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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/03/28/the-solitary-confinement-connection-was-clements-suspect-affected-by-years-in-prison-isolation/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | March 28, 2013

Solitary confinement may be at the heart of a tragic irony in the death of Tom Clements. The reform-minded Colorado prisons chief had expressed concern about the dangerous damage caused by prolonged prison isolation, and the risks of releasing prisoners directly from solitary onto the streets. Now, emerging evidence suggests that the main suspect in Clements' murder, who was released from solitary confinement just two months earlier, may have suffered from precisely that kind of damage.

Evan Spencer Ebel was killed in a shootout with Texas police last Thursday, two days after Clements was shot to death on the doorstep of his Colorado Springs home. Prior to his release from prison on January 28, Ebel had served eight years for several armed robberies. Most of that time was spent in extreme isolation, locked down 23 hours a day in a small cell.

Ebel's prison records, obtained by the [Associated Press](#), show that he was placed in solitary because of 28 different violations he racked up during his time behind bars. According to the AP, he was disciplined for smearing feces on his cell wall, punching a fellow inmate and punching a guard in 2006. Prison documents say Ebel also threatened to kill that guard and their family. That attack earned him another felony conviction.

As early as a year ago, Evan Ebel's father, Jack Ebel, testified before a committee of the Colorado State Legislature that after years in solitary, his son had trouble communicating during visits. Even though he's well-read and he's a good conversationalist and gentle, he started out that way, what I've seen over six years is he has become increasingly paranoid and [is] extremely anxious. So when he gets out to visit me, and he gets out of his cell to talk to me, I mean he is so agitated that it will take an hour to an hour-and-a-half before we can actually talk, Jack [Ebel told legislators](#). He was speaking in favor of a bill that would have more closely monitored the mental health of individuals in solitary, and required that they spend some time in the general population before their release from prison. (The bill was voted down.)

The idea that Ebel's alleged violent acts were triggered in part by his years of solitary confinement (and perhaps not, as earlier suspected, by his association with a white power prison gang) was bolstered earlier this week by evidence obtained by reporter Susan Greene. In an article in the [Colorado Independent](#), Greene writes:

In the weeks before his death, Evan Ebel, suspected killer of Colorado Department of Corrections Director Tom Clements, had broken ties with white supremacist prison gang 211 Crew and was debilitated by the transition from prolonged isolation to social contact, according to a friend and former fellow inmate.

In a series of interviews conducted with *The Colorado Independent*, parolee Ryan Pettigrew dismissed widespread media speculation that Ebel shot Clements as part of an orchestrated 211 Crew gang hit. He said that, over the course of the last few weeks, Ebel was growing increasingly agitated in his adjustment to life outside of prison and beyond the tiny administrative segregation cells in which he spent years deprived of regular human contact. Trust me, this was no gang hit. This was about what was haunting Evan Ebel, Pettigrew says. Clements' name never came up.

Pettigrew supported his statements by producing dozens of text messages he exchanged with Ebel over the last two months. The messages reveal Ebel as wrestling with anxiety about his freedom and grappling with the urge to ease that anxiety through violence. The texts span from February 1, four days after Ebel's release from prison on January 28, to March 5, less than two weeks before Ebel is alleged to have killed pizza delivery man Nathan Leon and then murdered Clements before he led Texas authorities on the high-speed highway gun battle that left Ebel clinically dead last week.

Greene also writes of Tom Clements' deep concern over the lasting effects of long-term solitary confinement, and the dangers they might present to the public.

In an exclusive interview last spring, Clements said that, immediately after [Colorado Governor John] Hickenlooper recruited him from Missouri to run the Colorado corrections department, he found disturbing one very alarming statistic he said kept him up at night that 47

percent of Colorado prisoners being released from isolation were walking directly out onto the streets without help reintegrating into social environments and interacting with people.

Clements wanted longer transition periods and step-down programs before setting isolated prisoners free. As Pettigrew tells it, Ebel said he had little help making that transition. He said altercations during his brief period in a step-down program landed him back in isolation.

You have to ask yourself the question How does holding inmates in administrative segregation and then putting them out on a bus into the public, [how does that] square up? Clements said.

We have to think about how what we do in prisons impacts the community when [prisoners] leave, Clements continued. Its not just about running the prison safely and securely. Theres a lot of research around solitary and isolation in recent years, some tied to POWs and some to corrections. My experience tells me that long periods of isolation can be counter-productive to stable behavior and long-term rehabilitation goals.

Soon after taking office, Clements launched a study of solitary confinement and decided to close Colorado State Penitentiary II, the states two-year-old supermax prison, which was designed and built entirely for isolation. By last springs interview, Clements said he had reduced the 47 percent isolation-to-streets release to 22 percent. His goal, he noted, was to drive to zero the number of isolated prisoners being released without step-down programs.

Hickenlooper also mentioned solitary at Clementss memorial service on Monday. It is an unbelievably bitter irony the thing he most wanted to change was releasing people from six years of solitary confinement directly into the general population, he said. Theyre considered unsafe to release into the prison population. How can we release them back into the general public?

(Our earlier reporting on conditions in the all-solitary Colorado State Penitentiary, where Evan Ebel spent much of his time in prison, can be found [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

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

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Reports from Colorado inmates, We are walking around in unbelief, just shaking our heads, hoping that they dont think his (Tom Clements) changes were wasted on us. This is the first director that made positive changes and were willing to give us a chance. We had hope.

Tom Clements believed that conditons of confinement effected the success of inmates. We do too.

@Russ

From an NPR article titled:

A Neuroscientist Uncovers A Dark Secret
by BARBARA BRADLEY HAGERTY
June 29, 2010 12:00 AM

The criminal brain has always held a fascination for James Fallon. For nearly 20 years, the neuroscientist at the University of California-Irvine has studied the brains of psychopaths. He found that he shared two out of three of their characteristics.

The Three Ingredients of a psychopath.

- 1) A certain type of brain abnormality.
- 2) Presence of the warrior gene, MAO-A gene (monoamine oxidase A).
- 3) Abuse or violence in ones childhood.

This science is behind the New World of Neurolaw.

Luckily, like you, Fallon had good parents.

The following video explains how you can have the first two and still live a normal life.

Add the third and well you get

Richard Kuklinski The Iceman HBO interview (2001) Part 2

Begin the video at 58:50 of the interview when the doctor explains the Icemens condition to him.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ceERzARTMGs>

Cases like this one today makes me wonder if the system is adding this third ingredient.

There is no question about the horrific effects Isolation does to a human being. However, apparently at this point in time, there is no answer as to how to integrate a dangerous individual back into a public community safely, whether home to the street or less restriction in the prison community I do not see, my brothers and sister convicts, who are yes convicted of crimes, doing their time peacefully as the genie pigs for experimental reintegration of dangerous combative. The Justice System has no right to threaten their safety for a prisoner doing hos/her time in a peaceful mode has as much a right to safety as does the general public..

Sciences has some of the answers, yet it is the will of the community and cost fractures to implement programs of behaviour modification and its civil rights questions that prevent us at this time from moving forward on (humane?) methods of integration for the combative..

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