

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/02/13/scarred-by-solitary-experiencing-prison-isolation-as-a-kid/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | February 13, 2013

The following commentary is by Enceno Macy, the pen name of a young man who is serving a 15-year sentence in a West Coast prison. From the ages of 13 to 17, he experienced solitary confinement as a juvenile in three different settings: juvenile detention, jail, and state prison. Solitary Watch encouraged him to write about this experiences and how they affected him. We are proud to have facilitated publication of his powerful essay, which was published yesterday by the McClatchy Group and picked up by McClatchy-owned papers around the country.

Solitary confinement is no place for a kid. I know this from firsthand experience. As a young person in the criminal justice system, I was placed in solitary locked down in a small cell for up to 24 hours a day several different times before I was out of my teens. And although you can't see them, I bear permanent scars from this treatment.

I first experienced a kind of solitary confinement in juvenile detention when I was 13 years old. We would get sent to lockdown for bad language or being too loud, or for forgetting to ask permission to talk, get up from our seats, or change the card game we were playing basically, for acting like kids. Where I was, the time in isolation usually lasted a few days. I know that in some juvenile facilities, children get locked down for weeks or months at a time.

When I was 15, I was accused of a serious felony, and while awaiting trial I was placed in involuntary segregation in county jail. I was put there solely due to my age and for my own protection, but I was treated the same way as adults who were put in solitary for serious rule violations. We received two books a week, two sheets of paper, and a golf pencil. There was no access to any form of education or counseling for youth (or anyone else). In the wire cages we sometimes went to for exercise, the space was not much bigger than the cell. I spent seven and a half months in those conditions.

Once convicted, I was sent to adult prison, where I experienced several stays in disciplinary segregation, usually lasting a few months each for fighting, leaving my job early, arriving back late from a meal, and copying out the lyrics to a song that they deemed gang related, probably just because it was rap.

The guards were petty, and liked to single out youngsters who had a lot of time to do to try to break us, I guess. Something as simple as using profanity when speaking with a state employee would get us a couple of weeks in seg. In other words, actions that would qualify as everyday misbehavior for most American teenagers would get us placed in conditions that have been widely denounced as torture, especially when used on young people.

A typical day as a kid in seg involved a lot of sleep probably 16 hours on average. I'd wake up for breakfast, sleep until lunch, read for an hour or so, go back to sleep until dinner, pace back and forth, try to write poems or rap song lyrics, read, and wait/hope for mail then go to sleep and do it all over again.

In some of that time I might find someone I could talk to through the crack in my door. We had so little to do, we'd end up yelling insults at the guards just to vent our anger and restlessness.

I was ruled by sorrow, fear and anger: Sorrow about missing people I used to know, and my mom. Fear about what might be coming next in my seemingly endless sentence. (I had no concept of what time really meant, so 15 years felt the same as 50.) And anger at those who I felt had wronged me. Back then I wasn't skilled in identifying my emotions, let alone dealing with them appropriately.

There were no positives in my mind, no outlet to exercise the hurt and confusion. I was so lost. I never cut myself or attempted suicide, as I know a lot of kids in solitary do. But I did think about death a lot, and I had dreams of an apocalyptic world (and still do).

I know that solitary confinement caused me considerable psychological damage or really, added to what was already brewing. It encouraged me to retreat deep into a demented reality where I was so alone, it made me feel as though I wasn't meant for this world. I still feel that way to this day like I don't fit. On the clinical side, I was even more deeply depressed than I had been growing up.

Like most people who have served time in solitary as teenagers, I will someday be released from prison and resume life in the free world. And because of solitary I will never be right mentally, I fear. More than 10 years later, I think some of the effects have faded, but my panic attacks are so severe that they put me on anti-depressants for PTSD. I still have a hard time trusting, so I don't consider too many people my friends. It's pretty lonely because of that, but I'm used to the feeling now.

I realize that prisoners, even young ones, sometimes need to be separated from one another for safety reasons. But I don't think they should be put in segregation for things like talking back or being late for an appointment. And I don't believe solitary confinement as it is practiced today is ever appropriate for teens. Kids need positive outlets whenever they are separated from others. They need some kind of program where they get counseling and periods to exercise their minds and emotions.

On any given day there are hundreds, and probably thousands, of kids under 18 in solitary confinement in America's jails, prisons, and juvenile detention facilities. I know what they are suffering, and I wonder how many of them, like me, will bear the invisible scars of their isolation. It may be too late for us, but there is still time to save countless other children from this silent torture.

The author, now an adult, is serving a 15-year sentence in a West Coast prison. He writes under a pseudonym to avoid the risk of retaliation. He wishes to thank his mother and Solitary Watch for encouraging him to write and assisting in the publication of this work.

McClatchy Tribune Services

Read the recent ACLU/Human Rights Watch report on youth in solitary, *Growing Up Locked Down*, [here](#).

View Richard Ross's powerful photographs of kids in solitary, part of *Juvenile In-Justice*, [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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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<http://www.ctpost.com/news/texas/article/Mental-illness-increases-at-Texas-youth-facilities-4278688.php>

Young offenders with mental illnesses now outnumber youths who are gang members at juvenile jails

Read more: <http://www.ctpost.com/news/texas/article/Mental-illness-increases-at-Texas-youth-facilities-4278688.php#ixzz2L6C2Le1X>

This seems to be a nationwide problem.

I'll make it easy for this one article:

<http://alcalde.texasexes.org/2012/10/in-prisons-youth-are-prey/>

In Prisons, Youth are Prey

BY JORGE ANTONIO RENAUD IN NOV | DEC 2012,

Excerpt:

Prison is a place of violence, and the will and discipline needed to fend off gang overtures and sexual predators are not qualities many teenagers have.

It is impossible to overstate the trauma prison afflicts on an individual. The effect it has on kids is even more horrifying. Youthful brains lack the ability to regulate their emotions. They are still undergoing changes to their brain structure and neural circuits. The stress and trauma of prison cause huge disconnects between what young people think and what they feel. While the cognitive functioning of teenagers is similar to adults, their emotional development is entirely different, resulting in impulsive actions rather than rational behavior.

I previously posted several links to info on juveniles in adult prisons on here. You can find them here:

<http://solitarywatch.com/2013/01/13/photography-exhibition-highlights-children-in-solitary/#comments>

In prison, men revert back to animalistic behavior: the predator and the prey.

Edward Bunker found himself in the position of prey while he was held in LAs notorious County jail at 16 years-of-age.

He was forced to attack a mass murderer in the showers while he was there or become his bitch. He writes about this in his memoir Education of a Felon.

L.A. County Jail:

Page 41: I stared into the thick black steam, holding the toothbrush tight and ignoring the water wetting my pant legs.

Alone in the last shower, he had shampoo in his hair and his face was turned up into the stream of water. His skinny little white body was pitted with acne, his arms covered with blue jailhouse tattoos. He was two steps away, and I hesitated for a moment. When he turned his head, white shampoo foam rolling down, his eyes open and he saw me. His eyes widened, and he started to smile; then he saw the weapon or something in my face. He turned to reach for a towel that had been thrown across the half-wall separating the rows of showers. I was sure it held a weapon. He would have gotten it if he hadn't slipped on the wet floor. One foot shot out, and he went down on one knee.

Before he could recover, I pounced, swinging the toothbrush handle with the protruding razor blade. It got him high on the back, near where the neck begins, and sliced down about six inches before movement carried him out of the blades arc. I chopped again, this time so hard that the razor blade snapped and flew away. His ducking plus the force of the blow threw him on his knees with his back to me. He was naked. I was fully clothed. Killer or not, at that moment Billy Cook was at my mercy and he was yelling for help. Naked prisoners were rushing to get out. I jumped on his back, grabbed his hair from the rear, and slammed my fist against the side of his head. Pain shot up my arm, but his cry made it worthwhile, I was soaked with water and blood.

Someone came up behind me. Fingers dug into both cheeks and my eyes and tore me loose, gouging out flesh as I was hauled back.

He was 17 in 1951 when he arrived to San Quentin prison.

While banged up in solitary (aka the hole), Bunker could hear the incessant clicking of a typewriter. It came from the cell of death-row inmate, Caryl Chessman.

Chessman, known as LAs notorious red light bandit had written a thinly-disguised autobiographical novel about prison life called Cell 2455 Death Row. Bunker already knew Chessman from an earlier meeting. Chessman sent over to Bunkers cell (via a sympathetic guard) a copy of Argosy Magazine in which the first chapter of his book appeared. Bunker was inspired by Chessmans example.

My older brother Mikes story is very similar. Mike was also held in the overcrowded, racially charged, atmosphere of Los Angeles County Jail at the age of 17 sometime in May of 1966 just after the Watts riots of August 1965. Bunker also wrote that he was very happy that he had not been there after the riot after hearing first hand accounts of what went on thereafter.

I learned about Mikes experience from two of my brothers friends. Both Greg and Psycho were still exhibiting the effects of pumping iron during their time in the joint when I met with them. Although I knew Psycho casually from Sun Valley I didnt know him well. But that was about to change. As we spoke they began to tell me about what went down in L.A. County Jail while they were held there along with Mike. I listened intently with a mixture of brotherly pride and awe as they paid homage to Mikes actions. This is what they had to say.

Every since the Watts Riots the black population in County Jail had been exploding. Attacks on whites were becoming an every night occurrence with one after another of us falling victim to these mother fuckers. There were gangs of blacks beating and raping a different white guy in the dorm every night.

Mike realized that it was just a matter of time until he was targeted so he took preemptive action and lured the leader of the group into a room. Mike was holding a mop handle behind his back and had a razor in his pants pocket.

The dude approached Mike confidently like a real bad ass convinced that Mike was no threat to him but he was stunned when Mike cracked him across the face repeatedly with the mop handle. The handle soon splintered into useless toothpicks forcing Mike to take cover but the man never even wobbled although he was clearly disoriented. So Mike dove under the bed to retrieve the blade in his pocket.

The guy quickly recovered his composure then grabbed Mike by his two legs and tried to pull him out from under the bed in order to get at him. Mike held onto the leg of the bed with one hand and tried to get his razor out of his pocket with his other. It was a race to see if Mike could retrieve his weapon before the guy could pull him out and if he had the dude probably would have slammed your brothers head against the wall. Mike struggled to break free from the guys grip until he was finally able to grab a hold of his razor and begin to slash at the dudes eyes causing so much blood to flow into them that it blinded the guy and forced him to release Mikes feet.

The bulls came running into the cell at about that point and took Mike away in shackles chained from the waist to his ankles. Mike was held in a separate room and questioned as the medics frantically worked on the other guys wounds in the clinic down the hallway. After stitching the mans wounds up on both his face and his arms the wounds were wrapped up in gauze. Then the bulls escorted him into solitary confinement unit.

Man, I mean, everyone gasped when they saw this dude, bandaged up like some kind of Egyptian mummy. Then the bulls went to get your brother and we all held our breath wondering who the fuck could have given this huge mother fucker such a horrific beating. When your brother was brought in seemingly struggling against the weight of his shackles the whole unit burst out laughing because we had all expected to see some kind of fierce giant foaming at the mouth not some skinny teenage white boy.

Some weeks later we heard Mike yell out as he was being escorted out of the hole Hey guys catch you later. I am being sent up to Tracy. Keep the faith home boys. With that Mike was lead out and transported to Deuel Vocational Institute in Tracy, California. Tracy is a notoriously violent adult prison and Mike arrived just in time for a race riot lead by George Jackson himself. The rape of a white inmate by a black inmate resulted in the gruesome murder of the rapist. Revenge was demanded and all hell broke out.

Although he was not involved Mike ended up unconscious in the hospital shackled to the bed. He was still 17.

Prison is no place for teenagers.

https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:iCskrUaZfjoJ:www.justice.gov/crt/about/spl/documents/la_county_juvenile_findlet.pdf&hl=en&gl=us&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEEShLYuAeZutTbQ0nAoJOilkN4dRikPVTI2OJcOygLmu500zDrs737LjY1YF2VdxvTaxvyYS5uVQ

I would like to share this report on Los Angeles County Juvenile Halls. I was researching this yesterday because I have spent time in solitary in each one of these beginning at the age of 10. They now call solitary the Special Housing Unit (SHU).

Excerpts:

At the time of our tours, both our investigative team and County staff agreed that the juvenile halls were failing to meet the serious mental health needs of detained youth. Los Angeles County had completed a study under which it determined that 50% of the youth entering the system needed mental health services, and staff estimated that perhaps one quarter of those in need actually received care. At the time of our tours, the County was making plans for reform and awaiting secured funds for additional staff and other improvements.

Many youth engaged in self-harming behavior without appropriate interventions. Staff labeled much of this behavior as manipulative, without mental health professionals talking with the youth to address their behavior and underlying emotional issues. Doctors wrote orders for a number of youth who engaged in self-harming behaviors to receive behavior modification plans. In a number of files we determined that such plans were never written or carried out. The Behavior Modification Contract of the Special Handling Unit is not a behavior modification contract in any therapeutic sense. It is merely the list of rules youth sign upon entering the SHU.

I suggest reading this report and you'll see that all the terminology and methods are taken right out of the adult system. It has a lot of material for your site.

Maybe because I entered at such a young age I adapted to the hole without incident. I never freaked out or protested in the hole, but rather I took it in my stride. However the cries of the mentally ill made it difficult to rest or to concentrate.

If interested you can read about my experience as a ten year old and a bit of my 13 year old brothers here:

Voices from Solitary:

In Solitary at LAs Juvenile Hall, circa 1962

<http://solitarywatch.com/?s=Los+Angeles+Juvenile+Hall+1962>

Conditions are even worst today.

This failed system has avoided reform for over a century.

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Solitary Watch

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