

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | September 18, 2010

Robert Platshorn was leader of the Black Tuna Gang of marijuana smugglers in the late 1970s, an experience described in his book [The Black Tuna Diaries](#). In 1980, he received what was then an unprecedented sentence of 64 years in federal prison. When he was released on parole in 2008 at the age of 65, he was the longest-serving non-violent marijuana offender in America. But as Platshorn wrote in a [blog post for High Times](#) earlier this year, that distinction won't be mine for long. Many sentenced after me will soon be able to claim my title. They are serving LIFE WITHOUT PAROLE and will never get to spend another minute as a free man. When Platshorn was convicted, he writes, no one received a life sentence for marijuana. That changed in the early 80s as Reagan stepped up this insane failure of a drug war. According to Platshorn, several other non-violent marijuana offenders, including [Billy Deckle](#), are now in their sixties and seventies, and will likely never be released.

Here is what they have to look forward to: Surviving day to day in an environment so dangerous that a slip of the tongue often ends in death. Since the elimination of parole, federal prisons are populated mainly by young, uneducated, aggressive inmates serving absurdly long sentences. They have little hope and nothing to lose. Violence has become endemic in a system that has little or no reward for good behavior. Prison gangs find older non-violent inmates easy prey.

Inadequate medical care. It costs the taxpayers billions to provide even minimal health care for older inmates. Yet these are the people least likely to commit a crime after release. An older marijuana offender serving a long sentence is likely to die in prison for lack of medical care

An extremely unhealthy diet. It becomes an obsession, trying to find enough decent food to maintain good health. Even under the best of circumstances, it's no longer possible. When I entered prison in 1979, the budget to feed an inmate for three meals a day was \$2.62. When I left prison in 2008 it had shrunk to \$2.25. This has to pay, not only for food, it has to cover repairs and replacements for kitchen equipment, civilian salaries, and eating utensils. You don't have to be an economist to figure out, that since Bush decimated the prison food budget, the cost of inmate medical care has skyrocketed. Especially for older inmates, many of whom require a special or restricted diet. Now, the Bureau [of Prisons] will say that they provide special diets for those who require them. And it's true. Sort of! Those diet trays usually contain so little edible food that the starving sick geezer ends up eating a piece of deep fried breaded sewer trout or a hunk of fried breaded mystery meat, just to stave off the terrible never ending hunger pangs. The results, a sick geezer who now needs expensive medications and has little or no chance of surviving a long sentence. Most of those geezers would pose no threat to society if released. It's even worse when the geezer is serving forever for marijuana, a harmless substance, and an effective medication that is now legal in many states. How would you feel if that old pot smuggler was your Uncle Billy?

Geezer in the hole! The Hole! Segregation! The Federal Bureau of Prisons thinks it sounds better if they call it the SHU (Special Housing Unit). Take my word for it, it ain't special in any way you'd like to experience. During my almost 30 years in 11 different federal prisons, about 3 years were spent in segregation. They got it right in the old movies, the hole. Now you might ask, why would a nice non-violent old dude wind up in the hole? Lots of reason! Someone drops a note saying the old dude's life is in danger. Result many months in the hole. He gets in a fight. Doesn't matter if it's self-defense. Into the hole! Uncle Billy gets caught coming out of the chow hall with an apple or a cookie in his pocket. The hole! The old pot smuggler has been forced to work in the prison factory because he owes a fine. A tool disappears from his work area. Everyone who works in that area is tossed in the hole. And so on and so on. Now what happens is: he has to eat whatever shows up on the meager tray that comes through the slot, or starve. Mostly he eats all the starchy crap because he's been flat on his back all day and night, and he's bored to death. Meals are the only break he looks forward to. Each time he leaves his cell his hands are cuffed behind his back. This is especially painful for an older inmate. He has to be cuffed while he crouches backwards with his hands pushed out through the lower food slot. This usually means Uncle Billy will forgo his three weekly showers and exercise periods. It's no big deal when you're young and supple, but for a geezer it's a different story. The only way I can express it is, if you are over fifty, spend 90 days in the hole and you come out two years older. Fatter, slower, more depressed, and less likely to recover physically or mentally.

It's time for all the Uncle Billys to go home

Read the full blog post [here](#), and excerpts from Platshorn's book at www.blacktunadiaries.com.

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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

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September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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that and the bop s full of bull you herd the saying it a lawyer or a poltishion siad it its a lie or bull crap well it the bop ses it and it ses tryig to help inmates kids thare speeking out thare asshole if the Fbop ses it its a lie

i like the way you tell this to the others out thare you know i yonger i admit never ben in prison but hell even if not in the hole or what they call shu still dose same shit to you nuthng nuces bout it to i like your coment howsthares nothing speshel about it you want to expences lol i secont that big time solitary even on yonger dose a nuber like drug and dringken never can or will be abel to do for anyone who wants a look at hell your locel supermax shu is what you need to go see thats hell just not on fire yet lol hell on eath it is you think you ben thow hell usa no you havent you made it soltary is shell on eath like nuthing els is old or yong none should go thow it makes me sick i am yong and got seenyor moments befor 40 even come yes thanks to solitary call it shu suclushion restited envimental stimlashion rest tharpy all solitary may thare be light in the darknes of justice

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