

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2014/05/15/way-solitary-women-massachusetts-jail-get-strip-searched-videotaped/>

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by [Victoria Law](#) | May 15, 2014

When women are moved to the Segregation Unit for mental health or disciplinary reasons, they are strip searched. With four or more officers present, the inmate must: take off all her clothes, lift her breasts and, if large, her stomach, turn around, bend over, spread her buttocks with her hands and cough, and stand up and face the wall. If the woman is menstruating, she must remove her tampon or pad and hand it to a guard. An officer with a video camera stands a few feet away and records the entire strip search. This officer is almost always male.

This is a description of what has happened when [women are taken to solitary confinement](#) at the Western Massachusetts Regional Womens Correctional Center (WCC) in Chicopee. The procedure has been followed not only for women being sent to isolation for violating jail rules but also women who are being placed on suicide watch or who have requested protective custody. Since September 15, 2008, on approximately 274 occasions, a male corrections officer recorded the strip search with a handheld video camera; 178 women were affected by this practice.

In 2009, Debra Baggett wrote a letter to the law office of Howard Friedman about this practice. The office, which has been involved in a number of cases involving prisoner rights and strip searches, investigated Baggetts complaints. We found that the jail had a written policy allowing male guards to videotape the strip searches, stated David Milton, the attorney representing the women. When the jail refused to change its policy, Baggett and a group of other women held at the jail filed suit.

On April 22, 2014, a federal judge heard arguments in *Baggett v. Ashe*, the class-action lawsuit which now represents 178 women. At the center of the suit is the jails practice of allowing male guards to videotape the strip searches of women being moved to the jails segregation unit. The jail has argued that male officers do not watch the searches while filming.

Jails and prisons and especially womens facilities are notorious as sites of sexual violence and abuse. Women make up just 7 percent of state and federal prisoners in the United States, but they are the victims in [33 percent of all sexual assaults by prison staff](#). In addition to these physical assaults, women in jails and prisons have reported incidents of sexual humiliation by male officers, from making frequent sexual comments to watching them as they shower.

Even against this backdrop of routine sexual abuse, the practice at Western Massachusetts Regional WCC appears extreme. Attorney David Milton [stated that the practice is very rare](#). No one knows of anywhere else that does this. Its so intuitively wrong, it hasnt come up, he said. Advocates and formerly incarcerated women elsewhere have confirmed that they have not heard or experienced the practice in their states.

This doesnt mean that videotaping strip searches has never happened. In the 1990s, New York States Albion Correctional Facility came under fire for allowing male guards to watch women being strip searched. Although female guards were the ones holding the cameras, male guards were allowed to watch the strip searches and the videotaping through a partially open door. Albion began the practice of videotaping strip searches in January 1994, claiming that the practice would prevent abuse. Women at Albion, however, said that the videotaping and allowing male guards to watch the searches were part of a system wide pattern of sexual abuse within the prison, including sexual assault and impregnation by staff.

After a fight, Leonides Cruz was brought to Albions Special Housing Unit (where individuals are held in solitary confinement, or segregation). Cruz described her experience [to the New York Daily News](#):

When I got there, [officers] brought in a video camera and told me to strip completely. It was this really unsanitary room like a closet. There were two female officers taping, but the door was opened a crack and two male officers were looking in. They had me first touch my body and then my mouth. This is not the way its how much does generic ativan cost supposed to be you have to touch the mouth first, because you could get an infection if you touch certain parts of your body and then put your fingers in your mouth. I had to bend over . . . in front of the camera it was so embarrassing and humiliating. I wouldnt fight it because I knew that things would get worse for me. When they finished video-taping and I came out they were all laughing.

At Albion, videotaping and other forms of sexual humiliation occurred not just to women sent to solitary. Another woman [described](#)

being strip searched, videotaped and humiliated upon her arrival at Albion:

The sergeant escorted me in there and I saw they had turned on the cameras. In the room there were two female officers standing in this dirty room, with a filthy floor . . . Two male officers were standing outside, and I could see them looking in. They started filming and asked me to strip one piece of clothing at a time, like a striptease. This is a medium-security facility, I couldn't believe what was happening to me. I told them that they weren't supposed to do this since I was stripped in the other facility and handed off. They're only supposed to do this if there is probable cause. After my clothes came off, they asked me to lift my breasts. Then they told me to turn around . . . I was so humiliated that I started to cry, and the officer laughed and said, Tears don't cut it here you're in a real jail now.

In August 1994, Prisoners Legal Services threatened a lawsuit against New York States Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS). In response, DOCCS [offered a settlement of \\$1000 per incident](#) to each woman. Albion also stopped the practice of videotaping strip searches. Publicity about the videotaping and the prisons systemic sexual abuse by staff members also prompted State Senator Catherine Abate to [draft legislation making it a crime for staff to have sex with prisoners](#). The bill passed and was signed into law in July 1996.

However neither the settlement nor subsequent legislation stopped the pervasive sexual abuse and assault in New York State prisons. In January 2003, nearly a decade after the settlement, the Prisoners Right Project of the Legal Aid Society of New York and a private law firm filed [Amador v. Andrews](#), a class action lawsuit on behalf of women imprisoned in New York State who had been sexually abused by staff. The suit charged that prison staff subjected women to numerous instances of sexual abuse, ranging from inappropriate touching to rape. (Four years later, in December 2007, the court dismissed the claims on the grounds that most of the women had failed to exhaust the prison grievance system. This despite the fact that they had complained to the prison systems Inspector General, which is where grievances about sexual abuse are referred.)

Strip searches are one way that jail and prison staff can sexually humiliate and abuse the people that they guard. But because strip searches are everyday practice in many facilities, they are not covered by legislation designed to prevent sexual abuse, such as Albion's bill or the Prison Rape Elimination Act. According to [MassLive.com](#), lawyers from both sides [of *Baggett v. Ashe*] noted the lack of case law on whether cross-gender videotaping of strip searches runs afoul of Constitutional rights meaning the case could be precedent-setting.

As they await the judges decision, David Milton, the attorney representing Baggett and the 177 other women, noted that the lawsuit has already had some effect: As a result of this lawsuit, the WCC has virtually eliminated the practice of male guards videotaping strip searches. Now it happens less than one percent of the time. If we're successful, we hope that the success of this lawsuit will send a message that women prisoners retain a core of human dignity and privacy that cannot be violated.

Victoria Law is a freelance journalist and author focused on incarceration. Her books include *Resistance Behind Bars*, *Prison By Any Other Name*, and *"Prisons Make Us Safer" and 20 Other Myths About Mass Incarceration*. She tweets @LVikiml.

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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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<http://godfervor.com/prison-cop-perverts>

Here is something I wrote about this issue. Allowing opposite-gender prison staff to view inmates unclothed is insanity!

There is absolutely NO reason for cross gender strip searches. The only reason for a male CO to be in the shower areas, is if there is an issue that the female CO needs assistance with. The only outcome of these practices. Is the humiliation of someone who is already in a low point of their lives. You have wonder how the supporters of these practices would feel if it was someone that they loved. Being subjected to this abuse.

What happens to the video tapes? This entire system of strip searching and maximum genital exposure sounds like some kind of racket to me; At the expense of these vulnerable, powerless women. This is the perfect job for sexual predators. These people return to the communities damaged and often outraged. If they decide to vent, it will most likely be against the communities they are released to and not the people who violated them.

Sometimes when I hear certain things about united states like this treatment of incarcerated persons, I wonder why that place is still called

land of the free, certain things that happen there are things that will be inconceivable even in third world countries

In India, the public would have been on the roads shouting slogans against this nonsense. The social activists would have removed the government and called for fresh elections.

Courts have upheld the right of female officers to work in male prisons and male officers to work in female prisons.

The prison has a legitimate penal interest to keep contraband and weapons out of a maximum security segregation area. The purpose of the videotaping is to prevent false allegations against the officers who are conducting the strip searches. All of the people commenting on here need to walk a mile in a correction officers shoes before making these negative comments.

That does not give them the right to humiliate women when there is no need for it. Its so easy for the type of people that do this job to get on a power trip as many studys have shown, when you allow men to be involved in strip searching women you are inviting predatory behaviour.

You are absolutely correct. I dont understand how some of losers see nothing wrong with this mess. Strip searches should ONLY be performed by same sex. Why would it be necessary to have a male present while a female is undressing. It makes no sense. Any guard, whether male or female, that deliberately humiliate someone and than laugh about it should be immediately terminated from their job. Theyre the type of losers that would commit a serous crime and have other guards cover for them. They are useless to society.

Rob Nells I have to ask what you do for a living? Presuming you have a job.

Stop making lame excuses. No male guard has any business around female inmates that are being strip searched. The only ones that see nothing wrong with it are perverted, worthless losers with no brains. Strip searches should ONLY be done by the same sex.

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often, correctional workers will write in with comments on why endless, daily strip searching is necessary for security reasons. Then, on occasion, a case hits the news wherein the guards themselves were strip searched because of reports of guards binging in cell phones for the inmates. Those strip searches are never cross-gender. Nonetheless, the correctional workers union never fails to contest those security measures on the grounds that they are inherently degrading and humiliating to their members.

There is absolutely no legitimate reason why cross-gender humiliation should be part of the correctional system. It is lunacy. No other first world, civilized nation subjects human beings to this nonsense and then tries to justify these Abu Ghraib-like practices on the grounds of equal employment rights.

Low life gutless guards. They need to be bitch slapped.

Sounds like your time in prison wasnt as you hoped.

In addition to what girlzone said, the fact that the strip searches are being video taped at all is outrageous.

These guards more than often enjoy the humiliation and embarrassment of the searches, dont forget men are also subject to this treatment continually too. Its lunacy in the dontdontland of the free that we in the UK have far tighter rules on women being searched.

As someone who is a part of this class action suit i.fully support it!t there us no reason why a FEMALE officer cant do the search and video tape when this happened to me there were five other female officers there while I was being stripped searched and they still had a male officer holding the camera youre going to tell me one of those females that was just standing there watching me undress Connors have the camera instead of having a male guard thats not looking at the camera video tape you bending over spreading your cheeks and coughing. Youre guna tell me they dont look while video taping whats the point then how would they even know If they were taping what theyre supposed too be taping, a naked female its bullshit and any one who thinks thus isnt a problem has something wrong worth them. This goes for males also, female guards shouldnt be doing strip searches or video taping them either its not right

Jamie All you just did was explain why officers do strip searches, which has nothing at all to do with this article. This article is exposing sexual abuse in prisons when male officers observe female strip searches.

Strip searched and videotapes are not just done by males in female prisons. This also occurs in male prisons by female officers. Stabbing instruments are found secreted in vagina/anal cavities by both males and females. It is sad that the searches have to occur, however they are for not only the protection of the future cell mates, but also the prison staff.

Yes, they are videotaped by male guards. Thats why they have law suits, and Im sure there are some still pending. Its reality. This crime takes place more often than you think. Now theyre bringing it out to light. You are so naive, man.

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