

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/12/11/women-solitary-confinement-isolation-degenerates-us-madness/>

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by [Victoria Law](#) | December 11, 2013

A mass prisoner hunger strike rocked Californias prison system this past summer, drawing international attention to the extensive use of solitary confinement in the United States. Increasingly, solitary is finding its way into the mainstream media and onto activist agendas. Nearly all of the attention, however, has focused on solitary confinement in mens prisons; much less is known about the conditions and experiences inside womens prisons.

During [Octobers legislative hearing on solitary confinement in California](#), lawmakers asked prison officials about women in solitary confinement. Officials from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) stated that 74 women were held in the Security Housing Unit at the California Institution for Women (CIW) and a handful of women were awaiting transfer from the Central California Womens Facility (CCWF). CDCR does not separate people in the SHU with mental illness from those without mental illness. CDCR officials did not address the number of people in the Administrative Segregation (or Ad Seg) Unit.

According to [CDCR](#) statistics, as of September 2013, 107 women were held in Ad Seg at CCWF, which has a budgeted capacity of 38. The average stay was 131 days. Twenty women had been there longer than 200 days, two had exceeded 400 days, and another two women had exceeded 800 days. At CIW, 34 women were in Ad Seg with an average stay of 73 days. Two women have exceeded 200 days.

Lawmakers inquiry prompted advocacy group California Coalition for Women Prisoners to send an [open letter to Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner](#) requesting that she investigate conditions of solitary confinement in womens prisons. The group noted that, with the conversion of Valley State Prison for Women to a mens prison and the transfer of several hundred women to Californias other two womens prisons, the use of solitary confinement has dramatically increased.

To justify the increase, CDCR has cited enemy concerns or a documented disagreement between people that may have led to threats or violence. Those designated as having enemy concerns are locked in their cells 22 to 24 hours a day and lose all privileges. CDCR reports do not separate the number of people in Ad Seg or the SHU for rules violations versus those confined because of enemy concerns. The California Coalition for Women Prisoners has noted that many of these enemy concerns are based on incidents that happened years ago and may not be valid today.

Dolores Canales has a son who has spent thirteen years in Pelican Bays SHU. Canales has also had [firsthand experience with solitary confinement](#). While imprisoned at CIW, she spent nine months in Ad Seg, where she was confined to her cell twenty-two hours a day. There, I had a window. The guards would take me out to the yard every day. Id get to go out to the yard with other people, she recalled. But the isolation still took its toll: Theres an anxiety that overcomes you in the middle of the night because youre so locked in, she described. Even after being released from segregation, Canales was unable to shake that anxiety. She broke into a sweat and panicked each time she saw a group of officers even though she had broken no rules. I just cant forget, she stated years after her release from prison.

Although the spotlight on solitary has focused largely on California, every womens prison has a solitary confinement unit. Floridas Lowell Correctional Institution for Women has a Closed Management Special Housing Unit (CM SHU) where women are confined to their cells 23 to 24 hours a day. There is no free movement or social interaction, reported one woman. We just sit locked in a concrete and steel room the size of a small residential bathroom.

In Indiana, Sarah Jo Pender has spent nearly five years in solitary. My cell is approximately 68 square feet of concrete with a heavy steel door at the front and a heavily barred window at the back that does not open, she described. Walls are covered in white; the paint chipped off by bored prisoners reveals another layer of primer white. No family photos or art or reminder notes are allowed to be taped to the walls; they must remain bare. Our windowsills would be a great place to display greeting cards and pictures, but those are off-limits, too. There is a concrete platform and thin plastic mat, a fourteen-by-twenty inch shelf and round stool mounted to the floor, and a steel toilet/sink combo unit. We get no boxes to contain our few personal items. Everything must fit on the shelf, bed or end up on the floor.

Her cell is searched daily by guards although, like everyone else in the prison, she is strip searched any time she leaves the unit for a

doctors appointment or a no-contact generic ambien 10 mg visit. When she is taken to the showers, she is handcuffed, then locked into a 3 foot by 3 foot shower stall with a steel cage door for a 15-minute shower. As is the case across the country, visits are conducted behind glass.

Pender was placed in solitary confinement after successfully escaping from prison in 2008. With the assistance of a guard, who had been having sex with her and several other women in the prison, she escaped. After 136 days, she was found, re-arrested and returned to prison, where she began her unending stint in solitary confinement. Because Pender is considered a high escape risk, the administration has taken steps to isolate her even within the segregation unit. Other women could talk to each other through their doors, but they were instructed to never talk to me or else they'd be punished, she recounted. The male guards were never to speak to me unless there was a second guard present, and only to give me orders. Female guards only spoke when absolutely necessary, per orders, except they chatted freely with any other prisoner.

As in many jails and prisons, those with mental health concerns are often placed in segregation. One of them is going to be released to society this month, Pender wrote. She has been in solitary for six or eight months because she has repeatedly cut herself with razors, including her throat, several times. Their solution: lock her in a room and don't give her a razor. Another woman spent 2 years in segregation, originally for disruptive behavior. Her stay was extended each time she hurt herself. She cut her wrists in the shower, they found her, took her to the hospital, stitched her up, put her back in lock and wrote her up for self-mutilation. She ripped the stitches out and got another battery write-up. Threw a mop bucket at the sergeant for another assault write-up and was completely maxed out on her sentence, so they let her go home from solitary. She returned that same year with new charges. She never got therapy while here or any mental health care that she obviously needed.

While Pender did not enter with preexisting mental health concerns, years of little to no human contact has taken its toll. At times she feels lethargic and depressed. In 2010, she had a psychotic break, which lasted nine months. Since then, she has been on and off half a dozen kinds of psychotropic medications. I didn't need the meds for the two years I spent in godawful Marion County Jail, and didn't need them for five years at Rockville prison, she recalled. But when you lock people in rooms for long periods of time, the isolation degenerates us into madness, or at least depression.

Others with no preexisting mental health conditions have also been affected. I watched a woman claw chunks out of her cheeks and nose and write on the window with her blood, Pender said. My neighbor bashed her head against the concrete until officers dragged her out to a padded cell. Two other women tried to asphyxiate themselves with shoestrings and bras. In Florida, faced with the prospect of ten months in CM SHU, a woman attempted suicide. I had hung myself and was *quite dead* when the guards cut me down. My heart must've stopped because of the loss of involuntary functions, but still they wrapped me in a sheet and rushed me to medical and succeeded in reviving me, she recalled.

Despite being locked in a cell the size of a bathroom for the foreseeable future, Pender hopes the increased outrage about solitary confinement leads to concrete changes. What would she ask people to do?

They can help by contacting their legislators and judges about their views on long-term solitary confinement. They can help by supporting small groups of activists and organizations who are passionate about this topic. Many people don't have the desire to donate two hours of their week or month to a group, but what about two hours of their monthly wages? Or the book of stamps and box of envelopes that has been collecting dust since email was invented? There are lots of ways to help change the system. Whatever you choose to do, just DO something. Just having conversations with others about the subject is doing something. Someone else might volunteer to type up and format a newsletter. Help design a website. Circulate the info. Make phone calls to organize events. Anything is better than turning the page to the next article and forgetting about us, leaving us alone in our cells.

TOMORROW: Many women's prisons utilize solitary to punish those reporting staff sexual assaults or harassment.

Victoria Law is a freelance journalist and author focused on incarceration. Her books include *Resistance Behind Bars*, *Prison By Any Other Name*, and *"Prisons Make Us Safer"* and *20 Other Myths About Mass Incarceration*. She tweets @LVikiml.

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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@Martin

I think judging from his comment below that Trio is attempting to be funny.

Trio said this in reference to Silverstein:

<http://solitarywatch.com/2011/05/05/americas-most-isolated-federal-prisoner-describes-10220-days-in-extreme-solitary-confinement/#comment-57941>

August 22, 2014 at 10:46 pm

awww poor baby. I hope all you bleeding heart low life liberals lose a loved one by someone like this monster, then maybe you'll understand.

Could he be a convert?

TRIO REALLY ??? THATS A LOT OF TIME !!!!! ME ?? I DID FROM JUNE 28, 1972 UNTIL JANUARY 27, 2010.. NEVER WAS ABLE TO FIGURE HOW MANY DAYS THAT IS, BUT ITS A LOT OF HARD TIME 37 YEARS +/-..

I did 37.8 years, uh I mean 29.6, no, make that 35.9.

I don't understand how a Country like America can do these ungodly things to people and get away with it. This is why America is no longer respected in this world. They are no longer the head but the tail. You expect these things from other countries but not America. By the way male guards should not be allowed in women prisons. That's why there is so many rapes. It's sanctioned rape.

To provide some clarification. The same CDCR COMPSTAT data cited in this report does indicate the number of women in solitary confinement and how many were in a segregation unit while participating in a mental health program.

At CCWF, where there were 107 women in Ad Seg, five of them were on single-cell status, none of whom were listed as participating in a mental health program.

At CIW, there were 34 women in Ad Seg, 105 in the SHU, and 19 in the Psychiatric Services Unit (PSU). In total, there were 22 women at CIW on single-cell status, including 10 still in general population. Of the remaining 12, 5 were in the PSU, 1 in Ad Seg, 2 in the SHU, and four receiving mental health services in the Enhanced Outpatient Program (EOP).

We have no right to torture people. but because society does not care about anyone in prison, and people make money off prisoners it OK> ??? Wake the hell up people, you need to care. It speaks about us all as humans to let it go on.

I reference my comments made on the issue of the Pelican Bay SHU which was ordered closed many years ago. the best way to deal with Solitary as a means of Administrative control in all sectors, is to eliminate the psychopathy that supports it as a Weapon of Convenience.

There may be a very few instances where it is necessary, and, I suggest the eliminating the means, its use will decline exponentially.

Martin G. Smith

Thank you guys for all you do* For getting this out in the open. Now people will know just what those women are going through* God Bless all of you at solitary watch. Merry Christmas to you & yours Gellybean*

IN MY POST ABOVE I MADE A MISTAKE I DID 37.7 YEARS FLAT IN THE FEDERAL PRISON SYSTEM.. NOT 30.7.. WHILE IN PRISON I WAS FEDERALLY INDICTED 2 TIMES FOR ATTACKING CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS.. FOR ABUSE BEAT BOTH CASES IN TOPEKA FEDERAL COURT WHEN GUARDS ABUSE THEY GET CUT UP BLOOD.. IVE BEEN THERE, SO I KNOW HOW ABUSES AFFECT THE MIND I LIKE THIS SITE I CAN PROVIDE INSIGHT ABOUT DOING TIME AND THE ABUSES THAT GO DOWN BY PRISON ADMINISTRATORS, AND I DONT GIVE A DAMN WHAT THE GUARDS OR WARDENS THINK ABOUT MY COMMENTS.. KNOWING THEY ALREADY CHECKED ME OUT.. TO SEE WHO I AM. EVERYBODY, HAVE A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY NEW YEAR.. RESPECTS AND REGARDS, I REMAIN INTERESTED. THANKS !!!!!!!!!!!!!

ITS SAD TO READ ABOUT HOW WOMEN ARE BEING TORTURED IN THE JOINTS BY ADMINISTRATORS SURE, ITS DIFFICULT TO DO SEG. TIME FOR YEARS.. IN MANY CASES ITS SIMPLY UNJUSTIFIED I SAW MANY MEN GO TOTALLY MAD AND SELF DESTRUCT FROM DOING LONG TERMS IN SEG MANY OF THE RULES ARE UNNECESSARY; SUCH AS PHOTOS TAPED TO A WALL OR PLACED ON A WINDOW LEDGE I DID MORE THAN 30.7 YEARS FLAT, MUCH OF IT IN MAX UNITS SEG. BECAUSE PRISON STAFF CONSIDERED ME-THE WORST OF THE WORST..!!!!!! WELL, I GOT OUT AND IM DOING VERY WELL ON LIFE PAROLE MY HEART GOES OUT TO THESE PEOPLE WHO ARE BEING TORTURED BY THE PRISON SYSTEMS IN THIS COUNTRY and IM HAPPY TO BE OUTTA ALL THE DRAMA

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