

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/10/12/voices-solitary-live-day-contemplating-death/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | October 12, 2013

The following comes from Toby Chavez, currently in solitary confinement at the Penitentiary of New Mexico. He is serving a life sentence for first degree murder and armed robbery, a conviction he is appealing, and will be eligible for parole after 30 years. Chavez has been incarcerated since 1999, and has spent over a decade in solitary confinement in and out of the state. Like others across the country, he is housed in segregation for alleged gang affiliation. Allowed one non-contact visitation a month, he has been unable to hug or kiss a loved one since his 2009 marriage to his wife, Christy.

Christy has made the following observation of how Tobys incarceration and protracted terms in solitary confinement have affected him: Over the years I have seen his attitude change in the fact that he is seeing more clearly that the best chance he has to come home is to stay out of trouble and to get as much education as he possibly can. He obtained his GED in 2012. He has become more compassionate for others and understanding. However, I have also seen that being in solitary makes him extremely sensitive to anything that is out of routine such as a lock-down, not getting mail from me, a cell change, etc etc. He worries endlessly over the health of his mother, and if he will even see her on the outside again. Sal Rodriguez

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Living life in solitary confinement has been the most horrendous experience Ive had to endure in all my 43 years on this earth. I have been in prison for 15 years, 13 of them in solitary confinement. Solitary confinement is designed to dehumanize, cause a person to become dependent, and spiritually break an inmate to the core of his soul.

Each and everyday that comes and goes takes a piece of humanity away from me to the point I dont really know who I am. The lack of human contact I have with other inmates is like being thrown into a black hole and completely forgotten! I havent been able to hug, kiss or hold a family member in over 14 years! Im not able to receive visits from my wife or have any type of real quality time with my loved ones. Im stuck, alone and have very few words I can speak with other human beings. Im forced to eat every meal, exercise, and play games by myself. I laugh at myself sometimes because its the only voice I can hear. My own shadow has literally become my only friend. If and when I get the opportunity to speak with my wife, mom, or loved ones, I have to put on a mask with a smile, because I never want them to see the monster Im becoming by the psychological damage created by solitary confinement. I live each day contemplating death, throwing in the towel and just calling it quits. A person can only take so much loneliness.

The staff of the DOC are trained to say only one word, no. If I were to ask for such basic necessities such as toilet paper, tooth brush, soap, blankets, or even writing paper, the answer is always no! Since I am stuck in my cell twenty three hours a day it is impossible to retrieve these items on my own. I am forced to be dependent on the staff to bring these basic human needs in order to keep a proper hygiene status and maintain a decent state of mind. Now mind you, if the staff does not approve of the color of your skin, race, charges of your incarceration, or just the way you look, they are not obligated to bring you anything. I am forced to live in a tomb like room made of cinder black and concrete. There are no mirrors to see my reflection and nothing to remind me of the outside world.

Everyday I am forced to bend at the waist and spread my butt cheeks during a strip search, not to mention running my fingers through my mouth and then picking up my testicles to show the staff that I am not trying to hide and drugs, weapons, or contraband, as I attend one hour of recreation in the yard, which I am again in solitary, inside a cage much like a dog run. Then I must repeat the same process as I return back to my cell, even after my cell was searched as well as my person. Laughter comes far and in-between the days, months, and even years of life in solitary confinement. In reality there is nothing to smile or laugh about.

Solitary Confinement isnt fit for an animal at the zoo. Therefore even the animals that are caged have some type of companion to play with, share meals with, or even pro-create and spend their days with. Our conditions have made up a way of living life that we do not understand the definition of the word rehabilitation. We are not allowed to enjoy liberties of prison life, such as maintaining a job, learning a skill, having access to the library for education, working in a hobby shop, or helping to maintain the compound. Trying to learn a sense of responsibility and learning the concept of being independent and taking care of myself, and preparing to return back into society and become productive members of our communities, is almost impossible. Instead, we are thrown into the tomb like room, told to shut up, ask for nothing and do as we are told.

Being thrown into a black hole and being completely forgotten about, isn't what was meant when the Judge gave each and every one of us our sentence. Our punishment was to be stripped of our freedom and taken away from our loved ones and to realize our wrong doings, not to become monsters and products of psychologically damaged victims of solitary confinement.

After years of this torture, and realizing I have been a victim of solitary confinement, scares me to my core. Will I survive on the outside? Will I be able to be held by my loved ones, after all these years of no human contact? Will I even be myself again? The person I was before solitary confinement shattered my spirit? Hopefully one day, solitary confinement will come to an end, and I won't have to wear that mask I do with my loved ones any longer. At least I can dream!

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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a. holmes how bout not murdering another human being. novel right????? too many bleeding hearts round here again eye for an eye does stop the recidivism does it not ??? so the death sentence system does work people. also saves coin over the next couple of decades spent in prisons

there is no rehab for murder save Jesus they forfeit life in this world be glad ur still breathing and able to maybe come to your creator before ya head to Hell apart from Jesus

Thanks for sharing our story. It is heartbreaking to know that Toby is not the only one that faces this pain everyday, or our family. I hope that one day we will all see an end to solitary confinement, and I hope to get to hold my husband!!!

Americans just don't give a shit and yet they try to educate the whole world about human rights. Hypocrites. The truth is that they are still in the Dark Ages when it comes to handling crime. Look at Norway for example. They know how to rehabilitate people.

What pressures are being put on New Mexico to stop such barbaric practices?

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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