

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | June 30, 2010

The following account is one of the [many prisoner testimonies](#) that appear in [Institutionalized Torture](#), a recent report issued by the Human Rights Coalition-Fed Up!, a prisoners rights group based in Pittsburgh. The report documents abuses at Pennsylvanias State Correctional Institution at Dallas, particularly conditions of confinement within the Restricted Housing Unit. The RHU is SCI-Dallass lockdown unit, where prisoners live in 23-hour-a-day, not-quite-solitary confinement a seldom discussed aspect of some control units in the age of prison overcrowding. This statement comes from an RHU prisoner who chose to remain anonymous.

One thing I want to point out first is although this is a level 5 segregated housing unit (RHU), a lot of us, myself included, are forced to have cellmates back here (at least at SCI Dallas). That means 23 and 1 five days a week and 24 hour lockdown the other two with a cellmate not of our choice I think that in itself is pretty inhumane especially being as though this is so-called solitary confinement.

I, for one, was physically assaulted by a previous cellmate and some people are even sexually assaulted by cellmates. The cell was disgustingly filthy when I first entered it. There were stains on the walls and the bunk that looked like boogers/snot and dried blood. Hair and dirt was everywhere and it smelled very bad. Also, the cells have no windows and very minimal air circulation. Plexi-glass spit shields prevent air from flowing in cells. The water that comes out of the sink and the showers is a dark rust color and tastes like chemicals. It even stains my white boxer shorts that I wear in the shower.

We are let out for one hour a day, Monday through Friday, for recreation which consists of being cuffed and led by a dog leash attached to the cuffs to an outdoor area where there are a whole bunch of cages similar in size to our cell. We are placed one person per cage and left out there with nothing for one hour. This is where some inmates smuggle containers filled with feces, urine and other bodily fluids and fling it on each other. Some inmates actually undress, squat down and defecate into their hand and throw it like that. We also come out 3 times a week for shower which lasts anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes usually. Occasionally Ive been left locked in the shower stall for close to an hour or more, obviously forgotten about. This is another area where inmates can throw feces, etc. because they put 2 inmates per shower stall, next to each other only separated by a fence-like partition. Other than special circumstances, these are the only times we come out of our cells.

The noises I hear are mostly constant banging from inmates near and far in the RHU. And Im talking about 24/7. Some inmates bang on tables, bunks, doors, sinks, etc. and it seems like it never ceases. Also, I hear inmates constantly screaming.

My ability to focus has definitely changed. When I try to read I cannot focus on what I am reading even on rare occasions when it is relatively quiet. Ill find myself reading the same page of a book for like 20 minutes or half an hour at a time because I cant concentrate enough to comprehend what I am reading. My mind constantly wanders and I sometimes find it difficult to talk to people because of this as well.

Thankfully, Ive never had an impulse to hurt myself, or at least a serious one I should say. This place definitely makes you think about it though. I feel sorry for weak-minded or mentally unstable inmates, though, because I can see how they would have such impulses. In fact, at least one inmate committed suicide by hanging himself in his cell while Ive been in this RHU. It was a few weeks ago, I dont recall the date. But the jail swept that incident under the rug and put a new inmate in that cell the very next day.

My sleeping patterns are different while in RHU. I must try and doze off during the rare times that it is quiet. But my sleep is often interrupted by banging, clanging, C/Os [corrections officers] yelling, inmates screaming etc. Also the light makes it almost impossible to sleep during the day. My sleep is very disturbed and Im sure the pattern is unhealthy. I have frequent nightmares. I have daydreams and fantasies very often in RHU. Mostly they are about being somewhere else, what I would be doing or like to be doing if I was home, planning for my future when I get out or just imagining that things were different. I sometimes reminisce about my childhood or past experiences.

My perception of reality is usually OK. I have noticed slight visual hallucinations in my peripheral vision and also if I focus on an object for extended time. Now that I think about it, my perception of reality maybe isnt as good as Id like to think it is. I must admit, my thoughts are often irrational in relation to reality and often violent. Sometimes my perception of time is off. I sometimes get paranoid and think my cellmate is watching me or paying too much attention to my business. We get absolutely zero privacy. I often get paranoid and

wonder if he is a homosexual. Sometimes I have urges to hurt him, but I try to control myself. I try to remind myself that it is not his fault we are forced to be in this situation. The banging noises and screaming voices often seem unbearable. Sometimes the toilet flushing sound even becomes unbearable as well. Also, I sometimes get very claustrophobic and feel like I am having a panic attack. My heart beats very fast, I sweat and have shortness of breath.

I do not feel that the prison administration was justified in placing me in the RHU. I was placed back here for what I perceive to be relatively minor infractions both times. Often times, I for one, as well as other inmates I've spoken to, will plead guilty to charges that we are not guilty of simply because we know the sanction will be much worse if we plead not guilty.

I think that the whole idea of solitary confinement is insane. We are already in prison. This is just a form of inhumane punishment and torture. The administration is obviously indifferent and could care less about the long term affects that this type of confinement has on us as human beings. Obviously we are not human beings to them, we are merely a number. Most of the inmates in solitary confinement need mental help but are not receiving it.

If they were to use solitary confinement in prisons, it should be limited to extreme cases where it is a last resort. As it stands now it is a first resort. Inmates can come to RHU for something as petty as sleeping through count. Its totally ridiculous. My first time back here was for using a curse word (abusive language)



James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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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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I have had a family member severely mentally and permanently damaged over solitary confinement. The judiciary system does not work. It completely needs changed from top to bottom. Especially for the fact that once these ppl have done the already unreasonable amount of time they are released back into society where they can no longer be able to live as they're expected to. Those who give these unreasonable amounts of time should sit there for just one day then come back out. Its hell I hate the system with a passion I've never been to prison. My loved ones have right now my boyfriend is. Scary thing is he's not the type to handle doing time further more the reasoning of why he is in is ridiculous and now he's in shu for something he didn't do. Its clear to me now police officers correctional officers drill sergeant etc. Their the bigger criminals. My boyfriend has the biggest heart ever he feels others pain a big teddy bear with a big heart he went to prison on a lie well no not a lie per say but a officer seen or heard he was driven earlier during the day im still uncertain of which one later on that evening he pulled us over saying he was driven he wasn't I was. I wanted my boyfriend to fight it he wouldn't. He was given Willard that's a 90 program where we live now he's in shu for testing positive He was given meds by the facility that would cause a false positive. Funny thing is what he should of tested positive for he was a double negative. Clearly something isn't correct previous to the one of the sgt or captin I cant remember which had told my boyfriend he had to give him 3 names of ppl that were doing stuff. My boyfriend was stuck as far as he knew nobody was everyone was being litig. He also told him if he didn't cooperate he'd be thrown out an written up. Suddenly this happens. A bit sketchy don't ya think. I mean ur helpless hes helpless and idk all this it needs to be stopped. Laws need changed prison systems need changed im alone here in trying an I dont no where to begin but those who sentence ppl to these crazy amounts of time should sit their an see first hand just how long a day really is in prison an shu keeplock rhu all that. I wanna fight for this those helpless ppl I feel for u.

I am astonished by what I have just read. How can anyone believe that it is the good guys who are doing this to the bad guys? If we allow SUCH TORTURES TO GO ON THEN WE ARE EVIL. Much of what I read reminded me of the behaviour of some apes in zoos. The throwing of faeces, the screaming, the banging, the violence and threat. If we keep human beings in such a manner then we are no. sorry words fail me, I am just so shocked.

Thanks, Alan for your comments. I am very sorry about your families pain. This is system of justice we support through our taxes is not just affecting the offender. The effects of the justice system destroy families. Harming innocent people too. Every inmate may have a mother, father sister, brother, wife, child, Im sure you get the point. Im not saying there shouldnt be consequences for disobeying societies laws. Im saying that the consequences are not working. We have extremely high incarceration and recidivism rates in this country, apparently the system isnt working!!!! It has become a cottage industry that supports itself on its citizens. People need to wake up and realize that the prison system is filled with mostly drug addicted/mentally ill people. The prison system has a human ware house, I refer to it as a modern day Bedlam!! I recently read a statistic in the newspaper stating that one in 30 Americans is behind bars, pretty scary. This is all of our concern, thats pretty indicative of a system that has failed.

Louise: I believe the only thing worse than experiencing this is to have a child experiencing it and not being able to stop it. It drove my mother to walk into the governors office (Arnold S.) and demand to be heard. She warned us all that my brother would never make it out alive and she was right. When she also died we wanted to notify my brother but he had already died and had been cremated and tossed into the ocean. None of us even knew.

I wish your son the best and encourage you to keep in touch with him. My mother and father were sick so and no one else took the time to visit and the guards knew that they could do whatever they wished to him. (He by the way requested that we not visit after my mothers protests against visible signs of physical abuse by the guards had brought heat on him. This only caused him further trouble with the guards.

He spent most of his time in prison in the SHU and near his release date they claim that he hung himself. Of course the letter he wrote two weeks before his death where he threatened them with legal action upon his release had nothing to do with his death. Yeah right!

This is heart breaking and sickening, especially since the person who experienced this abuse is my son!! My son didnt murder, rape or assault anyone yet he is treated as less than an animal. I know others have experienced worse treatment. We as a society are culpable for these abuses if only through our apathy! We need to speak up as a society and let our legislators know that this inhumanity to our fellow humans is unacceptable!!

In the words of Thomas Jefferson, All tyranny needs to gain a foot hold is for people of good conscience to remain silent, will we as a society accept the abuses of our fellows? Or will we speak up?

god can i undrstand what you going thow i mean sher i never ben in prison per say but i have had a round of my owen with solitary and oh man dose it fuck you up lol i the one you all know posted bout my old school oakhill lol gess picking at your cuts is considered a form of self mutelashion never knowen that was considered that befor lol lol so i gess i can say i do fit moest of shu sindrum lol yes that was out of more lern to laf or go mad lol notested i do that a lot more thow lol not sher why it not realy funny thow i just laf off my pissed off now days man was my sleep fucked up still is somewhat not as bad thow and the things you menshoned are bout what i was going thow sempt no asshole to share it with but yes they should do trying to pare cellmates that work well if they going to at all you may not see thsi as right of me to say but your lucky you had someone to go thow it with you may not think it but it is more painfal a lone even if you get nuts bout him thare all the time thouts yes it will not be as bad when your out but hate to say lot of it never realy dead stops it like haveing a cold and you take something to lessen the effts but in this case you allways have the cold and the pills effts if you know never takes a way your sintums just weekens them your likely to be in that week state of the sindrum forever like i said sucks ass

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