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## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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A COVID-19 Quarantine Brings Back the Trauma of Years in Solitary Confinement

by [Voices from Solitary](#) | January 11, 2021

*The following piece was written by Judith Vasquez, a 64-year-old woman incarcerated at Edna Mahon Correctional Facility for women (EMCF) in Clinton, New Jersey. Prior to her incarceration, Vasquez was the first female licensed electrician in Jersey City and also did plumbing, carpentry, locksmithing, and mechanics. She was first arrested at age 32 and she was held in solitary confinement at the county jail for three years before and during her trial. She was tried in 1995 and sentenced to thirty years to life for first-degree murder, though she still maintains her innocence and is fighting to have her conviction overturned. At EMCF, she experienced several more years of solitary confinement in the maximum security section of the prison. A federal investigation in April 2020 found that [at least ten women held at EMCF had been sexually abused by staff](#) and the prison now faces a coronavirus outbreak, with two incarcerated people dead from the virus. Vasquez will be eligible for parole next year, though her freedom depends on the parole board. Vasquez has two daughters and four grandchildren, two of whom she has never met.*

*In this piece, Vasquez describes the 14-day quarantine in solitary confinement that women at EMCF face when they enter the prison during the COVID pandemic. Vasquez herself experienced this quarantine when she returned to the prison after a hospital stay. She details how the isolation worsened her already poor health and caused mental breakdowns and emotional pain because it brought back her previous years in solitary. Vasquez calls for prisons to find alternatives to placing survivors of solitary in isolated quarantine cells because it can be highly re-traumatizing. For Vasquez, it nearly cost her her life. Melat Eskender*

I remember when I was first taken to jail. Slam shut, the door went. I did not come back out for three years. For reasons unknown to me, I ended up in solitary confinement. Locking someone in a cold cell for years can bring on serious mental problems. Once that big steel door slams shut behind you, you cant get out. This is when your mind starts to run. Sometimes its running so fast, youll be running on empty. This is when the mental breakdown begins.

Its easy for someone to say that three years is not a long time. To me it felt like a lifetime. Solitary not only blocks you as a person from living life, but it detaches your mind from reality. It happened to me when they threw me into a cell.

Three years in solitary confinement can change a person. It can turn you into a person you always feared being. Even years after you survived this confinement, your life will never be the same. No matter how much therapy you undergo, and even after you may reclaim a normal state of mind, there will always be setbacks. A change can transpire and make things go from better to worse in a snap of a finger. For example, any return to isolation can trigger flashbacks from a time when you were in solitary confinement.

I have been in prison now for 29 years, serving a 30-to-life sentence for someone elses crime. I am 64 years old. I have osteoporosis, osteoarthritis, and osteophytosis. I have blood clots in my lung, I have a heart condition, pulmonary embolism, asthma, spinal stenosis, and a whole bunch of stuff that comes with old age. Then I once again faced the mental breakdown that comes with solitary confinement.

Since this coronavirus came about, I have watched on TV how people need to be quarantined at home. Some of these people say that this causes discomfort or that they felt they were losing their minds. Yet, these people had every necessity to survive anything coming their way while being locked in their home for 14 days. I would like to share with these people what losing your mind is like during a 14-day prison quarantine.

I just recently suffered an injury. I was told that I had a fractured hip. I was forced to walk in agony, pain, and suffering with no crutches, no walker, and no wheelchair for 27 days. There was no method to this madness and pain. So off I went by ambulance, screaming, crying, begging for mercy. Not even the medics cared.

Once I arrived at the hospital, I spent four days locked in a room. I never saw a doctor. I never received any medical care, except a lot of pain medication. I guess they wanted to silence my distressful cries of pain.

Then I was sent back to prison. Since this pandemic hit, prison policy dictated that any prisoner who left the facility for any appointment or emergency had to go into a 14-day quarantine when they returned. This quarantine is not like the one you do at home. This is prison-

style quarantine. I will describe a prison quarantine cell.

Picture a freezing room with no curtains or covering to keep the cold out. The filth is beyond filthy. There is grime everywhere you look: on the door, the walls, and the floor. I feared catching some disease in there.

Now let's talk about bugs! They were crawling everywhere. This place was breeding grounds for ants. The ant situation in this prison was so bad that they crawled into our mayonnaise and ketchup bottles. When the bottles were squeezed, all that came out was ants. Or when boiling ramen noodles, after pulling out the bowl from the microwave, all you would see are ants floating on top of the water.

Spiders were crawling out of the radiator, mice running over your body as you lay down to sleep. When I first arrived at this prison, I would scream at these mice running over my body as I slept. Many times they ran around in packs, as if they were having some family mice reunion. One night I counted 11 of them!

But after all the years of not being able to do anything about it, you have no choice but to get used to them. Mice running over you while you slept was part of the prison rental lease. Heck, you get to a point that you start keeping them as pets. I would rather have the mice running over me as I slept than have those daddy long-legs silently slither into any open areas of your body. I have seen spiders that looked like tarantulas! Trust me when I say there are bugs here scientists have yet to discover!

Looking down the hall leading to this cell, it looked dark and gloomy. It felt like walking down the hall of an old abandoned insane asylum. You would hear voices, banging on the doors, and screaming. It just made you wonder, were you still in prison?

I counted six different colors of paint on the cement walls and floor, just barely brushed on. Half was scraped off, the other half peeling off. The scene looked like the basement in a haunted house movie. The sink looked 60 to 70 years old with paint peeling off and some sort of corrosive accumulation around the faucet like you find building up on old car batteries. Looking at it would make anyone think twice before brushing their teeth with the water coming out of it, never mind drinking it.

There is a guard who sat at the entrance to this hall leading to my cell. You could call, yell, scream, bang on the steel door, and no one would come or answer. Yet you could hear them talking, so you knew they were there and heard you. But they came when they felt like it. After 20 minutes of yelling, I thought to myself, if I was having a heart attack I was as good as dead.

When I entered this quarantine cell, I wanted to run back out. But that big steel door just slammed behind me. There was no way out. I was their prisoner, so I was going nowhere.

The bed sheet had stains that looked as if someone bled out on it. The mattress was stuck to the steel bed. All I wanted to do was get in bed because I was in a lot of pain. The hip bone pain ran down my thigh and knee. This was torture to me. I knew this pain was not a normal thing. I finally threw myself into bed and felt this hardness of steel under me. In the hospital I had just come from, they had those motorized hospital beds. I could push a button and the bed adjusted to my comfort. Here, my only comfort was the anticipation of a muscle relaxer.

After I jumped onto this brutal backbreaking bed of steel, I pulled the blanket over me and stayed still in hopes that the relaxer would take effect. But it didn't last too long. I had to squirm myself out of bed. A person's body temperature drops when lying still and the coldness in this cell was dropping just as fast.

I grabbed the blanket they gave me. This reeked with unpleasant odors and was covered with other impurities. I started to wrap my body in it, looking like a mummy. Mind you, doing all these movements was not an easy task due to this mystery hip fracture pain. My body trembled and shivered. It was so cold, I actually cried myself to sleep. Due to the hip pain, I not only cried but moaned. All together it sounded like someone dying a slow death.

That was just a recounting of my first night in this solitary confinement cell. As days went by, I continued making long, mournful cries. I could hear the officer just feet away from my cell. She stood there while she listened to me cry. Then I heard one inmate in another quarantine cell yell out to the officer, Why don't you go see why she is crying, instead of just standing there! That is inhumane!

I had stopped eating, and I had completely stopped drinking water. I couldn't understand why I had no desire or thirst for it. I hated it. My body was sinking in. My skin was so dry it looked like dry sand in the desert, all cracked. Before all this happened, all I drank was water! I loved water!

When the nurses would bring my pain medication, they could see I was dehydrating. They had a look of worry on their faces, but did nothing. My eyes were sunken, my face was drained of life. I could feel my organs taking a turn. They were hurting. All this happened within a week's time.

Certain times of the day, the officers would come around to pick up garbage. They would open the flap on the door and push a garbage can under the flap. When it was my turn, I would toss out my breakfast, lunch, and dinner trays full and unopened. Since all this had started, I lost 27 pounds!

By my 11th day in this cell, I wanted to put an end to this torture. I couldn't take it anymore. The filth, the coldness, the dirty clothes. The pain! I had no personal items with me. I had nothing with me that could make my day go by a little smoother. All I had were these grimy four walls to look at that could drive anyone mad. This began to remind me of the cell I was locked in for three years, 26 years earlier.

I cried, cried, and cried. All day and night, that is all I did. I wanted out of this hell. I could not stand this filth. I could not understand how I had tears in me when my body was so dehydrated.

As a result of these violent emotional expressions, I looked up to the ceiling and began crying out to my deceased family. I lost my mother in 2010, my father in 2012, and my loving sister in 2019. I cried out to them to please take me with them. I cried out to my children to please forgive me and please understand why I had to leave them. My thoughts of death could not be overcome even by my

children or grandkids. I then started to visualize my childrens and grandkids faces on this ceiling. I could see each expressing their heartaches as they asked why I left them. It was like some video playing of all of them, showing me how angry and hurt they were.

As I continued to scream from pain and cry of heartache, I felt my body and mind weakening. I honestly wanted to end it all. This did not feel like a prison cell anymore. This started to feel as if I was thrown into a coffin and the lid was slowly closing as I lay inside alive.

During these 14 days of quarantine, I lay in this filthy bed bawling my eyes out. I closed my eyes tightly and these bright flickers of light began to flash. Then all of a sudden, I was standing before the cell where I was confined for three years. After all these years, I honestly had myself believing that I had blocked those three years of solitary confinement out of my life. I was wrong, they were back!

Before this 14-day quarantine and the injury took place, I had always pretended that I was over those three years of solitary I did at the county jail. I was in denial. I believed that I was over it and I was just fine. Many of the other women would point out to me how I was still living in this solitary confinement world. By this, they meant that while in general population, we were not locked in and could move about pretty freely, but I would still choose to stay in my cell all day and night and not go out. I would tell them that they were wrong. I would make up excuses, claiming that I was working on something and needed to stay in my cell all day and night. After giving this much thought, deep down I knew they were right.

I never realized it, but as I sat down and thought about it, I was actually keeping myself in solitary confinement of my own free will. This frightened me, so I would try and stay out of my cell. But the more I tried, the more I would find myself in self confinement. Again I went into that denial phase. I refused to believe that this was happening, and I pushed this thought to the back of my mind and left it there. It remained there for 26 years.

The flashbacks returned in flickers of light. As they flickered rapidly on and off, I saw myself in front of that cell. I was terrified because I did not want to enter again. These flickers of light kept flashing different scenes from those three years. During these flashes, I could see myself on the floor crying, just as I did those three years in solitary confinement.

Then all of a sudden, it all came back to me. I was there. I was in that solitary cell in the county jail again! I was a stranger to this type of environment. I had never been to jail before. As I walked in and that door went slam, shut, I froze and felt nothing but those four walls starting to squeeze me in. I looked around and thought, I wont have to be here long, once they will see that I am innocent they will let me go. But thats when I believed in the system and never knew how corrupt it was. So here I am 29 years later!

I noticed the small narrow strip of window. I looked out and all my view consisted of was brick walls, more brick walls, and barbed wire. No sky, no grass, no trees. A steel bed, a night table, four walls with freezing temperatures. As time went by, I learned I was not allowed commissary. I had no TV, no radio, no library, no recreation, no nothing!

After the first year, I forgot what the warmth of the sun felt like. Or the feeling of a raindrop or snowflake falling on my tongue. A breeze to blow across my face, a breath of fresh air. The grass, trees, birds. I never thought anyone could be deprived of nature and its solace.

More horrible things happened to me in that cell, but right now I dont want to think about it. Those were painful moments I had believed were gone. I placed my hands on each of my temples and I screamed like never before.

I opened my eyes and cried out to my deceased mother, Mom Please Take Me Now!!! I was waiting for a heart attack, a stroke, even heart failure! Or that maybe I would choke to death, since my mouth was so dry from the dehydration.

As this episode of a woman gone mad continued, my tears just poured down steady. I cried like a lost baby looking for her mother. However, I kept looking up to the ceiling hoping for my mother to appear. I shouted out, Mom! Mom! I was in a state of mind I never experienced before. So after seeing that my mother would not take me, I now yelled out to Satan! I called for him, I begged him to take me. I actually offered him a deal, take my life, do as he wished with it, and he can have my soul!

Being locked in solitary again made me hit rock bottom. Since then, my mind feels clouded, confused, uncertain. The whole experience altered my state of mind. I felt I lost something. I have not been the same since. I just cant shake it off. Everyday I wake up, I still believe I am in that quarantine cell. I realize I am still haunted by the three years I lived in solitary. Sometimes I think about being set free one day, and I wonder: will I be able to cope?

That 14-day quarantine was the worst thing that could be done to anyone who had suffered isolation and mental cruelty before, even if it was 26 years ago. I believe that the prisons should be aware of this re-traumatization, and find another solution to protect inmates who have suffered through solitary confinement.

Fortunately, at some point I realized I was making a harsh decision and being selfish by asking my mother to take me, and even Satan! I was disregarding all the years I had remained alive for my children. I was disregarding the fighter I had been against this system for so many years. So I refused to give in and allow the system the satisfaction of me taking my own life. I am a true fighter! True fighters and believers dont give up and are made to survive.

But it does make me wonder, what if the prisons ignore these things, and I end up locked in solitary again for quarantine or even detention. Will I survive it next time?

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.

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