

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/08/19/voices-from-solitary-welcome-to-supermax/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | August 19, 2011

Pornchai Moontri was sent to Maine State Prison at the age of eighteen and has served the first 20 years of a 45-year sentence. Born in rural Thailand, he was brought to the United States at the age of eleven by his mother and American stepfather and endured years of abuse. His early life, as well as his crime, incarceration, and conversion to the Catholic faith, have been described in an [autobiographical essay](#).

In the following piece, titled Super Max, Pornchai Moontri writes about his introduction to solitary confinement in Maine State Prison's supermax unit. It includes a description of being forcibly extracted from his cell by a Correctional Emergency Response Team, or CERT, a scenario similar to the one caught on video [here](#).

This account originally appeared on the blog [Voices from the Cracks](#), maintained by Sophie Inchains, who describes it as a project with the purpose of allowing prisoners to express themselves in the public sphere. We believe that visibility is key to undermining the systems that are created to oppress and silence the marginalized. This blog is not a celebration of crimes nor in anyway does it seek to invalidate the experience of victims, only recognize that prisoners are still human and need to be heard.

The time I spent in a New England state prison's Super Max unit is not easy to write about. It changed me more than I care to acknowledge or talk about. I spent three-and-one-half years in one stretch in Super Max. Of thirteen years in that prison system, more than half of it was spent in Super Max.

The first time I was sent to Super Max was kind of scary. I was sent there because I was accused by confidential inmate informants of planning to make a homemade bomb to try to blow up the prison. I was nineteen years old, and had been in prison only four months when I was sent to Super Max.

When I first saw the place, it looked really tough. It had rows and rows of razor wire around its perimeter, cameras at every turn, and three check points before you even get to the entrance. As I was getting out of the prison van at Super Max, I was met by six SERT Team guys in full riot gear. They told me what they expected of me: no quick movements; keep my head up and my eyes forward; no speaking at all unless I was asked a question. I was told that if I did not obey these rules perfectly upon command, as they put it, I would be dumped on my ass! They really knew how to make a guy feel welcomed.

Once inside, when I first stepped onto the pod, it was the smell that I noticed first. The smell of urine and fecal matter was so overwhelming, I thought I might get sick. I was taken to a cell, and locked in. My very first thought was that I didn't want to touch anything. It was filthy. Then I knew that I would have to clean the place up before I could possibly live there, but I have nothing to clean with no cleaning supplies at all. Before I could ask the corrections officer (c/o) for something to clean with, the guy in the cell next to me told me that it would be easier to just set off the fire sprinkler system to douse the cell. About ten minutes after the deluge began, the SERT Team was at my cell door to extract me from it.

I wrestled with four of them for a few minutes before they got me to the floor, and beat me like a dog. My arm was so twisted behind my back, I thought it would break. With a booted foot pressing my bare head to the concrete floor and another on my neck, my leg bent so far backward that my foot pressed against my butt, I was powerless.

Then I was placed in the black chair, chained and cuffed, and unable to move at all. After five hours in the black Chair, I was asked if I was calm now, and ready to be

taken back to my cell. I said something sarcastic and angry, and just spend longer in the chair. Unfortunately for me, that was not my last time in the black chair. I was brought back to it many times usually for three or four hours at a stretch. I just didn't seem to learn my lesson.

Finally, I was brought back to my cell, cleaned by the sprinkler system just as my neighbor said it would be. It got cleaned the hard way! That was my first day in Super Max.

The Super Max cell had nothing in it but a stainless steel toilet, a bunk, and a stainless steel table bolted to the wall. The window in the cell door was about twelve by sixteen inches. Any time I had to be moved or let out of the cell, I was placed in four-point restraints, hands and feet, and then stripped to be searched after every movement.

Every day there was the same monotony: breakfast at 0530 followed by forty-five minutes alone in the rec pen. That was like a big dog cage. I could take exactly eleven steps inside it and then back again. It was about five feet wide and eight feet long with chain link on all sides and above. It really was a cage. I could have a fifteen-minute shower five times a week, and one fifteen-minute telephone call per week. There was no use of a TV or radio.

Lunch was always at 11:30 and dinner at 4:30. Four times a day guards would come to count me at the same time every day. I would have to stand up or sit on the concrete bunk. I was allowed to look at three books per week. I would take any books that were big so they would last a long time. I read the Bible cover to cover twice. I read Stephen King books because they were big. I also read Shogun and any other large novel I could get. At 0700 every day, someone would come by with a tube of toothpaste, put a dab on my finger, and I would brush with that.

Super Max was so depressing and so solitary that prisoners would try to cut themselves deeply or hang themselves just to get out of there. Since this Super Max prison opened in 1992, there have been three inmate deaths there by suicide (one was a suspected homicide), and hundreds of prisoners were seriously injured. One prisoner was extracted from his cell so he could not harm himself, and then he died from the injuries he sustained while being extracted.

The longer a prisoner stayed in Super Max, the more anti-social he became. Inmates would do anything to try to break up their day and entertain themselves. Some played with their own urine and feces, and others used those as weapons, throwing them at the guards after calling their names to get their attention. Some of the more manipulative would talk other prisoners into acting up. I know today that we acted like animals because we were treated like animals.

I survived Super Max by doing as many as 1,500 push-ups a day, and venting as much of my anger, frustration, and energy as possible into physical fitness. In a way, this also worked against me. The more physically strong I became, the more I was treated like a dangerous animal. I knew that self-discipline was my only way to stay sane, so I lived a strict regimen of exercise for many years.

When I finally left Super Max for good, I had a lot of emotional problems. I was angry, depressed, often hostile, and anti-social. Then I was transferred to an adjacent states prison system where I had a new beginning. I found a lot of help here, and all the baggage of those long hard years left me in time. I never want to go back. I am 38 years old now, and haven't seen freedom for almost 20 years. However, I have learned that freedom begins on the inside, not the inside of a prison but the inside of my own soul. It is there that I am free.



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

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.

HELLO MAX

I've just finished reading your essay and was so over-taken with the realization that the road to Jesus is, indeed, narrow and rocky. As I continued on, the feeling, also continued, that our Great God will and does allow us to go thru so much pain, depending on our condition, to turn us toward Him. He never, however, ever asks us to suffer more than He's asked His Own Son. With the pain that we sometimes go thru, it's kind of hard to realize

how much Jesus actually did suffer.

Having said that, please understand how much your words hurt me for you. This world is, for sure, becoming more and more evil. It confuses me, at times, trying to understand why people seem to enjoy hurting others. Its a fact, they do, but I cannot comprehend it. I have some unique hurts in my past, some of which I am amazed that I am sane. Like You, Fr. Gordon, and many others, I honestly believe these situations are exactly what save us and maybe bestow upon us the gift of His humility, to a point, so that He may use us, in some way or another, for His Glory.

What good could we possibly be to some poor soul, who hits bottom, if we had not shared the same experience as they? I have a feeling, Max, that Our Good God hasnt even begun to use you yetso hold onto your bootstraps, it may be an exciting ride.

God bless you, Max, and know that you have another friend to pray for you. Fr. Gordon is prayed for every dayplaced on one of my most favored, international, prayer linesand you will be accompanying him, there, daily.

Thank you for your wonderful blogyour personal essay. It surely speaks of great loss and success where it counts. And, your witness will also give glory to our God and others, who NEED to hear your deliverance from darkness into Light, because it acts as a sign post pointing others in the direction they need to travel.

Praising God for You.

A friend in Jesus,

Helen

Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.
Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. Mt 5:15

Those beds inside a SuperMax are created on a self-fulfilling prophecy that creates a mindset that justifies the actions taken. Many prisoners housed inside a SuperMax can be kept at a lower custody level but because of politics and other internal admin reasons that prejudice and create stereotyping and biased thinking in their classification, they are locked up and forgotten to punish them even further than the system is designed to do. This madness is out of control as the people that work inside these places are convinced that its an us versus them issue and creates additional hostilities that create longer time to serve inside such a place. The culture is growing and that is scary as this practice decimates the human mind in both short term and long term placements. Mixing the mad (mentally ill) and the bad (behavioral) prisoners is a lethal combination that results in high suicides and more violence. This practice of solitary confinement should be reviewed and addressed by the DOJ if they are really interested in justice.

This is a day in the life of one of our good friends, and its something all of our friends should read.

This is an excellent article about one young mans terrible ordeal in an abusive prison system. I have interviewed Pornchai Moontri for an article of my own, and find that he is an extraordinary young man who has become the gifted person he is in spite of a system with many obstacles. My article, Pornchai Moontri at the Narrow Gate is linked below:

http://araminthethicket.blogspot.com/2011/07/pornchai-moontri-at-narrow-gate_22.html

you speak true of the scars solitary leaves i was never in a prison but i have had my owen long run in with a form of solitary my self and i to was at fist not wanting to admit the chanes it cosed me to go thow and was a bit if not at fist vary inbarested by it but like you siad in time moest of it gose a way at least but never all of it sadly i a glad to hear you are no longer thare no one should be put thow solitary let a lone in a supermax you are a strong soul you done what meny can not you have clawed your way back from the hell that is the plane of justice well done i hope you one day get out of the plane all the way out that is may thare be light in the darknes of justice

In Colorado, we dont have enough minimum facility prisons but we recently added another 300 Supermax beds across from our older Colorado State Penitentiary, which houses nearly 900 of the worst of the worst. Odd that Colorado seems to have so many prisoners who are so bad to the bone they just cannot be managed in general population. And, while prison budgets are cut and programs decimated, more prisoners are being sent to our very expensive Ad-Seg units. We have prisoners who entered as juveniles and who, more than a decade later, are too mentally damaged to EVER be released. So they will end their life sentences walled away from all that makes us human.

We destroy our fellow men and women and then elect to bury what is left of them in these barbaric tombs. Americans love to crow about American Exceptionalism. What does it say about us when the only things we excel at are violence, torture, and spiritual annihilation? What has happened to Americas soul?

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