

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | February 18, 2014

This post is the first in a series of pieces Solitary Watch will be publishing for a new project calling for people held in solitary confinement to write on various proposed themes. For these pieces, Solitary Watch periodically suggests a specific theme for regular project participants to reflect on in their writings. For each individual topic, we will post several entries, each featuring the work of man or woman held in isolation. Our first theme suggestion calls for participants to describe a day in his or her life in solitary confinement.

The following response comes from Sarah Jo Pender, 34, who is currently 13 years into a 110-year sentence for murder, though she continues to maintain her innocence. She is being held at the Indiana Womens Prison on the far west side of Indianapolis. After [escaping from prison](#) in 2008, she was placed in solitary confinement. Last week, Solitary Watch received word that, after spending over five years in isolation, Pender was recently moved out of solitary to a transition dorm, where she will remain 90 days before being moved back with the general population. Lisa Dawson

My name is Sarah Jo Pender. I have been held under the wide thumb of prison administrators for five years in solitary confinement at the Indiana Womens Prison. My official punishment for escaping ended four years ago, but I am still here and there is nothing I can do to get myself out.

Generally, women in segregation are held between two weeks and six months, though multiple offenses can extend sentences to years of punishment. The isolation unit is comprised of twenty-five single cells along one hall separated from general population. My cell is 7 x 10 of painted concrete, white and chipping, with a barred, sealed window at the rear and a steel door with a small observation window at the front. A slab of concrete and thin mattress makes my bed. A stainless steel sink and toilet encrusted with years of use sits three feet from my head when I sleep.

Food is never hot and is served on plastic trays through a hatch in the door. Sometimes, it is tolerable only if I don't chew it first. Unpalatable globs of flour that was once upon a time pasta is drenched in a tomato base and served sixteen different ways mixed with mechanically separated chicken bits and soy pellets marked for animal feed. However, the bread is always edible and I can buy a jar of peanut butter if I want. What a luxury.

Here, it is cold. Artificial ventilation blows directly onto my bed so that no amount of repositioning brings relief from the chill. My bed must be made by 7 a.m. each day, so that I cannot access my full bed linens during the day when it is the coldest. The captain threatens to strip our cells of belongings, including all bedding if we are caught covering ourselves with the sheets during the day. I am wearing three pairs of socks right now, and my toes are purple and stinging cold.

I am confined to my cell 22 hours each day, and the other 2 hours am handcuffed and escorted 25 feet down the hallway to another locked room for recreation and exercise, though the space is only twice the size of my cell. In the largest room, I can take nine steps before I must turn around again and again. But there is a television that I can watch public broadcasting and lots of books. Books keep us sane. Since books are a main source of time management and entertainment, the prison uses them as a method of punishment. Women on disciplinary status are only allowed one non-religious book and one religious book at a time. I am allowed to possess up to five books. If we are caught with too many books during a room search, we are subject to further discipline.

Six days a week, my hands are restrained through the door hatch and an officer escorts me into a shower room. Four stalls line one wall; each stall is enclosed by three concrete walls and a steel mesh door that shuts us in and gets locked. I have fifteen minutes to shower with an army of black bugs on the walls. Black mold peppers the baseboards and thick scales of scum cling to ripped shower curtains. Then I am recuffed and escorted back to my perpetually cold cell.

As a kid, I slept with my bedroom door cracked for a sliver of the hall light to visually orient me when my bladder woke me up at night. Now, my room is constantly lit even at 2 a.m. I can push a button to dim the fluorescent bulbs, but I can never, ever sleep in darkness. However, the nights are usually quiet, except for the occasional slamming metal door, ringing phone, and piercing scream from one of the actively psychotic or suicidal women housed on the unit.

Despite knowing that isolation can drive people insane, the mental health care here is woefully inadequate. Once a month, a mental health staff comes to ask us if we are hallucinating, hearing voices, or are suicidal. More frequent meetings can be requested, but they offer no coping skills, no therapy, no advocacy. The luckiest among us are prescribed anti-depressants to numb us from the hardest parts

of being alone. I am fortunate to have incredible support from my family and friends. To pass the time, I read, write, learn and plan for the future when I can be with them again. What sanity I eek out of these letters, books, phone calls and visits is enough to sustain me just a little longer. I am mentally stable now, but my mind broke down under the weight of isolation 3 1/2 years ago, and it was a long, slow, painful process of putting myself back together.

Acutely psychotic women who refuse medication are frequently locked in a cell where they bang and talk and argue with voices, scream about God and demons, and/or refuse to shower or eat for fear of being poisoned. This can go on for weeks until some invisible threshold is crossed and E-Squad officers dressed in full riot gear come in, hold her down, and a nurse injects her with an anti-psychotic medicine. This scene gets repeated every two weeks until she cooperates.

Other women who enter sane will become so depressed that they shut down or hurt themselves. I watched a woman claw chunks of flesh from her cheeks and nose and write on the window with her blood. My neighbor bashed her head against the concrete until officers dragged her to a padded cell. When she returned, the scab on her forehead was huge and shaped like the country of Brazil. Right across from my cell, a woman slit her own throat with a razor and was wheeled out on a gurney. Two others tried to asphyxiate themselves with bras and shoestrings. Now no one has shoestrings and we shuffle around in floppy tennis shoes with loose tongues. Once, I found some embroidery floss and tied up the middle lace holes to keep myself from tripping. A guard demanded that I give her the five inch strings and then formally punished me for this violation. Another woman cut her wrists using the metal band around a pencil eraser. Now, all our pencils are stripped naked. It is always the poor prisoner porter who is forced to clean up the blood puddles and shit smears left behind when someones mind spirals down the rabbit hole.

How is this an acceptable management tool for human beings? Short-term isolation is understandably useful for investigations, medical quarantines, emergencies, etc., but using long-term isolation to manage behavior is inhumane and hateful, especially when prison administrators do not offer a clear alternative. There is no behavioral therapy, no guidance, no education. There are no identified, achievable goals for the prisoner to earn her way out of isolation. The decisions seem arbitrary and capricious at best. There is no due process to protect our miniscule civil rights.

In the thirteen years I have been held prisoner, I have never committed an act of violence. I escaped from another prison over five years ago with the help of a prison guard. I essentially walked out of the back door. Today, that guard is at home a free man while I am still kept in this earthly purgatory. Why and for how long I do not know, because the prison administrators refuse to tell me. Hows that for human rights in America?

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

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 saw the movie and it left me with a sick feeling. Then I saw the solitary confinement punishment and now I feel ashamed that such a thing is happening to a human being. I read your description of what is taking place. I know others who have been in solitary confinement. For this to be happening in a civilized society requires a terrible denial. Guilt until innocence is proven is the opposite of innocence until guilt is proven. Because of Jesus Christ we are innocent until guilt is proven.

I was incarcerated at IWP for almost 4 years and did only a 3 day stint in solitary for a mental breakdown. Everything she describes is true. It was horrible and dehumanizing. I met Sarah and she is kind and very well educated. My heart goes out to her as well as all the women in IDOC. At times guilt would consume me because I had an outdate. I would think about how some of the women, no matter falsely accused or guilty, would not see any better than that place. Stay strong Sarah. There are people out here who met you on the inside praying for you.

My heart goes out to her for the punishment she is enduring. Mass murderers do not get this type of cruelty. I will be praying Gods will for Sarah. This Indiana Womens prison should be investigated. I really do not know how she is surviving the way she is forced to live her life. God be with her.

I have read about this case and about your trial sarah. It is disturbing and bothers me because I know Pennington was lying, and he raped again Jenifer Pender I reside in Boston, Massachusetts and Id like to write to Sarah in support in many ways.. I do not know her address but if someone can get it for me I would appreciate it. I have empathy for this story deeper for certain reasons

I believe that you have done your time and should be free. Good luck to you Sarah.

Timsa

Sarah the only life we get is the life we choose to make. With or without a future.

Association determines location.

Though we are warned so many times that we are on the wrong road, we always hope that all will work out for us proving the choice we made was right.

The choice you made to follow your heart, as all say is good, was a heart filled with suffering and pain. Most People can only follow what they

want for themselves, selfishness, control and ownership. Such was the case with your partner. The only choice you should have made was the first choice your heart yearned for, that was your own space.

No one ever wants to hurt anyone to get our desired life.

Choose life today. Look up and see how Jesus Christ is the best choice you can every make.

Although you are locked out from the outside world, this will be true freedom.

Today choose life and be truly free.

I was at Rockville for a year. The women in these prisons are at the mercy of corrections officers who are on a power trip and know they can do or say anything to these women, and never have any consequences. I was there for adding a refill to a prescription of pain pills. I have never been violent, and I never hurt another human being. The biggest misconception is that prison is for the worst of the worst criminals. Most of us had the mental disorder of addiction, and were convicted of non-violent, victimless crimes. The second biggest misconception is that prisoners receive rehabilitation, counseling, or treatment. This is absolutely false. In Indiana, if you are not sentenced to at least 3 years-there is no treatment. Even if a judge orders it-you cannot get what does not exist. I shared this with my local police chief and judge who had no idea this was the case. Basically, they took me from a job I had for 7 years and caged me for one year then let me out. Most people in prison will return to their community the same person that went in-but with a lot of bitterness and anger. Our state constitution states that our penal system is set up for reformation not vindictive justice. This means prison is to rehabilitate, not just punish. However, in Indiana-this is the biggest lie of them all.

Better than being dumped like garbage. now shut up and do your time!

I have just watched your story on tv in Australia. I feel for you and i have to say keep your hopes up. Lindy Chamberlain the lady who always claimed a dingo took her baby served 3 years before she was found to have been wrongly convicted. So i guess where there is life there is always hope.

I am disgusted at the conditions that you have to endure.

I just watched the Lifetime movie last night and am so intrigued by your story. Praying you get out of that hell hole soon.

Just a matter of time and its looking like there may be a new trial and larry sells on your side this around with new evidence. Thats great. Hopefully within a couple years youll be out with time served 4 the crimes you did commit.

Sarah I seen your movie on Lifetime and an episode of snapped with you a few months back. And since I have read everything I can on your case for some reason I cant shake my interest in what you have gone through. Maybe because I 100% believe you had no part in the murders although you very well may have taken place in disposing the bodies and went on the run with your ex out of fear maybe. I also believe the Indiana corrections department will hold you in confinement as long as possible because you made every one of them look like fools with your escape. That prison needs to be shut down when theres multiple guards convicted of having sex with inmates and hiring psychotic mass murders as guards like Steven Kazmierczak. But 3, 4, 5 years of that type of punishment is very inhumane. I hope you are able to keep your sanity while trying to battle the justice system. I believe you have so many supporters who do not think you belong in prison period. Who knows if you will ever walk free but keep your head up and pray for the future. write back if you want to if they allow you to do so. I dont think you can read these though. Josh

This is for my dear sweet little sister Sarah. I know that the hands of justice have not served you well. We miss you everyday, and pray that there is someone out there that can find the one bread crumb to finally get you the justice you so deserve. If anyone doesnt believe you then they are ill informed and should probably do so research before going on a witch hunt. Indiana department of corrections has not only stripped you many times of humane rights. They have also stripped you of basic rights that even dogs in shelters get. I love you sis stay strong!

I have read all her stories from everywhere. From her movie, book, google, Wikipedia you name it. Its sad its frustrating to see an innocent woman behind bars. She didnt kill her roommates. Im not going by her word but by evidence. That letter was fake. Again evidence. The only mistake she made was not reporting the crimes and escaping from jail but those sentence should of been served and along time ago she should of been released. Its amazing how in many famous cases in the US such as that of Casey Anthony for example all the evidence is pointed to her though she is found not guilty but here you have NO evidence to charge a woman with murder yet gets convicted. I dont understand and I wont ever understand. She is innocent and its stupid how people cannot realized that. Guys evidence is the number 1 key. People. Geez. Let her go. Give her a fair trial. She doesnt deserve to be behind bars. Even if her only role was manipulation. Im sorry if someone where to manipulate me to kill someone and I do it. I am fully responsible. I cannot blame Noone for my own actions and this was totally the case. I hope one day shes free.

Hi Jenifer,

How is Sarah doing now?

tell sarah that she has now a new friend in belgium!!thanks jenifer

Sarah what the prison administrators are doing to you is barbaric and wrong I live in California, if you would like to write me then go ahead, I hope things go better for you.

I dont understand why ur still there Your ex boyfriend said that he was the killer!!!! And admitted that he wrote the letter to make you pay his mistake ..!!!

Just got finished watching your movie. Smoking hot actress plays you. I just wa t to wish you some good fortune. I believe you didnt do it. Write me if ya wanna chat.

Mmmm wonder if shes even telling the truth?

I am an ex-offender from RCF also and while I was in there I did a stint in Lock where you are at. At that time we were allowed to get under our blankets at any time of the day. They actually wanted us to sleep because it kept everyone quiet and not disturb the Guards. The way they are treating you now is horrific. I can only imagine what you are going thru. Keep your head up Sarah and know that there are women out here that are praying for you and your release.

I am an ex-offender from RCF. Although I know about your crimes, and having to deal with my own incarceration, I find it almost barbaric how they are treating you. If there is anything that I can do for you, contact me please.. Your piece was well written, and I must say that whatever you are doing to keep your sanity, keep doing it! Stay Strong!

Martin J. McNally,

I hope this finds you doing well. I would like to get in touch with you to speak about your history both before and after imprisonment. Would you be open to this? I hate to use this as a means to communicate, but if you reply yes, then I could get in touch with Solitary Watch and they could put us in contact. Or feel free to contact me at lobays@hotmail.com
Thank you.

A 110-year sentence?! This is quite surreal. It conjures up some pretty grotesque images.

I write incarcerated people in 12 states and recently received a request for help from a mentally ill person who requested psychiatric care and when the Elmira Prison did not help this individual he attempted suicide. I wrote Governor Cuomo and he sent me a form letter saying he would forward my letter to the proper agency. I also wrote Senator Parker. I hesitated because when I attempt to help a prisoner, retaliation takes place against the inmate. The inmate insists he has no family members to advocate for him and I asked for his permission and received permission to proceed in alerting government officials.

After reading this letter by Sarah Pender, I am ashamed of my own freedom. Our vast prison apparatus is unworthy of us as a free people.

Please do provide an address for these letters. Trough my weekly radio show, I reach the inmates at Pelican bay.
Much appreciated,
Sista

THESE WOMEN IN INDIANA ARE BEING TORTURED !!!!! THANKS FOR THIS NOTICE. I WILL SEND A SMOKING HOT E-MAIL TO THE DIRECTOR OF INDIANA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS ASKING SAME TO INVESTIGATE THOSE CONDITIONS OF CONFINEMENT and MAKE CORRECTIONS. THE WOMEN CANT LAY UNDER THEIR BLANKETS DURING THE DAY????? THIS IS A TORTURE SITUATION!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! AND THE FOOD MENU NEEDS TO BE REVIEWED !!!!

Your new program of describing a day in solitary is great! I want to share it with my pen pals. Please provide your snail mail address so they can mail you directly. No one in Californias solitary gulags have access to the internet. thank you

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