

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2014/11/05/a-girl-hung-herself-yesterday-deaths-at-california-institution-for-women/>

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by [Victoria Law](#) | November 5, 2014

On July 30, 2014, Margarita Murugia was found hanging in her solitary confinement cell at the California Institution for Women (CIW). She was there for her own protection, not because she did something, wrote April Harris, a woman currently incarcerated at CIW. Apparently her mom was dying of cancer and they refused to let her see her mom. She tried to kill herself with every denied request. She finally did it.

According to advocacy group [California Coalition for Women Prisoners](#), CIW has had seven deaths since the start of 2014. In comparison, the prison had five deaths in 2013 and one in 2012.

Shadae Schmidt, better known as DaeDae to her friends, was another of these seven deaths. On March 24, 2014, Schmidt was found dead in her cell. In February 2014, while in the Security Housing Unit, or SHU, she suffered a stroke. She was taken to the hospital where she received medical attention. According to women inside, she was returned to isolation in her SHU cell less than three weeks later. The following month, she was found dead. Hers was the third death within three months at the prison.

Krys Shelley and DaeDae Schmidt had spent 10 years at Valley State Prison for Women before Shelleys release in May 2012. The following year, Valley State was converted to a mens prison; the women were moved to the Central California Womens Facility across the street or to CIW in Corona.

Schmidt was transferred to CIW where she began complaining to friends and family that she was receiving the wrong medications. Then she was sent to the prisons Security Housing Unit (SHU). Like the SHU in mens prisons, women spend up to 23 hours locked in their cells. No one is sure why Schmidt was sent to the SHU, but it doesnt surprise Shelley. At Valley State, Schmidt would be sent to the SHU for talking back to an officer or for fighting to protect other women, she said. Schmidt was also sent to the SHU on allegations that she possessed tobacco, which was banned from California prisons in 2006. If they hear you have tobacco, theyll search you, theyll search your room, then theyll lock you up and investigate, Shelley, who had also spent time in the SHU pending investigations, explained. They dont let you out until theyve finished their investigation. Schmidt was never actually found guilty of tobacco possession.

Shelley spoke with Schmidt several months before her death. She said that their conversation was full of laughter. We always talked, she said. We were always laughing. The next time she heard anything about her friend, it was news of her death.

Deaths in Lockdown

Dana Simas at the press office for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) insists that the SHU is not solitary confinement, pointing to the fact that, in [July 2014](#), only four of the 96 women in the SHU were in cells by themselves. The other 92 were double-celled. (The number of people in single cells rose to six of the ninety-three women in SHU in [August 2014](#).) Women are allowed out of the SHU for mental health appointments, medical appointments, and library visits. They are allowed to go to the yard, which has individual holding cells where they can exercise and talk, although the cells make it impossible for them to touch each other.

But Pam Fadem with California Coalition for Women Prisoners disagrees. A year ago it was [solitary] until the prison was too crowded and everyone began getting a cellmate. Having a cellmate while on lockdown has sometimes increased risks of violence. She described Wendy, who had been placed in the SHU for her own safety while at Valley State Prison. When she was moved to CIW, she was placed in general population where she was physically attacked three times within two months. She was then placed in a solo cell in SHU. As the prison became more crowded, CDCR placed another person in her cell. She tried to refuse since it was an unknown person to her that felt like a threat, Fadem explained. But the person was moved into her cell, Wendy was promptly attacked and only then was the second person moved out. Double-celling individuals while keeping them locked down in their cells for 22 to 23 hours a day is considered by advocates to be another form of isolated confinement, and not an acceptable alternative to solitary.

Deaths Outside of Solitary

Not all of the deaths have been in solitary. The first death, of 29-year-old Sheena Crigler, occurred on February 8th. On February 24th, Alicia Thompson, known as Gypsy to her friends, became the years second death. Prison officials told Thompsons mother that she had

committed suicide. Her mother, however, insists that her daughter did not commit suicide. She told Solitary Watch that her daughters body had no signs of hanging trauma, but did have bruising around her left temple. She and her grandchildren had spoken with her daughter three days earlier, on Friday, February 21st. She called every week, her mother said. She seemed happy.

DaeDae Schmidts death in the SHU was the third. Two weeks later, on March 26th, Stacey McCannon, whom friends called Grandpa Smiley, fell off a ladder, hit her head and died shortly after. According to women inside, that same day, eighty-year-old Delores Emmons died. In addition to these six deaths, women inside the prison report one other death.

Eight months after her daughters death, Alicia Thompsons mother is still waiting for the coroners report. The coroners office told Solitary Watch that it has not yet determined the cause of death. We have a year to file the report. Cases can take six months or more, explained Pamela Sokolik. Were not keeping it from her, but the case is not yet closed.

Thompsons mother is raising Thompsons three children, an eleven-year-old daughter and two sons, ages eight and four. Shes heard about the other deaths in the prison. Theres too many deaths. I dont understand why there hasnt been an investigation yet, she said.

Attempted Suicides

During July and August, four women unsuccessfully attempted suicide. According to the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, at least two of the women had been housed in the SHU.

According to Dana Simas, this number of suicides, both attempted and actual, is not unusually high. But, she acknowledges, were dealing with a population in all sorts of crisis. Some are dealing with the fact that theyll never get out of prison. Some may have gotten bad news from their family, had a bad encounter with someone else or just be having a bad day. Unlike people on the outside, they cant remove themselves from the situation. She also acknowledges that the prison environment can exacerbate already-present mental health issues.

Simas told Solitary Watch that mental health clinicians are available at all times within the SHU. All they would have to do is request to see a mental health clinician, she explained. In the SHU, staff are required to conduct welfare checks every fifteen minutes. During each check, staff must be able to see each person, note their actions and look for evidence of self-harm. Staff members have the authority to move a person to a mental health crisis bed.

However, women have told the California Coalition for Women Prisoners that, while clinicians check on them daily, they do not do so every fifteen minutes. They see a doctor twice a week, but are locked into a cage for their counseling session. They are unsure whether the doctor is a psychiatrist, psychologist, medical doctor or other type of clinician. Women also report that the doctors rotate often, making it hard to establish rapport.

Simas told Solitary Watch that if a person has attempted suicide, she is transferred to a mental health crisis bed. She is placed in a suicide prevention room and kept under 24-hour watch by staff. Release from the crisis bed comes only after mental health professionals, which include a psychiatric technician, a psychologist and, if medication is required, nursing staff, have conducted an evaluation and determined that the person is no longer at risk of self-harming.

Whats Being Done?

Citing privacy laws, Simas was not able to comment on Murugias suicide or what steps had been taken after each of her unsuccessful attempts. The way CDCR approaches suicide is very serious. We will continue to improve our policies, our trainings and our responses, she stated.

Women inside say otherwise. Jane Dorotik notes that, while CDCR has policies around providing mental health care and addressing mental health crises, these policies are rarely put into practice. She recounted one instance in which mental health staff turned away a person who needed help:

One day, Shirley brought a troubled woman over to me. The woman was twitching her leg, having difficulty just sitting still and focusing to talk to me. She was able to tell me, between incoherent mumblings, that she was hearing voices. She couldnt get the voices out of her head and she was afraid of what they might tell her to do. She was thinking of cutting into her head to make the voices stop.

I walked her over to the health clinic and explained the urgency to the staff. They responded in condescending and dispassionate terms. We wont see her without a pass from her housing unit. I walked into her unit (going out of bounds myself) and spoke to her housing staff to alert them to the urgency. They responded, Go away, you are out-of-bounds and can be written up. We know how to handle this.

The next day I saw the woman walking around the yard mumbling to herself and twitching her leg. Half of her head was shaved and she had lacerations all through her scalp. She had obviously tried to quiet the voices on her own, to no ones great alarm.

The woman Dorotik described attempted suicide on August 1, 2014, the day after Murugia was found hanging in her cell. She was sent to the prisons Special Confinement Unit (SCU), a mental health unit, where she was also prescribed medications. She also participated in programs, such as self-esteem, substance abuse, stress management and reading enhancement, as well as daily group talk sessions. She reported that the programs provided her with relief from the constant hopelessness of the SHU. But after thirty days, she was declared stable and returned to the SHU. There are no group talk sessions in the SHU.

Days after Murugias suicide, Dorotik said, CIW continues to struggle with how to implement policies to increase safety, prevent suicides, intercept drug trafficking and reduce fights. They try and eliminate blind corners and other external control measures. They never address the root of the problem overcrowding [and] depressed hopeless women with no clear vision of the future.

Victoria Law is a freelance journalist and author focused on incarceration. Her books include *Resistance Behind Bars*, *Prison By Any Other Name*, and *"Prisons Make Us Safer" and 20 Other Myths About Mass Incarceration*. She tweets @LVikiml.

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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Eric lost your number call me 951-663-6626

Can we talk .. angel4me51@gmail.com

R.I.P MY Sissy ,MY FRIEND, MY BUNKIE,MY STUPID GIRL GYPSY :(.OH HOW I MISS YOU, GONE BUT YOU WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN ALICIA..FEB24 was ONE OF THE WORST AND PAINFUL DAYS OF MY LIFE WHEN I WALKED IN TO OUR CELL AND SAW YOUR LIFELESS BODY, REMEMBER LIKE IT WAS YESTERDAY, BREAK MY HEAD GO IN CIRCLES SEARCH FOR ANSWERS TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE HAPPENING BUT IT DONT MAKE SENSE, YOU WOULDNT GO OUT LIKE THAT, U WERE SO FULL OF LIFE, PRIDE AND JOY, STILL DONT MAKE SENSE..I WILL NEVER NOW,, MISS U AND LOVE U SO MUCH Sissy.

This is Gypsy Mom can you please call me 951 663 6626

This is Alicia mom call me 951-663-6626

Missing my baby Alicia They can run from me but God will reveal everything that happen,,, in That Cell. And God is on my side

i am so sorry about what happened to her.. i was there from 2009-2012. and it seems to just get worse and worse, nothing I can say will ease the pain of losing a child. I just felt so bad when I read about it.. I am sure you will find the truth of what REALLY happened. Bless you and your grandchildren. Eva Shelayne Sharp

I served 20 years at Valley State Prison and witnessed so many Mentally and physically ill women ignored or mistreated. Its an atrocity that is lied/covered up regularly. ALWAYS insist and pursue details about your loved ones deaths.

Hi please help my family member is in here and is getting death threats , can someone message please email me angel4me51@gmail.com

Call me my daughter was kill there 951-663-6626

I am so sorry to hear this so sorry for your loss , I just got this message i will call you later when I get home .. Judy

Call me how is your friend I pray nothing happen to her

My family member is ok now , she got out this week , but went through a lot of bad stuff while she was in there , She seen so much and had lots of things happen to her in there ..She is trying to move on with her life

Not letting a prisoner see her dying mother is itself cruel and unusual punishment.

May you rest in peace our dear, dear sister Dae Dae. The same for the others and anyone else whose souls float on the breeze. We must never forget the deceased.

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