

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2014/04/21/voices-from-solitary-solitary-takedown-part-i/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

close

Search

close

close

by [Voices from Solitary](#) | April 21, 2014

This post is the next in a [series of pieces](#) Solitary Watch is publishing as part of a project calling for people held in solitary confinement to write on various proposed themes. Our second suggested theme, [Analyzing Isolation](#), calls for writers to provide their analyses of solitary, discussing ways in which the practice is counterproductive.

*The following comes from Robert W. Howe, who was serving his fourth year at federal supermax ADX Florence in rural Colorado at the time this piece was written. According to his letter, he will have spent almost a decade at the federal supermax upon his release to a lower security prison (so long as he receives no write-ups for rule violations). In his piece, entitled *Thoughts from Inside the Control Unit: A Prisoners Perspective*, Howe describes the effects of being physically confined in an extremely small cell for years on end. Lisa Dawson*

Truth About Consequences

The control unit at U.S. penitentiary max in Florence, Colorado, is a 23-hour a day lockdown facility, where I am currently serving a 95-month administrative sentence. I was given this sentence for taking a correctional officer hostage for two and half hours at USP Atwater in October 2007. I was given an additional life sentence for the hostage incident. The administrative 95-month sentence is the FBOPs way to seek some form of retribution for my actions. Now the BOP will say that Im not being punished. By the end of this essay I would like for you, the reader, to determine where the truth lies. Theres three sides to every story: their side, my side and then theres the truth

Into my fourth year here at the federal supermax control unit, certain issues are becoming readily apparent. Psychological strains of anxiety and bouts of mild depression are beginning to surface in this stark encapsulated environment. I find myself constantly rearranging the small amount of property Im allowed to keep. I do this in order to break up the sameness of my cell and the Groundhog Day effect of repetitious occurrence.

The ever-present background noise of demented individuals who bang, broadcasting toothless or tooth-full threats, the sounds of the toilets, sinks, showers, sliding grill-gate bars, steel doors, fire alarms blaring, officers keys clanking, staff radio blare at full volume, and a myriad of other sounds that become nuisance noise constantly assault your senses.

The consequences of being physically confined in an extremely small cell for years on end have already begun to take a toll. Since my arrival here, I have suffered prolonged hypertension, necessitating blood pressure medication and chronic care visits. The optometrist gave me glasses and told me that individuals who are confined lose their vision at a higher rate due to the fact that we dont get to use our long distance vision. I have joint pain from the never-ending hard surfaces, vitamin deficiency from lack of natural sunlight and probably others that would take a professional to diagnose.

Stark or Stark Raving

While it is true that one doesnt need to worry about being in a physical altercation in the control unit (except with staff), the assault on your physical being and mental state is constant and unrelenting. When this facility opened, it was labeled as one of the most psychologically debilitating places on earth (*Newsweek*, July 13, 1998).

I have been amazed at the physical conditions. The parts that I have been subjected to are antiseptically stark. When I arrived here, I was placed on A-Range in the Special Housing Unit (SHU), which always smelled of mace, feces, urine and the musk of unwashed bodies. That is where dysfunctional inmates who have severe mental and/or disciplinary issues were kept. The control unit has its own version of A-Range, albeit scaled down to a few glass houses, which are cells with Plexiglas on the bars. Even here in the control unit, where rigid protocols are claimed to be enforced, inmates with psychological issues are supposed to be screened out. Yet I find it fascinating that I continue to observe individuals who have degenerated into babbling, banging, crying and erratic behaviors, including successful suicide.

The jaded attitudes of staff and inmates alike seem to incubate a culture of pervasiveness and apathy. My observations these past few years have detected unconcern, psychological degradation and outright alienation of the mentally ill. The psychology departments attitude towards control unit inmates is dismissive at best and unscrupulous at worst

Controls Silent Tool

Most control unit inmates were at one point social creatures similar to regular individuals with the exception that they've been forced to inhabit an unnaturally sterile microcosm in an environment that restricts social means not just with other inmates, but also with family and friends. When the administration only allows someone one 15-minute phone call per month, and restricts the amount of mail they can send out by providing stamped, addressed envelopes under the guise of a security issue, instead of selling them on commissary, that is an administrative penal effort to staunch social interaction. When you go to team hearings, they request that you have good familial ties, and if you don't, points can be added to your security score, which of course they control. The average inmate in the bureau supposedly gets 300 minutes each month of phone time and unlimited mailing privileges. It's almost Kafkaesque, the treatment disparity we incur. Even Senator John McCain said of extended solitary confinement, "It's an awful thing, solitary. It crushes your spirit and weakens your resistance more effectively than any other form of torture or mistreatment."

If I am able to remain incident free, I will not be eligible to leave ADX until I have almost a decade ensconced in this environment. What amount of resilience am I going to need to stay sane, much less remain socially acceptable to my peers? I feel like Sisyphus, forever sentenced to roll my boulder up the hill, only to find myself at the bottom with no end in sight.

Unspirited Letter of Law

Control unit confinement is a beast unto itself. Federal courts have given prison administrators carte blanche to run their operations with little to no oversight. With the emphasis here on control, control implies being controlled by someone or something. The question begs then, with the body controlled, what price does the mind suffer? The influence of physical control on the body has serious significance on one's mental state. There is no human being that can tell me this environment is conducive to even fair mental health; even those who work and study this environment lead compartmentalized lives.

Only total immersion can give one a clarified truth. Control units are allegedly subjected to human rights standards. The conditions of control unit confinement are both physically and mentally severe. They are disproportionate to legitimate security needs and inmate management objectives. They disregard the very real need for significant human contact, which shows a stunning disregard for us as human beings.

There are a couple of old sayings: familiarity breeds contempt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Together they form the spirit of supermaximum ideology. Unfortunately there is no measurement taken for misery and suffering. The absence of normal social interactions, exposure to non-natural environments, and any semblance or perceived normalcy all are detrimental to the physical, mental and spiritual self. I know beyond a doubt that prisoners who are exposed to years or decades of hostile control unit environments experience rage, depression, despair, anxiety and a plethora of other issues.

The provisions that are made for control unit inmates are almost non-existent. More often than not, the psychological staff representative at team hearings, which occur monthly, are silent, asking no questions. Yet they base their reports on those two to five-minute interludes. They do not make rounds in the unit. They come to your cell if you request any form of treatment, with your outer door open so that all four of them can get in your sally port. Now everyone on the tier can hear your innermost thoughts.

Forced Transference

Inmates who have diagnosed yet untreated serious mental illnesses should not be housed alongside inmates who are trying to maintain their fragile grips on sanity in a control unit environment. It is not fair to the mentally ill inmate, and it creates an unnecessary burden on those inmates who are forced to deal with seriously mentally ill inmates who would not be in this environment if the administration would follow their own protocol. One could surmise that forced transference may be a precursor to perfectly normal inmates acquiring symptoms and issues of their own. This breakdown by the psychology department at ADX, as well as administrators, shows a dereliction of duty to the degree of deliberate indifference.

In closing, unless a true and meaningful effort is made to address this extremely serious problem, it will only continue to get worse, leaving a blemishing stain on the conscience of a society that claims even prisoners deserve to be free of physical and mental torture (as stated in the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution).

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.

Even if the comments aren't allowed in they will be read. This has to change. It makes my blood boil at the injustice. People inside are not being treated as human beings. They no longer have value. It is above and beyond any reason that they are treated in this fashion. I have a family member who has been on 23 hour a day lockdown for 8 years. Not one time has he been allowed to make a phone call. His clothing hangs on him due to being starved. The brown water that comes out of his faucet isn't drinkable. He has epilepsy and is left to lay there when he has a seizure. I started a blog a few months ago based on his letters to me hoping to help more people understand just how wrong this is. He is still a human being. He still has hopes and dreams. He has a son he has never touched. Except for one year after he was wrongly thrown in juvy, he's been locked up since he was 17. He is 31 now. He is poor, black and lives in Texas, a bad combination. He now belongs to the new class of slaves.

My Name is Jamie. Life in prison
sonniquick.blog.com

Most of SW articles will not be allowed by the censors to prisoners at ADX, I get them back, not allowed due to mention of the prison and or prisoners. Even when Knox committed suicide at ADX THAT ARTICLE WAS NOT ALLOWED IN.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News