

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/05/08/voices-from-solitary-growing-old-in-isolation/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | May 8, 2013



Shawn Fisher, who is serving a life sentence at Massachusetts Correctional Institution Shirley, has written to Solitary Watch making the argument that the treatment of many elders in prison is in fact a form of solitary confinement. An organization of lifers in Massachusetts has urged the state legislature to adopt some sort of compassionate leave act that would let the old out to die in the free world. There is no hospice in the Massachusetts corrections system. So far, nothing has happened. For more on aging prisoners in Massachusetts, read my article [The Other Death Sentence](#). James Ridgeway

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I would contest that the Skilled Nursing Facility (called the Health Services Unit [H.S.U.]) falls under solitary confinement. The cells are 4-5 man wards but they are locked in that ward for 24 hrs a day. They are not permitted to leave the HSU area for any reason. They cannot attend religious services, programs, or Law Library. There are also several single cells that house four permanent inmates. Those inmates are in their cells, alone 24 hours a day. One inmate has nothing but a mattress and a chair in the cell. NOTHING ELSE. He suffers from dementia and stands at his window, talking through the glass to no one in particular for long periods of the day.

Another inmate who suffers from the same thing, lays in his bed all day long, with no one to engage or talk with. The argument can be made that they don't know where they are, but just the same it is the most inhumane site you will ever witness.

Here at MCI Shirley prison, the effects of the aging prisoner have already had an impact on the population at large. In the last five years several elderly inmates have died in the bowels of the hospital services unit (HSU) called the skilled nursing facility. Most, if not all, died alone with nothing but a bed to comfort them in their last days. What's even more disturbing is oftentimes friends of these men who are housed in the general population do not hear of their passing for days, sometimes weeks later. For some this may seem like a trivial matter but it is indicative of a more serious issue that is slowly taking root among many of the lifer population; hopelessness, particularly the younger men serving life sentences.

Policies enacted here at MCI Shirley prohibit inmates from visiting anyone housed in HSU area, that is, unless they work in the HSU as runners. This policy further prohibits anyone who lives in the HSU from leaving the HSU to attend programs, library, and religious services; in effect punishing individuals for being sick. Many of these men have served 10, 20 and 30+ years in prison. In that time some have lost contact with family and friends who live on the outside. In most cases, they've been incarcerated for so long that there's just nobody left to contact. In almost every instance these men have formed bonds with other prisoners that they've served time with, creating a family unit amongst each other. Men serving long term sentences serve more time living together than the ideal family unit, and yet, when one becomes sick it's very likely that neither of them will see each other again.

Imagine being told that a hospitalized family member is not your concern, nor can you visit them! Imagine being that individual who is terminally ill and knowing that you can no longer see, talk, or spend time with the very person you care for and consider family. It is a dire situation that the younger population sees and realizes, this is what my future holds for me! The hopelessness that instills deep within one's soul is palpable. To know that the only thing you have to look forward to at the end of your days is not friends or family or religious community, but rather, a bed and four walls which the D.O.C. considers a humane way to die.

The restrictive policy of denying ill prisoners a sense of humanity in their dying days creates a climate of hopelessness that in turn creates resentment toward a system they truly feel is killing them. So much so, that this dark, bleak, and foreboding outlook has become a reality to them. This reality has generated conversations among lifers that no one should ever have to have. Some of the men have expressed a desire to commit suicide before they get to that stage; some have even made pacts with someone they know to have them be smothered with a pillow; some have even gone so far as to make promises to one another that they will slip the other some medication to die of an overdose. In many instance inmates are refusing treatment and refusing to seek medical attention so as to avert being placed in the HSU area. The idiom among the men is to refer to HSU placement as a death sentence.

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

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September 6, 2022

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Lisa o. & kat think a tiny bit before you talk down to people stupidly, from my standpoint your very fucking wrong. & it makes me sad inside to see people so confused. poor things maybe one day your all mighty god will come and save us all. buuu until then we need strict rules in place and no one is going to change the fact that prisoners deserve to be miserable and are happy to be alive!!! stupid bitches

the fact that some of you ppl actually feel bad for this scumbag is absolutely mindblowing. these people are murders. they killed innocent people who had families and now your worried about there health and happiness? fuck off. i know of shawn fischer personally, and i know friends of the victim he brutally tortured and beat. watching him try to get pity makes me absolutely sick and listening to people talk about morals and values and being kind and fair are absolutely fucking wrong. had it been your child murderer for no reason would you still defend there values? if your sister or brother had been tortured and beaten by a group of dumb wannabe thugs would you be at the jail demanding that said inmate still got treated fairly and got to see his friends? doubt it. it is so easy to preach about being nice and morally correct when your watching from afar. put yourself in the victims shoes and youll surely understand why prison is hard for the inmates. if these disgusting assholes do not want to rot away then they shouldnt have taken anothers life. in my opinion these men are exactly where they deserve to be, and thinking of them dying alone on a cot with no one around brings a huge smile to my face(: justice is served and if i was in charge the punishment wouldnt be an easy ride through life in a cushy jail cell. i would personally kill you myself. eye for an eye. the moment you take it upon yourself to kill another human being you are losing your right to being treated fairly. it makes me mad how dumb people are feeling bad for prisoners! maybe we should let them out again so they kill your child? or make prison a sweet fun non threatening place so people dont mind going? its a fucking punishment for fucking criminals and they should be miserable the entire time. fuck everyone moron who believes that they should be treated fairly. im assuming your all god believing catholic faggots or women who are to weak to logically think of what is fair. fuck every misguided person and fuck shawn fischer. hes a good for nothing punk who will never change and is still looking for sympathy instead of manning up and taking his deserved punishment. shawn fischer your a pathetic lost cause who should have died 10 years ago instead of the beautiful life he took. i ever see you out of jail and i can promise youll be begging to go back

FYI: Not that its all that critical, but Dostoevskys quote is actually from his book House of the Dead, not Crime and Punishment. Keep up the good work, Solitary Watch!

Russ, if you really think that would be the solution, than your morality hasnt developed that much. Lets say it with Yodas words: Fear is the path to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate; hate leads to suffering. I sense much fear in you.

Who do you believe should effect their fate? How about the victims of their crimes? It would be interesting if we could determine the punishment of those who do crimes against us as individuals. Would that not be a saner and a fair way? I could may be go with a concept like this. Rape my daughters, and I require you, to be castrated Or kill my child; for me it would mean, I can kill you, and I would do it myself Would not that be fair. Steal from me; and I make you my slave, until you pay me back every thing you took? I think I could like this type of concept

Reading this makes me so sad. There has to be a more humane way to deal with aging and ailing inmates. I understand how lifers do not want to go to the HSU. They should allow the community to assist with visitation by Christian groups so that these people do not feel alone in their end times.

And yet there are some who will say and post here that these individuals deserve this. It wrenches my gut to read this stuff. Maybe thats why people turn their heads its too painful to contemplate. And these are just the neglected. Proves that neglect is a form of abuse. And

abuse is just a degree of torture. God bless us everyone.

Fyodor Dostoevsky also said: Men do not accept their prophets and slay them, but they love their martyrs and worship those whom they have tortured to death. As we do here at Solitary watch Bless you all in your work..

Tragic though it seems it is the plight of the aging even in open society. Dostoyevsky, in his book crime and punishment it stated you can judge the degree of a civilized society by its prisons others over the years have said similar Churchill, Truman, I have even said it in differing ways myself. It appears here in you are talk about the aging sane and insane placed together, the key word Lifers and we have fought to end the Death penalty; so the under lying real question is as I see it. (Is a Life sentence a Life sentence?) What is punishment anyway? Is it morally right? You can be a do-good-er a Liberal who would coddle cries wolf on anything that my seem harmful. Yet has no answer to the question of rightful punishment. Only jumps on the band wagon when prisoners are victimized. Which is a prominent issue here in the US, no doubt about it. However, it is getting at what should be done that is at issue. Is it wrong and immoral to have situations like this (I say Yes!) with that How do we fix it? You cant let a dementia patient out in the street. I know, my own dear and loving aunt who was no criminal had to be put into a mental place; the poor lady became combative and vile at all family; so the problem is not only in the prison it is in open society also.. There are very heavy underlying issues here; even with the visitation between incarcerated prisoners, who is liable if a visiting con gets hammered by the nut bag he is visiting? This guys are in the frikin prison for crimes against society, you need to get that in your writing. They are not free, they are under punishment for bad acts. As I was myself for many years. We gave these men mercy in the first place. Didnt we? We sentence them to LIFE rather than kill them.. Arnt we nice a Life in a Box Isnt that the Christian Way?

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