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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/09/24/solitary-confinement-policies-in-california-revised-yet-again-as-inmate-leaders-promote-end-to-racial-hostilities/>

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | September 24, 2012

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has recently circulated a [memo](#) regarding the most recent revised edition of its Step Down Program (SDP) and Security Threat Group (STG) Program proposal. The revised policies come one year after a series of statewide hunger strikes by prisoners in the Security Housing Units (SHU) in Pelican Bay and other California state prisons.

In California, one is placed in the SHU most commonly for being deemed a member of an STG or, one of seven gangs known to be involved in criminal activity. These gangs are the Aryan Brotherhood, Black Guerilla Family, Nuestra Familia, the Mexican Mafia, Northern Structure, Nazi Low Riders and the Texas Syndicate. Currently, anyone deemed to be member of these gangs is sentenced to an indeterminate SHU term, which usually entails years of solitary confinement in either a SHU unit at one of three California prisons (Pelican Bay, Corcoran, and Tehachapi) or any of California's Administrative Segregation Units (ASUs) until a SHU cell opens up.

The process of being labeled a member of the STGs, however, has been controversial. People have reportedly been validated as members of STGs for, among other things, possessing [calendars](#) with certain artwork or making references to [George Jackson](#) (an African-American prisoner who co-founded the Black Guerilla Family). The revised policies purportedly aim to strengthen the criterion for gang validation. However, critics such as attorney Charles Carbone counter that the proposed policies are more of the same. It has been [noted](#) that the revised policies include consideration of tattoos and artwork as contributing factors to a SHU term.

Us in AdSeg arrived from county jails and are going through process to get transferred out of here to a SHU, writes T., who is SHU-bound at North Kern State Prison, my validation is just like everybody else falsely accused. Anytime you do certain things like speak Swahili or read and study our history as New Afrikkans we get validated. T. has been in the ASU for four years pending an opening of a SHU cell. Our program is simple. Handcuffed everywhere, yard and shower three times a week, in waist and leg chains, he writes.

Further, the revised policy plans to implement a Step Down Program in which prisoners could hypothetically transition out of the SHU and back into general population in four years. This policy would be based on a series of steps with increasing numbers of privileges and ultimately involving greater social interaction. Currently, people sent to the SHU for STG membership must prove that they have been inactive in any gang for six years. Due to this standard, over 500 people held in SHU have been in solitary confinement for [more than 10 years](#) and nearly 80 for over 20 years.

This is the seventh time the policies have been revised since [March](#). The memo provides highlights of CDCR's policy proposals, including the following:

A new STG Behavior Disciplinary System has been developed that defines administrative and serious behavior or activities allowing offenders to be held individually accountable for STG-related behavior or activities. Offenders will be afforded due process using the existing disciplinary system.

The SDP will be an individual behavior-based program for STG affiliates that will provide housing, enhanced programs, interpersonal interactions, as well as corresponding privilege and personal property enhancements for participating STG affiliates. The SDP shall be completed in five steps; the first four steps will be accomplished in the SHU and the final step will generally be at a level IV 180 design facility. The SDP allows offenders engaged in STG behavior or activities to demonstrate their ability from this type of behavior, preparing them for return to nonsegregated housing.

Though the details of the revised policies have not been made available, there is some potential for reform. Among these are indications of a pilot program to be implemented for up to two years to test, evaluate, and refine the program.

Further the memo reads: In the near future, case by case reviews will begin for the existing validated gang population housed in SHU facilities to determine their appropriate placement and/or retention within the SHU/SDP or release to general population.

According to Marilyn McMahon from California Prison Focus, CDCR officials have stated that in the next month or two several people

were going to come down from Sacramento to review the 56 associates who have been in the SHU the longest for possible immediate release into the mainline.

Michael [Dorrough](#), imprisoned at California State Prison, Corcoran, has spent 24 years in the SHU after being validated as a member of the Black Guerilla Family in 1988, is skeptical of any talk of reforms:

It is virtually impossible to figure out or believe anything you might hear regarding the step down program. Its supposed to be revised again. This will be the sixth revision. In all honesty I would not want to be included in it. Aside from those privileges that have been outlined in each of the draft proposals, you have no idea what the expectations are. And it is stated that there are expectations. There is a contract that you must sign stipulating that you agree with whatever the expectations are. No one knows what the contract looks like and thats usually the best indication that something is wrong.

I would be lying I said it is not tempting.

It is.

Dorrough, who has been held in all three of Californias SHUs, writes of psychological struggles as a result of his prolonged isolation:

I know that, psychologically, damage has been done. I dont just talk to myself, I curse myself out. Sometimes Ill drop something, a piece of paper, a spoon, and Ill get mad at whatever Ive dropped. Ill snatch it off the floor with the intention of harming it.

You can actually feel yourself disconnecting. And I ask myself from what? You really have been cut off from everything. This is it.

And here we are only allowed out to the yard cages once, maybe twice a week. We are confined to the cells 24 hours a day, five or six days a week. I have developed a condition in which I bite down on my back teeth constantly. Its been happening for a couple of years. And the only thing I have been told is that its all in my mind.

Isolation can really crush your spirit, he writes.

Another Corcoran SHU prisoner has also indicated a pessimistic view of CDCRs policies, invoking deceased hunger striker [Christian Gomez](#), who died while protesting the harsh conditions of Corcorans Administrative Segregation Unit,

The reality is there is a significant number of us for whom death holds no real fear, in fact, in some ways as an alternative to another few decades of this it holds some appeal. If it becomes necessary to take up peaceful protest again and its unfortunately looking that way you may be writing a lot more Christian Gomez articles. Most here only want to, after so very long, hold their children, kiss their wives, speak to their families, and have access to some meaningful program that will give them some hope of parole, higher education, and marketable job skills. But all of this is indicative of a sick society, of values and mores that have never been seriously and confronted and corrected in the history of U.S. social, political, and economic development.

Meanwhile, the validated leaders of various STGs, including the Aryan Brotherhood and Black Guerilla Family, announced a call for an end to racial violence among California prisoners. They have called for a cease of all hostilities in the prisons and jails starting [October 10th](#). The group, referred to as the Pelican Bay Short Corridor Collective, were also the chief leaders of last years hunger strikes. They write: The reality is that collectively, we are an empowered, mighty force that can positively change this entire corrupt system into a system that actually benefits prisoners and thereby the public as a whole.

Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watchs first and most prolific intern. Based in Los Angeles, he served as an editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register and the Press-Enterprise, and is now the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

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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Finally!

Hopefully inmates can now focus on their shared plight rather than the fallacy of their tribal allegiance. The authoritys excuse of preventing racial warfare by locking up STGs in the CAs SHUs may soon be nullified.

I am also encouraged by the acknowledgment by the Corcoran SHU inmate that inmates held in the SHUs want and need some meaningful program that will give them some hope of parole, higher education, and marketable job skills.

I quote an Guardian article titled Americas-invisible-incarcerated-millions:

.while poor uneducated black men are vastly over-represented in our prisons and jails, black men with college degrees are not much more likely than their white counterparts to end up in prison..considering the extremely close links between educational achievement (or, more correctly, the lack thereof) and the likelihood of a prison term, if policy-makers truly wanted to reduce the prison population, then Its education, stupid should be the motto falling off everyones lips.

Of course this can only occur if the there is peace. When I read who has called for peace I am again hopeful:

The validated leaders of various STGs, including the Aryan Brotherhood and Black Guerilla Family, announced a call for an end to racial violence among California inmates. They have called for a cease of all hostilities in the prisons and jails starting October 10th. The group, referred to as the Pelican Bay Short Corridor Collective, were also the chief leaders of last years hunger strikes. They write: The reality is that collectively, we are an empowered, mighty force that can positively change this entire corrupt system into a system that actually benefits prisoners and thereby the public as a whole.

Success is by no means guarantied and there will be those that seek to exploit individual acts to gain more influence. As an example, I watched a couple of interviews of Salmon Rushdie this weekend. Here is one:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4J20ZBT7G7g>

In the interviews Salmon Rushdie, talks about Muslim Rage and how incidents carried out by individuals or small groups in the west are being used to promote a wider Western vs Muslim war.

Rushdie believes rather than being spontaneous the recent violence over an outrageous video insulting the prophet Mohammad is manufactured and used for political gain.

If you want to seize or increase your power than it makes sense to rally the troops behind you whenever you discover such exploitable provocations.

As an example he points to the evidence found during the raid on Bin Ladens home which proved he was surprised and disappointed when the west did not condemn Islam as he had hoped. Rushdie believes even though Bin Laden is dead, Muslims are still being manipulated into a war of civilizations that he always wanted.

Hopefully enough of us will see through such schemes to thwart those that would mislead us.

Good work Sal!

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