

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/09/13/portrait-of-a-prison-whistleblower-and-his-punishment/>

## Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#) | September 13, 2012



I often tell people perhaps shocking some that a prison inmate I know, Deane Brown, is one of the most moral individuals I've ever met. This despite the fact that he had gotten in deep trouble since early childhood because, he once told me, he felt no moral compunction about taking things from well-off people.

As a consequence of that lack of scruple, he is serving 59 years for masterminding a string of burglaries in Maine in the 1990s. Its probably a life sentence.

Heres a typical Deane Brown story: Seven years ago, when he was at the Maine State Prison, the lights went out in his pod because of an electrical malfunction. There were no emergency lights.

It was pitch dark, Haley Black told me. She was a new, 21-year-old guard and the only officer in the pod, which housed 64 men. Especially for a female, all kinds of things could happen.

She was startled to find Brown, a husky man, backing up to her. Ill protect you in case something happens,' he told her.

When the lights came on, some chairs had been thrown around, but nothing had happened to her. Black, now a student at a community college, said of her protector: Hes a sweet guy.

Around the time of that incident was when I first heard of Brown. In the summer of 2005 I received an email that began: Im writing to ask you to take a hard look at the Maine State Prisons treatment of inmates at its Supermax facility in Warren, Maine.

The emails author, Ron Huber, a political activist who lives near the prison and who has a weekly call-in show on a tiny community radio station, described letters and phone calls from an inmate, Brown, who complained about the guards harshness, the unsanitary conditions, and the destructive solitary confinement of the wing of the prisonofficially, the Special Management Unitthat he had been thrust into.

I had reported on Maine government for many years, but I knew nothing about the supermax. For that matter, like most reporters, I knew nothing about prisons.

After several requests and an appeal to the governors office, I finally got to see Brown that fall. Although we were separated by thick Plexiglas in a non-contact cubicle, he was in handcuffs and leg irons. Then in his early 40s with long, dark hair and a wispy beard, he proved to be highly intelligent and articulate.

He had been held in the unit for months, he said, because guards had discovered small tools in his cell that they claimed could be used in an escape attempt. Brown said he used them to fix inmates radios.

Its supposed to be an administrative program for correcting behavior, he said of the supermax. Instead, Its creating animals.

He vividly described brutal, frequent cell extractions of severely mentally ill inmates who were in the supermax because they were incapable of following prison rules. They should be in mental institutions, he said. Solitary confinement only made them crazier and, eventually, suicidal.

His description of the supermaxmade me think of the word torture. The treatment of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at Abu Ghraibhad given the word a new resonance. Was torture accurate to describe what happened in the supermax?

Brown said yes, and the torture was both physicalfor example, cell extractions, which were essentially beatings for disobedience by a team of guards who then tied the inmate to a restraint chairand psychologicalnear-total isolation in a tiny, bare cell with the lights always on.

The most disturbed prisoners threw their feces at guards and, after cutting themselves, their blood. Those actions lengthened their supermax staysometimes, for years, after they were criminally charged with assault. Brown said the walls and ceilings were literally coated with shit and blood. In the three hours of our interview, I filled a notebook.

He had a list of other supermaxinmates who wanted to talk with me. Two days later, I interviewed four of them. That day, I filled two notebooks. The five descriptions I obtained of the supermax launched my series for the [Portland Phoenix](#) and then for other publications on Americas unique practice of mass torture.

Eventually, a prison-reform movement in Maine stimulated a new governor, Republican Paul LePage, and his new corrections commissioner, Joseph Ponte, to [dramatically reduce and reform](#) the states practice of prisoner isolation. When in June Senator Richard Durbin, the Illinois Democrat,convened the first Congressional hearing on solitary confinement, he [praised Pontes actions](#).

But Maines anti-solitary movement had begun with Deane Brown, and he paid dearly for his activism.

At first, perhaps because of the publicity given him, his situation improved. He was released from the supermax into the prison general population. Through 2006, we continued to be in close contactin person at the prison, in mail, and in information relayed to me via his phone calls to a close friend. I learned a lot about the prison, but I also learned his personal story.

Its the old story: the nexus of poverty, parental neglect, physical and sexual abuse, mental illness, lack of education, drug abuse, criminality. The story began with him chained to the sink by alcoholic parents. He spent most of his youth in psychiatric and penal institutions. In one, he said, an employee would come at night and painfully squeeze his testicles. He was six years old.

He also spent time at a private boot camp for teenager offendersElan, in Maine, now closedwhere he said he was buried up to his neck in the ground overnight on three occasions and where he said Kennedy nephew Michael Skakel, later convicted of a notorious murder, beat him up.

The New Hampshire prison system provided him his first lengthy experience with solitary confinementeight years of it. In institutions where power tends toward the absolute, challenging authority makes you unpopular with authority, and wherever Brown has been incarcerated he continually has complained about abuse andthe quintessential jailhouse lawyerhas helped other inmates with their complaints. His protests have led him to hunger strikes, refusals to take medicine, and threats to commit suicide.

In Maine in 2006, his continuing, pain-in-the-ass-to-the-prison contact with [Ron Huber](#)and me resulted, late in the year, in his being shipped out, in a prisoner exchange, to the Maryland Correctional Adjustment Center, that states supermax in Baltimore600 miles from his friends, family, and the Maine news media.

The Maine corrections commissioner at the time, Martin Magnusson, would not explain why. Later, when Brown unsuccessfully challenged the transfer in court, prison officials admitted that his contact with the press was a reason he was sent away. They also said he had helped another prisoner try to escape.

Brown maintained that he had never even met the prisoner who had tried to escape. His lack of participation in the escape plot was confirmed to me by a prisoner who admitted his own involvement.

Several Maine prison guards have told me they felt Brown got a raw deal by being exiled from Maine. He was popular with some guards and many inmates. Recently, out of the blue, a corrections officer wrote me saying hed like to help get Brown back to Maine.

Although the Catholic chaplain at the Baltimore supermax told me Brown was out of his element there because there was no violence in his prison history, he was kept in Baltimore for 20 months.

The Baltimore supermaxwas far more violent than the Maine prison, Brown told me in a recent interview, because there were no gangs in Maine. But it was in some ways looser. Prisoners could have televisions and radios. The Maryland supermaxshowed Maines to have so much overkill it was pathetic, Brown said. He has long been amazed at the arbitrariness of the supermax world.

Brown next was transferred to Western Correctional Institution in the Maryland mountains before landing in the adjacent, brand-new, high-tech North Branch Correctional Institution, with a 256-bed single-cell unit that replaced the Baltimore supermaxs role in the Maryland prison system.

These rural prisons are in a kind of correctional industrial park surrounding by forested hills and rings of concertina wire. The prisoners are mostly urban African Americans, the guards rural whites. But there are some white prisoners: white-supremacist inmates beat him up

in North Branch, Brown said, because he was friendly with blacks.

He spent much of his time in North Branch in solitary. This was punishment, he felt, for his propensity to file grievances and lawsuits often, because of the dangerous way insulin was administered for his diabetes.

He has lost most of his legal battles, but a Maryland judge awarded him \$2,500 for damages because of medical neglect. This was a rare victory for a prisoner one he was confident prison officials deeply resented.

In 2010 he was transferred to New Jersey ostensibly, he said, because of a threat to his life in Maryland. But he believed officials shipped him out because of his legal troublemaking.

He was first put in the solitary-confinement Management Control Unit of the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton where, he told me, many prisoners are mentally ill, corroborating what a former inmate there, [Ojore Lutalo](#), has told me.

Brown said Trenton put him into solitary, officials informed him, because of his locksmith skills, which he has the unfortunate habit of bragging about. He was surprised that he was treated as if I was dangerous.

Our conversation took place in the Trenton prison, a big, brick, jumbled-together complex next to a superhighway. Before I interviewed him I had to talk a guard and a public-relations minder out of putting him into the rooms iron cage.

I had visited Brown several times in Maryland. Now 48, he has long had significant health issues: diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure, thyroid trouble, waves of depression. But previously he had looked okay and cracked jokes continually with a subtle wit.

In our New Jersey interview, however, he was less animated, paler, heavier, and had a weaker voice. He said he had developed a lung infection. His diabetes was causing his feet to bleed. He was living in a quasi-medical unit in the prison general population. I feared his fight against prison conditions might finally be wearing him out.

We talked a good deal about solitary confinement. He had become an authority on the subject during his long career of incarceration for, mostly, burglaries. Besides the eight years in isolation in New Hampshire, there was a year in Maine, almost three years in Maryland, plus four months in New Jersey.

Your mentality is going to change with any prison experience, he said, but the change is more extreme in solitary because the prisoners thoughts are not shaped by social contact. Instead, you're influenced by four walls and what you think about, and what you think about is all you've got for information. So delusions are created, and there's no way to test what you're imagining against the real world no trial and error, he said. A typical delusion: You start thinking you're invincible. That delusion can get a prisoner into profound trouble.

Long periods of solitary lead to rage. For example, an inmate who had been put into solitary because he used foul language against a guard, Brown said, may begin to think, 'Now I wish I had killed the son of a bitch.' He added: Some people just crumble. They become different people.

Brown once wrote to Maine legislators when they were considering an ultimately unsuccessful bill to restrict solitary confinement: Is it right or wise to destroy our minds and spirits and then, should we survive, dump us upon an unsuspecting public?

His spirited activism has occasionally brought him support from the outside, including from the National Lawyers Guild, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and pro-bono attorneys in Maine, Maryland, and now in New Jersey.

Jean Ross, of Princeton, one of New Jersey's stalwart warriors against prisoner abuse, helped him get out of solitary and has advocated for better medical treatment. She also has given him food packages and money. She is a remarkable woman, he said.

At present, Ross is doing the legal work to try to get him back to Maine. This seems possible at last because Ponte, the corrections chief, has emerged as one of the most progressive in the country. Ponte's reductions of solitary confinement and inmate extractions were the very reforms Brown was promoting when he was sent out of state. Ponte also has instituted a new right of return policy as prison activists in Maine have taken to calling it that makes it easier for prisoners exiled to other states to apply to come back. Motivated by what happened to Brown, Ron Huber had worked with Ponte to create the new policy.

Brown sees his case hinging on whether the escape accusation against him will be believed. But the deputy warden who was his chief accuser at the Maine State Prison was fired soon after Ponte took over a promising development for Brown's chances.

The national movement against prisoner abuse including the growing movement against solitary confinement is composed of various kinds of activists: prisoner family members, civil-rights attorneys, religious people, reform-organization staff and volunteers, and journalists.

These folks have the good fortune to live outside of a prison. But there are activists like Deane Brown on the inside. They face very different challenges in, and very different consequences for, their activism. I am proud of my suffering because I know that, through it all, change has come to many, Brown once wrote me from Maryland.

Of course, his gang of burglars caused suffering to others. But he has admitted his guilt, he has spent far longer in prison than he would have spent for similar crimes in any other civilized country, and his suffering has been considerable throughout his life.

When some people experience great suffering, they become insensitive to the suffering of others or even want to inflict pain on others. But in prison Brown's reaction has been different.

Ross, his attorney, tells of a New Jersey prisoner in a wheelchair who deeply insulted Brown while he was transporting him within the prison. Some inmates insisted that the prison culture required that Brown hit the man. But Brown wouldn't do it.

Ross comments: I have great respect for Deane because he demonstrates his obvious compassion for others with action even actions that place him in jeopardy.

*Lance Tapley is a freelance investigative reporter based in Maine. His work frequently appears in the Portland Phoenix. He contributed Mass Torture in America to the anthology The United States and Torture, published by NYU Press.*

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

i was in the mental health units both in thomaston and warren from 1998-2002 almost 4 years straight. i believe i am the most verifiable and trustworthy witness to any case between those years. i was highly trusted and worked in the wardens office and for the unit. I first hand saw 90% of all atrocities including the cover up of multiple assisted suicides by a sadistic inmate.

after my best friend killed himself with the instructions and influence of said sadist i made a complaint that was met by threats and then i was rapidly transitioned to min security and bumped to top of list to the farm and transferred with many signed recommendations from all levels of staff.

in addition i had the pleasure of visiting the maine youth center in the early-mid 90s including many days in the secure unit again witnessing many terrible events.

so if anyones interested in more send me an email my story of how i got into prison and the mental health unit is just as interesting.

I noticed the side bars reference to SF Bay Views front page which reads:

California prisoners make historic call for peace between racial groups in California prisons and jails

September 12, 2012

This will totally unnerve the guards!

But lets hope this peace spreads nationally.

Less violence should translate into less isolation.

This is the best chance to ease or totally eliminate the scourge of long term isolation.

Is it right or wise to destroy our minds and spirits and then, should we survive, dump us upon an unsuspecting public? Yes, this is done to prepare for potential Board of Parole Hearing in order to find reason to not release. Prisoner breeding nation executes happy sentencing, tough on crime and backwardness as humanity is concerned. Leading merciless. Model to the globe.

In the following description lays an important clue to prison violence which prison officials then site as the reason for these isolation units.

The prisoners are mostly urban African Americans, the guards rural whites.

Rural white guards and urban African Americans in adversarial roles = mutual hatred.

Since the guards are armed most of the resentment they create is redirected to a easier target for vengeance as this line eludes to.

But there are some white prisoners

Rather than feeling racially superior most white inmates feel quite vulnerable.

White inmates feel cohesion in their ranks is a matter of survival not of white supremacy.

Having these inmates at each others throats is very much encouraged by these guards who then sit back and enjoy the carnage.

One needs to understand this when you read such statements as the following:

white-supremacist inmates beat him up in North Branch, Brown said, because he was friendly with blacks.

.a New Jersey prisoner in a wheelchair who deeply insulted Brown while he was transporting him within the prison. Some inmates insisted that the prison culture required that Brown hit the man. But Brown wouldnt do it.

Fraternizing or showing weakness in face of an enemy is going to have consequences in prison. Unfortunately this is not exclusive to one group but a fact of life for all inmates.

When violence between the factions flares up the guards loudly proclaim:

You see theyre all animals so we have to lock them up to protect them and us!

Then this inmates questions reminds us:

Is it right or wise to destroy our minds and spirits and then, should we survive, dump us upon an unsuspecting public?

Great question!

I cannot blame anyone for wanting to escape such a vindictive and corrupt system that punishes them for asking such a question.

P.O. Box 11374  
Washington, DC 20008

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

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



**Solitary Watch News**