

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/01/24/inside-little-gitmo-documents-detail-inmate-surveillance-at-federal-prisons/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | January 24, 2011

Public Intelligence, a web-based project that describes itself as an international consortium of independent researchers who wish to aggregate and defend public information while maintaining its accessibility around the globe, has published a series of documents relating to the Communications Management Units at two federal prisons. As we've [written before](#), these experimental units, sometimes referred to as Little Guantánamos, were established secretly during the Bush Administration, supposedly designed to hold high-risk inmates, including terrorists, whose crimes warrant heightened monitoring of their external and internal communications. But the reality, according to [a lawsuit filed last year by the Center for Constitutional Rights](#), is that many prisoners end up in the CMUs for their constitutionally protected religious beliefs, unpopular political views, or in retaliation for challenging poor treatment or other rights violations in the federal prison system.

According to the analysis provided by Public Intelligence:

Several [restricted intelligence reports](#) from the Counter-Terrorism Unit of the Federal Bureau of Prisons obtained by Public Intelligence detail the incredible levels of surveillance conducted on inmates convicted of terrorism offenses. In particular, the reports detail inmates stored in secretive units known as Communication Management Units (CMU) which have been widely criticized by the [ACLU](#) and other human rights groups for placing severe restrictions on the activities, as well as visitation and communication rights of inmates housed in the facilities.

There are known to be at least two CMU facilities, one in the [United States Penitentiary at Terre Haute, Indiana](#) (THA CMU) and another in the United States Penitentiary at Marion, Illinois (MAR CMU). All written correspondence to or from the inmates in these facilities is reviewed by staff and may be rejected. All telephone communications with the inmates must be live-monitored by staff, recorded and analyzed, and must be in English. Requests for non-English conversations must be made ten days in advance and must be monitored by a translator. In addition to these restrictions, the number and frequency of calls is greatly reduced from the 300 minutes per month available to general population inmates to one call per week with a maximum length of fifteen minutes. At the warden's discretion, the length of this call may be reduced to three minutes. All visitation with inmates housed in a CMU are conducted in non contact facilities, separated by glass and communicating through a telephone. These visits are also restricted to twice per month for two hours at a time.

Public Intelligence also describes the types of surveillance used on these inmates, including apparently illegal monitoring of privileged attorney-client communications.

The documents obtained by Public Intelligence are raw intelligence reports from Federal Bureau of Prisons analysts detailing the intimate surveillance of each inmate's communications during the reporting period. Each report summarizes a particular detainee's communications of interest, describing in great detail the source or destination of the communication with complete phone numbers and addresses, as well as the contents of the communication. Sometimes, the reports appear to be dealing with communications that are legitimately made to people and organizations connected with an inmate's criminal history, such as white supremacists contacting other known white supremacists. However, many of the communications that are monitored are nothing more than mundane conversations to family and extended relatives. For example, the communications of Ali Sofyan, an inmate of the Terre Haute CMU, are [intensely scrutinized](#) as he discusses his desire for a new Quran, describing how he would also like to sing passages from Yemeni wedding songs to the other prisoners. Another inmate, Essam El Shami, is discussed over [multiple pages](#) in one of the reports for corresponding with his wife and son. The analyst even feels the need to quote entire passages from a letter to El Shami's son:

Keep on praying and take care of the school and work, and soon, after daddy is released, 6-8 months later, no one of you have to work again and daddy will take good care of you all and give you all the money that you all needed. Who knows? You could have your own business, but first the college. Son, again I don't need to tell, take care of mama. She is all we get. She is our angel.

[One report](#) simply states that an inmate by the name of John Pankin has changed religions from Protestant to Muslim. The analyst tries to ascertain the reasoning or influence behind such a decision, but ultimately is unsuccessful. Pankin is listed as being incarcerated at the Marion, Illinois CMU despite having committed offenses with no connection to terrorism.

There are also several instances of what appears to be illegal monitoring of confidential communications conducted under attorney-client privilege. According to the official U.S. Department of Justice [rules for the CMU at Terre Haute](#), under no circumstances will privileged attorney-client communication be monitored, as prohibited by national policy. However, there are examples of the monitoring of authorized attorney-client communications in the documents.

You can read the full analysis [here](#), and access the original documents, as published on the Public Intelligence website, [here](#).



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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the BOP is nuts i mean ohh no save us the tarerest are telling thare kids to do good and go to school oh wate thats what we do take care of mama thats sounding tarest to me lol not dam bop get your head out your ass the units are uncalled for how the men and women in them still stand to love and hope for after it all is beside me but i glad for those who still hold thare mind this madnes needs to stop may thare be light in the darknes of justice

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