

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/07/09/louisiana-jail-locks-suicidal-prisoners-in-3-x-3-cages/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | July 9, 2010

Even in the context of the United States grim and sometimes brutal prison conditions, a [story released yesterday by the American Civil Liberties of Louisiana](#) shocks the conscience. The ACLU is protesting treatment of prisoners in one parish jail, who are routinely locked in cages measuring 3 x 3 feet one-fourth the legally mandated size for caged dogs in the same parish. What makes this story even more sickening is the fact that this treatment is used on prisoners who are suicidal.

We know that placing prisoners in cells or cages too small to lie down in was one of the [forms of torture employed at Abu Ghraib](#) and other interrogation sites since the start of the so-called war on terror. Even there, the detainees were most commonly released after a day or two. At the St. Tammany Parish Jail in Covington, Louisiana, the ACLU found prisoners suffering from mental illness, and deemed at risk of killing themselves, are sometimes held in the tiny cages for weeks or months.

What follows is the story in full, as released by the Louisiana ACLU. The groups open letter to St. Tammany officials can be read [here](#). A detailed story on the case, including St. Tammany Parish's response to past protests, appears in [New Orleans City Business](#).

After extensive investigation into conditions at the St. Tammany Parish jail, today the ACLU of Louisiana sent a letter to St. Tammany Parish Sheriff Jack Strain and Parish President Kevin Davis, demanding an end to the practice of caging suicidal prisoners in squirrel cages. After the jail determines a prisoner is suicidal, the prisoner is stripped half-naked and placed in a 3 x 3 metal cage with no shoes, bed, blanket or toilet, according to numerous interviews conducted with current and former prisoners. Prisoners report they must curl up on the floor to sleep because the cages are too small to let them lie down. Guards frequently ignore repeated requests to use the bathroom, forcing some desperate people to urinate in discarded containers. The cages are in a main part of the jail, allowing other prisoners to gawk at those confined in these cages. People have been reportedly held in these cages for days, weeks, and months.

Sheriff Jack Strain has been quoted saying that prisoners need to be caged like animals. Tragically, Sheriff Strain treats his most vulnerable prisoners worse than the minimum legal standards for dogs. According to St. Tammany Parish Code 4-121.10, dogs must be kept in cages at least 6 wide x 6 feet deep, with sufficient space to lie down. This really should go without saying, but in America we should not treat any person worse than animals. said Barry Gerharz, Prison Litigation Fellow at the ACLU of Louisiana.

Marjorie Esman, ACLU of Louisiana Executive Director, said This is what can happen when you have law enforcement treating the mentally ill. If the Constitution's Eighth Amendment protection against cruel and unusual punishment means anything, it means that people shouldn't be treated like this. Jails across this country typically have housing for suicidal prisoners and don't resort to such barbarity. The squirrel cages belong in the history books.

Several witnesses report suicidal prisoners forced to wear orange short shorts (Daisy Duke style). Prisoners also report being forced to wear Daisy Duke shorts with Hot Stuff written on the rear end. People who have been placed in the cages describe acute physical and psychological after-effects, including clinical depression, nightmares and crying fits after they were released from jail. Prisoners report that they are hesitant to inform guards when they feel suicidal, out of fear that they will be placed in the cages. This increases the likelihood that a prisoner will commit suicide, as happened last fall.

The Sheriff is scheduled to receive millions of dollars for upgrades to the jail. In this morning's letter to Parish President Kevin Davis and the Sheriff, the ACLU of LA demands that some of this money be used to create humane housing for people on suicide watch at the jail.

We appreciate that mentally ill prisoners pose a challenge for the jail, but Sheriff Strain has a legal and moral obligation to care for sick people in a humane way. Caging them for prolonged periods of time is an unacceptable solution, both from a legal perspective and from a human rights perspective. We hope that the sheriff will use this opportunity to build a more humane facility, so that we can avoid litigating this issue, said Katie Schwartzmann, legal director for the ACLU.

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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.

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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I realized I didn't post this site as well.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/lobotomist-bedlam-1946/>

A real eye opener too. I think that the one you sent me is also very coincidental. Sometimes I think there is a guiding hand in all this. Those who believe have no doubt.

<http://rawstory.com/rs/2010/0709/security-punches-tazes-nephew-clarence-thomas/>

Thanks for the link to PBS The Good War Behind Bars. I had not know about this, and the draft resisters of that time being imprisoned in this here free Country of ours.

The one woman you speak of Alice Paul, is the greatest woman in our History. If I had a wish, it would be to meet her, to have known this strong and fierce woman. And the madness she experienced is still with us, you just have to look at the sick politics of today. What would she say, and what would she do?

This article makes me sick.

History repeats itself if we do not pay attention.

In the past good men and women have exposed such horrors.

During WWII more than 3,000 conscientious objectors, volunteered for assignment as mental hospital attendants. These young Methodists, Quakers, Mennonites and Brethren filled out questionnaires and wrote narratives for use in the preparation of instructional material for mental-hospital workers.

They found that beatings of patients were merely the extreme end product of overworked, poorly trained and shamefully underpaid employees to control hundreds of patients whom they feared and despised.

Far more frequent than beatings were the endless cruelties involved in the use of constraints.

Although some hospitals had managed to dispense with physical restraints entirely and others permitted their use only on written order from doctors, the all-too-widespread practice was to leave the decision to tie down a patient or throw him into solitary up to the harassed and fearful attendant.

Such instances of callousness and incompetence and the records are replete with hundreds cannot, of course, be excused in men licensed as physicians and pledged to the Hippocratic Oath.

In 1943 a group of conscientious objectors stationed at Cleveland State laid a stack of affidavits a foot high on the desk, covering conditions such as those I have described and other horrors even worse.

At first the stories were met by officials with shocked cries of it ain't so.

For what happens to the mentally-sick in our present hellhole hospitals is not the sad experience of some other fellow. Ever minister, every doctor and every leader of any community organization knows that mental illness can strike down members of his immediate circle. Given the facts the people will rally to put an end to concentration camps that masquerade as hospitals and to make cure rather

than incarceration the goal of their mental institutions.

At the same time as these men were exposing this abuse of the most defenseless amongst us others like them were placed in prison where such abuse was directed at them. Most refused to serve because killing was against their religion.

<http://www.pbs.org/itvs/thegoodwar/bars.html>

If the mystical truth that comes to a man proves to be a force that he can live by, what mandate have we of the majority to order him to live in another way? We can throw him into a prison or a madhouse, but we can not change his mind

-William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience

Prisoners of Conscience

Over six thousand COs who refused to serve in the Army and in Civilian Public Service camps, or whose drafts boards deemed them insincere, went to Federal prison. In fact, one out of every six men in U.S. prisons during World War II was a draft resister. Among them were Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, and legendary jazz musician Sun Ra. War resisters found themselves behind bars for up to six years. Some were even held up to two years after the war ended.

Imprisoned draft resisters represented a broad spectrum of Americans. While over 75 percent of those imprisoned were Jehovahs Witnesses, members of traditional peace churches were joined by other Protestants, Catholics, Jews, socialists and anarchists. Large numbers of Puerto Ricans refused draft induction to protest Puerto Ricans colonial status. Many Hopi Indians, who are traditionally pacifists, refused the draft call. Seventy-three Japanese American internees refused draft orders from the Heart Mountain relocation camp in Wyoming to protest the internment of Japanese-Americans. They were imprisoned for their action.

CO prisoners were threatened by fellow inmates and guards and spent long periods in total darkness, on hunger strikes and in solitary confinement. The war resisters who were followers of Gandhi and crusaders for non-violent resistance to evil applied their strategy to ending segregation in prison. Their hunger strike, waged to desegregate dining in Danbury Prison, lasted 135 days before the warden capitulated and Danbury became the first federal facility with integrated meals. When they won, the hunger strikes spread to other prisons. Eventually the entire federal prison system was integrated.

While suffering forced feeding and long bouts of isolation, many war resisters found strength of spirit in their prison experiences and went on to build social movements based on non-violence.

Prison authorities saw COs as a problem population. James Bennett wrote the following about the imprisoned war resisters in his 1943 Annual Report as the Director of the Bureau of Prisons:

The most difficult group of conscientious objectors [is] the political or philosophical objector. He is primarily the reformer with a zeal for changing the social, political, economic and cultural order. Objection to war frequently is only one element of his program. He is more an activist than a pacifist. His motivation frequently stems from an over-protective home or a mother fixation, or from a revolt against authority as typified in the home and transferred to society at large. He is a problem child whether at home, at school or in prison.

And for all you women out there who enjoy voting check this story out.

http://pbskids.org/wayback/civilrights/features_suffrage.html

By the time Alice Paul and the National Womens Party began their suffrage campaign, the old leaders of the womens movement were gone.

In an effort to break the spirit of the picketers, the police arrested Alice Paul. She was tried and sentenced to 7 months in prison.

Paul was placed in solitary confinement. For two weeks, she had nothing to eat except bread and water. Weak and unable to walk, she was taken to the prison hospital. There she began a hunger strike one which others would join. It was, Paul said later, the strongest weapon left with which to continue our battle . . .

In response to the hunger strike, prison doctors put Alice Paul in a psychiatric ward.

They threatened to transfer her to an insane asylum. Still, she refused to eat. Afraid that she might die, doctors force fed her. Three times a day for three weeks, they forced a tube down her throat and poured liquids into her stomach. Despite the pain and illness the force feeding caused, Paul refused to end the hunger strike or her fight for the vote.

After 5 weeks in prison, Alice Paul was set free.

The attempts to stop the picketers had backfired. Newspapers carried stories about the jail terms and forced feedings of the suffragists. The stories angered many Americans and created more support than ever for the suffrage amendment.

Finally, on January 9, 1918, Wilson announced his support for suffrage. The next day, the House of Representatives narrowly passed the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, which would give suffrage to all women citizens.

This is why no one should be subjected to this because it has happened to good people in the past and it will in the future.

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