

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2020/04/22/voices-from-solitary-coronavirus-panic-in-a-quarantined-wa-prison/>

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close

Search

close

close

by [Voices from Solitary](#) | April 22, 2020

John Hovey, a 52-year-old man serving three consecutive life sentences at Monroe Correctional Complex in Washington State, wrote the following piece in March 2020. Hovey has been incarcerated since the age of sixteen. In this piece, he describes the process of increased restrictions upon incarcerated people, including lockdowns for units that may have been exposed to the virus. Since March, six incarcerated men at the Monroe facility have tested positive for COVID-19 and have been placed in isolation, [according](#) to KOMO News. Hundreds of people held at Monroe demonstrated in April against the conditions and were met with pepper spray and rubber pellets.

Lockdown, as described by another incarcerated man at Monroe in an [article](#) published by the Marshall Project, means: They are confined to their windowless cells for almost the entire day. Imposing the torturous conditions of solitary confinement on people under the guise of social distancing does not, as proven historically, solve the public health crisis. Instead, it creates more detrimental psychological and physiological effects. Advocates have outlined [alternatives](#) that would both mitigate the spread of virus and restrict the use of solitary confinement. Valerie Kiebala

Even the nation's high-security prisons are not immune to the panic and chaos generated by the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic. Thus far at least two WA penal department employees have tested positive, according to what officials have confirmed to the prisoner population via memo.

In one Monroe prison, a prison guard was confirmed positive for COVID-19. Consequently, a living unit is under lockdown in an attempt to control the situation, and the prison itself has curtailed most of its programs, namely those involving outside volunteers and staff. In a somewhat unprecedented move, WA has canceled visitation privileges in its prisons, an extreme measure considering the department places a premium on visits, allegedly to bolster family connection and community involvement.

Meals are delivered to the cells. Twice a day, mandatory temperature checks are made by a nurse at cellfront through the bars. Inmate janitors patrol the unit with spray bottles and mops. A prison chaplain makes daily rounds.

From the prisoner perspective, imagine the initial confusion over this situation. Some view the response as unwarranted punishment or an excuse to cancel activity or keep people locked in their cages. Most prisoners don't have a television or radio (when radio reception in a steel and concrete chamber is possible). For those trapped in the quarantined unit, accurate news is difficult to acquire. Phone calls are permitted, but not everyone has someone to call. Memo updates are passed out every couple days, but largely state the same thing, precautions for an evolving situation.

The prison has a large number of mentally ill prisoners, some of whom have difficulty understanding what is happening. There are prisoners who do not speak English, and have sporadic opportunity for communication. The prison in question is also something of a medical facility, with many aging and ailing prisoners brought here partly because of its proximity to hospitals. The facility is sensitive to the possibility of outbreaks, with a few precautionary scares in the past such as flu and Mersa worries.

Caution and sensible prevention are always laudable efforts. Reactionary panic, chaos, and paranoia are hardly surprising in these situations, but one would hope calm reason would prevail. Whether in the prison or without, suspicious minds cite the nation's quarantines as test-run preludes to martial law and other government abuses. History has not been kind in this regard. People are also stockpiling supplies like doomsday-preppers in activity reminiscent of the silly Y2K scares of 1999.

Oddly, the lockdown quarantine isn't very different from what the prison routinely inflicts upon many prisoners they have deemed guilty of prison trouble (disciplinary infractions), in a practice called cell confinement. The designated prisoners emerge from a prolonged stay in IMU, the prison's segregation/isolation jail within a prison, only to be told they must also be trapped in their normal assigned cell for a number of days or weeks, without even the hour of outdoor air IMU residents receive daily. (The prison is an old obsolete structure that lacks windows in the cells or even in the units.)

Even if COVID19 eventually passes from memory with comparatively minor fallout, it serves as a sobering reminder how vulnerable humans are to the simple virus. We've learned little from SARS, Ebola, Avian flu, or even AIDS. Progress is slow against such an ancient and powerful enemy. Modern society has not yet had to deal with a pandemic on the level of the Black Death or Spanish Flu, and chronologically, we are long overdue.

This could be a potent warning of things to come. Overpopulation and climate change guarantees much worse is on the horizon. If they choose to, people can use these times of crisis to come together, to develop new solutions and try to unite for the greater good, instead of the endlessly divisive selfish hate the country is all too often mired in. Apathy and indifference to the plight of others is no better. We have to be better.

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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Unfortunately, we're not past the death penalty because that's what every human being in confinement in state or federal prison is facing..praying for you brothers..

Thank you for sharing the insightful and prophetic article, Mr. Hovey. I agree, we need to do better. Although I foresee our new normal being different, I still fear we will quickly forget the lessons and acts of compassion that have been seen as of late. Sadly, we as humans, rarely learn from history despite it always repeating itself.

Thank you for sharing your article, Mr. Hovey. I found it insightful, prophetic and well written. I applaud you for seeking out knowledge and personal growth where others would give up.

Your last paragraph was profoundly true and could stand solely on its own.

Collectively, we are all vulnerable and you are correct, naive, to the catastrophic events looming on the perimeters of our lives. My hope, as is yours, that some of the lessons and acts of compassion we are happening now will remain but I am skeptical, as we humans never seem to learn from those before us.

we have to do better I absolutely agree.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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