

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2021/10/28/voices-from-solitary-in-prisons-mass-solitary-confinement-turns-quarantine-into-punishment/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | October 28, 2021

John Hovey, a 54-year-old man who has been incarcerated since the age of sixteen, and is currently serving a life sentence at Monroe Correctional Complex in Washington State, wrote the following piece in March 2021. He describes his experience of solitary confinement as quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic. His entire unit was moved to the isolation unit in the prison in February 2021, despite having already experienced nearly a year of lockdown. Hovey, who had been sent to that unit on previous occasions, reflects on how the experience of solitary is always punitive, whatever the label attached to it. This is an abridged version of a longer piece by him. Sara Rain Tree

As I write this, I have just returned from IMU Intensive Management Unit, Washington State's designation for solitary confinement. (In other states: isolation, supermax, close management, I-row, disciplinary segregation, lock-up, prison jail, the hole, and any number of other colorful epithets and euphemisms.) Essentially, an empty sealed cage, a small concrete and steel tomb containing a sink-toilet and a sleeping slab where a person is punished and/or hidden for an indeterminate amount of time, some for many years at one time.

What heinous crime did I commit? What terrible deed did I participate in to suffer this torturous indignity? I continuously tested negative for the coronavirus. (As did most of the people in my living unit.)

Does merely labeling punitive solitary confinement nonpunitive (Pandemic-Quarantine) make it so?

My entire unit was placed in IMU in February 2021. Why the mass move to IMU at that late juncture? It was a few weeks short of one year since Washington locked down its prisons on quarantine. My facility had been under some form of in-cell in-unit segregation for nearly a year, generally with only a single hour out of our cell and little recreation or outdoor excursions, sometimes for weeks. We did not have even regular exposure to fresh air or a view out of any window, simply because the antiquated (century-old) facility structure was not designed for it. The prison has four housing units, normally holding two hundred people each, and all four were cycled in and out of IMU. Each person endured a minimum fifteen-day stay in segregation, but some were held considerably longer.

As needlessly oppressive as the lockdown already was, officials made matters even worse by eventually relocating everyone to IMU—a draconian, ultra-punitive, soul-killing hellhole. Punishment cells are the last place a person should be if they are older, infirm, or medically at risk. Several factors worsen your health, and compounded, make you more vulnerable physically and mentally. Your stress levels are permanently elevated, which impacts your immune system, among other things. Often, the cells are freezing, as are the showers. Your clothing and bedding are inadequate. Meals arrive cold and unpleasantly prepared. Staff are scarce except during security counts when they won't respond. Toilet paper is rationed. Laundering is infrequent if at all. Contacting medical or administrative staff becomes extremely difficult. Mental health care is nonexistent except to ineptly address suicide attempts.

It is far more difficult to communicate with loved ones from IMU. All visits in Washington State prisons were discontinued on March 13, 2020, and remained so for well over a year. Most quarantined inmates didn't have postage envelopes pre-ordered (a twice-monthly two-week process), making letters impossible for some time. Phone calls are once daily but at unpredictable, predetermined times. The limited pseudo-email feature on JPay gadgets (for those able to have purchased one) is inoperable in IMU (no WiFi) and there is no access to any JPay kiosks.

We were moved despite zero evidence an IMU stay would magically immunize anyone. When directly confronted, actual medical personnel (who walked the tiers weekly doing temperature checks, or less frequently, Covid testing) have all stated to us the actions of the Department of Corrections make no sense, are not medically indicated nor pandemonically sound, and that they have no say in this, I'm just here to check/test etc. My unit had been tested for Covid over four times in a row and most people, like myself, were negative. Moving at-risk inmates around en masse, some to a gymnasium converted into a dorm, is reminiscent of a suburban mother's chickenpox party, a bid to infect everyone (or claim everyone has been exposed), so the prison can artificially hasten the move to resume normal operations.

The D.O.C. mishandled the response to the pandemic from the very start. In the last couple of months before the moves to IMU, staff

interacting with incarcerated people temporarily sported medical gowns, gloves, and face shields in addition to the already-mandated masks. Had this been done from the start, Washington prisons would have never experienced mass outbreaks. People in prison cannot spontaneously generate coronavirus, it must be transmitted, and only employees could bring it into the facility, most of whom took months to be forced to wear masks regularly and properly. Covid wasn't carried in on the wings of dragonflies. Staff themselves should have been isolated.

I've been subjected to a total of at least four tours in Washington IMUs over the years, none warranted and only spuriously justified. Every time it is a freshly traumatic experience, a continual infliction of PTSD, worsened each time. The despair, duress, and depression are crippling. One time I was denied my eyeglasses and left functionally blind for over a month. Most times, my serious needs for medical intervention are impeded. Every time, mental health needs are completely ignored.

IMU is a favored weapon in the vast penal arsenal. It also tends to be prison officials' first response. Instead, they should be making certain IMU is only used when absolutely necessary, a last resort for a dangerous, desperate situation, expediting proper due process, and making an IMU stay as short as possible.

The truth of incarceration is ugly and unpleasant. It is not a hope-filled inspirational journey. It shouldn't be relegated to a worthy cause of a trendy activist fad. It is the pure hell of suffering in tiny cages in overcrowded warehouses for years or decades. Incarcerated people, like criminals and terrorists, are the easy undisputed common enemy, the one marginalized group everyone is allowed and encouraged to despise. And IMU is one of the more damning weapons, relabeled as quarantine or not.

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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