

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2020/06/20/how-to-survive-supermax/>

Policy Issue Resources

close

Search

close

close

Inside the Hell of Solitary Confinement

by [Solitary Confinement Reporting Project](#) | June 20, 2020

This week, The New Republic published a long essay by Arthur Longworth, which was written with the support of a grant from the [Solitary Confinement Reporting Project](#), managed by Solitary Watch with funding from the Vital Projects Fund.

*Longworth has been incarcerated for 35 years and has spent long stretches in solitary. He is a 2019 PEN America Writing for Justice Fellow and 2018 Pushcart Prize nominee whose essays have been published by the Marshall Project, VICE News, Medium, and Yes! Magazine. Longworth is also the author of the 2016 book *Zek: An American Prison Story*, which was nominated for the Washington State Book Award. The following is a brief excerpt from the essay, which can be read in full on [The New Republic's](#) site.*

.....

When you're in a supermax or an Intensive Management Unit, as it's dubbed here in Washington state, your field of experience contracts. It is wholly contained within your closet-size cell; the world outside prison, the prison itself, and the rest of IMU may as well not even exist. Your struggle to survive your stay in solitary is waged within the bounds of that cell.

You have to train yourself to make it through your time in IMU reasonably intact. There's no instruction book just as there are no manuals on how to endure the wheel or the rack. You either develop the ability over time, or you don't. There are plenty of prisoners who don't, or can't, condition themselves to the environment. They're the ones you hear screaming and pounding as hard as they can on the steel door of the cell all hours of the day and night. Or they're the ones you don't hear at all.

The pulse of IMU is the unrelenting sound of madness. It pervades every part of the facility, reverberating through the concrete walls of the cell, the soles of your bare feet, your bones, your teeth. There is no time without the jarring slam of steel doors, screaming. You can hear the riot-suited guards with batons and Taser shock shields enter cells to extract prisoners. A guard passes through the block every 30 minutes with a heavy rubber mallet he uses to strike every wall, door, and cuffport to ensure the cells are all secure.

There is the blinding light that's on 24 hours a day in the cell, and the constant exposure to institutional-grade capsaicin spray, known familiarly in riot-control settings as pepper spray. The cellblocks are connected by air vents, so even if it isn't you who the guards are spraying, the effect is nearly the same.

You have to dissociate yourself from the experience to withdraw a part of yourself and keep it at a distance from the world at large. You start by deadening your senses to what's happening around you. All that you see and hear in IMU would still happen whether you were there or not. You can't change any of it, and none of it is happening because of you. So you turn your attention away.

You have to protect that part of yourself from your feelings: the helplessness, the anger, the hopelessness that washes over you in an unrelenting tide. Those are the feelings that arise inside you in that place. You can't stop them. But if you stand back if you don't allow the separated part of yourself to wander out into the storm of those feelings, you can get through it.

.....

Please read [the full essay](#) on The New Republic website, where it appears in the new [Sold/Short section](#), focusing on inequality, justice, and labor.

The Solitary Confinement Reporting Project awarded grants to journalists on both sides of prison walls to report on 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 [Solitary Confinement Reporting Project](#)

February 24, 2022

by [Solitary Confinement Reporting Project](#)

February 8, 2021

by [Solitary Confinement Reporting Project](#)

January 28, 2021

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.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News