

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2015/08/04/voices-from-solitary-a-second-by-second-attack-on-your-soul/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | August 4, 2015

The following is a collection of excerpts from an interview with Johnny Perez, who went to prison at the age of 21 and served a total of 13 years in various New York City and State facilities. He spent an accumulated three years in solitary confinement, with his longest consecutive stay being ten months. Since his 2013 release, Perez has been working at the Urban Justice Center as a Safe Reentry Advocate. He is a full-time student at St. Francis College of Brooklyn through the post-incarceration program Hudson Link and is also involved in various advocacy groups such as the Jails Action Coalition (JAC) and New York Coalition for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (CAIC). Hallie Grossman

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The cell itself is very small, very quiet. Sometimes it gets so quiet that you can hear your own heartbeat. It also can get so loud from the noises and sounds that the other men in other cells make. You find yourself going to sleep to the cacophony of different voices. In the summer, it gets real hot, so hot that the walls sweat. Sometimes, it gets so cold that you have to try to cover yourself with as many blankets and sheets and wear pants and shirts to bed. I've been in cells where I could touch both walls with my hands if I stretched my hands out. It could be claustrophobic at times.

[There is] no interaction whatsoever with other humans. The officer comes by every hour, and even then there's no contact, no talking, no communicating, not even any eye contact in extreme cases. The last meal is at four-thirty in the afternoon with the next meal being at six o'clock in the morning. If you're not standing wide awake, by your door, when the officer walks by, you don't get a tray.

[In terms of communicating with people in other cells,] you can stand by your door and yell at the top of your lungs, and somebody in another cell could hear you. There's definitely no face-to-face contact, communication, that kind of thing, where you could read somebody's body language. I was playing chess with a guy for months, and I never knew what he looked like. As far as contact with the outside world, you can write a letter, but there are no phone calls. If your family doesn't come visit you, then you don't get no visits. Even on a visit, if you're on level one, you go on the visit and they don't uncuff you.

[Solitary confinement] affected me in a number of ways at different times. As a youth because I did some solitary time as a teenager it affects your self-esteem, it affects your self-confidence and the way that you see yourself. It makes you aggressive, it makes you angry, it makes you impulsive, it makes you an introvert. There were times when I contemplated thoughts of suicide, though I never voiced it out loud. I tended to internalize a lot of the oppression. Sometimes, officers tell you, Hey, you ain't shit! This is you, this is your life, you're nothing but a criminal. Hearing that once or twice is nothing, but hearing that day in and day out for months at a time, you start to say, Damn, you know what, maybe I ain't. Maybe I'm *not* good enough. Maybe I am what they say that I am.

As an adult my behavior was more reactionary towards others. I remember hating all authority figures, no matter who it was. Supervisors, officers, judges, lawyers, just hating the entire world, you know? So a lot of that was more outward, versus when I was a teenager, it was more self-directed.

So, when I got out, it wasn't easy at first. Thank God I wasn't released directly from solitary to society, as some of my friends have been. But I was released in 2013, and 2011 was the last time I was in the box, when I went to Rikers Island. They dropped me in the middle of 42nd Street Times Square, after being gone for 13 years. And there's these flashing lights, there's people, there's, like, Elmo is fighting the Statue of Liberty. There's the guy with the sign that says, I need money for weed, there's all of these lights, these cameras, these big billboards, and it's overwhelming. It's very, very overwhelming. All these yellow cabs, and these cars going back and forth. When I got off the train, I hadn't crossed the street in 13 years so I'm standing there with all the crowds of people going back and forth, and I'm just standing there, to just take in the scene. I spent maybe half an hour or forty-five minutes just standing.

I learned that with solitary or even prison, but more like solitary it's a second-by-second attack on your soul, where every second is spent thinking about the next second, and that just makes the day so long. You try to sleep it off, but sometimes too much sleeping drives you to be awake for long periods of time. You don't do solitary time, you *survive* solitary time. And I know this to be true because some of my peers did not survive solitary time. They've either left psychologically different than when they came in, or committed suicide.

A lot of injustices go on in solitary, mainly at the hands of officers who might put people together who are from opposing gangs, opposing height and weight, things like that, as their own little human cockfights. They stand at the door and they bet on whos gonna win. They might say to the guy inside the cell, If you beat him up, Ill give you an extra tray of food, things like that, you know, very barbaric, very dehumanizing.

Its real difficult to get out of solitary confinement because every ticket that you catch while youre there leads to more box time. So, its not uncommon to find someone who was sentenced to thirty days, or even ninety days, tested positive for marijuana or any other drug, and then end up in there for years at a time, accumulating numerous tickets while theyre in there. Something as simple as using your sheet as a shower curtain at Upstate CF could get you another thirty days in there.

From an advocate point of view, I would say that as a nation, we cannot keep victimizing people to teach them that they shouldnt victimize people. Its like the death penalty: We kill people to teach them not to kill people. It doesnt make sense. We have to be careful about becoming the cure that is worse than the disease.

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

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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Dave I know this an old post, but your point of view is why nothing gets accomplished. If we only advocate for the people or the types of people we know, things will never change. Divide and conquer the reality is Rick is a criminal too. Hes no more or less deserving of humane treatment than others subjected to solitary confinement.

Thank you for sharing your story!! From Raymond Dware & Makin Movez LLC down in Fort Pierce, Florida. Salute to your continued movement and Voice for so many who will never get the opportunity to speak for themselves!

I spent 6 1/2 months in solitary in a federal prison. I came to realize that the problem wasnt me (I was not in for a violent offense). Rather, being able to throw someone in solitary for an extended period of time helped the prison administration feel more empowered, knowing that they can so severely punish an inmate for a frivolous reason. They know the inmates have little recourse; they know there is no such thing as due process for the inmates. As the saying goes, Your punishment is being in prison; youre not in prison to be punished. Most of the administrators I encountered didnt buy into this concept. Instead, this was their chance to demonstrate to the defenseless inmates exactly who is in charge.

The writer should have done a piece on someone who is a model prisoner who is locked up in solitary aka protective custody instead of those who worked hard to put themselves in there over and over. <http://clemencyreport.org/richard-wershe-jr-named-michigans-no-1-inmate-deserving-clemency/>

Dave Majkowski What does working hard to get in there look like? Did you know that people are placed in Solitary for the most frivolous reasons like having too many stamps, helping other people with their court case, or in my case, being addicted to drugs? When we separate Model from those who are Working hard to get in there we take shift the focus from the real issue the author is attempting to convey: The inhumanity that is Solitary Confinement!

Johnny.. I know solitary confinement is a problem but I choose to have more sympathy for those who are in there because they tried doing the right thing. Like cooperating with the authorities in order to put murderers, violent criminals and crooked cops behind bars. Many are locked in protective custody for reasons why other violence or breaking rules behind bars. One close childhood friend Rick Wershe is one of those people.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dean-dauphinais/an-open-letter-to-michigan-governor_b_7754828.html

Showing society that not all those locked in solitary are problem inmates or those acting up all the time will help show the full reality and scope of the problem. Honestly? I dont want my friend lumped in with those who may belong in isolation because of their lack of self control. Right now hes locked up with murderers and others who shouldnt be in the general population or in society.

this is just a example of what thousands of people go through every day all day , so thankful for real voices out of solitary like johnny who show and prove that this system needs to end

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