

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/01/18/suicide-in-solitary-the-life-and-death-of-armando-cruz-part-2/>

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | January 18, 2013

On December 26, 2008, Armando Cruz was admitted to Mercy Hospital of Folsom following an attempted self-castration. He had wrapped strips of sheets/shirts around base of scrotum and has been tightening them over the past three days because I am on a mission, according to a Clinical Report by a physician who examined him.

Cruz would go on to say that he did it to prove he was tougher than the voices.

Housed alone in the PSU, he would participate in few groups. However, no disciplinary issues are noted in his documentation. On February 5, 2009, his custody was reduced from Max to Close Custody. His SHU term was suspended and he was allowed to participate in EOP Programming, which included more social interaction.

He would remain disciplinary free throughout much of 2009.

He was transferred back to Salinas Valley State Prison, being placed back in the Department of Mental Health, on September 29, 2009. The goal was to make him competent to stand trial for the January 18, 2008 incident in which he bit an officer. Within a month, on October 16, he would be cited for possession of dangerous contraband.

Two months later, he would participate in his first, and only, parole board hearing. The parole board noted that Cruz has not been released from Discretionary Program Status (DPS) due to his erratic behavior and therefore, has not participated in any group activities. The board also indicated that Cruz had spent some time before the board emphasizing that he wished to stay away from the El Cajon Dukes, a gang he had claimed he was a member of since his arrest, a claim his mother disputes.

On February 2, 2010, the board would deny parole for seven years, telling him he needed to stay disciplinary free and that he had not yet taken full responsibility for his actions.

Cruz would remain at Close Custody security until December 2010.

His mother believes that quietly, Cruz was agonizing over his February parole denial. He thought that he would serve 8 years and come home, she says.

He would have a cellmate for most of 2010, and remained relatively discipline free. In May 2010, he was transferred to Vacaville, at the California Medical Facility.

On July 27, 2010, a Department of Mental Health/Vacaville Psychiatric Program Discharge Summary indicated that he remained incompetent to stand trial. Quoting a court ordered psychological evaluation, the Discharge Summary reads it was noted he has made some improvement since his last evaluation in that he is now aware of the charges against him whereas previously he was not. He is still experiencing psychotic and manic symptoms which interfere with his ability to be an effective participant in his own defense.

Further, the report indicates that the nature of Cruz's diagnosis of schizophrenia often leads the patient to misinterpret reality and engage in behavior which may be dangerous to him or others. It is therefore recommended that the patient be transferred to a facility that can continue to provide further mental healthcare within a safe environment.

The Discharge Summary cites a visit by family his mother and his sister. He was reportedly overjoyed on account of that and indicated his desire to be placed at a facility which could be closer to his family. This would be the last contact visit. The last time that Cruz was able to hug and kiss his family.

At this time, Cruz was diagnosed with Schizoaffective Disorder, bipolar type. He also was noted to have hypothyroidism.

He would be discharged back to Salinas Valley State Prison, and then was sent back to CSP, Sacramento in the EOP program. The assault charge against him would be dropped in favor of administrative measures.

On September 27, he was admitted to the Mental Health Crisis Unit due to having bruising on his neck. According to a Mental Health Interdisciplinary Progress Note, He reports (vaguely) a psychotic episode in which he was feeling tremendous pain in his neck and put his hands around his neck to stop the pain, causing bruising.

In October, he was again admitted to the Mental Health Crisis Unit for self-abuse by choking himself out. It was noted that he has chronic thoughts of impending doom and an internal feeling of senselessness which he explains as a perception that everything in the world is dull and boring.

While there, two psychologists evaluated him by request of the Mental Health Crisis Bed Interdisciplinary Treatment Team. Cruz was noted to have a fourth grade reading ability and indicated that a neurological examination might be necessary to determine if Cruz's frequent self-asphyxiation has caused any brain injury. His attention was found to be in the Profound Impairment range. His memory, language, and executive functioning were also noted to be impaired.

On November 26, while out on a yard, he committed the act of Battery on a Peace Officer Resulting in a Use of Force. Armando slapped at Correctional Officer R. Mirandas face while he was crossing the main yard, reads an Institutional Classification document. He was placed in the Administrative Segregation Unit and assigned to the Walk Alone yard. One month later, this determination was that Cruz would receive 180 days in the ASU. He would be allowed to have a cellmate, which he would have from December until April 2011.

The Final Year

By January, Cruz was taking several medications. Divalproex (anti-convulsant), lithium (mania), benztropine (to counter antipsychotic medication effects), promazine (antipsychotic), propranolol (beta blocker), and risperdal (antipsychotic).

In January 27 he told a mental health worker I've been slacking off with the groups some. I go to some. I went to only one group this week I haven't seen the Dr. about the Risperdal. I still get the same amount. She was supposed to stop it. I don't care. I have all kinds of moods today. He also reported a reduction in hallucinations.

In March, he was allowed a visit from his mother. Behind glass, they saw each other for the last time. Phone privileges were taken away and for his final months, his only contact with his family would be through letters.

On March 26, he was observed anxiously tossing his bedding around and acting irrationally. When guards inspected his cell, he was found to have a piece of metal approximately 5 inches in length attached to a toothbrush with plastic wrap. Cruz admitted, It was mine, I was hearing voices. For this, he would be placed in Administrative Segregation. He would spend his final six months in solitary confinement.

On April 4, Senior Psychologist M.L. Hoffman, in writing about the weapon incident, remarked that his behavior and thinking at the time of the incident were likely sufficiently disorganized that he does not accurately recall nature or quality of his actions.

At some point in April, he began to talk about an imaginary friend named Michelle in his cell. I see and hear things. I feel all alone in my cell. I created my own kid We say we're going to chop your arm off. If you told me I would be immortal, I don't want to be in a coffin. I want to go home. I want to go to the hospital and kick it. I think it is like a dragon. A thought is just a thought for me.

On April 18, he reported generic manufacturers of klonopin sleeping between two and six hours a night. I would rather have a cell. I like to be alone but I liked to have a cell at times. I'm talking about a parallel universe I have weird dreams. My dreams are very emotional. Demons tell me what. I listen because I want to tell them to shut up, he is reported to have said.

While kicking back with Michelle, he told a mental health worker on April 28. A suicide risk document written that day notes that he appears to be decompensate with symptoms of mania, imaginary child, elevated mood, threatening to spit on staff, loud music from his cell, banging on the cell door and yelling at all hours and strange laughter at odd times.

On April 29, a clinician asked to see his neck to check for bruises. He became abruptly engaged and began yelling at this clinician. He said, You're really stupid and dumb. Get the fuck out of here bitch! He attempted to spit on this clinician and several custody officers that arrived ten minutes later. He continued yelling loudly You fucking smelly ass bitch! If you treat people like that, you're going to get fucked up!

For this he would continue to remain in solitary, as well as lost of any appliances, phone privileges, personal property, and access to the prison canteen to buy things.

He would be placed in a suicide watch unit from April 29 until May 10. He would be checked every fifteen minutes. According to these records, he would spend most of his time pacing his cell, laying down, and standing still.

On May 9, he became irate after an officer came to pick up his empty breakfast tray. Speech became rapid, loud and pressured, rambling, very hostile and Armando did not want to take his medications, swearing non-stop and he remained on spit net status. Was placed in holding cell for time to calm down, reads a mental health document.

Cruz would be ordered back to the Psychiatric Services Unit on June 7, 2011. He was single celled and assigned to the Walk Alone Yard.

On July 7, a Psychiatrist Progress Note indicated that he was taking Risperdal, lithium, Inderal (for blood pressure/tremors), and Prozac (depression). According to the note, he was cagey about discussing [auditory and visual hallucinations. Feels people plot against him.

An interdisciplinary note the same day indicates that Cruz was participating in his assigned groups, and particularly liked one that had to do with anger management.

There is no clear record of his final two months. The few records available indicate that he was issued a rules violation report (RVR) for

an assault involving a correctional officer, the details of which are not currently available, on August 31 a date on which he was noted to be agitated in a health document. The initial inmate death report, dated 09/21/2011, indicated that his last assessment by a mental health worker was on September 9th. The report indicated that receiving the RVR may have precipitated the suicide.

His mother reports having received letters from Armando. Contained were references to his imaginary family that he believed lived with him in his cell? In the months leading up to his death, he wrote I wish I could see you guys, I miss you so much and frequently told his family that he loved them.

He knew for a long time that he was going to take his life, his mother says. After the parole rejection, he lost hope. He thought he was going to come home.

Armando Cruzs September 20, 2011 suicide was the culmination of a decade in Californias corrections facilities.

Over thirty other California inmates committed suicide the same year as Armando. At least two others that Solitary Watch has reported on died amidst mental health crises. Johnny Owen Vick, who had spent time in segregation units and had a history of mental health issues, committed suicide on September 16, 2011. On October 24, 2011, [Alex Machado](#) committed suicide following a year of increasingly psychotic mental health problems while held in the isolation units of Pelican Bay State Prison.

According to [Amnesty International](#), between 2006 and 2010, there was an average of 34 suicides in the California prison system a year, with 42% occurring in solitary confinement units.

As far back as 1890, the US Supreme Court Samuel Miller in re Medley wrote of solitary confinement: A considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi-fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others became violently insane; others still, committed suicide; while those who stood the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community.

In 2001, federal judge William Wayne Justice, writing as part of the case Ruiz v Johnson, found that [Solitary confinement] units are virtual incubators of psychoseseeding illness in otherwise healthy inmates and exacerbating illness in those already suffering from mental infirmities.

The evidence of the serious harm that prolonged solitary confinement has been heavily documented over a century. This has been especially true of inmates who have been institutionally determined to be mentally ill and a danger to self. Despite this, Armando Cruz, like 80,000 others in prisons across the country, was subjected to isolation for months at a time. Cruz, who entered the prison system with a long record of severe mental health problems and a history of self-harm, was placed in isolation typically for actions committed during clear mental health crisis episodes. In isolation, Cruz ruminated, choked himself, and hallucinated a family. It was in this bleak environment that he died.

His mother demands answers. He loved and valued his family, his church, his life. It was the system that killed him. Why did the system fail my only son?

Until the day I die, I will tell my sons story to see to it thatthere are changes to thisbroken system, so thatno other family should ever have to suffer the great loss my family and I hasendured and suffered. To see that no other man or women is treated as poorly as my brave heart Armando suffered. No onepaidattention tomy sonscries. To see that once and for all, the system does away with Solitary Confinement, and hears the cries of allthementally ill. And to see that the [needs of the] severely mentally ill are addressed throughcontinuity of careto be given a chance to rehabilitate and have closerplacementsto their immediate family because in my sons case he did better when he was able to see us more often. Love heals everything.

Individuals who would like to get in touch with Yolanda Cruz are encouraged to send an email to this author of this article sal_solitaryyw@yahoo.com. The author would like to acknowledge Dolores Canales, of [California Families to Abolish Solitary Confinement](#), for bringing this case to Solitary Watchs attention.

Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watchs first and most prolific intern. Based in Los Angeles, he served as an editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register and the Press-Enterprise, and is now the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

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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cooperation.

I am an active member of a group in New York that attends Board of correction Meeting in order to propose minimum standards, we protest the deaths of inmates through suicide or neglect by Department of corrections, I and my brothers and sisters in our group appear on televised programs but I have come to the conclusion after reading every board of correction Meeting since 2004 minutes, researching law suits filed on behalf of inmates that the only way to end the insanity of Rikers Island is to meet with union officials of the correction officers Captains, and Sargeant union leadership. The Federal courts banned strip searches for detainees at Rikers but the practice went on for ten years. It's the spirit of the law that will create change. Correction officers have a life expectancy of 59 years versus 77 for the general public due to stress of their jobs, leading to heavy drinking problems, suicide, divorce and excessive use of force. The union demands respect. They reject the use of the word guards. The public, right or wrong has a conception of correction officers as brutes, sadistic animals no better than the prisoners in solitary confinement. Well, I don't buy that story. As a person with a diagnosis of bipolar I know only too well the stigma based on stereotypes. Mentally ill are portrayed as violent. The fact is we are usually the victims of violence. The unions must admit that in many cases excessive force is used in quelling an incident. They have to admit there are officers who are sadistic. The union has to insist that their members show compassion, understanding and at least, just as a doctor has the responsibility of causing no harm when treating a patient, a correction officer doesn't forget every person in their charge and control remain human beings despite their alleged crimes. Just as the inmate is a human being, so is the correction officer. Give them adequate pay, increased training, remove mentally ill from Rikers and return them to their families and communities with proper treatment, medication if necessary, housing, job training and opportunities. America, wake up. This shit must end. The mentally ill, people in solitary confinement are no longer alone and forgotten. allanfeinblum@aol.com

@Allan Bravo well said!!! That's right we are watching as much as we can. I dream of changes to this practice of isolation where they put mentally ill people and then they commit suicide. Not right. Prisoners are people.

Too many holes in the states story. I'm so very sorry for Senora Cruz, Mental illness is NOT addressed in this country.

There are many clues in this article that point to a possible and if true disturbing conclusion.

You write:

While in jail he was kept in segregation for periods of time for his own protection. He had reported being taken advantage of by inmates.

The board also indicated that Cruz had spent some time before the board emphasizing that he wished to stay away from the El Cajon Dukes.

Justice William Wayne Justice of Texas also wrote in 1999:

More vulnerable inmates are raped, beaten, owned, and sold by more powerful ones. Despite their pleas to prison officials, they are often refused protection. Instead, they pay for protection, in money, services, or sex.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun, Farmer v. Brennan:

Prison rape not only threatens the lives of those who fall prey to their aggressors, but it is potentially devastating to the human spirit. Shame, depression, and a shattering loss of self-esteem accompany the perpetual terror the victim thereafter must endure.

Here is an article:

Prison Rape and the Government MARCH 24, 2011 David Kaiser and Lovisa Stannow

The Justice Department published its first plausible estimates. In 2008, it now says, more than 216,600 people were sexually abused in prisons and jails and, in the case of at least 17,100 of them, in juvenile detention. Overall, that's almost six hundred people a day twenty-five an hour.

The department divides sexual abuse in detention into four categories.

Most straightforward, and most common, is rape by force or the threat of force. An estimated 69,800 inmates suffered this in 2008.

The second category, nonconsensual sexual acts involving pressure, includes 36,100 inmates coerced by such means as blackmail, offers of protection, and demanded payment of a jailhouse debt.

These are a few of the reasons why prisoners fear reporting rape.

Fear of being written up and possibly losing good time.

Fear of retaliation.

Fear of feeling that no one will believe them.

Fear of feeling that no one really cares.

For all these reasons, a large majority of inmates who have been SEXUALLY ABUSED BY STAFF or by other inmates never report it.

Overall, most victims were abused not by other inmates but BY CORRECTIONS STAFF agents of our government, paid to keep inmates safe.

Combining all these clues I wonder if the bruises on Armandos neck were signs of erotic asphyxiation and thus signs of sexual abuse.

Erotic asphyxiation is the intentional restriction of oxygen to the brain for sexual arousal.

Given the documented history of staff abuse at Salinas Valley Prison, and the incidents that Armando had with said staff, it is highly likely he was on a shit list.

All of this is suspicious to me as was my brothers own death there.

I hope this possible explanation does not further upset the family who is searching for answers.

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