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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/12/04/many-california-prisoners-solitary-confinement/>

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | December 4, 2013

With the considerable attention focused on solitary confinement in California, Solitary Watch has observed inconsistent and widely varied statistics provided on the number of individuals housed in solitary in the state. We have reviewed and compiled statistics reported monthly by each prison through the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitations (CDCR) COMPSTAT reports (Computer Statistics or Comparative Statistics), which CDCR publicly [releases](#).

Available through COMPSTAT data are the number of individuals housed in Administrative Segregation Units (ASU) and SHUs. Further, COMPSTAT includes the number of individuals on single-cell status as of the final day of the month being reported, including the number of individuals in the ASU and SHU on single-cell status, as well as the average length of stay in the ASU. COMPSTAT further differentiates between prisoners placed on single-cell status for temporary stays and those on single-cell status who are labeled S Suffix. S Suffix prisoners are those placed on single-cell status long-term due to being deemed a threat to security.

What follows is a presentation of the most recent set of data that may be of interest to Solitary Watch readers. Excluded is the California Rehabilitation Center (CRC), which reported faulty numbers to COMPSTAT. As CDCR began its reforms of the SHU in October 2012, we are comparing and contrasting data from October 2012 to September 2013, the most recent set of data.

For your convenience, Solitary Watch is making available the spreadsheets used to generate graphs and statistics used in this report. For the Excel sheet for October 2012 click [here](#). For the Excel sheet for September 2013 click [here](#).

Total Number on Single-Cell Status

CDCR does not officially acknowledge the use of [solitary confinement](#) as a term or concept, and so COMPSTAT does not reflect solitary confinement. Instead, CDCR reports single-cell housing. A relatively broad designation, it means people may be single-celled voluntarily or involuntarily. They may be housed in segregation units (SHUs, ASUs) or in general population. They may be on single-cell status because they've committed a rules violation (e.g. murder, assault) or for their own protection. Further, they may be housed on single-cell status for days or years at a time.

Given this, there is considerable variation in the circumstances that constitute single-cell status, but it is the closest researchers can come to what would be called solitary confinement.

First, a chart presenting the number of individuals on single-cell status at each facility, in October 2012 and September 2013:

Most significantly, this reveals, among other things, a dramatic drop in the use of single-cell housing at Calipatria State Prison, which has long served as a holding facility for California prisoners awaiting transfer to a SHU facility. Meanwhile, it appears that other state prisons have been fairly consistent in their use of single-cell housing, particularly the maximum security facilities (the first nine presented in the chart).

In [October 2012](#), out of a prison population of a population of 124,718:

In [September 2013](#), out of a prison population of 125,168:

With 450 more prisoners in California prisons than in October 2012, there are 343 fewer California prisoners on single-cell status as of September 2013.

Security Housing Unit Population

California's use of long-term solitary confinement came to international attention this past summer with a two-month-long [hunger strike](#) that began with the participation of 30,000 people in prisons across the state, and ended with 40 hunger strikers who refused meals for 59 days. The most recent hunger strike was a continuation of two statewide hunger strikes that took place in 2011, which began in July and September, respectively, and each lasted three weeks.

At the heart of the hunger strike were the five core demands which centered around conditions in the Security Housing Units (SHU), where prisoners suspected of gang affiliation have historically been housed for indeterminate terms until they either complete their prison sentence or snitch on their prison gangs. With meaningful and constructive programming few and far between, those housed in the SHU are typically kept in small cells for 22.5 hours a day, if not the whole day. Those housed in Pelican Bay State Prisons SHU are generally housed in solitary confinement, as the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) insists they are the worst of the worst.

There are currently three other SHUs in California, located at California State Prison, Corcoran, California Correctional Institution in Tehachapi, and California State Prison, Sacramento (aka New Folsom). There is a smaller SHU unit for women at the Correctional Institution for Women (CIW).

As previously mentioned, CDCR implemented reforms to SHU policy in [October 2012](#). CDCR redesigned the criteria for being designated a Security Threat Group (STG, or prison gang) member or associate, designations that previously led to indeterminate terms in the SHU. CDCR claims that its revised criterion are more behaviorally based and thus greater weight is put on actual rather than suspected prison gang activity. Further, CDCR created a Step Down Program (SDP) that hypothetically allows individuals to transition out of the SHU and back into general population through a six year program. Through the SDP, people could either be held in the SHU for theoretically indefinite terms or as little as one year. As part of these reforms, CDCR announced that it was conducting case-by-case reviews of all those in the SHU for gang affiliation to determine whether they should be housed in the SHU at all and if so, what step of the SDP they ought be placed in.

According to an October 2013 press release, CDCR had conducted 528 reviews of SHU prisoners. Of them, 343 were approved for placement in either Step 5 of the SDP (placement in a maximum security facility, though not in the SHU) or general population. An additional 150 were placed in different phases of the SDP. The remaining 35, according to CDCR, are retained in the SHU for their own protection. CDCR has told Solitary Watch that these individuals are generally gang members who have renounced their gang affiliations and thus must be protected from possible retaliation.

When these reform began in October 2012, there were 3,923 individuals in Security Housing Units:

Combined, there were 1,849 individuals in the SHU on single-cell status (47%).

In September 2013, there were 3,881 individuals in Security Housing Units:

Combined, there were 1,772 in the SHU on single cell status (45.6%).

Over the course of a year, the number of people in the SHU was reduced by only 42, with 77 fewer SHU individuals on single-cell status.

Administrative Segregation Unit Population

Administrative Segregation Units (ASUs) serve a number of functions and are in existence at all prison facilities. People may be placed in ASUs during an investigation, for their own protection, or to serve short-term segregation terms for disciplinary purposes. As ASUs are supposed to serve as temporary housing units, some ASUs are notably lacking in programming opportunities for prisoners housed in them.

First, a chart on ASU population by prison illustrating the wide variation in use of ASUs.

In October 2012, there were 7,007 individuals in ASUs:

In September 2013, there were 6,734 individuals in ASUs:

While there were 273 fewer prisoners in ASUs in September 2013 compared to October 2012, there were 138 more prisoners on single-cell status in ASUs in September.

Administrative Segregation Unit Average Length of Stay

Solitary Watch has previously reported on notable exceptions to the temporary aspect. [Earlier this year](#), women transferred to Central California Womens Facility (CCWF) following the re-purposing of Valley State Prison for Women to serve as a male facility (now, Valley State Prison) with enemy concerns were housed in ASUs for their own protection. Despite not doing anything wrong, they spent months in ASUs, including on single-cell status, treated the same as individuals placed in the ASU for violence and other rules violations.

In addition, ASUs commonly serve as housing units pending transfer to the SHU or as overflow units to house SHU-status prisoners. Solitary Watch has received an [essay](#) from one former Calipatria State Prison ASU prisoner who spent 22 months in the ASU. Further, conditions in ASUs, particularly in the context of long-term solitary confinement, can and have been associated with suicides. This year, Dr. Raymond Patterson, a court-appointed suicide prevention consultant to CDCR, [reported](#) that 40 percent of the first 15 suicides in 2012 took place in ASUs. A further 9 of 34 suicides (26 percent) in 2011 took place in ASUs. Solitary Watch has previously reported on the suicide of [Alex Machado](#) in Pelican Bay State Prisons ASU in 2011. Machado had a history of suicide attempts and was extensively documented to be suffering from hallucinations, paranoia, and panic attacks.

Fortunately, COMPSTAT provides some glimpses into how long people spend in ASUs. A chart generated by Solitary Watch of the average ASU terms in October 2012 and September 2013:

As can be seen, ASU terms vary from institution to institution. What can also be observed is that the average stay at in the ASU can last for months at a time. California State Prison, Centinela has the longest average length of stay of 188 days, or just over six months in temporary segregation units. As previously discussed, the temporary nature of ASUs mean that they come with limited programming opportunities. As a result, spending months in ASUs not only means spending months in segregated confinement with relatively little to

do, but also months without constructive, productive programming.

Unfortunately, the COMPSTAT data does not provide the average length of stay for people housed in single-cell housing in either general population or either of the two types of segregation units presented here (SHU, ASU).

Conclusions

There are a few takeaways from this data.

First, this data is limited in what it actually tells us. What we can know from this data is the number of people who are on single-cell status. What we don't know is how long people spend on single-cell status. CDCR only makes available the average length of stay of individuals in ASUs, but not the average length of stay of all prisoners on single-cell status.

Second, comparing September 2013 to October 2012, it appears that CDCR has slightly reduced its use of single-cell status despite a rising prison population. It has also reduced the SHU population and the number of people in the SHU on single-cell status. It has also reduced the use of ASUs. However, it has increased the number of people in ASUs on single-cell status. Why it has done this is unclear.

Third, some prisons seem to have taken more significant reductions in their use of single-cell units and segregation units. Whether this is due to greater use of alternative sanctions or some other factor is also unclear.

We also don't know whether there is any association between increased use of single-cell units and lower institutional violence. CDCR itself admitted in a recent legislative hearing it doesn't really know the effect of segregation units on actually producing a safer prison system. And finally, we also don't know how many people are currently suffering from the heavily documented effects long-term solitary confinement can have on a person, particularly emotionally and psychologically vulnerable people in state prisons.

Solitary Watch will continue to monitor COMPSTAT data and present further information in the future.

Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watch's 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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It looks horrible. I am really surprised to find from this valued writing that, in the name of law, they (the prisoners) have been brutally tortured. It is quite humiliated. Thanks a lot, you have just raised in the right time.

What we badly need also is an accurate count of how many are in isolation nation-wide. That 80 thousand figure has stayed the same for years. I doubt that ever included juveniles, people in county jails and people in immigration facilities.

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