

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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close

Search

close

close

by [Voices from Solitary](#) | June 28, 2012

Robert Saleem Holbrook is serving life without parole in Pennsylvania for a crime committed when he was a juvenile. When he was 16, Holbrook was recruited by adults to serve as a lookout during a drug deal that escalated to robbery and then murder. Under the states mandatory sentencing laws, he was given LWOP an experience he describes in an essay called [Crushed Against the Law: A Child Offenders Encounter with Blind Justice](#), published on the blog maintained for him by friends on the outside. It remains to be seen how the Supreme Courts recent decision banning mandatory juvenile LWOP will affect his sentence. Holbrook has now been in prison for 17 years, and has spent many of those years in solitary confinement. He is a member of the [Human Rights Coalition](#), which opposes solitary confinement and other forms of abuse in Pennsylvanias prisons. He wrote the following piece, titled [Control Units: High Tech Brutality](#) while in the Special Management Unit (SMU) at SCI Greene. Jean Casella

A prisoners whole existence, especially one in a control unit, is defined by numbers, statistics, and information transferred through an endless process of paperwork. When I go to the Program Review Committee here in the Special Management Unit (a control unit) at SCI Greene, my release to general population is repeatedly denied, they claim, because of a history of assaultive behavior. It is useless to defend myself against their rationale, yet I do to probe the predictable response of my captors.

Their justification for the continual confinement of myself and others in the SMU is based on the rational of a separate committee that determined I am an assaultive prisoner who has demonstrated the potential to harm others. Never mind the fact that this determination was made in another prison. Since a separate Administrative Committee determined that I am assaultive, I must therefore be assaultive. Their system of paper- work and statistics is never wrong; their committees are omnipotent and all knowing.

We the prisoners are mere spectators and captives to the process. Our presence is only necessary to secure our signatures on their paperwork or to say something that can be documented and used against us in future hearings. Our signatures place our consent on their paperwork. They permit us to seal our fate by certifying our consent of their process.

Every step of our day in the control unit is reduced to a methodical and omnipotent numbers system. I am housed in cell 23 on the 2nd tier. I receive 3 meals a day, 3 showers a week for 5 minutes each with 1 bar of soap, and 3 shaves a week with 1 razor that must be turned in after 15 minutes. I go to the yard 5 days a week for 1 hour a day with 1 prisoner per cage. I can only have 1 box in my cell containing only 2 pairs of socks, 2 t-shirts and 2 underwear. I can only have 4 books that must be exchanged on a 1 for 1 basis. I can only have 1 jumpsuit, 1 towel, 1 washcloth, and 1 toothbrush and toothpaste that are exchanged every 30 days on a 1 for 1 basis. I can only have 1 visit for 1 hour every week with only 1 visitor. The SMU Committee reviews my status every 30 days.

The prison officials tolerate no alternation in their process. There is no room for negotiation or compromise. The system must run smoothly. Dissent or resistance is crushed by the Correctional Response Teams dressed in futuristic battle fatigues. It is a ruthless war of attrition designed to grind a man down to his breaking point.

The previous method employed by the prison system to break prisoners was to break bones. They relied on brute force and unrestrained violence. This method did not sit well with the American public when it was exposed. It also tarnished Americas image in the world as a nation of high standards and values. The method was flawed in that it usually only strengthened prisoners resistance and made them stronger men. The prison system therefore directed its resources to develop a method of confinement that would destroy a prisoners mind and his will to resist.

The new assault was directed not against a prisoners body, but rather his mind and senses. The concept of a complete sensory deprivation and isolation was developed. This concept revolved around the ideas that if a prisoner is deprived of mental, physical, and emotional stimulation, his mind will inevitably turn inward and feed upon itself. With no outlet in an isolated environment, the mind is left to its own devices. The result is that a prisoners thoughts run out of control. Concentration becomes difficult and prisoners invent fantasies or images of themselves which they cocoon themselves in.

Some never emerge from this world they create. The mind will seek any relief available. It is not uncommon for men to talk to themselves for hours on end. Insanity and madness rule in a control unit. The units are filled with prisoners screams, outbursts and pleas for communication. A mans nerves deteriorate right in front of his eyes. Each prisoner suffers his own personal hell. Everyone is affected

in one way or another. Whether the experience affects him for the good or the bad depends upon the man.

It takes an internally strong man to overcome the isolated environment of a control unit, and an even stronger man to retain his sanity and sense of humanity in such a manufactured, hostile atmosphere. Control units are notorious for turning the strong man into a weak man, turning the sane into the insane. It can turn a man upside down and cause him to abandon all the principles and values he holds dear. Conversely, it can reinforce a man's principles and values, and turn the weak man into a strong man. Given the control units track record in driving men crazy, it is not surprising that the majority of prisoners sent into it are either politically conscious prisoners, prison lawyers, or rebellious young prisoners. It is this class of prisoners that occupies the control units in prison systems across the United States.

A substantial portion of mentally disturbed prisoners are also placed in these units by prison officials so that sane prisoners are subjected to constant verbal abuse and physical assault with feces and urine by this unfortunate class of disturbed prisoners. The presence of mentally disturbed prisoners also prevents unity among the prisoners. Prison officials encourage the actions of these prisoners by rewarding them with token privileges and other superficial enticements. Divide and conquer is the norm and the administration can always be counted on to keep friction going amongst the prisoners.

The prison administration, committees, and guards that operate these control units only view prisoners in terms of our institutional numbers and our files that sit on their desks. That human beings occupy their cells doesn't register. When a man is reduced to a number he is not supposed to have emotions, concerns, hopes or vision. His only function is to process through the system. Prisoners are only to be added, subtracted or multiplied according to the amount of bed space (warehouse space) available in the control unit. Never are they to be rehabilitated, refined or educated. Everything is reduced to a fine number and is supposed to run as smooth as mathematics. Regiment through force and isolation in a prisoner's life and thoughts will eventually cause him to break and assume his place in the system. But the control unit method is flawed because it fails to take into account that humans are not fine numbers on paper. They are not desensitized objects. Under pressure they will resist, fight back, capitulate or retaliate.

The man that successfully makes it out of a control unit with his mind intact is a stronger person than he was when he entered it. He is a man who developed and evolved under solitude and hostility. If he is politically conscious he emerges stronger in his convictions. So though the state may be destroying countless prisoners across the country in its control units, it is simultaneously breeding a stronger politically conscious class of prisoner committed to a revolutionary change in the social, political, and economic order, especially affecting Black communities in America.

The politically conscious prisoners (labeled the worst of the worst by the state) coming out of these control units recognize that a major contradiction exists in American society. This nation which exalts itself as a defender of human rights and an oasis of freedom and justice violates these very principles within its borders. The operation of units designed to rob a prisoner of his mind and strip him of his so-called human rights violate the very principles America proclaims to represent. International agencies such as Amnesty International and Human Rights have condemned control units as inhuman and cruel and unusual punishment.

In spite of world communication condemning such practices, the U.S. prison system is increasing the construction of these units throughout the country. Construction of these units is encouraged and financially supported by the federal government, the same government that condemns so-called totalitarian nations such as China, Cuba, etc. for human rights abuses against their citizens and prisoners.

Since the American government and its judicial system refuse to abolish control units, and a substantial portion of the American public is indifferent to the treatment of prisoners, major international human rights agencies, civil rights organizations, religious organizations, etc. should petition the U.S. government to abolish these inhumane units. Petitions should also be sent to the U.N. and World Court of Justice seeking an indictment and condemnation of America's control units. Though it is extremely unlikely the U.S. would abolish its use of control units, an indictment would make it far more difficult for this country to play the human rights card when attempting to isolate nations it is at odds with. This could cause the U.S. to seriously examine its policy of operating control units.

Prisoners, their families, and organizations that work with prisoners must participate in this campaign to abolish control units and expose their abuses. No longer should the U.S., which condemns the human rights abuses of other nations, be permitted to lecture to the world about human rights, freedom and justice from a podium of righteousness all the while standing on a platform of hypocrisy.

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

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

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September 6, 2022

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RIPPD RIGHTS FOR IMPRISONED PEOPLE WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES AND JAC JAIL ACTION COMMITTEE
DEMONSTRATED OUTSIDE OF 51 CHAMBERS STREET DURING A MEETING OF RIKERS COMMISSIONER AND DEPT OF
CORRECTIONS. THERE WAS A GOOD TURNOUT AND WE WILL BE BRINGING OUR CONCERNS TO THE
COMMISSIONER SHORTLY. ALLAN FEINBLUM

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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