

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2016/06/21/voices-from-solitary-solitary-is-a-living-death/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | June 21, 2016

The Correctional Association of New York recently released Voices from Clinton, a report detailing the abuse and isolation many of the incarcerated people at Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, New York, face. (See accompanying post.) The report follows how punishments and brutality at an already notoriously violent prison have become worse since an escape made by two men in June 2015. It is based largely on the accounts of men incarcerated at Clinton.

Solitary is a Living Death, which was included in the report, is a firsthand account of one man's experiences in Clinton's Security Housing Unit (SHU). He has been held in solitary confinement for more than 20 years. Since he is in Administrative Segregation (rather than Disciplinary Segregation), he is unaffected even by recent incremental reforms to New York's solitary confinement practices, and unlikely to be released from isolation. Like all of the accounts in Voices from Clinton, this one was published anonymously to avoid the possibility of retaliation. Julia Hettiger

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I have spent over 20 years in solitary confinement. As a result of an attempt to escape in the early 1990s, I received 12 years of disciplinary confinement in SHU. After completing this disciplinary sentence, I was immediately placed in administrative segregation (ad seg), where I have been ever since. The statutory maximum for the charge that led to my SHU confinement was a prison sentence of three and a half years to seven. At present, I have been in solitary confinement for three times the maximum length of prison time allowed by the criminal statute. All of us who have been in long-term administrative segregation have been abandoned. Ad seg is the most abusive form of solitary confinement because there is nothing I can do to get out of it.

When my disciplinary SHU sentence was going to end, a senior official from the Inspector General's (IG) office issued a recommendation that I be placed in ad seg and a hearing was held. All of the reasons given for why I should be held in ad seg were things that had happened before I was given the disciplinary sentence. At the hearing, all of the prison staff recommended that there would be no problem with me being housed in general population. Even two high ranking captains recommended that I be released from solitary. One captain personally told me that if he could just bring me down to general population himself, he would. The only person who testified against me being released from SHU was the official who wrote the ad seg recommendation. Yet the hearing officer sent me to ad seg. I remained in the very same conditions in which I was being held before my disciplinary sentence expired, but now it was more harsh because there was no release date.

From the time I was placed in ad seg until the present, there have been paper reviews generally every 60 days. DOCCS repeats the same reasons at these reviews as they had at the initial ad seg determination. They sometimes will put in some additional fabricated reasons, though mostly they note that my conduct had been good but then list the same reasons why I was put in ad seg at the beginning.

I have not had one substantiated disciplinary ticket since I was placed in ad seg. I have not received any substantiated disciplinary ticket for over twelve years. Yet, they keep me in solitary indefinitely.

They say it is not punitive. But in ad seg, I am in my cell 23 hours or more a day. I have one hour a day for recreation. I tend to go outside most days, at least when the weather is ok. But it is just in a bare cage with no equipment. Some people in disciplinary confinement have it better than us even though supposedly we are not being disciplined. People at Southport level 3, for instance, can get more privileges than us. People who have blown up buildings as members of Al Qaeda have TVs and commissary in their cells in federal prison. Ad seg is the ultimate punishment.

I have had a total of eight phone calls in the last 21 years. I have never had a commissary buy. In 2012, they tried to offer us some pilot privileges, but some of us in long-term ad seg rejected them. The pilot program offers: two hours of TV a month, a commissary buy that you can't use in your cell, an extra hour of rec a week, an extra visit and one phone call a month, and a pair of sneakers and shorts. When it first came out, I made a few phone calls, but then others and I decided to refuse all these privileges because they are token offerings. They are trying to offer us basic things that have already been given to others in SHU; trying to offer us crumbs to make it look like they were giving us something. At Southport, guys had sneakers, in-cell commissary, and phone calls since the 1990s.

Plus, they have used mental health patients as weapons against us in ad seg. People who have significant mental health needs or have a low IQ but are not S-designated and so aren't excluded under the SHU Exclusion Law are still in the SHU. And solitary just eats them up they get worse and worse, and will bang on the walls, throw feces, and do other disruptive and destructive things. Staff will place these patients in nearby cells to people in ad seg to use them against us. The person in the cell next to me laughs and talks to himself all day long which creates stress for me and makes it hard to read.

Solitary makes you hateful toward the people who hold you in here. There is nothing you can do. It is a slow death one day at a time. You become very resentful. I can see myself deteriorating in my thought processes. I start laughing hysterically at a very serious moment. For example, I was listening on the radio to the movie, Green Mile, and at the time of the botched execution I just started laughing hysterically even though it is a serious part.

You become warped in solitary. Any relationships you have get harmed. Even just dealing with people in here. I just make quick judgment calls about both COs and incarcerated people. For instance, I might see arrogance right away and I am not giving anyone a fair chance. It's a survival mechanism. There are a lot of treacherous people. And I am always on guard. And stressed. You feel that everyone is out to get you both COs and incarcerated people.

You just get tired of the abuse. I'm on my guard all the time. I can't have normal interactions with people. I can't interact on a basic human level. I'm at the point now that I am always thinking that I am not gonna let guys hurt me. I'm not gonna be a victim. I treat people right and want to be treated right. If someone comes near me I have to act. So I just avoid people. I have become anti-social. I'm not trying to be your friend or your enemy. You see the guy in Colorado who killed the commissioner 24 after he was released from solitary. You get kicked, beaten, disrespected and abused. When you go to the street, there is the possibility of a ticking time bomb.

Solitary is a living death. And there is no end in sight. I know it has affected me. The deterioration is there. I could use therapy. But, I need someone I can trust. Mental health is not an option for me here. If I speak to OMH, it is like I'm speaking to the guards; it is like talking to my enemies. People in OMH and DOCCS are boyfriend and girlfriend. Plus in the mental health crisis observation unit there are no cameras, and there are reports that staff deny patients food and are beating patients up in that unit.

I sometimes think of ending it. The finality of getting this over with. But I don't want to hurt the few people who care about me. And I don't want to give my enemies any help. I try to survive by exercising and reading.

The people who are doing it, who are pushing solitary and overseeing it, they wouldn't last two weeks in here. It is dehumanizing. It makes you feel you are not a human being. Just an animal. You have to fight not just to remain sane but to keep what little humanity you have left. People who claim to be upstanding humans officials and DOCCS staff are enforcing a practice of dehumanizing other human beings.

And at places like Attica and Clinton, the dehumanization is even worse. Attica may be the worst prison. Attica is a sick malignant organization. COs wipe guys' bloody faces with dirty mops. They did a work slowdown for the COs who were on trial for the George Williams beating. Now at Attica where I spent several years in the box until I came to Clinton in 2014 they are beating guys and then sending them back to their cell, sometimes without even giving a ticket so that it is not reported. Just as one example, there was a guy who had part of his face ripped off by COs and they had the porter stitch it up so there wouldn't be any injury report. They want to run that jail by intimidation. And they beat the sh*t out of people.

But if Attica is the worst, Clinton is running a close second, as far as physical abuse by guards goes. Staff brutality has been going on for a long time at Clinton. Guys have been killed by being thrown down the stairs. Other guys have mysteriously died. Clinton has many staircases and a long history of people being thrown down flights of stairs. There have been a number of deaths there over the years of incarcerated persons who all of a sudden supposedly decide to break away from guards inconveniently at the top of a staircase. It is murder, and it's swept under the rug by the powers that be.

There is a lot of racism here the abuses are targeted at Black and Latino people. They operate their own fiefdom here, with power over the district attorneys and judges because the staff are all interrelated to the community here. The COs are the people who vote and put into power the DAs and the judges. Those officials are not going to go against the COs in this area. So the COs carry out their abuses with impunity.

In solitary, I have seen many guys come into the SHU after being beaten people have their hands and their feet shackled and then they're beaten. Then they often shuffle people around including to other prisons after beating them up.

After the escape, they put new rules in place but all of the rules are about restricting things for the people who are incarcerated here, rather than anything related to staff. Plus they spent scores of millions of dollars in overtime just in the aftermath of the escape. But the abuses have been going on long before the escape.

The brutality and the use of endless solitary are perpetually punishing people under the guise of security. For some of us in ad seg, this is a lifetime in solitary. Are they going to punish those of us in ad seg forever?

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.

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

the abuses of solitary confinement in this country need to come to an end
it is totally unconscionable that we are treating people this way
someone needs to step in and say this is not right
how hard is it? why cant there be people overlooking what happens in a prison. there is such widespread and rampant abuse but if there were just someone that was overlooking the practices of the prison it wouldnt be such a problem.
there needs to be something done. someone has to say something. this isnt okay that they can put people away in ad seg indefinitely for 20 years. that is not justified at all. its totally and completely inhumane.
its not okay that COs get away with anything they want and have absolute impunity.

What has happened to you is horrible. It does not reflect who you are as a person or what you deserve. It reflects behaviors of other people. We may never understand why some people have chosen to engage in these behaviors, but it is very, very sad and it is not right. These conditions need to change. Stories like yours are inspiring other people to work hard to change conditions that are torturous.

I love your example of refusing to accept the small token offerings made by people who were in fact deeply hurting you. There is a quote that I love as well that reflects this same idea as you have stated. I am not interested in picking up crumbs of compassion thrown from the table of someone who considers himself my master. I want the full menu of rights (Desmond Tutu). This is an idea that we should all work to take more seriously. No one wants crumbs of compassion. People want to be well treated. People deserve to be treated with dignity.

Your story reflects your incredible resilience and determination to survive as a human being in conditions that are torturous. Your conditions are conditions of torture. Whether or not any particular correctional officer is intending to harm you or is aware of the extent of what people like you are suffering, you are living in torturous conditions. You dont deserve that. No one deserves that. The fact that you were willing to share your story is altruistic and will help others advocate for you and other people like you. You deserve to have a happy, peaceful life. You dont deserve this.

Thank you so much for your willingness to share your story. I hope that people will continue to work together to change conditions that are inhumane and torturous. When peoples human rights are violated and they are subjected to conditions that destroy their sense of themselves as human beings, we have a moral imperative as fellow human beings to act to change those conditions. We all need to respectfully and passionately advocate for changes that reflect our common humanity and do not treat people in ways that make them feel like animals.

I actually dont think that most people would treat an animal they were caring for in this way. And if someone did treat an animal this way, it would be concerning. The fact that we have people living in prison who are being treated worse than many of us would treat even a very difficult animal should be very, very concerning to us all. I continue to be inspired and encouraged by the wonderful work being done throughout the country to change some really appalling conditions.

This is very similar to the case of someone I advocate for in Texas. Its almost identical minus the beatings. Something needs to be done. Police take an oath to serve and protect no matter what, so do Prison Guards and anybody else who is in a position like this. For anyone of authority to abuse people regardless of their crimes, is a disgrace. Our Government allows this to take place and very little is done because hey they are only criminals right? Anyone who objects to my feelings should spend a week in the hole and tell me what you think. You may just change your mind about being beaten and have no hope for release even to General Population. They do nothing to reform these individuals as well. For those who do make it out into society, they may just be your neighbor one day! And for the record, some of these guys did not commit murder. This is about escape or crimes from 20+ years ago they are still being punished for. Murderers receive lessor sentences and thats the truth!

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Solitary Watch News

