

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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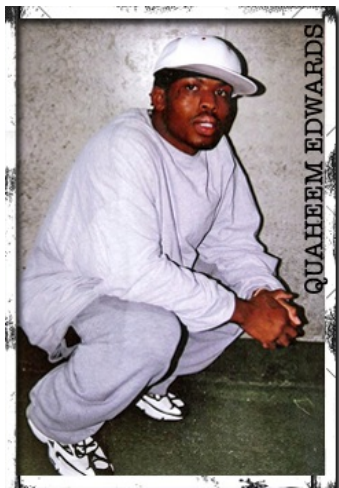
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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | September 14, 2011



Quaheem Ox-Splish Edwards is six years into a 21-year federal prison sentence for conspiracy to distribute cocaine, firearms possession, and witness intimidation. [He writes of himself](#). There's much more to my story than what the newspaper said or wrote. Edwards says he grew up with a strong, loving family, but still, chose the streets. I have no excuse.

Edwards was a member of the New Jersey Bloods, and due to my affiliation, and me doing time the best way I know how (protecting myself), he writes, I was shipped to a SuperMax prison on 6/2/09. It's a program called the SMU (Special Management Unit), which is an 18-24 month program of 23 and 1 lockdown. The SMU is at USP Lewisburg, a federal maximum security prison in Pennsylvania that has effectively become a supermax.

Edwards has been writing since he was twelve years old, says there's no better way to get some writing done than while you're on lockdown. To date, he has completed five books, and he says that now he is strictly about rebuilding and change. He blogs on the website [Live from Lockdown](#), a project of [Raise Up Media](#). In [the following piece](#), he describes his daily life at Lewisburg.

The white paint on the walls that surround me is shipped and stained from years of blood, sweat and tears. The doorways are so small you have to enter sideways and even a person standing at 5 feet 9 inches has to kneel. You may hear the saying Prison is prion. This is far from being true.

This place where I lay my head every night may be the size of a walk-in closet and that is without the normal furnishings. But even with the usual stainless steel sink and toilet, bunkbeds and table, these cells are only enough room for one person. If you have a roommate (and most likely you will) the two of you can't even be on the floor at the same time. In this place there are holes in the walls where spiders and other insects hide until they think we're asleep.

It's hot as hell outside. I know America can relate to this summer's heat wave. Now picture being trapped in a room where the window barely opens; not to mention the 12-foot pipe that sits in the corner of the cells. All year long this pipe is steaming! I'm talking about a pipe that is so hot, we can boil water in at least twenty minutes! In the hallways on the tiers there are two fans. What good are they on the other side of the door? Our only hope for not passing out is covering these pipes with our sheets and blankets then sleeping by the door. But remember, it's two of us in a cell.

Welcome to USP Lewisburg a.k.a. The Big House, recently labeled the (S.M.U.) Special Management Unit in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. This is a super-max prison where you are locked down 23-hours a day with the chance of one hour rec, but even that is not guaranteed. This is an 18-24 month program originally designed for inmates who were/are unable to conduct themselves respectfully in population. The SMU Program is run from three institutions. The others are in Louisiana and Alabama, but Lewisburg is by far the worst of the worst.

This is a place where speaking your mind can get you handcuffed and shackled with a belly chain. You can be in this position for anywhere from 72-hours to weeks, maybe even months. You are stripped down to your boxers and in a cell barefoot. A cell that may not have been cleaned in months! Imagine having to use the toilet shackled down..It is impossible to wipe yourself properly. Depending on what side of the prison youre housed in, you may not even get a shower.

Now youre probably wondering what are we doing to get this treatment. Dont get me wrong, there are some of us who raise hell but also, as I mentioned earlier, as little as speaking your mind will get you tied down. And the cuffs and shackles are tight to the point where your skin peels and bleeds. Where I live is far beyond inhumane. The treatment is brutal and has pushed many over the edge to commit suicide.

Imagine being locked in a cage with another inmate holding a shank (knife). God forbid if youre getting stabbed, the person has at least a 30-second head start before the C.O.s show up. Even then they dont go into the cages until both inmates are cuffed. You could be struggling to find your last breath and may be asked to Cuff Up.

Welcome to the Big House!

This isnt a place for any human being. If you have been walking with me through this story, please take heed. This is as real as it gets. Brothers are dying behind these walls and the days continue like nothing ever happened.

To the children of todays society, dont become a victim to these surroundings because everything is a cover up. What you see on the Discovery Channel and MSNBC is only what theyre allowed to broadcast. Those programs are edited to scare kids and protect the prisons. This here on LIVEFROMLOCKDOWN.COM is as real as it gets.

To our youth, please take heed to situations and circumstances such as mine and stay positive. They have a cell open for the tough guys too.

With LOVE and RESPECT,

OX a.k.a The Black James Patterson

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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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The only ppl I think that type of treatment is fair to un-lease upon someone is a rapist, and a person that harms children. We should hang ppl in downtown areas for all who chose to see. Now I know that this way of thinking is inhuman, barbaric way in ways. Im a believer in The Lord and he is (I think) also against that kinda of behavior, so im a Hippocrit. I just dont believe a person with that diseased type can be cured.

My prayers are with you Quaheem. My heart cries for you and so many other inmates that treated so badly. May God be with you and protect you.

I pray Gods peace and mercy over your life! Qua I pray God open the doors to freedom for you and others keep your head up and Trust God I know this is hard but we must Trust God!!! love you!!!

@Carmel you know if you have to ask what kind of society have we become to allow this to happen there is something seriously wrong with the process of incarceration, justice, fairness and humanity.. To answer your question.. we live in a society where we are now void

of freedoms that does not allow reasonable and evidence based alternatives to incarceration, we have compromised our Constitutional rights regarding justice for all, we have thrown away a most basic principle of fairness with innocent till proven guilty, we have put up legal barriers in the due process by judges, focused on political gains in the prosecutors office require mass convictions, and total disregard to dignity and the respect of human beings adding value to life and poor ethical conduct by those in power legislating more for their own greed claiming they are doing it for the good of many by privatizing prisons for profit.. and we believe them hence they are elected..

of course, thats just my opinion but challenge me on why I feel this way..

What kind of society have we become to allow this to happen?

Since submitting this piece, the author has been moved to Florence. Readers are welcome to extend their voices of support directly by writing to:

Quaheem Edwards 10800-084
USP Florence
PO Box 7000
Florence, CO 81226-7000

Its about time to see these influential inmates taking the lead,accepting responsibility and taking action to rebuild much of what they helped tear down.

Raise UP!

Solitary Watch- Keep doing great work and taking a stand on issues of inter/national importance!

This, like all the stories, is so horrifying. There must be a public forum, beyond the occasional editorials, that can be used to publicize these atrocities.

Unbelievable cruel conditions!

And I commend this man for taking responsibility for his past actions and in warning our youth to avoid following in his foot steps. This is an important step in his personal development.

I received just such a warning as a 17 year old while traveling on a adult prison bus. In my memoir I wrote:

The hardened inmate had been seated behind me and as he passed me by he paused and looked directly in my eyes and said I too thought I was so smart and tough that I could handle whatever the man threw my way. But look at me now man. Im on my way back to Folsom and Im not sure I can handle it no more. Its the hardest time Ive ever done man, real hard, dont be a fool like me and waste away in here.

A tear rolled down this mans cheek and I felt a lump in my throat to see such a harden man break down emotionally before my eyes. I watched as he entered the gate to the reception center his head bowed while dragging his feet seemingly in no hurry to return just like the first group that I witnessed on the trip down to Los Angeles.

The inmate soon disappeared from my view as I imagined myself in his place facing tens of years of constant danger in the depressing surroundings of Folsom Prison. It had been as if he was reaching out to an image of himself years before to warn himself like the Ghost of Christmas future in Charles Dickens novel A Christmas Carol. Im sure he wished that someone would have strongly warned him before he ended up in Folsom Prison.

I find elements of this mans story all too familiar because our prisons system has not reformed for the better over the last 42 years but rather it has become more draconian.

The reality of the main line in 1967 is described by my older brother Mike below as he rises and gets dressed the morning of a major race riot. (Many details that he wrote are too gory to post.) I recently read this prison was the bloodiest of all of CA prisons because of violence of the youth held there. My brother was 17 years old at the time and unaffiliated with any gang, at 125lbs this meant he was an easy target .

Act 1:

Five thirty in the morning and the racking of the cell doors, shrilling sirens and glaring lights wake be from my dreams. Its another day at the Deuel Vocational Institution at Tracy, California, but the sun doesnt know it yet.

In my 6 X 8 accommodations, cellmate Lewis and I begin our daily routine. I dress first. Because of the bunk bed and combination toilet and sink in the cell we share, there is hardly enough room for both of us to stand at the same time, let alone dress. And because our world is governed by adrenaline diplomacy, the threat of violence is constant. Known and unknown grudges can be settled swiftly, perhaps fatally, if you let your guard down for even a moment. So Lewis stands watch outside the cell door.

I hurriedly wash my face in the chill, blackish water that dribbles from the spout. Since it is so cold, I take the precaution of shaking all my cloths out. Cockroaches make my shoes, pants, even my hair their home away from the cold. When Im finished, I relieve Lewis from his position outside our door and allow him privacy to complete his dressing.

Rumor has it that It is going to come down sometime this weekend, probably Sunday, but it could happen any day, any hour, and if it does, it can easily escalate into a full-blown riot of the worst kind racial. Most riots are focused on the bulls guards, staff but when its racial the ugliness turns inward on the inmates themselves: rapes, beatings, mutilations and often deaths. The guards wont get involved except to finally clean up the mess because this vile, this violent, they know theyre helpless and apt to be swallowed up in the insane

whirlpool.

So it comes down to every man for himself or every fraction for itself: The Black Muslims, the Mexican Mafia, the Crips, the Bloods, the Aryan Brotherhood, the American Indians from Comanche to Sioux, to your basic misfits, fruits, nuts, and vegetables, all fighting, all competing for a stake in power and control in an environment of only four square acres held loosely in check by guards who are really no healthier or better psychologically or emotionally, than the animals they watch over. It simply comes down to animals guarding animals a cesspool in a pressure cooker!

Act 2

Lewis finishes dressing and we take a quick look outside our cell door, just to make sure everything is copacetic. I take first shift on the lookout for the bull. It is now time to armor down and to get our shit together.

Our armor is crude, but effective against the wide variety of custom designed weapons each prisoner has fashioned for himself. National Geographic magazines are soaked in the toilet, two or three at a time, until they are soft. Then, with a pencil, each page is painstakingly pierced until there is an even hole running from the front cover all the way through to the back cover, at both the top and the bottom, strips are ripped from bed sheets and made into crude ropes. These strips are then threaded through each hole in the magazine, binding them side by side, ending up looking something like a womans corset. The result is, quite literally, armor plates all the way around your mid-section from under your armpits to the small of your back. Providing a knife blade doesnt land between the magazines, these National Geographics make a pretty formidable body protection. Shanks homemade knives- enable us to walk to breakfast with a further sense of safety. Hidden in each of our mattresses, our shanks are made of Plexiglas, trimmed and sharpened on both sides. The Plexiglas was taken from Prison Industries and because it is plastic, it wont set off the metal detector. The knife handles are made from wooden handles of a gardeners spade, forced onto the end of the Plexiglas, then wrapped with sticky masking tape, which enables you to get a tight grip, and best of all; no fingerprints. To be caught with a shank on you is an automatic sentence of five years, but to be caught without it could easily be a death sentence!

Ready now for breakfast, Lewis and I walk down the three flights of stairs of Cell Block A. We reach the bottom door and zip up the old Navy P coats given to us for winter, and step outside onto the compound. The walkway is covered with slimy pigeon shit, frozen over in the winter-morning dew. But were less worried about slipping and sliding on the frozen slime than we are with what may lay waiting in the shadows and corners that we have to pass to get to the Mainline cafeteria.

There exist two and only two types of riots in prison: One is literally spontaneous erupting over the smallest of incidents and spreading like wildfire. The second, more serious and deadly is slow and calculated and includes well-planned physical and sexual assaults. The impending riot promises to be one of the latter.

As best we can, we keep our heads down against the cold Northern California winter wind, at the same time staying alert to danger, yet never making eye contact with anyone we dont know or are not on speaking terms with. The wrong gesture, no matter how unintentional, or stare held too long, if not provoking, immediate reprisal, will most assuredly be accounted for if and when it finally comes down.

The cafeteria is already half full and it isnt because of the great cuisine and atmosphere: Its dangerous to lie in your bunk after the doors are racked open.

More and more convicts pile in, each morning to the self imposed area designated by his group. Lewis and I dont belong to any particular group, we try to watch out for each other, but your race tends to automatically involve you in any altercation.

We find a good spot near the door. If it kicks down maybe well be able to get out before the bulls lock everyone in from the outside. (This way, they hope to isolate the problem and let whoever are locked inside finish each other off, making it easier on them to deal with and, eventually, clean up.) ..

The scream comes from the back of the cafeteria and echoes all the way down the aisles. A white man named Tank comes running out of the bathroom, his face streaming blood.

Lewis and I are up on our feet, but were immediately knocked to the floor by a rush of men trying to make it out of the cafeteria. The doors are slammed shut by the guards outside before we can get out. One mans hand is caught between the door and the wall. His fingers are crushed off and there are only bloody stubs remaining. He falls to the floor in excruciating pain and shock.

A gurgling scream comes from the left side of the cafeteria..Sammy is nowhere to be seen.

While half the cafeteria has rushed to get out, the other half has prepared to go into combat.

There is fighting everywhere. It looks like something out of a gladiator movie, but with less sophisticated weaponry.

Blind and bleeding, Tank has somehow made it near us and has huddled down in a fetal position, whimpering like a puppy dog, obviously going into deep shock. Lewis tries to venture out and get him, and for his efforts is struck across the head with a lead pipe. Dazed, his scalp peeled back and bleeding, Lewis falls back onto me behind the turned over table. He throws up all over me, and begins to mumble something about having to go out and feed his dog.

A black guy comes screaming out from behind the serving line with hot grease on his face, his skin streaming down like a pink river. Oakie now is lying face up in a sightless stare at the ceiling, the knife still deeply embedded in his throat. Sammy comes running, dodging the small groups of fighting men, seemingly untouched, but screaming out for Lewis and me. He looks bewildered and cant find us; I see the knife lodged just under his shoulder blade. I stand up to call out to him, and theres a whizzing sound over my head, then a painless pressure strikes the top of my skull and the floor rushes up to me. There is a sound of braking glass and I can smell something, at first sweet and thick, then gagging. And I begin to dream. I am back home with my brother Al and family in North Hollywood, we are all sitting around the floor of our home and I am happy, so very happy.

Act 3

The voice is calling my name over and over again.

Hey, wake up. If I have to lay here awake staring up at the peeling ceiling so do you. As if rising from the depths of a deep dark well, the voice pulls me away from my family. I move and feel something wet and slimy as I slide my skin across it. My left wrist aches something awful. Turning, I finally waken enough to realize I am in bed in the prison hospital. The slimy feeling is the old, unchanged bed sheets Im lying in. Opening my eyes, I look up and see my left wrist has been handcuffed to the bed post. The side of my head is bandaged and the gauze hasnt been changed in quite a long time.

Man, I thought you were a goner for a while, Lewis says with a half-hearten smile. You took a good one across the head. At least, thats what they tell me.

Well, sidekick, you werent moving too swiftly either. In fact, I thought theyd taken you off the count too.

They did take Sammy off, Lewis says, turning his head and looking away.

With only a mild concussion, Im promised to be back to life as usual, lucky me.

Torture is alive an well in the Prison Industry and Hell would be in a Privatized Prison. i cannot imagine the terror lived by these people perpetrated by the US Govt in collusion with Capitalism.

Reading this article and seeing the picture of this writerone cannot help but to, feel pain because of the situation he is now in. Although, this writer do not know that much about Federal prisons, this is an eye-opener. One can feel the pain: Because no one should be in a cage as if they are an animal.Even at the zoo animals has more room than this.

To perhaps get a shower, and perhaps have some exercise is really torture. It is torture because, without a shower one can become very ill from a disease and/or a body fungus; if it is so hot inside of the cell, the body sweats; as a result, ones private areas can become seiously infected. Then there is the case of Rickets, which is extremely serious.

What is totally interesting about this particular writing, is that one not only sees the state prison side of torture, but one sees that even though the Federal government is concerned about constitutional rights of the individual.They still torture people. It is sort of like the military and their prison system.

This writer has been told, that if one does not sleep during the day, even if they feel sleeply, they can sleep all night and maintain their sanity. Reading and writing is the second key.

Im willing to bet that the inmates at this Super Max have more humanity than what is displayed by the admin workers etc. Thats just pure evil and very much inhumane living in America

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