

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/11/08/bonnie-kerness-pioneer-in-the-struggle-against-solitary-confinement/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#) | November 8, 2012



In 1986 Ojore Lutalo, a black revolutionary in the Trenton State Prison now the New Jersey State Prison wrote to Bonnie Kerness's American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) office in Newark. His letter described the extreme isolation and other brutalities in the prisons Management Control Unit, which he called a prison within a prison.

I could not believe what he was telling me about the MCU, she says. She reacted by becoming this lunatic white lady calling New Jersey corrections officials about Lutalo.

Kerness immediately went to work trying to stop MCU guards from harassing prisoners by waking them at 1 a.m. to make them strip in front of snarling dogs leaping for their genitals to arbitrarily have them switch cells. She got this practice stopped.

Lutalo's letter also began to open her eyes to the torture of solitary confinement, which in the mid-1980s was just starting to spread across the country as a mass penological practice. Coordinator of the AFSC's national Prison Watch Project, Kerness had worked on prison issues since the mid-1970s. Now she became an anti-solitary-confinement activist. In 2012, she has been one longer and more consistently than, possibly, anyone else.

I try not to use the word pioneer lightly, says David Fathi, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's National Prison Project, but it certainly applies to Bonnie. She did the groundwork for the progress and success we are now having.

Corey Weinstein, a California physician who also was a pioneering activist against solitary confinement, says Kerness made a huge contribution early on by bringing a human-rights vision to the effort. It provided the intellectual framework that we could grasp onto to understand what was happening.

Reflecting on how difficult it has been for solitary confinement to be publicly recognized as torture, Stuart Grassian, a Massachusetts psychiatrist another trailblazer who is credited with identifying long-term isolation as the cause of a devastating psychiatric syndrome observes: How frightening it is to see people choose not to see what's in front of them.

Many years ago Bonnie Kerness chose to see what was in front of her.

A child shocked by injustice

Kerness looks much younger than her 69 years, and dresses stylishly though her wardrobe is purchased at thrift shops, she says. She makes sweeping gestures when she speaks in her East Coast urban twang.

Born in Manhattan, she grew up in the Bronx and Queens. Her working-class family was not political, but at 12 years old she was shocked to see on the television news kids my own age being beaten for trying to integrate schools in the South. This glimpse of injustice would lead to her life's work.

When she was 14, in 1956, she began doing volunteer social work in the Lower East Side, where for the first time she met community organizers. Five years later, she became one herself, traveling the South for the civil rights movement, working with the NAACP and other groups.

She portrays herself then as a young white kid who went south with very little political understanding. But in addition to on-the-job training, she received what might be called an elite community-organizing graduate-school education: a year in the mid-1960s at Tennessee's Highlander Research and Education Center, formerly the Highlander Folk School, a legendary social-justice leadership school which Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King had attended.

I have a special feeling for my generation, Kerness says the activist sixties generation. We each had something outside of ourselves to be devoted to.

In the early 1970s she went up from the South to New Jersey and got work with the AFSC in a housing campaign. She and others noticed that many poor people had a father or other family member in prison. This perception led to the founding of a New Jersey prisoner-rights effort that ultimately morphed into Prison Watch.

In her teenage years in Queens, she had completed two years of college. She began taking courses again, eventually getting a masters in social work from Rutgers. She also became active in the women's, gay rights, and anti-Vietnam War movements.

And she married and divorced. She has three biological children, an adopted child, and one of my lovers had three African-American children she helped raise. Now she tends out on seven young people she all calls her grandchildren one of whom interrupts an interview in the tidy AFSC office in downtown Newark with a call to grandma to ask if she will pay for a pizza with her credit card.

Kerness's life outside her work half-time, theoretically, now that she's officially retired revolves around her grandchildren.

The discovery of solitary confinement

After Lutalos's letter revealed the horrors of the Trenton MCU, to better understand the control-unit phenomenon Kerness got in touch with the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown. In 1983 the United States Penitentiary in Marion, Illinois, became the first prison in modern times to adopt near-total confinement of all inmates to their cells thus, the first supermax.

Kerness credits Nancy Kurshan, a prominent sixties and seventies radical and founder of the Marion anti-lockdown group, with helping guide her initial work, as did several former Marion prisoners. Kerness soon founded the AFSC's Control Unit Monitoring Project, focusing first on the 80 to 90 African-American politicized prisoners in the Trenton unit.

As she began getting letters from inmates in other states who told stories similar to Lutalos's, she contacted organizations around the country that were beginning to be alarmed by the rise of these draconian units. This new kind of imprisonment seemed so bizarre, People weren't sure what they were looking at, Kerness says.

And while she worked to build opposition to solitary confinement, she saw it rapidly become common. Only a handful of sizeable control units existed in the mid-1980s, but fewer than 15 years later more than 40 states had them. Many were large, free-standing supermax prisons.

Kerness also watched in dismay as control units and supermaxes became dumpsters into which society threw the mentally ill. The arbitrariness of the supermax regimen became clear. You're there because we want you there, she says of the ultimate criterion for who is put into isolation.

As citizen campaigns specifically against control units began popping up spontaneously, Kerness made connections with them and helped them in California, Wisconsin, Illinois, Massachusetts. In 1994, she helped bring 40 activists from around the country to the AFSC offices in Philadelphia to found the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons, which held public meetings on solitary confinement in several states.

Solitary: first among other issues

Kerness has been involved with many other prison issues, including sexual abuse, restraint chairs and beds, the overuse of stun guns and pepper spray, and prison privatization.

Her work has been particularly devoted to solitary confinement, she says, because we're so well known on this issue. Her daily duties include answering mail and telephone calls, sending out reams of requested material, contacting the news media, mentoring student interns, giving talks to college and community groups, and writing articles and reports.

Her AFSC reports include, as editor or author: *The Prison Inside the Prison: Control Units, Supermax Prisons, and Devices of Torture* (with Rachael Kamel, 2003); *Survivors Manual: Surviving in Solitary* (4th printing, 2008); and *Torture in United States Prisons: Evidence of Human Rights Violations* (Second Edition, 2011).

Although she praises several Quaker activists who encouraged her, she expresses frustration with the AFSC for starting national anti-solitary-confinement campaigns only to shut them down. After four years the AFSC unaccountably pulled the plug, she says, on the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons. Similarly, after a well-attended StopMAX conference in Philadelphia in 2008, the substantial national effort that was supposed to grow out of it never materialized.

An official at the AFSCs national headquarters in Philadelphia, Clinton Pettus, says the organization, like most nonprofits, went through a period of financial constraint a few years ago, and was forced to do more with less in its solitary-confinement work. The result: We partner with like-minded groups and individuals to form state-based coalitions that build grass-roots campaigns.

Kerness also generally faults the national organizations involved with prison reform for not making better connections between the American domestic prison system and the American foreign war machine. The organizations dont recognize, she says, that theres a worldwide class and racist oppression coming from the top of the economic pyramid.

The people who run the country own the means of production, she says, and this rich elite is ultimately responsible for the war against the people here which she sees as a campaign of social control and American wars against the people of other countries. Both here and abroad, she says, the primary targets are black and brown people.

A partner in activism

Kerness began helping Ojore Lutalo in 1986, but he has been, during the many years he spent on the inside, and since 2009, when he was released from prison, a professional partner in conveying to the world the horrors of solitary confinement.

He has vast knowledge of the subject. He spent 22 of his 28 years behind bars in isolation in the Trenton MCU. Now 66, he volunteers twice a week in the AFSC Newark office at a desk across a small room from Kerness. And he speaks beside her when she goes to colleges and community groups.

Lutalo got in touch with Kerness to protest what he says were the prisons corrupt practices, including inadequate food and medical care and arbitrary denials of visitors. But the corruption also was more fundamental. Lutalo spent so many years in solitary, he says in an interview, not because he broke prison rules, but for entertaining political thoughts the administration didnt approve of.

He presents proof, showing a 2008 letter from prison officials stating he was being kept in the MCU because his radical views and ability to influence others poses a threat to the orderly operation of this Institution. Serving time for armed robbery and assault with intent to kill, he had been a member of the Black Liberation Army, an underground, revolutionary offshoot of the Black Panthers.

Kerness has written of Lutalo: During the quarter century that we monitored Ojore Lutalo in isolation, he was never assaulted either physically or chemically. The no-touch torture he endured consisted of sleep deprivation, screeching sounds, extreme silence, extreme cold and heat, intentional situational placement, humiliation a systematic attack on all human stimuli.

The goal was to break me psychologically, Lutalo says.

He didnt break. But maintaining sanity during decades of solitary confinement is exceedingly difficult, he says. He saw many prisoners wiped out by the isolation. He says his political commitment kept him sane. His creation of political art collages that combine drawings and newspaper clippings was especially helpful.

With Kernesss assistance, Lutalos plight and the conditions at the MCU became known. Reporters interviewed him; documentary films appeared; a class-action lawsuit was filed on behalf of the units African-Americans. In 1995 the lawsuit was settled, and the court appointed a special master to review each prisoners case.

Eventually, after years, most inmates were released into the prison general population. Lutalo spent several years in the general population, but was put back into the MCU because, Kerness says an official told her, of a request by the federal Department of Homeland Security. He was released from it only when his prison term ended.

A harsh state

Although Kernesss work has often been on the national stage, the Trenton MCU has continued to be a major concern. The states prison system has always been one of the toughest on prisoners, she says, and the MCU is still being used unconscionably for mentally ill prisoners. But, she adds, its difficult to know whats going on in it and anywhere else in an extremely closed New Jersey system.

As if to prove that point, when the New Jersey Department of Corrections is asked about the number of prisoners held in solitary confinement, a spokesman replies by email: New Jersey does not utilize solitary confinement in any of its prisons.

This is a common response from corrections departments, since solitary confinement is not a bureaucratic phrase. Further inquiry produces an admission that administrative segregation (ad seg) . . . is utilized as a punishment for inmates and entails the loss or reduction of certain privileges. The spokesman, Matthew Schuman, adds that the vast majority of inmates in ad seg are double-bunked. Even those in single cells have opportunities to interact with other inmates, so ad seg is distinctly different from solitary confinement.

Kerness, however, counts over 329 ad seg beds at the Trenton prison that were pretty sure are isolation cells. In addition, shes positive there are 96 solitary-confinement cells in the MCU. Ad seg beds in four other prisons total 994, she says. These may or may not be doubled-bunked, but theyre locked down. Then there are special needs and protective custody housing units about which, she says, little is known.

Jean Ross, a volunteer prisoner-rights attorney based in Princeton, agrees with Kerness that New Jerseys prison system is unhelpful in providing information, isolates many inmates, and is a harsh system for prisoners.

Ross is specifically challenging, in a class-action lawsuit on behalf of inmates, the conditions in the falling apart West Compound of the 178-year-old Trenton facility. Ross says it has poor ventilation, excessive heat and cold, leaking pipes, rodent and insect infestations, and fire-safety lacks, among other deficiencies.

Kerness also was involved in bringing to light the particularly vicious conditions that alleged gang members suffered in a high risk

Security Threat Group Management Unit of Newark's huge Northern State Prison. Reports of the use of physical, chemical, and psychological abuse came to her during the entire 12 years the gang unit remained open, she writes in *Torture in United States Prisons*.

The unit was finally shut down in 2010 after inmate Omar Broadway, a Bloods gang member, used a camera smuggled in by a guard to secretly film abusive treatment of prisoners. His video, with scenes of guards pepper-spraying and beating inmates, was shown at the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival and, in 2010, on Home Box Office. Kerness says many of the Northern State prisoners were transferred to adsegunits in other New Jersey prisons.

The future of anti-solitary work

Kerness welcomes the embrace in recent years of the anti-solitary cause by mainstream groups such as the National Religious Campaign Against Torture they're doing dynamite. She believes describing solitary confinement as torture is the angle to accentuate. She has written that American legitimization of torture presents the country with a spiritual crisis.

She sees welcome developments, too, in law schools, especially with their students. She hopes we will begin to see lawyers with a more progressive bent. At present, progressive lawyers are still a very small group.

But most important to the anti-solitary battle, she says, are the people inside, such as Lutalo, who stimulated her activism.

As for her future, I wouldn't know how else to live, Kerness says, other than a life of activism, despite the slowness of change. Years ago, I almost did give it up because I was alone. This was right at the moment I met Ojore.

Hers has been a difficult crusade, too, because it's always been a struggle financially. To be an activist for social change costs money personally those collect calls received at home from prisoners, for example.

In a telephone interview, Ross, who has worked with Kerness on prison issues for 10 years, sums her up: She's very smart. She's very articulate. She writes very well because she thinks very well. She has a passion for justice. She's not afraid to confront the most difficult problems.

Later, by email, Ross adds: Because she has persisted in this difficult and stressful work for so long, she brings the wisdom of memory.

Kerness says she's not discouraged, but she's no Pollyanna about ending widespread solitary confinement. During her decades of work on prison issues she saw the American prison system become ever more repressive. I can only hope, she says of the future.

Whatever the future, I will spend as much time as I can working on these issues. If there's activism in you, you do it until you drop.

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.

When I was in college, I met a young man, who was artistic and funny. He had also been in juvenile facilities and adult facilities. To see what these places had done to him firsthand was very depressing. He had not graduated high school, and had no skills. The only life he knew was that of the prison system. His mental illnesses for the most part went untreated. He had gotten addicted to illegal drugs, which seemed to be the only thing that kept him going in life. As a young woman I thought that he was just doing it to himself and lacked motivation or just didn't want to work to better himself. As a more mature young woman I see now what the institutionalization does to these tortured souls, and how they are treated as less than human beings. I would like to learn more about how I could help these people out.

@kittykat I got involved by continuing research. Depending on your state there are groups. I have ended up supporting 1 person. And there are 100,000s of thousands in isolation the majority have no one that supports them. Finding someone that just needs a penpal will open your eyes. Good luck it's not an easy road. I was like u 6 yrs. ago emailed Sol Wat they never answered. They report the bad news but have never replied.

I take tons of time to write elected officials and agencies I help an advocate in WI with her needs they never run out. I live in MI began supporting prisoners all over the country.

there's over 2,000,000 in prison ~Good Luck~

Sw reports well but it is the people out here trying to make a difference which seems futile whether several prisoners or 1 I find it impossible to get anywhere with the prison any attempt to help seems to cause retaliation to prisoner..
And let us keep in mind this is a people issue and I think an issue that American prisons torture American people

am much obliged to hear everyone speak so candidly and personal.. this other world we know .. dont know ..cannot imagine in full scope.. or personal like with ojure allan and others ..including myself.. we can sy in common.. we barely escaped with our lives minds and .. great loss of time in our short existences.. much praise to those friends family and comrades.. who helped us along.. for from each of us few who survive hundreds dont.. broken bodies and spirits thereafterwe lose too many comrades both inside the walls and within min-security.. stay on top lest we let people be buried alive.. so that others work-job-carreer prison predators.. may make a living.. be good christians.. and even heroes in the eyes of a vengeful and deceived public sector.. we survivors and speakers for the oppressed .. must always step forward and represent our past imprisoned class..that the living.. the public.. the hatersall know that we survived all their: indifference :vengeance and hateful minds and hearts..

. ohayo bato

Excellent piece about a remarkable woman doing incredibly important work- thank you!

Hello Allan and anyone else interested in changing this horrifying reality. I couldnt agree with you more! Please contact me. I would like to help. My story is one that may surprise you. I am a student documenting journeys of people changing this crime against humanity. For more info about my journey please see <http://idwellindreams.wordpress.com/communications-diversity-and-social-studies/race-and-ethnicity-ss-dv-soc-2630-005/>

On October 5th I turned 73 and i believe confronting solitary confinement as legal torture and a human rights violation is a cause worthy of any citizen with a sense of compassion and an anger at the publics unwillingness to face the abuse , brutality , rape that goes on in our prison systems. 66 percent of all released prisoners after 5 years reenter the criminal justice system. This has to be considered a failed result . Rehabilitation has been replaced with severe punishment , dehumination. I was active in the anti war movement in the sixties , attempting to bring unions to wall Street where I worked for thirty years, but when I realized mentally ill people are in Rikers Island solitary confinement cells for 23 out of 24 hours I knew that if this injustice was made to end , all other injustices in America , including economic exploitation could be challanged. As a member of JAC Jail Action coalition and RIPPD Rights for Imprisoned People with Psychiatyric disabilities I know my efforts will be rewarded and we will be sucessful. I am in touch with 8 inmates in solitary at Wisconsin prisons and their biggest complaint is they are considered and treated as less than human. allanfeinblum@aol.com

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News