

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella](#) | May 5, 2015

For the next two weeks, Solitary Watch will be on hiatus while my colleague Aviva Stahl and I take a reporting trip to the United Kingdom.

While there, we will be speaking with officials and inspectors of Her Majesty's Prison Service, as well as prison reform advocates, scholars, and currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. We also hope to visit several prisons. Our particular aim is to investigate alternatives to the widespread use of long-term solitary confinement, practiced in the United States but virtually nowhere else in the Western industrialized world.

If time allows, we will also take a look at some of the icons of the British carceral state, including the Tower of London, where enemies of the crown were once held in extreme isolation, and Pentonville Prison, which has been in operation since 1842 and was built on the model of the U.S.'s notorious prototype of solitary confinement, Eastern State Penitentiary.

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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Pick up a pen! + paper! write to your penpal today, or choose someone random. People often lament how can I make a difference as just one person? Well. There's your thought for now:-)

Welcome to Solitary Watch from the UK! when I read this bit of news I thought wow it's both exciting and interesting, with S.W. coming to Europe, particularly as a U.K. resident.

There seems to be more networking of prison reform in the UK now, especially after a documentary was aired about US prisoners on death row. It provoked a massive reaction. I can imagine any report made Solitary Watch, and their experiences here and home, would be welcomed by people like me, and the large amount of people who just don't know.

O I'm v. interested about our own prisons.

A little background for the new reader:

Although Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary (E.S.P.) was built before Pentonville Prison, in England, its inspiration can be traced

back to London.

For before John Haviland, designed E.S.P., he had studied architecture in London in the early 1800s under professor James Elmes who, in lecturing on prison design said, The external aspect should be made as gloomy and melancholy as possible.

Wherever this viewpoint had originated it took hold in the states for when the prison the commissioners went seeking designs for E.S.P. they went on record as saying that, The exterior of the solitary prison should exhibit as much as possible great strength and convey to the mind a cheerless blank indicative of the misery which awaits the unhappy being that enters within its walls.

Thus when Haviland submitted his design he chose a gloomy, Gothic style that accented the security and the punitive nature of imprisonment.

E.S.P. remains Havilands most infamous design which was at the time it opened in 1829 the largest and most expensive public structure in the country.

In the decades following the opening of Philadelphias, Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP), Americans began a building boom of a variety of public institutions; penitentiaries for the criminal, asylums for the insane, almshouses for the poor, orphan asylums for homeless children, and reformatories for delinquents. Absent other social service programs these institutions became the preferred solution to the problems of poverty, crime, delinquency, and insanity.

Besides ESP John Haviland also designed, Harrisburg State Hospital (HSH) known at the time as the Pennsylvania State Lunatic Hospital which opened in 1851. Fellow Quaker Dr. Thomas S. Kirkbride, M. D. had been in his second year of medical school in Philadelphia when ESP opened its gates and was one of the trustees appointed by the governor for the hospital project.

Dorothea Dix an influential social reformer in the 19th century worked closely with Kirkbride. While visiting a jail in 1841 to teach Sunday school, she had witnessed the appalling treatment of the mentally ill who were forced to live in the company of common criminals.

Outraged, Dix convinced the legislatures of many states to construct public asylums. Dix and Kirkbride formed a friendship that resulted in a proliferation of asylums based on the Kirkbride Plan.

Ever since, prisons and asylums have shared common methodologies of confinement. Both were sold to the public as being therapeutic, as opposed to simple custodial institutions, but neither system has been successful as abuse, neglect, and mismanagement, soon replaced the reformers high ideals.

Then, beginning in the early 1950s, there was a major push for the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill after the abuse carried out in these mental asylums had been exposed. Some of the mental patients ended up in privately run nursing homes using the new 1965 social welfare program, Medicaid, but undoubtedly many others landed in prisons over time creating a growing mental health crisis in these institutions.

Today the mentally ill are over represented in solitary confinement units where their condition only worsens. The ill effects of solitary confinement became well known after the failed experiment in Walnut-Street Penitentiary, in Philadelphia, in 1787. Even so they went on to design

ESP specifically for Solitary Confinement. It was later noted in a U. S. Supreme Court on March 3, 1890 that under such conditions, a considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi- fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others became violently insane; others still, committed suicide; while those who stood the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community.

Nearly a century after this Supreme Court finding the first supermax prison opened for business in Crescent City, CA. Pelican Bay State Prison was specially designed as a supermax prison with isolation of troublesome inmates in mind. The Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit, which cost California taxpayers a quarter of a billion dollars, is perhaps the most notorious state run supermax prison. Pelican Bays design most resembles

the architecture pioneered at Eastern State Penitentiary, PA. From the air it is clearly a modern version of the Philadelphia prison: Its hub-and-spokes design taken directly from John Havilands 19th-century architectural plan.

Inmates in the SHU (known as the shoe) are kept in their cells close to 24 hours a day. As at Eastern State Penitentiary, inmates eat in their cells and exercise in isolated attached yards. But even at ESP, each prisoner had access to an enclosed garden, received writing and handicraft materials, and was allowed frequent visits with clergy and other moral reformers.

(SHU prisoners, who spend an average of 5 years in isolation, are permitted no visitors, spend 22 hours/day in a windowless steel cell, and are deprived of all belongings and all contact with the outside world).

After the United States Penitentiary, Administrative Maximum Facility (ADX) in Florence, Colorado opened for business in November 1994 this concept spread rapidly across the country leading to the current crisis where tens of thousands are held for years, many for decades, within concrete tombs designed for maximum sensory deprivation. As I write this 44 states are holding over 25,000 inmates in supermax prisons that resemble Pelican Bay. Another 81,622 are in some kind of restricted housing under similar conditions.

Second only to the federal government, California holds about 6,000 inmates in solitary confinement with thousands more locked down in double bunked cells. Of these 400 have qualified for a 2012 pilot program to transition them back to the general population but only a little over 150 have actually made the that transition.

One hundred and twenty five years after that Supreme Court finding the legal battle in the U. S. continues even while the international community condemns the practice.

Thanks for your info. Im specially excited about this new project as am UK resident. Be safe+best wishes.j.

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