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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | February 13, 2010

Three convicted killers on Georgia's death row died recently in the span of three months but none of them was executed. In October of 2009, Kim McMichen died of pneumonia. In November, Timothy Pruitt died from what was reported to be a botched suicide attempt. And on New Year's Day 2010, Leeland Mark Braley was found hanged in his cell.

Living for years or decades in solitary confinement under threat of execution, it's hardly surprising that men on death row become suicidal. Several [recent cases](#) in which condemned inmates elected to waive their right to appeal or even requested speedy executions have been viewed by some as legal suicides, and attributed to the psychological effects of life on death row. According to the [Death Penalty Information Center](#):

Psychologists and lawyers in the United States and elsewhere have argued that protracted periods in the confines of death row can make inmates suicidal, delusional and insane. Some have referred to the living conditions on death row as the bleak isolation and years of uncertainty as to time of execution as the death row phenomenon, and the psychological effects that can result as death row syndrome.

What's less fathomable is the Georgia Department of Corrections (GDOC) chosen response to the suicides. According to an article by Charles Stanley in [The Sunday Paper](#), an Atlanta weekly, since Braley's death, new restrictions, meant to enhance security within the prison, have been placed on inmates' privileges including the revocation of contact visits with family and loved ones for all prisoners. Advocates for prisoners and their families are arguing that new restrictions go beyond the limits of humane punishment or reasonable security measures.

While some may point out that these were dead men walking anyway, advocates and inmates whose guilt is in question counter that for people already confined to their cells for as many as 23 hours a day, the new restrictions that went into effect after Braley's death represent what Pastor Randy Loney calls another kind of death.

GDOC's new rules cap the number of non-family visitors allowed on each inmate's visitation list at two. Furthermore, inmates and their visitors are now separated by a barrier of wire mesh and bars, impairing visual contact and preventing physical contact.

Loney has been ministering to death row inmates for 25 years. He says visits from family and loved ones are a lifeline for most death row inmates, and to take that away from them is devastating.

Loney says he has seen a noticeable change in demeanor amongst the prisoners he regularly visits.

Their families are their lifelines, he says, and when they can't hug their mothers and fathers and children and brothers and sisters, they're heartbroken; it's palpable.

It seems that one of the motivations behind the new security measures is the idea that visitors might smuggle in contraband that would assist inmates in taking their own lives—a task the state wishes to reserve for itself. To reduce the risk of suicide, Georgia has placed additional restrictions on the one thing that might keep death row prisoners from wanting to commit suicide.

Although the contact visits were eliminated immediately after the inmate deaths, a spokesperson for the GDOC said the two things were unrelated.

The Sunday Paper asked Pastor Loney whether men convicted of humanity's most heinous crimes are likely to illicit sympathy from the public. He replied, "I think everyone agrees that there is a tremendous difference between punishment and dehumanization," he says. "To deprive people of human contact is far beyond punishment. It becomes dehumanizing."

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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September 29, 2022

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In the polite language of the John Howard Association:

Through a year or more of sensory and psychological deprivation, prisoners are stripped of their individual identities in order that compliant behavior patterns can be implanted, a process of mortification and depersonalization.

The techniques involved have been described by Amnesty International are laid out in Bidermans Chart on Penal Coersion. As early as 1962, Dr. Edgar Schein described the methodology at issue rather more straightforwardly in an address to all federal maximum security prison wardens in Washington, D.C.:

In order to produce marked changes in behavior, it is necessary to weaken, undermine, or remove supports for old attitudes. I would like you to think of brainwashing not in terms of ethics and morals, but in terms of the deliberate changing of human behavior by a group of men who have relatively complete control over the environment in which the captives live [These changes can be induced by] isolation, sensory deprivation, segregation of leaders, spying, tricking men into signing written statements which are then shown to others, placing individuals whose will power has been severely weakened into a living situation with others more advanced in thought reform, character invalidation, humiliations, sleeplessness, rewarding subservience, and fear [emphasis added].

In Dr. Richard Koms estimation, the purpose of an SHU-style facility is to:

reduce prisoners to a state of submission essential for their ideological conversion. That failing, the next objective is to reduce them to a state of psychological incompetence sufficient to neutralize them as efficient, self-directing antagonists. That failing, the only alternative is to destroy them, preferably by making them desperate enough to destroy themselves.

The following is a poem from one such inmate.

Fatalistic Suicide

After years of isolation, depression and
hopelessness, he decided-as simply as
turning down the blanket
on his bunk for the night-to take his
own life, so they could no longer inflict a pain that robbed him of
his identity, stripped him of his dignity,
destroyed his mind, and left him
to hang.

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