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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Public Facing Advocacy Writing

close

Search

close

close

If God should condemn us the way we do one another, what hope would there be for any of us?

by [Voices from Solitary](#) | December 28, 2018

The following account was published anonymously in the report [Solitary at Southport](#), which was released last December by the Correctional Association of New York, a nonprofit organization that monitors conditions in the states prisons and advocates for a more humane and effective criminal justice system. Southport is one of New Yorks two supermax prisons, and holds about 400 men in solitary confinement for 23 and often 24 hours a day in Special Housing Units (SHUs), some for years at a time. As the report documents, these conditions lead to severe emotional suffering, psychological damage, self-harm, and suicide, and also lend themselves to even higher than usual levels of brutality and racism by staff. Despite modest reforms brought about by a lawsuit, the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) still holds approximately 3,500 people in some form of isolation, and utilizes solitary confinement at levels well above the national average. In his detailed and eloquent account, the author presents solitary confinement as one of the most extreme expressions of a vengeful and punitive culture. He ends with a question: If God should condemn us the way we do one another, he asks, what hope would there be for any of us? Jean Casella

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I came to Southport with a multiple year SHU sentence after being brutalized by staff at another prison. Although I was beaten so badly that I was hospitalized for multiple days, had a fractured bone, and continue to suffer medical effects, I was sent to the box for multiple years for allegedly assaulting staff and was prosecuted and sentenced to more prison time.

Solitary confinement has a devastating impact on people. Peoples mind and humanity changes while in isolation. Solitary makes people much more antisocial. I have seen many people at Southport deteriorate. Young people at Southport in particular have no sense of how to act, and there are no programs to help them grow or improve their behavior. No one is concerned about them in here, and there are no regular opportunities to have one-on-one interactions. The only one-on-one interactions are if someone wants to talk to mental health, which many people are not comfortable with. It makes most people feel as if they will be viewed as crazy. If a person in the SHU is even slightly mentally or emotionally fragile, the chances of them breaking down are high. I witnessed a man kill himself while in a SHU at a previous prison before I was transferred to Southport.

Prison itself has had an impact on me physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. Just being in a cage 23-24 hours a day is a difficulty in and of itself. Caging animals for years is inhumane and deemed animal cruelty, yet it is considered rehabilitation for human beings? According to whom? When and where did anyone fairly test this theory to assess its impact on people and how did we determine it was legal? Such are questions that shall find no answers. Because the fact is that solitary is punishment and nothing more. In here, it is punishment, punishment, punishment.

Despite the horrors of solitary, some people become better in hope that they will be given a second chance, but many accept the reality that there is no forgiveness and no second chance. I am able to do different things to help me cope I read, write, and draw for instance. I can cope. But others cant, and they start talking, screaming, and yelling. Screaming, banging, and yelling in the SHU is infectious and once it starts, it continues to build, particularly for people who have mental health needs. Talking to someone you know is difficult and at times impossible due to either distance or noise of everyone trying to be heard. Solitary drives people crazy.

The idea of caging people as a means of rehabilitation is like referring to child abuse as a proper means of discipline. Nothing that debilitates a persons morals and principles or conscience can be considered a good thing. And what of those who are struggling with their morals, principles, or conscience from the start? What will spending years in a cage do to them? A man or woman could go insane if left alone on a small island for years, so who could possibly conceive that being alone in a cage would have no damaging effects? Not only on the ones caged, but also on those locking the cages. To make things worse, Southport denies people contact visits without cause. To deny people the privilege to hold and kiss their children, embrace and kiss their family members, wives, or girlfriends without a disciplinary loss of visit sanction or a non-contact visit disposition, is a form of cruel and unusual punishment upon both the people incarcerated, and their loved ones. Yet, at Southport, with plexiglass barriers, this privilege has been revoked from hundreds of people who do not have loss of visits or non-contact visits dispositions. Human contact, especially with loved ones, is a primary normality of human nature. The system is claiming to rehabilitate by inhumane means. But what would be the result of protesting against such

circumstances? More than likely even harsher penalties with each disciplinary infraction.

At Southport, I have seen other people get jumped and beaten up by correction officers. The COs are not trained at all on how to effectively relate to people. There are some security staff who take this job to feed their families, while others take it to exercise their hate or anger. Officers constantly goad men whom staff realize are outnumbered and in chains. Surely, this is a cowards paradise, and a mans cross to bear. Still, it is hard to feel safe in chains around those who hate you.

They also mess with our mail in here. I used to draw on envelopes for my daughter, but in here it is not permitted. Alone in a cage, they have a problem with normality. I have filed a lot of grievances to complain about various abuses. However, when you file a grievance you are basically writing to the same people you are writing a grievance about. It is always my word against DOCCS staff, and other DOCCS staff always side with their colleagues. For example, Southports medical assistance is very poor. Ive had to file numerous complaints and grievances several times before being given medical care, and Ive had to file lawsuits because of this lack of care. Many other people have had similar problems getting medical assistance here at Southport.

On one occasion, I talked to mental health staff about my feelings, including how much anger I feel. But then the mental health staff talked to security, and I received a disciplinary ticket and more SHU time. Other times I tried to talk to a mental health staff person about my feelings, but she related to me in a judgmental and biased manner.

I rarely go out to recreation. I sometimes go just to be in the sun. But going from one square cage to another is not even recreation for a Chihuahua. Recreation in Southport consists of a one-man cage outdoors about the size of a parking space. There is no recreation equipment at all, not even a pull-up bar. All one can do is walk in circles. Who comes up with this type of treatment?

Making matters worse, sometimes it is even hard to breathe in our cells and they can become unbearably hot in the summer. There are no fans in the cells. There are only vents in each cell that pull in air to ventilate and remove dust. At times, certain COs cut the vents off as a tactic, especially during the summer when it is hot and muggy. There is no air conditioning on the galleries or in the cells. When it gets hot, all we can do is hope for a breeze through the small window opening in front of our cells. On days like these, all you can do is try to survive the stifling heat alone in your cell.

I suffered from severe migraines due to the injuries I received when I was beaten at another prison, and I was not able to get the treatment I needed. I have had to fight for every medical treatment I have gotten and I am still fighting. I had a growth on my tricep so I signed up for sick call, but they sent me to see OMH instead of a medical doctor. They told me that they didnt believe that I had a medical problem, and even after all my advocacy eventually got me a biopsy ordered, medical staff stood over my shoulder while I was getting the biopsy and said, I bet its just a zit. But then eventually they cut out the growth. I have also lost several pounds at Southport due to certain medications I was forced to keep taking.

I am grateful that they provide some cell study programs at Southport. I appreciate the kindness and respect of the teachers not everyone who works within the prisons sees it as an opportunity to mistreat us. I believe the teachers want to help people. On the other hand, cell study teachers only come by once a month, and I dislike that we were not allowed to participate in any real correspondence courses. I also have not been allowed to get the substance abuse workbook or an Aggression Replacement Training workbook. If I was allowed to participate I would. I love reading, and the books I receive from outside prison book programs I have contacted, help me the most in here. It may take a while to get them, but they send me a few books at a time.

More money is spent on prisons that dont work than on programs that do or could work. Prison is a form of torture, not rehabilitation. It does more to mentally handicap an individual than turn an individual into a productive human being. And for those organizations that do strive to do the job that true rehabilitation can do, their greatest opposing forces are DOCCS and politicians. The same people who claim to want to stop crime.

Environments that do further damage to the mind cannot be considered a remedy for crime prevention. I have been in solitary confinement for over two years now. In that time I witnessed a man kill himself. I witnessed men become so angry during caged arguments that they throw urine and feces at one another. I never witnessed such behavior in general population. Those with family or friends on the outside are lucky enough to get a visit, but most people dont. Its easy to lash out in violence when one feels like he has nothing to live for, or that no one cares about him. Some are violent just to feel alive or a sense of purpose.

And that is what prison and solitary do to most men and women they give them no sense of purpose or robs them of what little purpose they felt they once had. And if someone does have any hope, the Parole Board is extremely cruel and they kill the hope of freedom.

And then theres the loneliness. One may find it hard to fathom feeling alone while surrounded by hundreds of other people. But those who find that hard to fathom are blind to the fact that even those who are not in prison get lonely. Including a loneliness from not having an intimate mate. It is a fight because this madness chips away at all of us.

I am affected tremendously every passing day by being in prison, whether in general population or solitary, but I choose to do what I can to stay strong. It is a battle, but it is a battle I dont wish to lose. My strength through it all has been my faith in God. Not in religion, but God alone. Not that I have anything against religion. But there are many without faith or who find it too hard to have faith under such circumstances of prison or solitary. I too have felt that way at times. Nor could I begin to tell you why I havent given up. I dont have the answer to such a question. Even facing a new charge and more time incarcerated when I was the one assaulted by staff, I feel I will find purpose to go on.

Before we can truly change the conditions of prisons, we must be able to change the minds of the people in control of the prisons. But will they change if they are benefitting from how prison currently is? I doubt it very much. It is good to know there are people out there who still consider us human beings. Too often people tend to use incarcerated people as a stepping stone in considering themselves better or more righteous. It is easier for them to feel better about themselves when they have someone else to look down on.

I am enduring. What choice does one have? It is either endure or be broken: mentally, spiritually, physically, or otherwise. Though many will swiftly judge me due to the circumstances that brought me to prison, I am truly sorry for what happened. It is not who I am nor is it

who I was. I was a young irresponsible kid who did something foolish over almost two decades ago. It is not an excuse, but it is the reality. If God should condemn us the way we do one another, what hope would there be for any of us?

Text and banner art from Solitary at Southport, 2017 by the Correctional Association of New York.

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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