

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/08/10/supermax-prisons-21st-century-asylums/>

## Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | August 10, 2011

While taking some vacation time, we missed [this powerful opinion piece](#) by Helen Redmond, which appeared last week on Al Jazeera English. It describes in visceral detail the brutality of life in Americas supermax prisons.

*People walked by and asked: How are you doing? I answered: How am I supposed to be doing? Thats the craziest question I ever heard. The mental health people asked: Are you having any suicidal ideation? What are you thinking right now? I said: Where the f\*\*\* am I? Thats what Im thinking. Aint this America?'*

*Brian Nelson, on his transfer to Tamms supermax prison in Illinois. He was locked, chained and naked in a holding cell.*

The recent hunger strike at Pelican Bay supermax prison in California exposed for three weeks the carefully planned and executed barbarism of life in supermax America. The utter desperation of the human cargo behind the concertina wire, buried deep inside concrete coffins was gut wrenching and heart breaking. Hunger strikes are a tactic of last resort for the completely subjugated; a slow, painful, non-flammable version of self-immolation.

Brian Nelson, a survivor of 12 years in solitary confinement at Tamms supermax prison in Illinois, understands the conditions that drove the men in Pelican Bay to stop eating. Distraught and anxious, Nelson paced in his cell for more than ten hours a day causing severe, bloody blisters on the soles of his feet. He tried to hang himself. In the year 2000, Nelson went on hunger strike for 42 days with four other prisoners to protest many of the same conditions that exist at Pelican Bay.

The demands of Tamms hunger strikers were similar, too: better food, shoes with arches, appropriate clothing, access to education, inmates with mental illness be transferred out, bilingual staff and abolition of the renunciation policy the debriefing policy related to gangs that Pelican Bay prisoners demanded be abolished. Guards tried to break the hunger strike at Tamms by leaving carts of fried chicken and freshly baked chocolate chip cookies on the wing. The delicious smells didnt break Nelson.

Supermax prisoners daily lives are chock full of alienating and undignified experiences, so empty of positive human interaction, thousands are willing to risk death than endure such inhumane conditions. That alone speaks volumes about the reality of life in supermax prisons.

One of the most humiliating aspects of life for inmates are the frequent strip searches forced to be naked, ordered to bend over by guards and spread the buttocks apart to have the anus inspected for contraband while coughing. Strip searches are the old normal. The photos of nude prisoners in Abu Ghraib in Iraq shocked the world, but to be stripped naked for hours or even days is standard operating procedure in supermaxes.

Nelson explained: Every time you leave your cell youre strip searched They do this to degrade and shock you Sometimes the guards would make homosexual comments like: Hey baby, spread your cheeks. Darrell Cannon, a survivor of a nine-year stretch in Tamms, described the strip search: They tell you to open your mouth, raise your tongue, hold your hands up, they go through your fingers and toes and tell you to turn around and spread your cheeks up against the chuckhole Its degrading to have two other human beings looking at you like youre some kind of specimen. It is extremely degrading.

### Rehabilitation not an option

Prisoners on suicide watch are routinely left naked in their cells. And inmates have been punished by caging, theyre held naked or partially clothed in outdoor holding cages in inclement weather.

There is no pretence of rehabilitation in supermax prisons; the purpose is harsh punishment. Prisoners endure supersized portions of psychological punishment as a result of strict and prolonged solitary confinement. Inmates are confined for 23 to 24 hours a day, every day, in cells that measure 7-by-12 square feet. It is psychological torture.

Supermax prisons are intended to isolate prisoners and to deny human contact. Cannon said: Everything you do, you do alone It

[supermax] was designed to break you mentally, by not allowing you to have another human being right there with you that you can interact with.

This extreme environment of sensory deprivation and social seclusion makes men go mad. Supermax prisons are filled with inmates with mental illnesses diagnosed. It is a form of insanity to put people in a place that provokes mental illness. Either they went in crazy, or they go crazy once they are there, said Laurie Jo Reynolds, an organiser for the Tamms Ten Year Committee and a Soros Justice Fellow.

Prisoners resort to cutting their flesh: A form of self-mutilation that results in thick scarring. Small shavings of concrete, plastic sporks or paper clips are used to cut and cause bleeding to arms, legs and genitals. Cannon remembers some prisoners cutting themselves, just to feel something they were willing to do anything to get out of their cell and into the infirmary to be around other people.

Nelson recalled an inmate who continually tightened a piece of string around his finger. It became gangrenous and was amputated. Men who injured themselves told him: I need the pain, to feel real.

### **They're not faking**

Gassing is also common in supermax prisons. It is a word used to describe prisoners throwing urine and faeces at guards. Gassing is treated as a security threat and is met with excessive force by a tactical team.

Prison mental health staff label inmates who engage in cutting and gassing as malingering and acting out, not as suffering from mental illness. And yet there is decades of indisputable, well-documented evidence that solitary confinement causes mental breakdown and self-injurious behaviour.

Dr Terry A Kupers, a psychologist who has conducted hundreds of assessments of prisoners in supermax prisons, explained in an article in the Belleville News-Democrat. Twenty-three hours a day alone in a cell causes many inmates to brutally attack themselves, he wrote. In the adult male population of the United States, self-mutilation occurs only in solitary confinement. It's an epidemic across the country. They're not faking.

Supermax prisons are modern, high-tech, taxpayer funded concentration camps. The architecture is a twisted blend of Fascist-Stripped-Classical and Functionalist designed to facilitate the One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest punishment of inmates. They are located in rural areas in small, conservative, majority white towns desperate for jobs. Pelican Bay was built on an abandoned logging site and is completely cut off from its surroundings. Tamms supermax is located in the far corner of Illinois in the village of Tamms, population: 724. The remote location of supermax prisons keeps them hidden and away from public scrutiny and protest. Media are not allowed in.

On the perimeter of supermax prisons loom large and imposing guard towers with gun turrets and floodlights that resemble German Flak towers.

The interior of supermax prisons is built on the architectural principles of isolation, surveillance and control. Doors and gates are controlled electronically. A panoptic central guard tower is encircled by prisoner pods and closed-circuit TV cameras allow guards to see into every cell. Privacy is nonexistent. Concrete cells contain a poured concrete bed, immovable concrete desk/stool, stainless steel sink, toilet and mirror. Metal wire mesh cell doors have a slot to deliver food and other items. Some doors have Plexiglas covers that insulate cells from sound, air and vision.

Architects have partnered with penal authorities to create austere, hermetically sealed dungeons devoid of natural light, colour or beauty. They are milieus full of monotony, guaranteed to provoke mental despair. Architects who build prisons call themselves justice architects. In response to that outrageous claim and to the boom in prison building, Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility (AAPSR) launched a prison design boycott. The organisation acknowledges the barbaric consequences of supermax incarceration and encourages architects to sign a pledge not to do any work that furthers the construction of prisons or jails.

Daily routines in supermax prisons are rigidly controlled. Prison guards and administration have total power and domination over every aspect of prisoners' lives through a series of capricious rules and regulations that, if broken, result in tickets, loss of privileges or additional prison time. Inmates' bodies, belongings and cells are subjected to relentless searches, inspection and video monitoring. Authorities decide the number of showers per week (one to five) and the amount of time (15 minutes), exercise time (1 hour), clothes, TV/radio access, food, visitation rights and can withdraw medication. Inmates aren't allowed to speak to other inmates when outside their cells. If prisoners stray off the yellow line walking to the shower or exercise cage, they can be shot.

The hunger strikers in Pelican Bay sent the world a distress signal: A supermax SOS. They are buried alive but still able to fight against the most appalling prison conditions imaginable. Those of us on the outside have a moral and ethical responsibility to hear and answer that call and fight to shut every supermax prison down.



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.

This is the right web site for everyone who wishes to understand this topic. You understand so much its almost tough to argue with you (not that I really would want to HaHa). You definitely put a brand new spin on a subject which has been written about for ages. Great stuff, just great!

this is for all you who want to know what hell looks like or is like if you wonder of what i mean when i speak of the plane of justice it is this vary sort of places a prision of no care no love no help but a bit of food a day the sentrys that gard have not a care for you in the world i cant help but wonder why are top cort in the us dose nuthing to end it till it hit me every plane has a warden and a court behide it one big tribunal who sends one to a hell that is justice from thare on it is the wardens who see that all runs but in the end you would never know the sickest part is not only is the plane of justice a plane in a game called everwuest but yes indeed we the us has perfeted it we have taken the ways of the tribunal under are wings and gave berth to the real plane of justice after all who would want to trust a court that will not stand up to this sicknes to interpret thare rights by what this nashion was founded on yes the lore you may sayi a nut gone to deep in to a game but if you look just right you see we fit the lore so well that this nashion is not under god anymore but is in the end not under the presdent no balance is thare the top court can kill what they say is not right with no over view of the other branches you see this is not one nashion under god anymore it is now one nashion under a tribunal are we willing to let them build the wals of the plane of justice round us till it is to late i for one am not but i fear only god can take down the new hammers may thare be light in the darknes of justice

Where are the Chaplains?  
The War Widows

Once again my thanks to Solitary Watch for their dilligence in keeping the reality of Americas prison system in the public eye.

Excellent points Ann-Belinda, your points are right on and they have caused me a lot of distress for a long time. No one is checking these prison staff, and no one is regulating the activities of them either, Prison Ombudsman is a complete joke. They have been confronted during the PB hunger strike, and have told people the welfare of prisoners is NOT their job. So, who is responsible for the civility of treatment? we the people .. the free world taxpaying people NEED to get a watchdog organization on every single one of these corrections institutions and make sure people are no longer being treated the way they have been, There are far too many small minds screaming injustice at all the privileges of prisoners, what they fail to realize is a level I prison is NOT the same thing as the SHU and that the broad spectrum of things inside is as brightly varied as the free world. We are not concerned with short time level one issues but they will be quick to jump on the bandwagon and scream injustice themselves.

I am so very glad, this movement is in full force, and thank you again Ann-Belinda, for asking those very pressing questions i hope they become as prevalent as the 5 core issues of the Pelican Bay Hunger Strikers

Here in California, an inmate can be sent to solitary confinement for months because a guard may dislike the person.No one, check to see if the guard is telling the truth.

I often wonder, if the people in charge of strip-searches, monitoring inmates nude, and also perhaps shooting someone because they went off-balance on the yellow-line, is not obtaining some form of gratification, other than total power over individuals. For example, are the military paying SuperMax prisons a fee to gather information to be used in combat, about treatment of individuals in order to break them and/or drive them crazy? Because, the men and/or women that are monitoring these inmates are also being equally degraded, and dehumanized, and they are totally without a lack of human dignity.

In other words, these men and women who are monitoring these inmates, must have a few screws loose, just to do this type of act to another human being, one would have to be in a position of no morals.

In a SuperMax, how can one loose their privileges? because to be placed within a SuperMax one has already lost their so-called privileges. My next question is this: how can adminstrators and prison guards live with themselves?

Next, where are the monitors for the administrators and prison-guards? What I mean by this question, is this: there is suppose to be a person monitoring how many days a person can be placed in solitary confinemet; this of course mean the length of time a person must spend regarding the infraction that is allegedly to have been broken.

Next, in order for prisons to impose and extend a persons prison term, do they not have to take them to court? Because, if the administrators can extend a persons time, based on their own accordance, then no one is subject to get out of prison. Next, what is the

ethnicity of inmates within the SuperMax prisons?

This writers over-all analysis is that prison administrators and prison-guards have too much power: the power can be based on hate, racism, and entertainment: therefore, their power need to be fully broken and monitored by the Federal system.

Veterans Village B-2  
4401 Teller Street  
Wheat Ridge CO 80033-3448  
303 238 1456  
<http://www.veteranschamberofcommerce.org>

How can we get legislation, state and federal, identifying those Wounded Warriors incarcerated who had a disability from Dept of Defense; Veterans Administration; prior to their offense.

The War Widows

[mmurphy@veteranschamberofcommerce.org](mailto:mmurphy@veteranschamberofcommerce.org)

Mary Murphy, former VA/Prison Chaplain/Marshal OklaCtCriminalAppeals

I had no idea! How did things get this bad and what can we (the public) do about this?

The time has come to review existing policies and procedures and include mental health, medical and program staff to the unit management teams to break through those traditional barriers where isolation, deprivation and solitary confinement points of concerns can be addressed through a therapeutic approach rather than the current punitive approach. There are ways of breaking through the culture but it will need the attention of those who control funding and retraining staff of the purpose of maximum custody to transition from punishment to treatment including those who are behaviorally prone to be disruptive, the SMI who need to be supervised with their treatment and medication needs, the STG who need to be provided legitimate avenues or options to work their way back down to GP and those who are there because they were targeted to be management problems with infinitive status because they can.. Its time to change the way we think and balance the needs between incarceration, programs, treatment and release back to the community. Its time

P.O. Box 11374  
Washington, DC 20008

[info@solitarywatch.org](mailto:info@solitarywatch.org)

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



**Solitary Watch News**