

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2021/05/14/voices-from-solitary-why-did-they-choose-antonio/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | May 14, 2021

Christopher Blackwell, 40, is incarcerated at Washington State Reformatory in the Monroe Correctional Complex (MCC). First incarcerated at age 12, he is now about halfway through a 45-year sentence. Blackwell is a prolific writer who has had his work published by the Washington Post, HuffPost, Marshall Project, BuzzFeed, and Jewish Currents. He is currently working toward publishing a book on solitary confinement. Readers can [follow Christopher Blackwell on Twitter](#).

In this piece written in April 2021, Blackwell provides one example of how men incarcerated at MCC have been mistreated since the pandemic began. He recounts the story of another man in his unit, Antonio Robledo Jr., who is punished with solitary confinement for making a simple request. The piece is based on interviews with Robledo and is being published with his permission. Annalena Wolcke

Hell no, were not gonna cell back in, we just came out, like, 20 minutes ago, if that! prisoners raged.

RETURN BACK TO YOUR CELLS! the guards kept yelling without any explanation.

Many prisoners were trying to get the guards to understand they had just come out for the limited time were allowed during quarantine 50 minutes a day, if we were lucky and that they just wanted to shower, make calls to loved ones, and complete other small tasks before being locked back down in their 6-9 cells. But guards were hearing none of it. They were always during times of quarantine behind schedule and, because of that, one section of the unit was losing their precious minutes.

Prisoners' frustration is understandable. The virus entered the prison via guards. The medical staff didn't follow rules or procedures to keep prisoners safe. And it's us, not them, who ended up in lockdown, left to suffer the consequences of their poor choices. We struggled to obtain the simplest of our needs: showers, recreation, and most importantly, time with our loved ones, who we worry about, given the state of the virus in society.

But that day, like most days, the guards didn't care. Looking to make a display of power, the guards singled out one prisoner and made him a warning to all others: this behavior would not be tolerated.

Antonio Robledo Jr., an extremely quiet, soft-spoken prisoner who never causes trouble within the prison, someone who would fit in better with characters from the Big Bang Theory than with his fellow prisoners, was on the north side of the unit, far from where the commotion had begun to erupt. He was walking slowly towards his cell, obliviously to the shouting that had taken place.

Looking to understand why his section wasn't receiving their full time out, Antonio stopped, pushed his thick glasses up with his pointer finger, and calmly asked guards, as he passed them en route to his cell, if he would have a chance to shower at a later time in the day, given they were being cut 30 minutes short on their time out. In an agitated tone, one of the guards said he would answer Antonio's question when he was locked in his cell.

Antonio continued towards his cell, shuffling his feet. Once in front of his cell, he waited for the door to be opened. Prisoners have no way to open doors on their own, and are at the mercy of a guard in a booth to do so. While waiting, Antonio heard a pack of guards thundering down the stairs in the direction of his cell. Confused about why so many guards were entering the unit, he continued to stand in front of his cell, waiting for the door to open. Never did it cross his mind, he was their target.

Once guards approached, two directed him to place his hands behind his back so he could be cuffed.

Excuse me? Antonio said.

In a firm voice, the guard repeated, Put your hands behind your back.

Antonio complied and was escorted to a holding cell while a shift Lieutenant and Sergeant decided his fate.

Prisoners were confused as to why Antonio was taken away in cuffs. We all knew he caused no disturbance; many of us watched the

whole scene play out through our open-bar-cell-fronts. However, we knew that someone had to pay the price for the prisoners who were demanding their rights to shower and call their loved ones. This could not be allowed to go unpunished it never does, and often someone who wasn't even involved becomes the target. For the Department of Corrections (DOC), it isn't about actually punishing the person responsible, it's about the statement that if someone crosses a line, prisoners will suffer!

Antonio stood in the small cell now where his stress and anxiety continued to mount. He had a feeling he would be placed in solitary confinement a place he had never been and had only heard horror stories about. He had never even received an infraction during his prison sentence.

Upon the completion of his interview with the shift Lieutenant, he was berated aggressively with a barrage of threats. How dare you endanger the lives of my officers? the Lieutenant demanded. All because Antonio had asked if he'd be allowed to shower. The Lieutenant went on to assure him he would be taken to solitary confinement.

Antonio was frozen in fear, teetering on the edge of a panic attack. He tried to calm himself by taking breaths and reassuring himself that everything was going to be okay, but this was no easy task he was scared. He remained in the tiny holding cell for over an hour, hands cuffed tightly behind his back as the metal dug deeper into his wrists.

I just kept trying to keep myself from having a full-on breakdown, Antonio later said.

He was eventually taken to another holding cell on the medical floor, where his vitals were taken, and he was stripped of all his clothing and redressed.

After what seemed like hours, Antonio was given disciplinary paperwork stating he was to be placed in solitary confinement on administrative segregation for refusing staff orders to return to his cell and for inciting other Offenders to riot. He was escorted to solitary late in the evening after spending hours in holding cells.

On the walk over Antonio started to experience a feeling of faintness and started to hyperventilate. The two guards escorting him had to pause for several minutes to help calm him before their continued trip to solitary.

Upon entering solitary confinement, Antonio was again placed in a holding cell for the third time. The small concrete box was filthy. You could tell the room hadn't been cleaned in a very long time. There were dried fluids running down the wall of who knows what. I would honestly be scared to know what it all was, and the floor was just gross, he said.

Standing in the tiny cell, trying not to come into contact with any wall or surface, a couple of guards finally appeared and instructed him to strip down all his clothing. He was then run through a strip search, asked to expose every crevasse and crease of his body. Not an inch went unseen by the prying eyes of the abusive guards. Once the guards were satisfied, Antonio was given a bright orange jumpsuit, pink boxers, a t-shirt, and socks proper attire for solitary confinement. After this humiliating experience was over he was taken to his new cell in solitary a cold empty box.

Antonio was still denied a shower and didn't receive one until 48 hours after entering solitary. I felt disgusting by the time I was finally able to shower, he said. He continued to sit in solitary weeks without any updates on what his status was, left to his own thoughts and mounting levels of stress on the possible punishment he could be facing. I made multiple requests for information on the case against me. All were met with silence, making it impossible to inform my family about what was going on.

Weeks later, he was told to get ready to move, as he would be returning to the main prison. Given the silence regarding the infractions he had received, Antonio believed all infractions must have been dropped.

During the walk back to the main section of the prison, he realized he was being taken to an older section, one that had been closed down and only recently reopened as DOC was in need of places to quarantine prisoners. This was due to a large-scale COVID-19 outbreak taking place at Monroe Correctional Complex (MCC).

When Antonio arrived, he realized there were prisoners violators of community custody being housed there, many of whom had just been brought in off the streets. They told me they hadn't even been tested for COVID. This made me really worry for my health and safety. I didn't want to catch the virus, he said.

After almost a month of silence, Antonio was *finally* informed that he would be taken to a disciplinary hearing and that he could request witnesses, if needed. He later found out the witnesses he had requested statements from were not even interviewed by the administrator conducting his hearing. In fact, multiple prisoners tried to file witness statements, yet all were denied by the administrator conducting the hearing. In the infraction paperwork it stated, witness statement denied. Not necessary for witness. And only two out of the several staff present during the so-called disturbance filed a report, and did so days after the incident took place, which is against DOC policy.

When Antonio was finally given the infraction hearing, he was found guilty of a major infraction (509 refused to proceed/disperse), and not guilty on the allegation of inciting other prisoners to riot. After reviewing the unit cameras, the hearing administrator decided the evidence just didn't support such a charge, offering minimal relief to the weeks of trauma Antonio had been forced to suffer.

After the hearing I felt like a dog who had been kicked around. The only thing I was guilty of was having the gall to ask if I would get a shower. Yet staff were allowed to lie and file false reports against me, none of whom will be held accountable. This is the culture inside prisons, a culture that allows prisoners to be bullied with no reprieve, Antonio said. He looked defeated as he told the story, and a little more hardened than the man I knew before he was taken to solitary confinement.

In the end Antonio didn't return back to his original living unit for months. He was abused physically, verbally, and mentally, and forced to experience psychological distress from those tasked to protect him. He was forced to suffer horrendous conditions that will remain with him far after he is released from prison.

Since the pandemic started, prisoners have been abused and mistreated continuously. We have been expected to follow unrealistic guidelines in the name of our own safety, yet it has been DOC that continues to place us in harm's way. This mistreatment of prisoners has gone on far too long. Safety measures put in place to protect prisoners have done nothing but offer the bullies in blue another way to abuse prisoners.

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](#)

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