

Fortresses of Solitude: Reporting on Solitary Confinement

By James Ridgeway

Supermax prisons and solitary confinement units are our domestic black sites—hidden places where human beings endure unspeakable punishments, without benefit of due process in any court of law. On the say-so of corrections officials, incarcerated Americans can be placed in conditions of extreme isolation and sensory deprivation for months, years, or even decades.

At least 80,000 men, women, and children live in such conditions on any given day in the United States. And they are not merely separated from others for safety reasons. They are effectively buried alive. Most live in concrete cells the size of an average parking space, often windowless, cut off from all communication by solid steel doors. If they are lucky, they will be allowed out for an hour a day to shower or to exercise alone in cages resembling dog runs.

The majority of these individuals have never committed a violent act in prison. They are locked down because they've been classified as "high risk," or because of nonviolent misbehavior—anything from mouthing off or testing positive for marijuana to exhibiting the symptoms of untreated mental illness.

Once isolated, they most quickly begin to deteriorate physically, psychologically, and socially. While less than 5 percent of U.S. prisoners nationwide are held in solitary, close to 50 percent of all prison suicides take place there.

After three years of reporting on solitary confinement for Solitary Watch, a website I co-founded, I'm convinced that much of what happens in these places constitutes torture. How is it possible that a human-rights crisis of this magnitude can carry on year after year, with impunity?

I believe part of the answer has to do with how effectively the nature of these sites has been hidden from the press

and, by extension, the public. With few exceptions, solitary confinement cells have been kept firmly off-limits to journalists—with the approval of the federal courts, who defer to corrections officials' purported need to maintain "safety and security." If the First Amendment ever manages to make it past the prison gates at all, it is stopped short at the door to the isolation unit.

As a reporter, I ran into solitary confinement in writing an article about Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox, members of the so-called Angola 3, who have lived in solitary confinement in Louisiana since 1972. When the prison denied me access, the ACLU of Louisiana took up my case, and I was finally granted what turned out to be the standard guided tour of the plantation prison. It included numerous dormitories, chapels, and even the death chamber—but not the solitary confinement units. Even the ACLU couldn't help me penetrate those fortresses of solitude.

While reporting on solitary confinement in New York State, I was readily shown around Auburn Correctional Facility by the affable warden there. I saw all kinds of cells, yards, and workshops—everything but the so-called Special Housing Unit (SHU) where people are held in solitary. These units, I was told, are never shown to the media.

At another New York prison, I managed to visit (under the watchful eye of a guard) with a man who has been in solitary for nearly 25 years. Since the Department of Corrections media policy forbids media visits to most prisoners in "segregation," I had to withhold the fact that I was a reporter, and sign in as his "friend."

Once I began reporting on solitary, I learned of a handful of other reporters who were encountering the same restrictions—and working around them and in spite of them: Shane Bauer in

California, Susan Greene in Colorado, George Pawlaczyk and Beth Hundsdorfer in Illinois, Lance Tapley in Maine, and Mary Beth Pfeiffer in New York have all exposed the solitary suffering that takes place in supermax prisons and SHUs, usually without ever setting foot inside them. Instead, they have painstakingly searched public records and carried on lengthy correspondences with the men, women, and children who live in these gray boxes.

Where journalists have succeeded, one way or another, in penetrating the black sites, their reporting has undeniably had an impact. In Maine, it helped spark a grassroots movement and a legislative initiative, which eventually spurred the prison system to reduce its use of solitary confinement. In New York, it became ammunition in a battle to keep people with mental illness out of solitary. And in Illinois, it provided fuel for an effort that convinced the governor to shut down Tamms supermax prison.

The stories have been effective. But their scarcity also suggests that the lack of press access to these sites around the nation has stifled public debate on a significant issue of policy and human rights. "Solitary confinement is a brutal form of prison punishment that has claimed many lives and caused untold suffering," says Mary Beth Pfeiffer. "That is the story that officials do not want told."

Until we are allowed to tell it properly—until we can visit solitary units ourselves, and speak unhindered with the people who live and work there—we cannot fulfill our duty as journalists to shine a light into society's darkest corners.

James Ridgeway has been a journalist for close to 50 years. He is co-founder and co-editor of Solitary Watch. A longer version of this article appeared in the Columbia Journalism Review.

A Hunger for Justice in California's Prisons

By Sal Rodriguez

On July 8th, approximately 30,000 people in in prisons across California launched the third statewide hunger strike since June 2011.

United under the same "Five Core Demands" that motivated three-week strikes in June and September/October 2011, and inspired at least one hunger strike at Corcoran State Prison in late January 2012, California prisoners refused state issued meals and over 1,300 engaged in a work stoppage and refused to attend classes.

As of this writing, August 25th, there are 96 hunger strikers in three prisons, including 42 who have been on hunger strike for 49 continuous days.

The hunger strikes are led by the Pelican Bay Short Corridor Collective, a group of men of various racial backgrounds incarcerated in the prison's Security Housing Unit (SHU). Last year, the group issued a call on all incarcerated Californians to put an end to the prison politics of race-based conflict.

The five core demands are: an end to group punishment; abolition of the gang debriefing policy and modification of gang status criteria; an end to long-term solitary confinement; adequate and nutritious food; and the expansion and creation of constructive programming for those on SHU status. Hunger strikers were encouraged to formulate additional demands relevant to their specific institutions.

Approximately 3,000 individuals are housed in SHUs across four prisons for alleged prison gang affiliation. About half are housed in solitary confinement, including 1,100 in Pelican Bay, where cells are 7 1/2 x 11 feet and windowless. Thousands more are in isolation in Administrative Segregation Units (ASUs)

The hunger strike has been a brutal affair. One hunger striker, Billy Sell, committed suicide after 14 days on hunger strike at the SHU in Corcoran State Prison. Sell is the second hunger striker to die in a year and a half. Christian Gomez died in February 2012 while on hunger strike at the Corcoran ASU.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), however, insists that the hunger strike is a "gang power play" orchestrated by "violent prison gangs" to reassert their power in the California prison system. Referring to it as a "mass hunger strike disturbance," CDCR was quick to delegitimize the demands and actions of the hunger strikers. Strikers across have reported receiving disciplinary write-ups, having their property seized, and having sandbags or other items placed at their cell door to prevent communications or "fishing." Those identified as leaders have been moved to other sections in order to cut off their communications.

Throughout the hunger strike, participants have been hospitalized for complications. There are confirmed reports of dozens of hunger strikers losing

over 10% of body weight. Others have been transported to prisons that are said to have better medical services than Pelican Bay.

On August 19th, CDCR confirmed that it had obtained court permission to force-feed hunger strikers. To date there have been no reports of forced feedings, which the state reportedly plans to use only if a participant approaches death.

CDCR repeatedly insists that it has already addressed the major concerns of the hunger strikers. The CDCR revised its gang validation criteria last year, but critics have argued that the revised criteria may result in even more California prisoners being targeted for gang validation.

CDCR is conducting case-by-case reviews of all SHU prisoners to determine whether continued placement in the SHU is justified under the revised criteria. Since October, CDCR has reviewed 425 in the SHU. Of them, 268 have been endorsed for release to the general population, and 125 have been placed in the incentive-based Step Down Program, through which someone may hypothetically get out of the SHU in four years. (Currently, the average SHU term is 6.8 years, according to CDCR.)

Governor Jerry Brown has yet to comment on the strike and CDCR is refusing to consider negotiations. Frustration continues to mount and uncertainty looms over how this strike will end.

About Solitary Watch

Solitary Watch (www.solitarywatch.com) is a web-based project aimed at bringing solitary confinement out of the shadows and into the light of the public square. Our mission is to provide the public—as well as practicing attorneys, legal scholars, law enforcement and corrections officers, policymakers, educators, advocates, and people in prison and their families—with the first centralized source of background research, unfolding developments, and original reporting on solitary confinement in the United States.

This print edition of Solitary Watch is produced quarterly and is available free of charge to currently and formerly incarcerated people, to prisoners' families and advocates, and to non-profit organizations. To receive a copy, send a request to the address or email below. We also welcome accounts of life in solitary confinement, as well as stories, poems, essays, and artwork by people who have served time in isolation. Please send contributions to "**Voices from Solitary**" at the address below.

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Solitary Confinement: A Mother's Plea

By Grace Bauer

Solitary confinement, or isolation, is widely used around the country in jails, prisons and detention centers for adults as well as young people. Until very recently, few people, beyond attorneys, families and advocates, gave it much thought. Isolation, like so many corrections practices, happens behind the walls of silence, long ingrained into facility culture and practice. In our punishment-oriented society, we tend to think those behind bars deserve whatever they get. This kind of thinking is fueled by a distorted sense of fear created by media and political rhetoric so much so that falling crime rates and research showing the failure of such practices barely register in society's consciousness.

When a young person enters into secure detention, they typically become isolated from their families and communities. Exorbitant phone costs, limited visitation procedures and times and placement in facilities long distances from home all add to that sense of isolation. Often, facilities will have a standard 2-6 week "intake" period where the child is not allowed any visitors and very limited communication by phone. Given that the majority of children involved in juvenile justice systems come from families who live below the poverty line, many families do not have transportation to reach far away facilities or the extra money to cover the cost of calls that experts describe as "gross profiteering." These are common practices in detention that fail to take into account the research that demonstrate the critical importance, of maintaining family and community connections, to the successful reentry of young people and to prevent recidivism.

My son is 25 years old. He has spent the majority of the last 15 years in detention centers, youth prisons, county jails and state prisons. His sisters have grown up, his niece was born and will celebrate her sixth birthday, our home was lost in a hurricane, a new home was built, his sister started college (and will graduate) and his uncle died, all while he was confined. He earned his high school diploma but has few job skills, little job experience, no

home, no family of his own, few friends and few prospects on the horizon. We have missed him and his presence in our lives and he has missed life, period.

He will return to society, at some point, along with roughly 800,000 others released each year; 95% of all sentenced inmates. The "tough on crime" rhetoric may make folks feel better but the reality of mass incarceration impacts everyone in society through lost revenues, increased health cost, lower wages, unemployment, expensive corrections and judicial budgets— the list goes on and on. As facilities cut back on the very things that lead to successful reentry, we can expect that young people, returning to society, will return less prepared, more disadvantaged and more deeply scarred.

All of the above and then we add on the deep psychological damage of solitary confinement. When my son was 13 and placed in a notorious juvenile prison, he spent nearly a year in protective custody, AKA solitary confinement. In those early days we had no information on the damaging effects of solitary and actually felt relief that he felt safe from the rampant violence in the facility. He was released from state secure care in 2002; four years would pass before we learned the truth about his time in isolation. It should have been evident that something traumatic and life changing had happened and we certainly saw the signs of something but we didn't know what. In 2006, a young man confined with him at the youth prison called to tell us about the day my son was raped by another young person, in solitary, who had been placed in the cell by guards. Those guards then took bets on which "kid would win". My son lost the fight that day. Throughout his years of incarceration, he has experienced solitary confinement in every facility, often for extended periods of time.

From January 25th through May 8th of this year, my son was confined in isolation, though the prison called it "protective custody." He was confined for 110 days with the exception of being allowed to take a shower on Monday and Thursdays and use the phone

at midnight or later. Several of his showers and calls were denied for unknown reasons. The average call lasted 6 minutes. That means that over a 110-day period my son showered approximately 30 times and was able to speak with us for about 3 hours. In this particular case, my son was confined for his own safety after being stabbed three times during the robbery of his cell. As his mother, I am grateful that he was kept safe and at the same time, terribly troubled by this prolonged period of isolation and its impact on his mental health.

I have witnessed the long-term impact of my son's time in isolation and prison. Some nights when I try to sleep, visions of the assaults play in my mind, like a movie that you can't turn off. I have sat across from him, trying to maintain my own composure, while mentally cataloging and assessing the bruises and wounds on his body. I have waited for calls or visits where I can know, at least for a short time, that he is safe and alive. I listen to him talk about how useless he is and how he has no worth. I held back tears (at least, in his presence) the day he said, "I'll never be anything but a criminal." In the car, on the way home, I cried like a child, as I thought of all the good in him and the future I had once dreamed of for him. The level of violence and inhumanity that he endures sickens me. Sometimes, when I can't hold it off any longer or we experience a new trauma, I cry hard and long for all that he has lost, all we have lost and how far we still have to go.

Day in and day out, we look for ways to keep him up-to-date on the world and engaged in learning. I marvel at his continued compassion and concern for strangers in such circumstances. His belief that, someday, he will finish serving his time and somehow overcome the numerous and complex barriers he faces inspires me. If he can still feel hopeful, I'll be damned if I will be the one to take that from him.

Once, he was an honor roll student that was well liked by his teachers and peers. After a few short months in juvenile detention he became fearful and anxious. I could not touch him to

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wake him up. He would strike out blindly in his waking moments out of fear of being assaulted. He cried out in his sleep and suffered from nightmares. He was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and deep depression. The physical abuse has left him with physical scars but it is the emotional damage, caused by the extreme isolation and exposure to horrific violence at such a young age, that concerns me the most.

My son's original crime was stealing a stereo out of a truck and breaking the window out of the truck. He was sentenced to five years for that crime. We were fortunate to find an attorney to represent him and get him out after a year. Unfortunately, the damage done in that year was enough to alter his life in ways I could not have imagined. He was grieving for his beloved grandmother and acted out, as adolescents

often do in those tumultuous years. The vicious assaults on his body, severe neglect and emotional and verbal abuse he suffered would be considered criminal if I or anyone else, other than the system, had inflicted them upon him. Yet the state and its employees were allowed to do this kind of harm to him and to thousands of others and there has never been any accountability for those crimes.

Behind the razor wire fences of America's prisons, there is seldom fair redress of grievances, little accountability to the safety and wellbeing of those housed within those facilities, scant programming, meager education services, woefully inadequate healthcare, widespread racial disparities and the pervasive and systemic abuse of power by those in authority. Study after study, report after report, all confirm the negative impact of isolation and the abject failure of mass incarceration. The cost benefit analysis, illus-

trated in volumes of data and research, demonstrate the exorbitant cost we pay to have less public safety, generate more crime and do unnecessary and possibly irreparable damage to those behind bars.

Prisons were supposedly built to lock up those who might harm others and deter crime. Somewhere along the way we lost sight of those goals. Today, prison walls have become an impenetrable shroud that shields and perpetuates crimes against humanity. Those walls allow the rest of us to ignore the root causes of crime and save us from having to look at the mass destruction of human lives that our appetite for retribution and punishment have caused.

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NEW YORK—United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Juan E. Méndez has repeatedly asked the United States government for permission to visit U.S. prisons to investigate the practice of solitary confinement. Following up on this request, in June, a coalition of civil and human rights groups called on the U.S. government to comply with the request. The coalition's letter, addressed to the State Department, says: "As a crucial step toward addressing the overuse and abuse of solitary confinement in this country... we urge you to extend an invitation to... Juan Méndez, to undertake fact-finding in the US...on this most pressing human rights issue." To date, the government has said only that it is "considering" the request.

COLORADO—A new report by the American Civil Liberties Union of Colorado, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind*, has found that the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDC) continues to depend on long-term solitary confinement to manage prisoners with mental illness. The report found: "Colorado currently holds 87 prisoners suffering from serious mental illness in solitary confinement. The number of prisoners in solitary confinement with moderate mental illness is much higher. This is despite the fact that a growing majority of the psychiatric community agrees

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that isolating seriously mentally ill prisoners for any length of time further damages their mental health."

WASHINGTON, D.C.—In May, the US Government Accountability Office released a report questioning the use of solitary confinement in federal prisons. According to the report, the Bureau of Prisons currently holds over 12,400 individuals in 23-hour-a-day lockdown, making it the largest practitioner of solitary and other forms of isolated confinement in the nation, and most likely the world. The report further notes that the BOP does not know whether its use of "segregated housing" has any impact on prison safety, how it affects the prisoners who endure it, or how much it all costs American taxpayers.

PENNSYLVANIA—A federal civil rights investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice has concluded that the State Correctional Institution at Cresson in western Pennsylvania holds people with serious mental illnesses in solitary confinement, in some cases for years. The DOJ said: "Cresson often denies these prisoners basic necessities and subjects them to harsh and punitive conditions, including exces-

sive uses of force." The Justice Department is expanding its probe to include all prisons in Pennsylvania.

CALIFORNIA—The non-profit Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility has launched a campaign calling on the American Institute of Architects "to amend its Code of Ethics... to prohibit the design of spaces for killing, torture, and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. In the US, this comprises the design of execution chambers and supermaximum security prisons ('supermax'), where solitary confinement is an intolerable form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment."

WASHINGTON, D.C.—A new ACLU report on solitary confinement on death row has found that over 93% of states confine condemned individuals for over 22 hours a day, and that 60% of people on death row live in cells without windows or natural light. Death row exoneree Anthony Graves writes: "Solitary confinement is like living in a dark hole. People walk over the hole and you shout from the bottom, but nobody hears you. You start to play tricks with your mind just to survive. This is no way to live... [S]ubjecting anyone in prison to solitary confinement is torture."

News Briefs by Lisa Dawson