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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | June 29, 2012

Below are glimpses into the daily lives of three inmates held in isolation. Each has been in isolation for at least five years. Their reasons for being held in solitary vary: one was validated for gang membership, another for an escape attempt, and another for assaults on correctional officers. Their reasons for incarceration vary, from attempted murder to drug law violations. There are some commonalities in their experiences: none of them have reported meaningful programming opportunities and there is a crippling monotony to their lives. All have reported feelings of frustration both as an emotional response to their circumstances, but also due to the absence of foreseeable release from isolation.

California

Inmate M. has been in the Pelican Bay SHU for five years, a validated Hispanic gang member. He describes his cell as roughly 8 x 12; in his cell are a concrete bed, stainless steel toilet and sink, desk, small stool and a thirteen-inch television. He wakes up at 5 AM, exercises, and takes a bird bath from his sink. Breakfast and lunch bags arrive around 7:30 AM. After eating, he spends three hours reading, writing, and worrying.

At some point in the day, he is allowed 60-90 minutes on the yard. He describes the yard as a concrete box, with a mesh ceiling that allows us to see the sky and get fresh air.

Depending on how much yard time he gets, he usually spends the next few hours watching television, especially sports. Like many on his unit, he enjoys watching General Hospital. He then naps.

Mail is delivered at 4:00 PM, dinner at 5:00 PM. He eats dinner and watches television before going to sleep at 10:00 PM. This is what he's done for five years, every day.

Utah

Inmate B. has been in isolation for 5 years, in Utah State Prison, Drapers Uinta 1 facility. He doesn't leave his cell to shower or exercise due to the procedures that entail putting a bag over an inmate's head, handcuffing and tethering between transports.

We get a styrofoam dinner, which is warm, but two cold meals of bologna (4 pieces), carrots, celery, bread (4 pieces), two cheese slices and one orange with two fruit bars. I wish I could send you a packet of bologna were fed for breakfast and lunch. A guard once stated: 'This shit could withstand a nuclear holocaust.'

I can't train as much cause my liver really goes through hell. It takes three hours to do it. One hour legs, one hour pushups/burpees, one hour curls/shrugs. But I don't take medication. The prison won't treat my Hepatitis-C because they say it's not bad enough yet! I have to be almost dead before they'll begin the interferon. My training helps my liver, at least I keep telling myself that. I get real hot, cold. I have to drink cold water some weeks and hot others. My eyes are always bloodshot and are sunken in. I'm dying that's the long and short of it.

I wake up at lunch 11:00 AM. Eat a white sack and then read or write/sweep floor/clean/bird bath in sink until 4:30 PM dinner/styro, eat that. On Fridays and Tuesdays I workout or do crunches at that time too. Then pace from 4:30 to 8:30 or 10:30. I read and write at desk and pace. Each a little. Then second white sack at 8:30 PM. Go to sleep around 3 or 4 AM.

It sounds bad doesn't it? And it would be without me doing my heavy workout and having all the dreams I could possibly want to come to me when I sleep. I think because the days are so bland my dreams are more vivid.

Oregon

Inmate G., an Oregon IMU inmate currently held in Texas, described his experience at the Snake River Intensive Management Unit in Ontario, Oregon.

The cells are sealed off pretty much completely, even the doors shut and have a side-bar type thing that fits along the deal. Youve got to yell to be heard, which is often more of a headache than its worth. Theres four large windows at the front of the cells, but you can only see the depressing view of the tiers, and the guard tower. Snake River IMU has always been the most isolated and depressing of the two [OSP being the other].

The cell is eight by twelve. A bunk running along the side wall, where the toilet and sink combo is behind the bunk. A table is attached to the other wall, with a small corresponding stool. Thats one of the only good things about IMU in Ontario, the large and spacious cells. But its so much more socially isolated and depressing.

SRCIs IMU is so damn bright, with the powerful florescent lights. Even the night lights they keep on 24/7 are similar to an average light! Theres many things that combine that place into being miserable.

With regards to recreation yards: In Ontario, youve got two. One outside and one inside. And they rotate the days, so you dont go outside everyday. The inside one is merely a large empty cell pretty much about ten by fifteen. And theres a dip bar and pull up bar. The outside rec yards there are probably ten by thirty, with a basketball hoop and ball out there.

Ive always liked to read, fiction and nonfiction, and I try to keep active with a workout, although sometimes its incredibly easy to get lazy. I love music, so having a radio has been my escape. I write, although not as often as I used to. Theres not much you can do, but I try to keep busy nevertheless.

Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watchs first and most prolific intern. Based in Los Angeles, he served as an editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register and the Press-Enterprise, and is now the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

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 [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/09/why-scandinavian-prisons-are-superior/279949/>

The issue here is the instinctive, visceral fear of prisons and prisoners. It is about basic assumptions regarding what states must do to people who violate the law, not only in order to secure the safety, but to satisfy the sense of justice, of law-abiding citizens.

In *Crime Control as Industry*, Christie concluded that the more unlike oneself the imagined perpetrator of crime, the harsher the conditions one will agree to impose upon convicted criminals, and the greater the range of acts one will agree should be designated as crimes. More homogeneous nations institutionalize mercy, which is to say they attend more closely to the circumstances surrounding individual criminal acts. The opposite tendency, expressed in mandatory sentencing and indiscriminate three strikes laws, not only results from, but widens social distance. The harshness of the punishment that fearful voters are convinced is the only thing that works on people who dont think or act like them becomes a measure of the moral distance between these voters and people identified as criminals.

Author Kenneth E. Hartman has lived inside California prisons for over three decades. In an essay in the forthcoming book, *Fourth City: Essays from the Prison in America*, he speaks to why that system sees 75 percent of all repeat parolees back within three years:

Most prisoners are uneducated, riddled with unresolved traumas and ill-treated mental health problems, drug and alcohol addictions, and self-esteem issues far too often bordering on the pathological. The vast majority has never received competent health care, mental health care, drug treatment, education or even an opportunity to look at themselves as humans. Had any of these far less draconian interventions been tried no doubt many of my peers would be leading productive lives. We internalize the separation and removal, the assumed less-than status, and hold up the idiotic and vainglorious pride we pretend to, like clowns make-up, to hide our shame. In the end, the vast majority of us become exactly who we are told we are: violent, irrational, and incapable of conducting ourselves like conscious adults. It is a tragic opera with an obvious outcome. Nothing else works is not a statement of fact; it is the declaration of an ideology. This ideology holds that punishment, for the sake of the infliction of pain, is the logical response to all misbehavior. It is also a convenient cover story behind which powerful special interest groups hide.

Nordic prisons are not all open facilities. Closed prisons here date to the mid-19th century, copied from Philadelphias Eastern State, or New Yorks Auburn, back when those prisons represented models of humane treatment.

But the most profound difference is that correctional officers fill both rehabilitative and security roles. Each prisoner has a contact officer

who monitors and helps advance progress toward return to the world outside a practice introduced to help officers avoid the damage experienced by performing purely punitive functions: stress, hypertension, alcoholism, suicide, and other job-related hazards that today plague American corrections officers, who have an average life expectancy of 59.

In 1832, Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Baumont came to America to study its prisons. They conclude their report with a warning: guard against extremes, and do not let the zeal with which you advocate certain means obscure the object sought to be obtained by them.

The answer is simple. Don't do the crime if you can't do the time. Remember, these guys in solitary have proven themselves to be the worse of the worse. They refuse to obey rules, they attack other prisoners and guards, they are incapable of being human. So, act like an animal, be treated like an animal. No sympathy from me. Do you animals realize that more than half the world would consider your situation heaven? Think about it. TVs provided for you? You don't deserve the privilege and cost to the taxpayers you offended and attacked. We each have the freedom to choose our own path in life. You chose the wrong one. Own up to it.

tell me where they sleep and how do they sleep

the warden & his groupies deserve the same treatment & I HOPE THEY GET IT IN THE BOWELS OF HELL !!!

Lack of hope lowers one's resistance to violent impulses.

I would like to offer a suggestion to the young college students that read this.

Start a program called H.U.L.K. using Hulks racially neutral green image and obvious need to control his violent impulses.

H is for Hope the first requirement needed for change,
U is for Understanding between the races, race is the primary catalyst for prison violence,
L is for Leadership to promote positive leadership in this regard, and finally
K is for Knowledge the key to anyone's future is known to be through education.

Such an organization is needed to inspire hope where there is now only despair.

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