

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/07/22/california-prison-hunger-strike-madhouse/>

## Campaign and Advocacy

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | July 22, 2013

California prisoners in over a dozen prisons are entering their third week on hunger strike, which began on July 8th with 30,000 prisoners across the state participating. This is the third hunger strike since June 2011 that California prisoners in the Security Housing Units (SHU) have participated in, demanding the same [five core demands](#), with an emphasis on ending California's practice of long-term segregation of inmates suspected of prison gang affiliation. As of Sunday, July 21, 1081 individuals were still on hunger strike.

One hunger striker, J., 36, has been incarcerated since he was 16, and has spent the last seven years in the SHU at California State Prison, Corcoran. J. wrote in a letter to his mother on the 7th day of the hunger strike, that he was feeling a lot better than I expected so I think I'll be able to last quite a while longer. He reports that the prison administration is just waiting us out. They're not running yard at all and they finally ran showers for the first time last night. The only medical attention they're giving us is if you go man down or put in a slip, other than that a nurse is walking the tier every 3 days and simply looking in all the cells but not asking any questions at all. Literally if you blink you'll miss the nurse walk by they're going that fast.

J. also states that prison officials gave everyone who's participating a 128 a memo as a warning that if we continue we'll be getting 115s [disciplinary write ups] next. It's crazy cause they're trying to say us protesting is gang activity, but every race is participating so how is that possible? Then when we eventually all get 115s for it they're gonna use it to continue to keep us in the SHU. That's why they're writing it up like that, it's pretty much a form of retaliation on their part.

I don't know if all this is gonna do us any good in the end, but this fight is worth the effort for sure, J. writes, if we don't stand up for ourselves who will?

The hunger strikers, led by prisoners at the Pelican Bay State Prison SHU, have faced retaliation. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has seized prison canteen items from participants' cells, including items such as Kool-Aid packets and coffee. Those identified as leaders of the strike at Pelican Bay and Corcoran have reportedly been transported to different segregation units.

Michael Zaharibu Dorrough, incarcerated in the SHU since 1988 following validation as an affiliate of the Black Guerilla Family, recently wrote a letter to a friend dated July 14th, in which he describes being identified as a leader of the hunger strike at Corcoran. Dorrough and his cellmate, J. Heshima Denham, with whom he has shared a cell designed for one for recent years, were identified as leaders of the hunger strike at the prison, along with two Northern Hispanics, two Southern Hispanics, and one white individual. They were transferred from their SHU cells to the section of Corcoran where gang dropouts and informants are housed. It's an Absolute Madhouse, Dorrough writes. A day after we were moved here, mattresses were placed in front of our cell. This we designed to re-enforce, psychologically, the feeling of being isolated. And, I guess, to prevent us from receiving food or beverages from anyone. It's so silly that it borders on being offensive. We have absolutely nothing at all in common with any of the people housed in the building. There is no reason at all to communicate with or accept anything from them. As is said, it's a building full of stool pigeons. This is the CDCR's version of sending us to a black site.

The blocking of cell doors with objects has also been [reported](#) by a hunger striker at California Correctional Institution, Tehachapi, where sandbags have been placed at the cell doors of hunger strike participants to prevent the passing of objects or messages. The Public Information Officer at Corcoran has confirmed to Solitary Watch on Monday that a sand bag type of hose has been placed at the bottom of cell doors to effectively monitor and manage hunger strikers and their nutritional intake, and that some hunger strikers have had visitation privileges curtailed for reasons that cannot be stated due to safety and security.

Dorrough and Denham had participated in the hunger strikes of 2011. Both reportedly lost at least 10% of their body weights, with Denham passing out during the first hunger strike in 2011, which lasted for three weeks. Recent events and retaliatory actions during this round of hunger strikes strongly mirrors the actions CDCR took against hunger strikers during their September-October 2011 hunger strike.

Denham wrote the following in [October 2011](#):

Human rights attorneys have been banned and we have been denied access to yard and law library. The warden has directed IGI to open and/or confiscate all legal mail for hunger strikers in 4B1L-C Section. RNs have been dismissive and outright verbally disrespectful to some hunger strikers in a blatant attempt to provoke us.

It was recently [reported](#) that attorney Marilyn McMahon of California Prison Focus has been [banned](#) from visiting clients in the SHU, who represents many of the leaders of the hunger strike. She and fellow attorney Carol Strickman had been banned from visiting clients during the September-October hunger strikes for reasons never fully explained to them.

Meanwhile, at Pelican Bay, the leaders of the statewide hunger strike had also been removed from their SHU cells. Reportedly, [according](#) to the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Coalition, prison officials have been attempting to break the resolve of strikers by blasting cold air into the SHU and Administrative Segregation (AD-Seg) units at Pelican Bay. A similar report has been provided to Solitary Watch by the wife a Pelican Bay hunger striker who is not among the leaders of the hunger strike. Similar claims were made during the hunger strikes of 2011, though CDCR spokesperson Terry Thornton denies that the temperature has been lowered.

The LA Times [reported](#) on Thursday that four hunger strikers have required medical attention. According to California Correctional Health Care Services (CCHCS) [policy](#), strikers who have refused food for at least 14 days will soon be getting a document telling them that You may die, even after you start to eat again, and that Now is the time for you to think about what medical care you want when you are no longer able to talk to health care staff. Strikers will also be provided with written information about advance directives and a Physician Order for Life Sustaining Treatment.

If you have any information from hunger strike participants, please contact the writer at: [Sal.Solitary@gmail.com](mailto:Sal.Solitary@gmail.com).

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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I RECENTLY DISCOVERED THIS (GAO)

U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTING OFFICE REPORT ON

BUREAU OF PRISONS:

Improvements Needed in Bureau of Prisons Monitoring and Evaluation of Impact of Segregated Housing

GAO-13-429, May 1, 2013

<http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-13-429>

It defines a Special Management Units (SMU), as A four-level program in which inmates can progress from more restrictive to less restrictive conditions;

SMUs consist of a four-level, 18-to 24-month program. An inmate may progress through the levels depending on his compliance with behavioral expectations, ability to demonstrate positive community interaction skills, and preparedness to function in a general population setting with inmates from various affiliated groups.

Not any different than Pelican Bay where:

Accountability in such control units both demand responsibility from an inmate and undermine their ability to respond. It shifts the weight of responsibility away from the prison system and onto the inmate who is often assumed to be incorrigible, whether or not they are actively fighting the system.

The inmate once classified as a security risk has their negative actions duly noted daily while at the same time whenever he overlooks an injustice inflicted upon him this bears no weight at all. The inmate is thus held responsible for any resistance but is given no credit when

they are compliant in the face of injustice.

The more extreme the isolation of a control unit, the more difficult it becomes for the inmate to make good choices or to bear the consequences of his poor choices.

Inmates are in a Catch-22 situation where they often can't follow the rules even if they want to, are punished whether or not they break the rules, or are legitimately under such a threat that they are forced to defend themselves and are then dealt even harsher punishment.

The inmate is told to conduct himself as an individual while under near-total control of guards, and threatened by gangs enforcing their own code of conduct upon him.

He is told to reflect on the consequences of his actions in an environment that has been proven to produce cognitive impairment and mental illness. He is told that he needs to become a good citizen while at the same time he is denied the right to interact socially.

In short, THE SUPERMAX INMATE IS SET UP TO FAIL!

I heard first hand last week at Corcoran Shu a female C.O say we could care less if they starve themselves these are the attitudes of the employers who these inmates have to deal with on a day to day basis. They are being retaliated on and it needs to stop! If their willing to give up the only thing they have left should say alot whats goes on in there!

Stop FREEZING inmates & put an end to solitary confinement. It was originally intended to protect other inmates from dangerous inmates, but is now being used as permanent housing for anyone who upsets guards and/or is considered validated as a gang member. Our relative is in there just for associating with Mexican mafia members, but after 3 years, isn't that enough punishment; no light 23 hours a day. That's inhumane. They can't get family visits except through a phone call for one hour if they are lucky. I have also witnessed shivering inmates walking through freezing cold/snowy weather with shoes that were thin as paper and no jackets. I do not understand where our tax money goes. THIS IS INHUMANE TORTURE. Many of these inmates are in prison for crimes that are not violent and do not deserve such torture. Treating these men like animals will result in them acting like animals and severe psychological damage. Please put an end to this torture.

Wise men have written:

It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong.

Voltaire

The worth of a state, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals comprising it.

John Stuart Mill 1806-1873

There are few better measures of the concern a society has for its individual members and its own well being than the way it handles criminals.

Ramsey Clark

The social state is at once so natural, so necessary, and so habitual to man, that he never conceives himself otherwise than a member of a body.

also by John Stuart Mill 1806-1873

But wise prison administrators are in short supply.

I am not sure how I view this stuff anymore? I have yet to see it effective, and if it is not effective, I try to move to another way. We had riots when I was in and I thought they were stupid. Burning your own stuff, was counter productive. We went to work stoppages and that was a good tool for a while. The leaders always got identified and paid the price (lock up), then we went to hunger strikes; I have never thought they worked; again leaders get lock down and removed. Education is a very slow tool, and building outside support is hard, again due to education and frustration I believe change is coming and it is not the kind of change prisoners will want to see. As an ex-con I could build a system that would nearly be constitutional and effective; however it would never please anyone who was going to be under its care. I pray for all those in struggle, I have no answers that would satisfy those under the gun.

P.O. Box 11374  
Washington, DC 20008

[info@solitarywatch.org](mailto:info@solitarywatch.org)

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