

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | May 22, 2011

This account of life in Special Management Unit at SCI-Fayette in Pennsylvania comes to us via the Human Rights Coalition, a Philadelphia-based prison reform and social justice organization. As HRC describes it: The Special Management Unit, or SMU, is billed by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections as a program designed to alter the behavior of prisoners who, in the language of prison administrators, are unable to adjust successfully to a correctional setting. In practice this means that, as with other forms of solitary confinement, the SMU is used to isolate and punish prisoners who have angered prison officials. The account begins with the prisoners arrival at Fayette.

I was immediately taken off a prison transport van by four guards and a lieutenant and cannon-balled straight to the SMU on L-Block. The pod was eerily silent that day, but I guess you can say that was the quiet before the storm because the next day all hell broke loose amongst the prisoners as they commenced to yell, scream, argue, bang on doors, throw urine and feces out their cell doors, threaten others, as well as threatening to mutilate or kill themselves. I then noticed the many psychiatric observation camera cells prisoners were confined in and how all of them were receiving psychotropic drugs. It then dawned on me that the SMU at Fayette State Prison was actually an INSANE ASYLUM for mentally ill prisoners and that I was placed in the thick of it all. Damn. Just my luck!

SCI-Fayette SMU L-Block

Fayette state prison is located in the Appalachian mountain range in rural Western Pennsylvania just a short drive from the city of Pittsburgh. SCI-Fayette has two Restricted Housing Unit (RHU) blocks, J-Block and L-Block. J-Block is used to confine prisoners on Disciplinary Custody (DC) and Administrative Custody (AC) status in the hole. And L-Block is used as the SMU program block to confine SMU prisoners.

The SMU (L-Block) consist of four pods labeled LA, LB, LC, and LD. Each pod has two tiers, a bottom level and a top level, which consist of twelve cells on the bottom and top levels making it twenty-four cells in all. Each of the twenty-four cells on the four L-Block pods are single-celled, which means the cells are to only confine one man per cell. On LB-Pod, cells 07 to 12 are equipped with psychiatric observation cameras, a shower in the cell and a back door leading to an adjacent caged area for yard exercise.

Each prisoner on SMU L-Block has to complete five levels that the SMU has designated before graduating the behavior modification program. These levels are called Phases, and proceed from the most restrictive level- Phase 5, the beginning level for most prisoners- all the way down to Phase 1, which is release into another prisons general prison population on a six month probation period. If the prisoner acquires a misconduct report during his probationary period he is returned to the SMU program to do another two-year stint beginning at Phase 5!

An Insane Asylum Disguised As A SMU Program

I had been placed on LB-Pod in the SMU program. The cell, typical to most empty cells on the pod, was filthy! Food had been splashed on the walls, dirt and tumbleweed-like dust balls covered the floor, the sink and toilet smelled of urine, and the smell of feces wafted into the cell from outside of the cells door. To make matters worse, the pigs refused to give me cleaning supplies that I may G.I (clean) the cell down, so I improvised with soap, water, and the t-shirt off my back and scrubbed the entire cell clean. Days later the pigs moved me on the top tier (with the other SMU prisoners) to another trifling cell!

There, the other SMU prisoners some Ive known from other prisons for years and others I just met began to school me on the PA DOC/SCI-Fayettes con-game, their so called SMU. Here, the SMU prisoners exposed the lie of the SMU program at SCI-Fayette and the PA DOC hypocrisy in regards to mentally ill prisoners and SMU prisoners. So let me tell yall whats truly going on at this isolated prisons SMU program on L-Block.

The PA DOC and SCI-Fayette are really running a full-scale Insane Asylum operation for mentally ill prisoners under the guise of the SMU program, in which the PA DOC gets to kill two birds with one stone, figuratively speaking. They get to continue to receive Federal Grant money for operating a SMU program while really using the SMU program to run an insane asylum for mentally ill prisoners!! Thats the con-game aspect of it.

According to PADO DC-Adm 6.5.1 Policy regarding the SMU program, the SMU prisoners must be isolated as super maximum security prisoners from all non-SMU prisoners, such as RHU prisoners on DC/AC status and mentally ill RHU prisoners. But this is not the case at SCI-Fayettes SMU L-Block. Here mentally ill DC status RHU prisoners are confined on the same L-Block pods that the SMU program prisoners are confined to!

On LA-Pod (Phase 5) there are ten SMU prisoners, and the remaining fourteen prisoners are mentally ill DC-status regular RHU prisoners. On LB-Pod (Phase 4) the twelve cells on the bottom level are all occupied by mentally ill DC-Status RHU prisoners whom we refer to as the crazies and whom are suicidal prisoners juiced up on psychotropic drugs such as Elevil. Every day there is drama with them, Im talkn capital D drama! The top level of LB-Pod (cells 13 to 24) confines supposedly SMU prisoners only, but mentally ill DC-Status regular RHU prisoners are confined on the SMU top tier as well. On LC-Pod (Phase 3) there is also a mixture of SMU prisoners, regular RHU prisoners on DC/AC status, and mentally ill prisoners. And on LD-Pod (Phase 2) there is a mixture of SMU prisoners, protective custody (PC) status prisoners, and one prisoner confined on Restricted Release List (RRL) status.

As of the date of this writing, there were only three SMU prisoners including myself on the SMU top tier on LB-Pod while all of the bottom tier cells are filled to capacity with the crazies! Two of the SMU prisoners have completed Phase 4 and were moved to another pod on Phase 3. Currently, I am the only SMU prisoner on LB-Pod! I am the last of the Mohicans left on LB-Pod Phase 4/SMU, surrounded by the crazies.

Punishment as Treatment = Hypocrisy!

Imagine that you encountered a group of people who treated their sick by sending them outside in the dead of winter to sit in that weather for 48 hours to cure their illness. You would think that such a people were foolish, right? Crazy, even! But this is exactly how the PA DOC officials think in regards to everything they do concerning prisoners, expecially the mentally ill and SMU prisoners. The PA DOC believes they can heal mentally ill prisoners and rehabilitate SMU prisoners by punishing and torturing them and treating them like animals and worse.

I have been on Phase 4 for a month now and during that time I have witnessed several mentally ill RHU prisoners threaten to commit suicide. I have observed how RHU prison officials eagerly geared up in black Star-Wars helmet, body pads, shields, pepper spray and stun guns and were just itchn to use their new toys against mentally ill RHU prisoners during cell extractions. I have witnessed the SMU/RHU counselor and unit manager come on the pod and leave just as quick as they came, without even as much interviewing and evaluating the psyche of the prisoners, let alone addressing their concerns. The Psychologist does the exact same thing. What occurs is that the mentally ill RHU prisoners minds deteriorate even worse to the point of insanity from the years of total isolation in solitary, forced cell extractions, beatings, restraint chairs, stripped cells, semi-starvation on food loafs, constant harassment by guards, and psychotic drugs.

The SMU prisoners are also punished in this ordeal because we are forced to live around these same mentally ill RHU prisoners who direct their madness against SMU prisoners and are subjected to an insane asylum type environment. Consequently, half of the SMU prisoners are going crazy and are stuck on Phase 5. And SMU prisoners are now being treated as mentally ill prisoners. The psychological behavior of the mentally ill is having an adverse affect on the SMU prisoners. But, the PA DOC claims they wish to rehabilitate SMU prisoners.

Mentally ILL Prisoners Need Human Rights, Too

As I pen this report, even I am being taken through Psych Warfare by the crazies, they have no picks of who they direct their madness to. In the two cells below me are two insane (non-SMU) prisoners, and in the cell next door to me is another insane, non-SMU, prisoner. In the below two cells, one prisoner has multiple personality disorder while the other prisoner is manic depressive. The prisoner next door to me is soul-less, his mind is gone, hes not even on this earth anymore. He urniates and defecates on himself every day and never bathes unless the guards force him to. He stinks so bad that the reeking odor of his body and waste drifts into my cell and outside his cell onto the entire top tier. The stench chokes you. My assigned cell and the other three cells air ventilation ducts are connected, and so every single day I am suffocated by the foul stench of my neighbor while the mentally ill prisoners in the two cells below me bang on their doors and scream at me through the air ducts. They are continuously cursing at me, disrespecting me, calling me the foulest of names, threatening to rape and kill my family, threatening to throw piss and shit on me and every other vile thing one can say to a person. This occurs 24-7!

I excuse their behavior and tolerate their insanity only because they are mentally ill. Although I have been placed through the wringer like this on many occasions throughout my 23 years of imprisonment as a juvenile Lifer, I cant say I am not affected. Who wouldnt be? I just drunk my first cup of coffee to calm my nerves, the bad part about it is I dont even drink coffee! The crazies made me do it!

The HRC is calling on the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections to end the warehousing of mentally ill prisonersin Fayettes SMU, and urging others to do the same. More information can be found [here](#).

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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.

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public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

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A ray of hope from the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court ruled 5-4 Monday that the living conditions in overcrowded California prisons threatened inmates health and violated constitutional rights against cruel and unusual punishment.

This case stems from two class-action lawsuits, one filed in 1990 involving substandard care for prisoners suffering from serious mental illnesses, the second lawsuit filed in 2001 generally for deficient medical care for prisoners.

The lawsuits claimed that these conditions in the prisons violated the Eighth Amendments prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment.

Justice Kennedy pointed out that the lower court here didn't say to California, you must release 43,000 prisoners within two years. It said you must reduce the prison population. And it left to California to come up with a plan that would reduce that population.

Justice Kennedy said it could do such things as transfer prisoners within between prisons. It could build new facilities. It didn't have to release 43,000 prisoners.

Eighteen states actually joined California in this appeal. And their argument was primarily one of concern for public safety if prison populations had to be reduced through the release of prisoners.

And, also, their state attorneys general feared that they would face similar litigation. So, I suppose we will just have to wait and see what the long-term impact of this particular order might be.

David's Hope is a non profit organization in Arizona dedicated to securing mental health care rather than incarceration for those living with a mental illness. We are also dedicated to seeing the humane treatment of the mentally ill in our prisons and to ending the use of solitary confinements for all prisoners but especially for the mentally ill. Thank you for this story which plays out far and wide, all over our nation everyday of the week.

ya that soud bout right for your shu units as well never not loud lots words thowing at rangdon others for no good reson hand full of out this world inmates lots of banging all times of the day and night ya thats solitary for you its a bich lol every one says oh my god dont let the kids drink or smoke or do drugs it hurt them ya over time it will lol know what i say kids if you want know what it feels like to be off your ass drunk stoned and beter understand your grampas war with ptsd week in solitary do that to you all at ones and faster to it is a bich we all bout war on drung war on tarer i got one how bout a war on solitary confindment i all for that may thare be light in the darknes of justice

I am horrified by this. I have a family member in Fayette. Hes been there since 2006 and has 7 years left. 3 years ago he was brought down to a court hearing and returned to Fayette 3 weeks later. We are close and I stay in constant contact with him. When they brought him back he was immediately put in SHU for no reason. After about 2 weeks of not hearing from him, I recieved a letter from him. He wrote it on a torn piece of paper. Basically it said he was in lockdown, he had no way of calling, and he wanted me to call the prison and find out what was going on.

He has been in and out of prison since he was a juvenile and knows the ropes. He knows other inmates from all his years being incarcerated, and he knows how to handle himself. He doesnt share too much of what actually life inside is like. When I ask he says its good, the guards are nice, and blah blah blah.

But when I got the letter, I knew something was wrong. He had never, ever wrote a letter asking for help like that. He was there 2 weeks and returned to general population. He called me 3 days after I got the letter. He said he couldnt get any information or explanation for being place in SHU and was concerned. After reading this, now I know why.

But Ive also got to say this Although I did not get a response from the prison when I called for this letter. I have dealth with Fayette on 3 other occasions and every person I spoke to including a few guards, his councilor, and the block manager (i think) they were all very kind, professional, and accomidating. They were quick to respond and arranged a special visit the day after our father died. On that visit

the guards seemed layed back, and not like guards at other state prisions Ive been to. And Ive been to many over the years.

Prison is not designed to be easy nor should it ever be inhuman. I dont condon my brothers actions and dont forget hes there out of his own poor choices in life. But he is my family and I feel as though when hes in prison I need to be there for him. Its how I was raised.

I would like to help in some way; either by writing letters or emails. I live in the Phila area.

Kind Regards, Jeanette

this is inhumane ,this place is sinful,you need to close this place down!!!how is any one going to get normal,this is the devil!!!

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Solitary Watch

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