

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/01/03/new-report-shows-juvenile-lifers-suffering-in-solitary-confinement/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | January 3, 2012

The United States is the only national in the world that doles out life sentences for crimes committed while the offender was below the age of 18. According to a [report released yesterday by Human Rights Watch](#), approximately 2,570 youth offenders serving life without parole sentences in adult US prisons, and as inmates they experience conditions that violate fundamental human rights.

The report draws on six years of research, and interviews and correspondence with correctional officials and hundreds of youth offenders serving life without parole, and presages the Supreme Courts upcoming review of juvenile LWOP. Youth offenders are serving life without parole sentences in 38 states and in federal prisons, HRW reports. Prison policies that channel resources to inmates who are expected to be released often result in denying youth serving life without parole opportunities for education, development, and rehabilitation.

Among the reports shocking findings is the fact that nearly every youth offender serving life without parole reported physical violence or sexual abuse by other inmates or corrections officers. Unsurprisingly, Youth offenders commonly reported having thoughts of suicide, feelings of intense loneliness, or depression. Isolation was frequently compounded by solitary confinement. In the past five years, at least three youth offenders serving life without parole sentences in the [United States](#) have committed suicide.

In its section on Protective and Punitive Isolation, the report finds that Youth offenders often spend significant amounts of their time in US prisons isolated from the general prison population. Such segregation can be an attempt to protect vulnerable youth offenders from the general population, to punish infractions of prison rules, or to manage particular categories of inmates, such as alleged gang members. Youth offenders frequently described their experience in segregation as a profoundly difficult ordeal.

It continues: Life in long-term isolation usually involves segregating inmates for 23 or more hours a day in their cells. Offenders contacted by Human Rights Watch described the devastating loneliness of spending their days alone, without any human contact, except for when a guard passes them a food tray through a slot in the door, or when guards touch their wrists when handcuffing them through the same slot before taking them to the exercise room or for a shower once a week. Youth had the same experience and feelings whether they had been isolated to protect or to punish them.

The reports findings on the use of solitary confinement on juvenile lifers (with corresponding footnotes) appears below. You can also read the full report which includes a series of recommendations to the president, Congress, corrections officials, and judges [online](#) or as a [PDF](#).

A growing consensus views protective isolation as acceptable only as a last resort and interim measure.^[56] Yet isolation is commonly used by prison officials as a quick solution to protection challenges including the challenge of keeping a young person safe in a prison full of adults.

Youth offenders reported to Human Rights Watch that they sometimes sought out protective custody to avoid harm. Occasionally, prison authorities recognize the problems a youth offender is having and take corrective measures. Jeffrey W., who entered prison at age 17, wrote:

At the beginning, the focus was on surviving. Naturally, I was the target of sexual predators and had to fight off a couple rape attempts. These were hardened, streetwise convicts who had been in prison 10, 15, 20, 30 years and I was a naive 18-year-old who knew nothing about prison life. Because of the rape attempts on me state prison officials [said] I should have been classified as needing protection. I was soon sent to the states protection unit. I stayed there for seven years until I was returned to the general population older, wiser, and capable of surviving general population.^[57] Unfortunately, segregation can exacerbate the lack of opportunities for programs described in more detail later in this report:

Right now I'm not receiving no schooling or counseling due to being in ASU Administrative Segregation Unit. They have no schooling for me or etc. They are way out of conduct here. I been asking to receive some GED work but I haven't receive no response. I wish to receive schooling. I learn how to read and write in prison and I want to be successful. I might get out one day.^[58] Prolonged periods of isolation can be devastating for anyone, but are especially devastating for young offenders.^[59]

Youth offenders are often placed in long-term isolation or super-maximum security confinement as a disciplinary sanction. Dennis Burbank, an administrative officer at Colorado State Penitentiary, offered an explanation for why youth offenders serving life without parole often end up confined in long-term isolation:

One [factor] is age when you come in at a young age with life without, there's not a whole lot of light at the end of the tunnel. Also, it's kind of a guy thing: the young ones come in with a lot of fear, anxiety, paranoia, and they want to make a name for themselves so they have a tendency to act out. They say [to themselves] I've got to impress everyone with what a bad-ass I am.^[60] Long-term isolation can have lasting negative effects on inmates. Troy L. came to prison at age 16 after committing first degree murder at the age of 15. He spent something like 300 days in an isolation cell when he was awaiting trial and had been transferred to isolation several times since for different reasons.^[61] Troy said he had spent so much time in isolation that he was unable to feel comfortable relating to and living around other people, especially now that he was housed in the general population barracks:

If you just see what these barracks are like, they got us piled in there like some cockroaches. And I've spent so much time over the years in just cells and lockdown for different reasons. And it's hard for me to deal with just having so many people around. So much I can't think you know what I mean?^[62] Human Rights Watch has systematically documented and advocated against the human rights violations inherent in the incarceration of individuals in super-maximum security prisons throughout the United States.^[63] Segregated living also has long-term psychological implications.^[64]

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.

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October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

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September 29, 2022

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Louisiana needs to find alternatives to all forms of incarceration. Maybe a name change as well from The Department Of Corrections and Public Safety to the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. In Louisiana Prisons lifers are not given a second chance a society. Life is Life in Louisiana. They literary warehouse people. Started with single bunks now double bunks and considering triple bunks. It is inhumane and insane to continue this practice. Other countries such as Canada and other states such as Colorado have used lifeline programmes which review records of lifers and those qualified get put on ankle bracelet monitor for 5 years and then continue their sentence on Parole for life. Which means that they have to go report to a PO monthly, pay fees, obtain a job and become tax paying citizens. These are all pluses to society and to the inmate. It reduces cost of incarceration, generates funds to probation and parole and increases tax revenue in the state. Louisiana ranks highest in the nation for incarceration and due to the long term sentences it is a revolving door to the newer criminals who count on committing a crime knowing that they will be released due to overcrowding. There are so many who have served 20, 30 and 40 years that would be eligible for this program. I would hope that someone would consider giving it a chance. It has got to be a better program than the backlog of courts and revolving doors that are in place now.

dam i can say they are right about it doing permnet harm messes with your mind your body it hurts more then it helps it is not right of us to put anyone in solitary to the amount it dose such harms to them lol hell bout time i come out a say it after the days in oak hill it is now at least ben over 5 years sens then and some the effects still hanging a round as in it still effects me today finely got a rubric dienosos of SHU sindrum yes thanks a lot oakhill lol thank god for Dr. Stuart Grassian the man i met years a go the man who found the sindrum it may not be in the DSM yet but dam well it is real and after years of showing meny difrent doctors that PTSD would not fit by what has to be present according to the dsm that is over 5 ears i finely got a anser and am no onger ashamed toor feel odd bout saying it as a fact between my assbergers and ocd i can now add SHU sindrum lol point is it dose not even have to be ina prison any form of solitary can mess you up for life like drugs and drinking could oly after years of doing it the lesson of this should be to you all out thare dare will tell you say not to drugs now we need to say not to solitary confinement may thare be light in the darknes of justice

The report, *From Time Out to Hard Time: Young Children in the Adult Criminal Justice System*, provides a comprehensive look at how the nation treats pre-adolescent children (primarily those age 12 and under) who commit serious crimes.

The process of my own commitment to the California Youth Authority (CYA), evaluation and placement, had taken around seven months from the time of my arrest until the day I arrived at Fricot Ranch Schools Eagle Lodge on September 28, 1964 at the age of 12. Fricot was located not far from San Andreas and Angels Camp in Northern Californias Calaveras County. Eagle Lodge was given its name for two reasons; first its location on the crest of the highest hill on the institutions grounds and, as we all know, eagles make their nests at great heights in order to spot their prey below. And secondly as a counselor later pointed out to me our lodge housed the oldest wards at Fricot which in his mind corresponded to the fact that eagles are the largest birds of prey. A little play on words there possibly revealing his perceptions of those he had under his care but incredibly enough it was true we were the oldest there. I dont remember physically ever crossing paths with any of the younger wards being held below during my stay but we could view them from afar. Their small size made me wonder what these children could have possibly done to justify the courts decision to send them to the CYA system, a system which was designed for only the most unruly kids held in the states custody.

During the year I spent at Fricot, an African American male therapist conducted interviews with me and two other wards with high IQs for a case study. The first was Poindexter the blond bespectacled movie critic that reminded me of the cartoon character by the same name on the Felix the Cat show. Then there was Red a slim freckled faced red head. These two were classified as geniuses while I had an IQ score of 138 well above the norm for the population committed to the CYA.

During my stay I stumbled upon a scene which confirmed my suspicions about Reds relative weakness. I walked blindly into the scene where I caught a glimpse of Red being sodomized by one ward while two others waited their turn. Following the jail house code of silence I quickly turned around and never mentioned what I saw to Red or anyone else.

During my second sentence to the CYA I had just been released from solitary when I was abruptly notified of my impending release to my fathers house in Louisiana. My impending release was a big surprise to me considering the prospect had never been mentioned before.

Then within days of receiving my street cloths from home I received a surprise visit from my mother. I was allowed to leave Preston for our visit just as I had done once at Fricot. I excitedly put on my new cloths and posed for some photos with my best friend Bill then headed up the hill to the administration building. On the way I saw Red who was serving time in the lodge that was reserved for property crimes. I hadnt crossed paths with Red since Fricot where he had been a timid skinny kid but now he had the look of an intimidating hard core criminal. Late while contemplating Reds metamorphosis I came to the conclusion that after being a frequent victim of gang rape in Fricot a bit of his humanity had been lost and that he most likely became a predator himself. Without thinking I called out Hey Red its me Al remember me from Fricot? Of course if I had thought it through I could have guessed that he would never admit to knowing me since doing so would mean owning up to what had happened to him in Fricot. Red answered angrily. No I never was in Fricot with you. At that point I realized his position so I just kept walking not wanting to blow his cover.

I was signed out at the administration building and released through the electronic door to where my mother waited. We hugged each other for a few seconds and mom kissed me on the cheek. I felt the relief that one feels when in the presence of loved ones. For this one moment during my year long ordeal I could forget the tension behind me and enjoy the warmth of my mothers love.

We walked outside with our arms around each other and I noticed a familiar face in the passenger seat. It was my older brother Mike he had beaten me out. He jumped out of the car and hugged me and he asked me, How are you bro? Are you holding your own in there? Awe man, are you doubting me bro? You know I get down when I have to. As a matter of fact I just got out of the hole a few weeks ago. Check it out I tell Mike about the incident that landed me in the hole and that got my advisory sent up stream to DVI an adult prison for being in the possession of numerous weapons for which he planned to carry out plans for a riot.

My families visit went by all too fast as we caught up with the events in our lives. I learned that the adult professional weightlifter along with several of his cohorts from his gym had attacked the me and Mike had himself since been arrested for crippling a 15 year old in a similar incident. While the punk was on bail for that infraction he beat another 16 year old to death in a rage. Damn I thought it must have been all those steroids. Our encounter with him had gotten my parole revoked and me placed into the unit designed for the most violent youths in the state. Now this adult muscle bound freak was finally going to get what was coming to him, a prison term. I grinned widely knowing what he was about to experience. Doing time is a bitch and with any luck he would become someones.

We must keep in mind that what juveniles experience while incarcerated will shape them and will directly affect our society as the abused become capable of carrying out the most disturbing acts of violence upon us.

Even in such juvenile institutions as those that I experienced as a youth frequent violent assaults, of all types, were carried out on weaker inmates by predatory inmates. Thus in my opinion it is unconscionable that we would place juveniles in adult prisons like tethered animals in a slaughterhouse.

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