LA in 1969. I later spent about 5 months in the Parrish jail where I heard the stories of former inmates of Parchment, Angola, and Sargarland, TX prison plantation farms. Little has changed they removed the physical torture of four inch wide straps which they beat you with and use isolation and restraints in its place.

In another 45 years what will it be like?

Im sure that was a rhetorical question, but Ill answer anyway: we thought we ended slavery 150 ago too so, I think we have a long, long way to go to civilization.

We seem to take one step forward and two steps back, dont know why.

Alan, thanks for the article. NPR has done a great job covering this story. Im very familiar with the law suit against Walnut Grove. I witnessed it from afar through the eyes of a young inmate Im working with. He is 22 now but survived 7 years at the cesspool called Walnut Grove or as I more fondly called it, the gulag. He aged out at 22 and is now at Parchman. Parchman is a respite after the grove. Our children do the hardest time in this country, except for the SHU, if only because they ARE children.

Untold numbers of kids held at WG have been hurt and/or damaged under the states watch. Now that the indictment has come down from the federal judge about the ineffable abuse at that hell hole for kids, I wish each and every survivor of WG would file a civil suit against the people who allowed it, condoned it, or participated in it. In true cowardly and greedy fashion, GEO took off like a bat out of hell back to Boca Raton after this scathing lawsuit was settled. The commissioner doing an about face after praising GEO.

Over the course of 7 years in battle at Walnut Grove, child #111796 survived 3 suicide attempts, nursed a collapsed lung w/o medical care, torn tear duct that has ruined his eyesight because he was denied surgery, numerous stab wounds, broken finger after guard slammed the iron door on it, numerous other broken bones, FOX-strength mace attacks to his face unable to shower it off, stints in the hole, gang bangings, filth, and an event unmentionable when he first arrived there. From 8th grade forward he lived in a virtual war zone, living in fear and forced to be hyper-vigilant 24/7. Even through all that he managed to keep an excellent record of conduct.

How can we still call the U.S a civilized country? We cant.

I pray.

@pamelako: Walnut Creek in the news.

http://www.alternet.org/rights/155326/the_unbelievable_brutality_unleashed_on_kids_in_for-profit_prisons/?page=entire

Alan, very nice story. I dont believe lwop is necessary at all. In most western, European and Scandanavian countries a life sentence is no more than 7 to 10 years and not spent gulag-style facilities where people are tortured and driven to madness by their captors.

The basis of Christian faith lies in redemption. But redemption is not possible while in punishment. America has returned to the dark ages of archaic and draconian punishments depriving prisoners any chance for redemption. Lwop sentences are tossed around like confetti, the new black, a popular trend but with no meaning or value. Even a 12 year old child can be cloaked in that sentence. A child can be sentenced to die in a cage even before hes reached puberty or maturity. This is a sign that a once great nation is on the decline, slipping toward 3rd world status.

As your story illustrates, people change, people arent the sum of one act. People are human and make mistakes, even repeated mistakes. But I believe most people are pulled toward their better side and want to do better and strive to do better throughout their lifetime and should be given that chance whenever possible. Every person has value, every person has worth, lwop and the death penalty rob from us that basic human quality.

How much distance from China to USA? Sentenced inmate lives in dictatorial surrounding, a training center dominant authority labelled Rehabilitation by CA authority. CDCR claims the blue and never gave prove. In contrary: inmate population grows and recidivism rate remains high. Humanity is only questioned when China is concerned while Golden GULAGS expose a society lie.

@pamelako:

LWOP Is it really necessary? And if so, how did we ever do without it before?

I also spent time in a CYA gladiator school where I developed a friendship with a guy named Bill who had been convicted of murder when he was only 15 years old.

I was there for disturbing the peace, which was a parole violation; Bill and I were both 17 at the time.

However Bill was not innocent and over the course of a year he described the murder to me in great detail.

Preston, where we were held, had similar demographics as Walnut Groves, 14 to 22 year old population.

Now after serving time with someone in such a violent atmosphere you develop a similar relationship as soldiers in combat. Therefore, I have often wondered what became of my friend over the years. I believe I have just found out via facebook.

Since Bill was going to be serving time until he was at least 22 they put him in a trade school/work shop at Preston where he learned upholstery. I worked in the laundry. Over the course of our friendship I found that Bill, although he appeared to be quite smart, couldnt read beyond the 4th grade level. Maybe he was dyslectic Im not sure today but regardless he was not going to be entering college upon his release.

I recently found a FB page of someone with the same name as Bill who was born in CA about the time Bill would have been in his mid-twenties, and then the family moved back east.

I then found an upholstery shop with the same last name. The upholstery business has been open for over 20 years now just like my own business and the upholstery bizs owner is also my same age, 60.

Bills last name is not common and the timeline I found for this family is so close to what is probable that I believe I found my old friend. There are other clues that are also pointing to this being him but Ill save that.

The point is rehabilitation is possible even of convicted murderers. By teaching an inmate like Bill with had a learning disability a trade he has paid his taxes since the early 70s and has not been a burden to tax payers.

For the tax payer this is a better deal than housing such people until they die.

However those that profit from this system will never admit to it.

Good luck.

Yes, Ive noticed and Im furious. Ive been helping a wrongfully convicted 15 year-old in MS file his appeals going on 6 years now. Hes got lwop and has survived the hell hole known as Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility aka Gladiator School where he grew up in a modern day Lord of the Flies deserted island. He was an 8th grade child surviving like an orphan in a Warsaw ghetto. WG was under federal investigation and a federal judge recently called it a cesspool and the worst abuse hes ever seen. Apparently, he knows nothing of the SHU. Well, thats another story I guess.

Having been exposed to the criminal justice system my eyes are open. Its not a justice system, its a criminal system. The shenanigans it took to convict a barely 15 year old of something he didnt do and subject him to mandatory lwop were amazing to me and still confounds me to this day. Ive learned that throughout this country, the sheriff, grand jury, court-appointed counsel, prosecutor, AG, judge, jury, appeals court and DOC are all part of the criminal system. And the free people look the other way (until it happens to them). Well, not me, I walked right into the fire. Hand in hand #111796 and I are fighting the criminal system every day. It aint easy, but I wont let it destroy us, Im gonna let it destroy them.

Our constitution is in shreds. The fact that a U.S. citizen can be held in isolation indefinitely whether for disciplinary reasons or not until they are driven to madness indicates our constitution is void. It was completely void when we learned that the Constitution doesnt protect the innocent from being systematically murdered by the State. We now know, it protects speech, religion, right to own a gun, but not your life. Those crazy forefathers, what were they thinking, your speech is more precious than your life. But, lo and behold, one cant speak if they are dead.

I voted for Obama because he promised to lead this crippled country in a different direction. I thought hed help his people in the struggle (wink, wink) and perserve and restore our constitutional rights. Alas, Obama turned out to be a muppet. Hed be off my radar completely if it werent for Supreme Court appointments. We would really be doomed if there were even one more racist, chauvinist, biased, stoolie judge on the US Supreme Court. So I guess Im gonna have to mark his box grudgingly.

Ha, and talk about gangs. Washington DC lobbyists, Wall Street thugs, political hacks called legislators, Carl Rove and his crew, Dick Cheney and his minions, the Chamber of Commerce, the Koch Brothers, the U.S. Supreme Court, all organized gangs reigning fear and terror and oppression on the American citizens devouring the constitution like greedy hogs. They belong in the SHU, indefinitely, for disciplinary reasons.

In Greed We Trust = United States of America

I pray that everyone held in isolation in American prisons be freed, by the grace of God.

no Pamelako, it is not constitutional. In case you haven't noticed, the US government political leaders have been taking great strides at undermining the constitution

I wish I had not read this. I think America should look at itself before it accuses other countries for human rights violations. 30 years in isolation? I honestly have never heard of such a thing. People driven mad to the point of self-mutilation, eating and wallowing in their own shit, starving themselves? Shameful. There is no excuse for this. What country is this anyway? I have to wonder if this sort of cruel treatment of a fellow human being and countryman can even be constitutional? Who among us has the authority to inflict such pain and suffering and inhumane treatment upon another human being? How can we look the other way? America, we need to clean up our act.

Reblogged this on [Faktensucher](#).

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