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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/05/12/abuse-and-cover-up-in-california-prisons-behavior-management-units/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | May 12, 2010

The American prison system is rife with euphemistic acronyms for the places where inmates are held in solitary confinement: Our prisons contain SHUs, SMUs, ASUs, CCRs, and most recently CMUs. *Now, a powerful two-part expose by Charles Pillar in the *Sacramento Bee* shows what goes on inside the BMU—the Behavior Modification Units—in several California prisons.

These units are supposed to combine SHU-style isolation and deprivation with a special program that includes classes in life skills like anger management, substance abuse treatment, and other measures to prepare troublesome prisoners to return to the general population, or to the outside. But the classes have been eliminated for cost reasons if they ever existed at all and what's left is solitary confinement.

Some of the inmates' behavior problems undoubtedly resulted from untreated mental illness. Whatever their cause, these problems were unlikely to be improved by round-the-clock lockdown. And at some of the BMUs, inmates reportedly lived in particularly brutal conditions, in an environment where, according to the *Sacramento Bee*, guards seemed to view behavior modification as a license to make inmates as miserable as possible to compel obedience.

A *Bee* investigation into the behavior units, including signed affidavits, conversations and correspondence with 18 inmates, has uncovered evidence of racism and cruelty at the High Desert facility [in Susanville, CA]. Inmates described hours-long strip-searches in a snow-covered exercise yard. They said correctional officers tried to provoke attacks between inmates, spread human excrement on cell doors and roughed up those who peacefully resisted mistreatment.

Many of their claims were backed by legal and administrative filings, and signed affidavits, which together depicted an environment of brutality, corruption and fear.

Behavior units at other prisons were marked by extreme isolation and deprivation long periods in a cell without education, social contact, TV or radio, according to inmate complaints and recent visits by *The Bee*. An inmate of the Salinas Valley State Prison behavior unit won a lawsuit last year to get regular access to the prison yard after five months without exercise, sunlight or fresh air.

The list of abuses reported by the prisoners goes on: Some cells leaked in rainstorms, soaking mattresses, they said, and blankets and toiletries were routinely withheld. Birds trapped in the unit defecated in prisoners' food trays, and prayer books and rugs were confiscated without recourse. When they complained, inmates said, mistreatment escalated to threats and outright assault.

Prisoners also alleged that racism played a role in their abuse, reporting that guards used racial slurs and referred to the BMU as the black monkey unit. One inmate who was marched down the corridor naked and in chains after a cell extraction said that he felt like he just stepped off an auction block.

Pillar's articles document not just the abuses themselves, but the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's extensive efforts to ignore, discredit, or bury these abuses.

State prison officials have known about many of these claims since at least July 2008, when Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation social scientists sent to [High Desert](#) to assess the program reported allegations of abuse including denial of medical care, racial slurs, gratuitous violence and destruction of protest appeals.

The *Bees* investigation also revealed a broad effort by corrections officials to hide the concerns of prisoners and of the department's own experts.

Inmates believe that the letters of complaint they wrote to the state inspector general and FBI were never sent out by the prison and if they pressed the issue, they said, they were subject to retaliation. Several state researchers also say that corrections officials told them to keep quiet about the abuse allegations, and to downplay and bury them in official reports.

The articles deserve to be read in full both [part one](#) and [part two](#). And it looks like they may actually have some measurable impact: In a [follow-up](#) to its expose, the *Sacramento Bee* reported:

State prison officials said Monday that they had dramatically broadened their investigation of alleged racism and cruelty by guards at the [High Desert](#) State Prison in Susanville. The move came in response, officials said, to a *Bee* investigation published Sunday and Monday about claims of abuse of prisoners in a special behavior modification program.

Investigative reporting has proved instrumental to exposing conditions in solitary confinement in several other cases, as well notably [Lance Tapleys reporting](#) on the Maine State Prison SHU, and [Beth Hundsdoerfer and George Pawlaczyks series](#) on Tamms Supermax in Illinois. The reporting has spurred official investigations, or even policy changes or legislative actions.

It looks like the American Friends Service Committee which has [long opposed the torture of solitary confinement](#) may be hoping the same thing will happen in California. On Monday, the *Sacramento Bee* reports, the AFSC challenged California legislators to look into the abuse allegations and pushed for the behavior units to be sharply restricted. (You can read AFSC's press release [here](#).) And on Tuesday two state senators [sent a letter](#) to Arnold Schwarzenegger stating their intent to fully examine these allegations, and requesting an immediate briefing by the corrections department.

* Security Housing Unit (or Special Housing Unit), Special Management Unit, Administrative Segregation Unit, Closed Cell Restricted, Communications Management Unit.



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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My son is in Pleasant Valley State Prison. He got so mentally ill while being in solitary for almost 90 days. I went to visit him while in solitary and after it I asked them for a psychological evaluation since I was concerned about his welfare and they followed through but they came with the answer that my son was fine. They kept my son there for two more weeks after my complaint. My son has not been the same after that, and later he developed suicidal thoughts. He is in the mental hospital now since an inmate saw he was in danger and he took the time to take him to Suicide watch. Prisons are not doing nothing but RUNNING young people's lives!!!! Where can I complain about my son's welfare?? I'm desperate!!!! He can suicide if they are not treating him right and the worst thing is, that I don't know anything about how he is doing since the release of info from us a little delayed.

Please don't feel any pity or remorse for the inmates. They deserve to be beaten and treated like shit. I hope it continues.

I need a good lawyer for my son who is being mistreated in Susanville CDCR. They sent him to a camp for fire fighting and then after he was there said he needed to go back to the prison because he's allergic to bees but he was stung and there was no reaction. No my son is being kept where there are no phones to call home or they are not allowed packages and he has no write ups and has never been in trouble. Somebody know of an attorney.

I was in H. D. S. P. You have to find out what happens by inmates of his race who were on his yard while he was there. Period. They know what really happened. B yard is SNY yard and has been for a few years at HD. I don't know how it works on SNY, but I know they were stabbing each other every day on B yard while I was on A yard. Every day!

HI I AM WRITING BECAUSE I JUST RECEIVED NOTICE THAT MY SON AND OTHER INMATES SENT FROM CALIFORNIA TO MISSISSIPPI WERE JUST MADE TO STRIP OUTSIDE IN THE SNOW BUT ASS NAKED. IN FRONT OF OTHER INMATES.

DOES ANYONE KNOW WHAT I CAN DO TO HELP. STOP THIS INHUMANE BEHAVIOR. OR A REALLY GOOD LAWYER?

hi my name is ana braganza. my borhter is in high deserst prison. iam in the same page as u sayin kizzie jones they sexual him for nothing i send \$ to him they take some out and keep it give like 5 or 10 doller and ya they do treat them its hurts me alot he my only lil brother i have i miss himm so much

HELLO MY NAME IS KIZZIE JONESMY FATHER IS IN HIGH DESERT PRISONTHE CO HAS JUMPED ON MY FATHER.IN SEXUAL ABUSE HIM.I SENT HIM A PACKAGE THE PRISON SENT IT BACK FOR NO REASON AT ALLMY DADDY HAS A PACEMAKER IN HIS HEART HE IS NOT IN THE BEST OF HELP..THEY DONT LET HIS MAIL GO OUT.IT IS JUST NOT RIGHT HOW THEY TREAT THE INMATES ..CAN SOME ONE PLEASE HELP ME THIS STUFF NEED TO STOP ITS JUST NOT RIGHT..WHEN YOU CALL TO THE PRISON ITS JUST MAKES IT WORSE ON THE INMATE..ITS NOT JUST MY FATHER BUT ALL THE INMATES WHO OR GETTING BULLY BY THE COS ITS NOT RIGHT..PLEASE EMAIL ME IF YOU COULD HELP OR KNOW SOMEONE THAT COULD..KIWILOVE777@GMAIL.COM

@Angie How ironic that you commented on this now. I forgot about this sadly it sounds like it was not uncommon. Jean has a post Ive just written. I wrote it the day after Fathers Day when I saw an article titled A Fathers Pain about a father who knows his son is being abused in DJJ in CA. His pain on Fathers Day was especially acute. I dont want to give away the rest keep an eye out for it.

Good luck I hope you get justice. I feel your pain!

Wow Alan,

My family and I just found out that my brother hung himself in Lancaster Prison 4 years ago they cremated his remains and threw his ashes God knows where. No family was notified and we dont believe my brother did this to himself. He had only 90 days left of his sentence. We want justice for my brother. He had a criminal history but he also had family that loved him! This sickens my heart and something needs to be done!

Hello Angie my cousin was an inmate at Susanville State Prison he was scheduled to be released the end of this however that will not happen because March 17, 2016 they stated he committed suicide. I do not believe my cousin committed suicide they say he hung himself from the top bunk bed but how is that possible its not high enough and they also stated that placed some kind of object in the cell door which made it become hard to open. They did not notify the family until almost 2 days later they took over a week to release his body they performed and autopsy on the back of his head 1 day after the incident when we were finally able to get the body released and sent to a funeral home in Sacramento they cleaned him and prepared for us to view the body my cousin didnt look the same his lips were swollen and he had a large deep scratch next to his bottom lip. There was no suicide letter or nothing I know how much my cousin loved his family and it just doesnt seen right to me that he would do this to himself. We can work together and try to figure this out your story doesnt sound right and either does mines. Please email me at tiffanywilsonwhite@yahoo.com

Twyla, I have also read your comment, but also know the man you speak of is a BIG crap talker, a thief, and A GINORMOUS LIAR, and does a lot to instigate others. He will never change! Although I dont think the COs should be touching him in this manner(not necessary), but that doesnt change the way he is!

Hi Twyla, I read your message about your husband, That was so wrong in what happen to him. I do pray that justice take place in what they did to him. I have heard about that prison and of all the bad and wrong things that goes on in there. I to have a love one in their and we have been trying to get him closer to home. Transfer out still waiting. We have going through this for a good while. Do you have any suggestions and do you have any names of some Activist that we or I can speak with? Your help would truly be apprecitive. God Bless you and your husband.

MY NAME IS TWYLA SLEMMER I HAVE A HUSBAND AT HIGH DESERT STATE PRISON IN SUSANVILLE ON B YARD DANIEL HAYES SLEMMER #D55638 HE WAS ABUSED BY A CO THERE ON JAN 23 2011 AND THE CO WAS OUT OF LINE THE CO PUNCHED HIM IN THE JAW AND HE BLEEDING FROM HIS MOUTH AND THREW HIM TO THE GROUND ON HIS CHEST AND PUT HIS KNEES INTO HIS BACK AND PUNCHED HIM IN THE BACK MY HUSBAND IS NOW FILING A LAW SUIT ON THE CO AND A FEW OTHERS HE HAS EVERY RIGHT TO DO THAT ITS HIS RIGHT WHILE HE WAS IN ADSEG D YARD FROM 1-23-11 TO 6-511 THEY TOOK ALL HIS PERSONAL PROPERTY AND BROKE HIS KTV TELEVISION I THINK THATS WRONG TO DO THAT BECAUSE A INMATE FILES ON WHAT HE THINKS IS RIGHT AND IT IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO AND THEN WOULDNT LET HIM TRANSFER OUT OF THEIR I STAND BY MY HUSBAND ALL THE WAY ITS IN HIS RIGHTS

No Amanda I havent any knowledge of a support group. I vent on blogs like this because of a guilty conscious I guess. Did I do enough when he was alive? Obviously I feel I didnt. Sadly he himself is partly to blame he asked for us all to stay away. He felt that when my mother raised hell he caught hell from the guards. Mom actually even walked into the governors office to complain. I cant help him now but I can speak out here in hopes that others that can be saved have a better chance to survive.

Thank you Fannie and I agree with everything you wrote. How many of these blind citizens will finally open their eyes in a cell. New laws keep racking in more and more people. Few of us have never broken a law. How many of us have drank alcohol and unwisely drove? Just an example but lets say they dont how about their kids in college? Even worst then going to prison is watching your kids enter those fateful gates of hell.

The sad thing about my little brothers case is he was non violent and near his release date. Our ailing mother saw it coming after visiting him on several occasions and seeing bruises from the guards. No matter if they drove him to kill himself or they covered up their own actions the system is responsible.

Dear Alan,

Just last night I was at a meeting with a mother whos child died in prison and she still doesnt have the answers about his death. This was nine years ago. She has been searching for other people who share her experience because she is still grieving. Would you be interested?

Or know of any support groups that you have reached out to?

Investigative journalism yes. Maine, Cali, and Illinois have been moved. PA is next!

Amanda HRC

Alan, I am sorry for your lost. What are the state laws and guidelines for a death in the prison system. It makes me sick to think that California considers inmates their property, to do with as they see fit without consulting family members. Something is really wrong here. Something needs to be done about this, its got to stop.

After reading the articles, and the comments, it dawned on me that Ive never seen so many blind people, they cant see, and they refuse to hear. Yet they all have their score book out, and thats all the involvement they want, is to be able to keep score. They dont want to give anyone in prison a chance to become a good person, a good father, a good mother, or a good spouse. They just want inmates kept in mental prisons without any human rights, and then when they are legally freed and those who return, they will say I told you so, and no changes will have made within the walls, or outside the walls.

I read this article with great interest because my late younger brother died in such a unit at Salinas Valley during this period of time. The callous comment about hanging around sickens me. They claim he hung himself but we believe he died at their hands since he was due to be released and threatened them with a law suit when he got out. He died two weeks later and his remains were cremated and tossed into the Pacific without us being aware of his death. Only after the death of our mother and his father a few months later did we learn of his death. This is not about race it is about brutality my other is white.

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