

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | January 30, 2010

While there are no concrete numbers, it's safe to say that hundreds, if not thousands of children are in solitary confinement in the United States in juvenile detention facilities, and some in adult prisons. Short bouts of solitary confinement are even viewed as a legitimate form of punishment in some American schools. In this first post on the subject, we address teenagers in solitary confinement in adult prisons.

In large part, this grim reality is simply a symptom of the American criminal justice system's taste for treating children as adults. A study by Michele Deitch and a team of student researchers at the University of Texas LBJ School found that on a given day in 2008, there were more than 11,300 children under 18 being held in the nation's adult prisons and jail. According to Deitch's 2009 report [From Time Out to Hard Time](#), more than half the states permit children under age 12 to be treated as adults for criminal justice purposes. In 22 states plus the District of Columbia, children as young as 7 can be prosecuted and tried in adult court, where they would be subjected to harsh adult sanctions, including long prison terms, mandatory sentences, and placement in adult prison. These practices set the United States apart from nearly all nations in both the developed and the developing world.

Documentation on children placed in solitary confinement in adult prisons is spotty. But the cases of several teens in long-term lockdown have been featured in recent reports on kids sentenced to life without parole (another uniquely American practice, addressed in an earlier post.)

According to a [2005 report by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch](#), teenagers in adult prisons often end up in solitary, either because they are considered disciplinary problems, because they feel compelled to join prison gangs, or because they have to be isolated from adult offenders for their own protection. An administrative officer at the supermax Colorado State Penitentiary (CSP) who was interviewed for the report believed the behavior that lands kids in solitary is often defensive:

One [factor] is age when you come in at a young age with life without, there's not a whole lot of light at the end of the tunnel. Also, it's kind of a guy thing: the young ones come in with a lot of fear, anxiety, paranoia, and they want to make a name for themselves so they have a tendency to act out. And if they are part of a gang, they are almost required to act out . . . They say [to themselves] I've got to impress everyone with what a bad-ass I am.

The PBS Frontline documentary [When Kids Get Life](#) focuses on five children in Colorado who were among 45 juveniles serving LWOP in the state in 2007. Among them is [Andrew Medina](#), convicted in 1999, when he was age 15, of taking part in a botched carjacking that led to murder. He is in solitary confinement at CSP, where he was interviewed in 2004 by Human Rights Watch. As reported on the Frontline web site:

For unclear reasons, Andy, who has been in prison for nearly eight years from the time of his first arrest, is now jailed at the Colorado State Penitentiary, the state's supermax high-security prison. Andy was transferred to the supermax roughly a year after his sentencing, when prison officials claimed he was the leader of a gang that had started a riot.

Andy explained the sequence of events as best he understands them to Human Rights Watch: They were doing a routine shakedown of our cell. I guess they found some contraband, so they end up giving me twenty days punitive [solitary confinement]. I was getting ready to go back in the population. All the beds were filled up so they were waiting for somebody to get in trouble, go to segregation, before I could go back out there. Then out of the blue, I'm ready to go, and they serve me papers saying, we got confidential information that you're involved with this security group [gang]. I didn't understand, you know? It just came out of the blue.

Andy's lawyer says he has no tattoos or gang symbols and that it's ludicrous to think that a teenager could head a prison gang. But when Andy sent a letter asking to involve his lawyer in a review of the transfer decision, he was told no private counsel are permitted to intervene in the process and that its proceedings are confidential.

The state says Andy has not made enough progress to transfer back to a lower-security prison. Over the course of more than four years in the supermax, his lawyer says he's developed twitches and become demoralized. Andy's mother lamented the limits imposed on their visits: I can't hug him or give him a kiss on the cheek or buy him a pop or a snack or anything, no. He's alive, but it feels like he's not, she

told Frontline.

Some children have entered lockdown when they were even younger than Andrew Medina. A 2007 report from the Equal Justice Initiative, [Cruel and Unusual: Sentencing 13- and 14-Year-Old Children to Die in Prison](#), described the case of Florida prisoner Ian Manuel, who was raised in gruesome violence and extreme poverty, raped by a sibling at age four. When Ian was 13, the report continues, he was directed by gang members to commit a robbery. During the botched robbery attempt, a woman suffered a nonfatal gunshot wound and a remorseful Ian turned himself in to the police. Ians attorney instructed him to plead guilty and told him he would receive a 15-year sentence. Instead, he was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

Ian Manuel was also featured in a powerful article by Meg Laughlin, published in 2006 in the [St. Petersburg Times](#), on solitary confinement in Florida, which has the nations highest percentage of prisoners in lockdown. Laughlin wrote about the nearly 15 years Manuel had spent in lockdown.

Now 29, Manuel has spent half his life in a concrete box the size of a walk-in closet. His food comes through a slot in the door. He never sees another inmate. Out of boredom he cuts himself just to watch the blood trickle. Attorneys who advocate on behalf of prisoners call Manuel the poster boy for the ill effects of solitary confinement.

In 1991, when Manuel arrived at the prison processing center in Central Florida, he was so small no one could find a prison uniform to fit him, Ron McAndrew, then the assistant warden, recalled. Someone cut 6 inches off the boys pant legs so he would have something to wear. He was scared of everything and acting like a tough guy as a defense mechanism, said McAndrew, now a prison and jail consultant in Florida. He didnt stand a chance in an adult prison.

Within months, Manuel was sent to Apalachee Correctional Institution in Jackson County, which McAndrew called one of the toughest adult prisons in the state. At Apalachee, the boy mouthed off to other inmates and correctional officers and made obscene hand gestures, racking up disciplinary infractions that landed him in solitary.

On Christmas Eve 1992, he was allowed to make one phone call. He called Debbie Baigrie, the woman he had shot. This is Ian. I am sorry for all the suffering Ive caused you, she remembers him saying. They began to correspond regularly. Baigrie said she was impressed with how well he wrote.

She asked prison officials to let him take the General Educational Development test and take college courses. I got a second chance in life. I recovered and went on, Baigrie said. I wanted Ian to have the same chance. But the rules of solitary forbade Manuel from participating in any kind of self-improvement or educational program. Instead, he sat in his cell day in and day out, without reading materials or human interaction, racking up more infractions for disrespect, which only extended his time in solitary.

After several years, Baigrie gave up. Not because of Ian, she said, but because the system made it impossible for him to improve. What does it say when a victim tries to do more for an inmate than the very system thats supposed to rehabilitate him?

Its my belief, [Manuel said at a federal court hearing], that the reason I havent been able to progress off CM (close management) all these years is the way the system is set up. One DR (disciplinary report) will keep you there for six months and those six months add up to years and those years turn into decades. In the past seven months, prison records show Manuel received three disciplinary writeups: one for not making his bed, another for hiding a days worth of prescription medicine instead of taking it, and yet another for yelling through the food flap when a correctional officer refused to take his grievance form. Those reports extended his stay on the strictest level of solitary for nine months.

Manuel told the judge that in isolation he has become a cutter, slicing his arms and legs with whatever sharp object he can find a fragment of a toothpaste tube or a tiny piece of glass. In the past year, Ian Manuel has attempted suicide five times. In late August he slit his wrists. A prison nurse closed the wounds with superglue and returned him to his solitary cell. When the judge asked him why he attempted suicide, Manuel said, You kind of lose hope.

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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

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.

There are many so-called boarding schools, military schools and boot camps that show many of the characteristics of reform schools or juvenile prisons.

The worst aspect which should raise a huge red flag is secrecy, when communication with parents is restricted or censored. Ask yourself why that is the case. Yeah, sometimes kids lie or exaggerate or are overcome with emotion; but that can happen everywhere, at good and bad places. Yet most schools, summer camps and so on don't censor outgoing mail, nor would they dream of it. Most of the time if the place is so wonderful, you'd want the kids to tell the parents, right?

The use of special words is also a danger signal. A special unit might be in fact solitary confinement. Withdrawal of privileges might mean not being given the necessities: food, sleep, a bed to sleep on instead of being forced to sleep on the floor.

Group therapy might really be lack of anyone with any credentials, just a bunch of kids and an unskilled minimum wage supervisor (called a counselor) insulting and putting down a newcomer.

Here is what Linton Hall Military School was like:

<http://lintonhallmilitaryschool.blogspot.com/2010/03/linton-hall-military-school.html>

Is this the kind of environment you want your kids in?

My Name is Lawrence M. Jiron, I am a Historian, Writer, and American Citizen, We as a Nation is in Grate Danger, on the verge of total destruction. We are dying, and people are asleep and don't realize how Wizard of Oz is killing us. There are no Constitutions in any State, You cannot have a living Constitution in a Democracy, It just does not mix Democracy is War, Total Control.. The United States is being at War since 1917, War after War, and We we have no Money People, Currency is NOT money. It is worthless paper..The Notional Debt just hit 16 Trillion, A Debt that can be ERACED. By a stroke of a pen, Its that simple Its not money.. Currency is DEBT, This Debt will go on forever, with no end in sight, ..This is total control over the People, Hold us in bondage for payment for a Debt that is not ours, Wake Up, People..The Legal System is way out of CONTROL, Corrupt beyond repair, Every State is Controlled by Attorneys and Judges, Full Anarchy and Insurrection.. We are in Trouble, AMERICA,, Enough talk, Time for action, Time to take the bull by the horn and lay him down Peacefully, We need to regain control of our Country, Petition, Pdition everything, Speak out, Question everything, Every Court in the United States is a Corporation, Corporations People, Doing Business as a Corporation, Its Called POLITICS, This Courts are not the Peoples Courts, they never were This why kids are serving life sentences, and killing people. for the Love of Money and not Justice. It's MONEY. WakeUp America, Time is running out, The Internet is full of Statements of America entering its Second Civil War We need to stop it. How, There is no such thing As an Attorney having a License to Practice Law. NO SUCH LICENSE, In no State, Here is where you start, Petition this Attorneys to show you a License, They never will, They cant.

God Bless;

Lawrence

Im 13 years old and my love of my life was arrested today for a fight at school and violating probation. He now has to do a 6 month lockdown and i don't know what to do right now. I love him SOO much. His nana was there when he got arrested and apparently she saw him cry for the first time and he wanted so badly to say goodbye to me. But he didn't get the chance. I feel so useless and hopeless right now. I live in new mexico. Is there anything i can do to help him out?

I was in a locked down facility until the age of 18. No criminal background. Just put in one for average teenage misbehavior. It wasn't in a prison of sort, but more a reform school. I served solitary for 2 1/2 months. 1 year total. This is nothing compared to what others go through, but still I have to undergo serious counseling and hell to recover. I have nightmares on a weekly bases and not one day goes by I don't think about the program. When your freedom is taken away, your family, your hopes crushed, and any hope of any future, I cannot explain to you the pain of your life. I prayed everyday I would die. At some point I actually thought I had and was just in hell. You lose track of time, of life, of any meaning, and any spiritually. You cannot possibly change anyone this way, and this is what our fellow America offer us children. A great hope. Punishing us children like this is pointless. We cannot change like this. It need to be stopped.

Through everything I have grown strong. Stronger than any adult I know. I have a steady job, a car, an apt, and am saving for college on my own. But the only way I was able to heal was through the love people. My friends surrounded when I got out and embraced. If it were not for them. I don't know where I would be. People CAN change, but it is only through love, and they must want to. Im sorry but any parents out there who do this to your kid. I promise, you will lose them forever.

I knew a guy who was non-violent who was sentenced to six months in prison, he was abused raped and kept in seclusion during his stay- he couldn't adjust to prison life. When he got out he was so disturbed, he abducted a 8 year old girl and killed her, he also stabbed another person before he was arrested.

To be honest if they treated me like that, when I came out, I would want blood and revenge against society. Treat people like shit behind bars, better hope they never get out, 10 times more hardened, used to be tazed and pepper sprayed and assaulted on a regular basis, you want people like this out in the community? They will kill you. Some of these people (not all) have been made by the system, some have been worsened by the system, and a small percentage improve, probably purely from their brains maturing and developing due to the length of time of incarceration.

To quote from your article:

the behavior that lands kids in solitary is often defensive:

the young ones come in with a lot of fear, anxiety, paranoia, and they want to make a name for themselves so they have a tendency to act out. And if they are part of a gang, they are almost required to act out . . .

This statement sounds like the plot line in this award winning 2010 French movie:

A Prophet (Un Prophete)

I guess it makes sense not to put them in this defensive position in the first place.

http://www.sonyclassics.com/aprophet/review_nytimes.pdf

Hmmmm. what is the success rate of the Colorado program? Does it work? It appears that the drill sergeants should experience the program (approach) to see if they think it will work. What about the Missouri youth program? Is your program as close to the success rate of the Missouri program? It appears that you are cultivating a group of violent teens rather than rehabilitating them. Love to hear thoughts

I am starting a literacy program for ex-juvenile offenders in the Central N.J. area for more information please call. 848-299-9465 Thank you

As sad as this is it is true lol my old school had a thing for it if you added all the time I spent alone well let me just say 6 hours every day 5 days a week for 7 months you do the math was like as if you did 35 days something like that but yes my old school was in NY called Oak Hill more like oh hell fact of it is I was born in a poor place I started life and spent first 17 months of it to some extent in solitary damn what it does to you like PTSD without the flashbacks but it never goes away the effects of solitary is found not just in the hole or the SHU it is in our schools as well

Thank you for sharing your story, Joshlyn.

In Colorado, more than half of our kids serving life without parole have spent years in lockdown. One, Jacob Ind, featured in Frontlines When Kids Get Life, entered our Supermax at 18 and emerged at 25. While some who are sent to control units may be the worst of the worst, our juveniles are generally sent for gang involvement or for minor charges. (They are safer locked away from predators.) Recently, the Denver Post, citing the rise in prison violence, called for the finish of a second Supermax here in Colorado. The project has already cost nearly \$300 million and would cost nearly \$21 million annually to staff. Yet, in a state that is cutting back basic services, the Denver Post urged the legislature to find the money to open up this second control unit. They cite increased violence in our state prisons. However, they never discuss the reality that time in Supermaxes only makes prisoners more violent and more volatile. Never is there a serious discussion of diversion for non-violent offenders, sentencing reform and re-entry programs. As long as Americans are driven by fear, there will be no real changes in the prison industrial complex or any of our other systems. To assuage that fear, we will destroy all that's good about America.

Thanks for your comment. I hope readers will check out your good work at the Pendulum Foundation fighting for kids in the criminal justice system, including your successful battle to end LWOP sentences for children in Colorado.

<http://www.pendulumfoundation.com/home.html>

It sounds like Manuel lost hope. Give him a bible and let him know there is no hope without God.

The Gulag Archipelago, by Alexander Solzhenitsin (sp) describes what happens when a dictatorship builds a prison system. Communist Russia/USA a distinction without a difference.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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