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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | August 16, 2013

The following was written by Carlos Marsh, who spent 22 months in the Administrative Segregation Unit (ASU) at Pleasant Valley State Prison between 2004 and 2006. His brother is currently incarcerated at Calipatria State Prison and has participated in the current hunger strike. Paralyzed from the chest down since he was 13 following a shooting, Carlos, now free, was incarcerated beginning in 1999 on a drug conviction. He was placed in the ASU at Pleasant Valley after being accused of orchestrating a riot. Extended isolation has left numerous scars on my being, he writes, I cannot be in crowded places or participate in group discussions. Reflecting on the current hunger strike, he told Solitary Watch that I believe that what the inmates are doing is courageous because now someone is finally listening. And all they want is their human rights. What I describe in the essay is just one story of many. -Sal Rodriguez

Never in my wildest of dreams could I ever have imagined that I could be completely and in every sense of the word cut off from the entire world. Like a severed limb detached from its life source my sense of self withered deteriorating in such a way that I am no longer recognizable even to myself.

What began as a regular day gave way to a riot at Pleasant Valley State Prison. In the aftermath I was approached by a sergeant who asked me, Who called the shot? Meaning who incited the riot. To which I replied I know nothing. In a blink of a moment I was escorted to the ASU with a green slip stating that two informants had given information that I was responsible for ordering the riot. I was taken aback, because not only did I not have any say in such matters, but I was aghast at the potential implications of such an accusation. My stomach turned at the thoughts that began to drown my mind.

I was speechless in a sort of emotive limbo. I don't quite have the vocabulary to accurately depict the torture that the four cement walls in ASU can inflict. The officer handed me a single bed sheet, blanket, roll of toilet paper, tooth powder, half a bar of soap, half a tooth brush, a thin white shirt and a pair of boxer shorts. That was the extent of my allowance! Less than the barest and most essential supplies were provided for us weekly. By Thursday all would be gone. Initially I understood that I would be held there for three months. However, every time I would go to committee for review I was told that there was no place to house me because I was deemed, a threat to the facility. I wondered how I could be a danger given that I am paralyzed from the chest down. I was consumed by despair because I was in a world that my words had no bearing on. I would go back to the thinking box because the reality is that that is all you are left with under this living situation. There is no television, no radio, nothing to occupy the mind.

In the ASU we are allowed ten hours a week in a cage that CDC disguises as a recreational yard. In reality it is nothing more than a cage with a toilet and sink, adjacent to six other cages that are all blocked off by cement walls. Yard time was Monday and Tuesday from 7:00am-11:00am and on Fridays from 7:00am-9:00am. The harshest times were at winter and rainy days because we were only allowed to wear shower shoes, boxer shorts, and a white t-shirt. On the rare occasion we left our cell we were handcuffed at all time. The weekends were especially cruel because there was no movement meaning no yard, no shower, and no mail. In addition, when you do look outside of your cell, you are faced with a white wall. The lonely screams of a desolate soul grasp at any semblance of sanity that you might be hoarding. The C.O.s loud speaker was never loud enough to conceal the bloodcurdling screams. This was truly an assault on the psyche. It would drive me mad. I would reach for my blanket and scream for it to stop. Often these episodes would last for countless hours. I would tell myself that soon it would be nothing more than a bad memory. Those words were essential for maintaining sanity in the ASU.

Twenty-two months went by and I was never able to neither confront my accusers nor examine a shred of evidence against me. This fact on top of the many months in ASU has left me scared and confused. The system can do anything they want with you if you do not collaborate with them. Extended isolation has left numerous scars on my being. I cannot be in crowded places or participate in group discussions. I have a deep seeded distrust of any and all types of law enforcement agencies. Specially, when I've also been set up by rampart division back in 1997. And, today when I utilize the public transportation it feels like I am being preyed, ready to be devoured by the same peace officers that have sworn to protect and serve, even at the city college I attend today. I have prison tattoos all exposed on my neck, head, and body.

What the ASU has done to my mental state is beyond unethical. I was serving 9 years for a nonviolent crime and ended up in a torture chamber for almost two years. Those months stand out as the most horrible experiences that I have ever had to endure. I would not wish ASU on my worst enemy. Till this day it bothers me that no evidence was shown to me. It was unreal to try hopelessly to explain myself to a committee. The ASU must be abolished because it was built to break an individual state of mind. Also, they are fixating the individuals human development and only to feel like dead meat rotting.

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

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September 19, 2022

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September 6, 2022

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Regular garden-variety loneliness in America can almost feel like this too. In fact, what people do to isolate other people in these prisons would never have been conceived/invented if the phenomenon of ordinary loneliness weren't so unrecognized for what it is. Conditions of our lives almost guarantee that the losers among us will live something like this...without ever having gotten near any prison. It happens inside people's rooms and apartments and homes in every town, hamlet, city and in-between place in this country. And I dare say it happens more relentlessly in America than in any other country, for reasons I can't get into here. But I for one for sure know those inevitable gut-wrenching screams that are torn from the human heart at the grotesque hopelessness behind it all! It is beyond obscene how ordinary people are forced to live when they can't earn/buy the (meaningful or any) company of others, and most of the time that's what it comes down to. Most jobs involve a virtual isolation from meaningful human contact as well, and that is for people lucky enough to have jobs.

And I myself personally know the feeling of being unable to be with others later on just as it affects solitary imprisonment victims. I was so startled when I saw that remark. After enough time being forced to live like that, one just cannot be with anyone else...it's just too disorienting and intrusive.

But who really recognizes what it's all about? Pretty much the best you'll get for a generic comment re: alone/together is that people who consider themselves to be living well will say almost to a person that they value aloneness because being with others is such a bother! I hear it from everyone...and only know what clueless fools they are, so rarefied, so self-satisfied, and so WRONG!! There is no end to my contempt for (otherwise) nice people who just don't get the downside of the real meaning of isolation...when it gets out of hand. Those types ALWAYS think they will have personal control over it all, as much as they know THEY will never be one of those poor slob who end up in an OFFICIAL isolation/torture cell for sometimes a decade nonstop or more for very often NO reason!!

So to the extent anyone in a position to make a difference can see what I'm driving at here, life will become incalculably more humanized for all of us, including for those behind bars. Can anyone reading this post be one of them? Will you do something if you are? If not can you pass this idea on to anyone you might know in that category? And if so, I personally thank you in advance.

Hello Carlos Marsh, I'm with the school paper, hoping to speak to you for a story. Can you contact me if interested? Thanks -Anna

I am so sad for this young man as I read it I wept as his history is that of my son he has unfortunately developed Paranoia Schizophrenia. He was in ASU at Chino for 8 months and is now in Pelican Bay psychiatric unit. I pray that God grant you peace, I draw slight hope on reading this as up until now I was not sure if my son could have any chance at any life after this. He is due to be released early next year back to the regular yard. I pray he remembers who he is and that he is truly loved. He like you did not commit a crime other than someone putting his name on a list. Everything that you describe describes my son and his situation he is now 32 yrs old and has been in prison since he was 22 yrs old he is appeal is not over yet thank God. This situation needs to be changed we plead for Guantanamo yet we are doing the same thing to American citizens daily with no remorse. Where is our compassion and humanity?

Oh how well I relate and agree with this story!!! I was recently released after serving 3 years for a non violent drug possession case in Wisconsin. It was my first time in prison and I have never committed a violent crime in my life. Out of the 3 year sentence, I did 14 months in solitary confinement for things like writing letters that offended the guards, speaking out against injustices all around me, and selling my artwork for canteen. I never knew that solitary was used for things like this!!! They use it at the drop of a hat, never as the last solution. It drove me crazy and then I learned to love it. Now I stay at home alone most of the time, unable to be around more than 1 or 2 people at a time. Thanks, DOC Wisconsin your women's prisons are nothing more than torture chambers.

Thank you. I am well educated, graduating with honors in spring 2014 and transferring to a University. After surviving months of torture education became my salvation.

Hmmm The guy writes like he's well educated. Don't we remember Go to your room

This so saddens me! How in this state, USA can we allow this to happen, why! Lord, does this continue to happen? What bothers me is that those that go in with no mental problems, come out if lucky! With many mental problems, and this state can even fix that!

Isolation of individuals (extended time or not) are crimes against humanity, and should be punished equally hard and harshly as the crimes against humanity by for instance Pol Pot, Adolf Hitler, Stalin, etc.!

When a system needs (extended) isolation of people already in its care and its responsibility, that same system shows its inability and total failure to maintain and or enforce justice!

Every system that enforces solitary isolation of individuals shows with each individual in solitary isolation that it is incapable of enforcing justice, and such a system is unworthy to exist, to be taken seriously, and even to be acknowledged as a system that has any right to force people of other countries to accept its values and norms!

A country like America should be ashamed of putting people who are in its care and under its jurisdiction in solitary isolation, were it forces other peoples to accept its values and norms, and every citizen of the U|SA who accepts such values is conspiratory guilty of the crimes that system commits!

As an American I am ashamed for my country, and it is deep sadness to realize that the administration of my own country allows officials and authorities to knowingly and willingly commit crimes against humanity!

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