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by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#) | July 7, 2021

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William Billy Blake, whose 2013 [essay](#) *A Sentence Worse Than Death* introduced hundreds of thousands of readers worldwide to the soul-crushing reality of life in long-term solitary confinement, has been transferred to the general prison population in New York. In a brief phone call, Blake said there are no words in the human language to describe how he feels, being with other people after spending nearly 34 years alone in a cell.

Blake's transfer comes at a time when New York prison officials, who used long-term solitary confinement against incarcerated people with abandon for decades, are finally facing sharp limits on its use with the enactment of the [HALT Solitary Confinement Act](#) earlier this year. Advocates continue to push for the [total elimination](#) of solitary.

In 1987, appearing in a courtroom on drug charges, Blake shot two sheriff's deputies during a bungled escape attempt, killing one and critically wounding another. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to 77 years to life in prison. He was 23 years old. You deserve an eternity in hell, said the judge at the sentencing hearing, rueing that the death penalty was not on offer. When he entered prison, Blake was two of the things prison staff hated most: a person who had killed a police officer and an escape risk.

What followed were three and a half decades in the most desolate and damaging conditions U.S. prisons offer. [Human rights experts](#) say that more than 15 days in solitary confinement constitutes torture, given the psychological damage it can cause, and even shorter stints carry [known risks](#). But Blake and others that prison officials in New York claimed were a danger to security have spent years and even decades in administrative segregation, or Ad Seg, one of many common euphemisms for solitary.

When Blake was sent to prison and into isolation, the United States was well into the [era of runaway incarceration](#), the consequences of which would be felt most severely by Black and Latino communities. It would be another two decades before the [prison population peaked](#) in 2009 at [over 1.5 million people](#) (not including people held in jails, youth detention, or immigration detention). As prison populations exploded, the use of solitary confinement did as well. In an essay on the history of the practice, Jean Casella and James Ridgeway described how solitary, which once seemed a relic of a bygone age, was [revived](#) as a tool of control and punishment in the 1980s and 90s, including [in New York](#). From 1995 to 2000, the number of people in solitary increased by 40 percent nationwide.

Through it all, year after year after year, Blake remained sealed in isolation, in a cell for all but one hour a day, absorbing the world through the books in his cell (and later a pair of headphones), letters, the guards and prison staff that came and went, and the misery of the men in cells around him.

In 2013, Blake [described](#) decades of life in a box. His companions were mice and cockroaches, the only creatures free to roam the unit. Life consisted of an austere sameness that makes it difficult to tell one day from a thousand others. If he left his cell at all, it was for the allotted one hour of recreation time in the yard but there too, he remained in isolation. There is nothing in a SHU yard but air: no TV, no balls to bounce, no games to play, no other inmates, nothing, he wrote. Around him, men were driven to despair and some to suicide.

Had I known in 1987 that I would spend the next quarter-century in solitary confinement, I would have certainly killed myself, Blake wrote nearly ten years ago. If I took a month to die and spent every minute of it in severe pain, it seems to me that on a balance that fate would still be far easier to endure than the last twenty-five years have been.

Unlike [so many](#) others in solitary, Billy Blake survived and he chronicled what he endured. In *A Sentence Worse Than Death*, he wrote of boredom and loneliness to such a degree that it seemed to be a physical thing inside, so thick it felt like it was choking me, trying to squeeze the sanity from my mind, the spirit from my soul, and the life from my body. The essay attracted more than half a million readers when first published on Solitary Watch in 2013, and was reprinted in multiple outlets and in translation. It became the lead essay in the collection [Hell is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement](#).

Through his writing and his experience, Blake introduced many not only to the barbarism of prison practices in New York, but also to the particular predicament of the few dozen people held by the state in administrative segregation. Rather than being placed in disciplinary

segregation for a finite (though sometime lengthy) period as punishment for a specific violation of prison rules, many of the individuals in Ad Seg appeared to be in solitary confinement permanently, with no end date and little hope for release. Early solitary reforms, including a legal settlement reached in 2015, had left administrative segregation untouched. In [recent years](#), federal courts scrutinized the practice in individual cases, finding that DOCCS may not use Ad Seg as a charade in the name of prison security to mask indefinite punishment for past transgressions, but did not strike down the practice as a whole.

Finally, this year, a nearly-decade long organizing [campaign](#) to dramatically limit the use of solitary confinement in all its forms, including administrative segregation, bore fruit. Starting in 2012, survivors, people with loved ones in solitary, and other advocates in New York fought for an end to long-term solitary confinement in New York and, since 2014, for the passage of the HALT Solitary Confinement Act. (Note: This authors partner is a member of the HALT Solitary campaign.) For most of the decade, Republican control of the state Senate, made possible by a small faction of conservative Democrats aided by Governor Andrew Cuomo, doomed the effort. In 2019, Democrats gained control of the legislature. As the legislative session entered its final days, HALT organizers went on a hunger strike demanding passage of the bill. Instead, lawmakers, facing a governor with veto power, struck a deal with Cuomo on a far more limited executive order.

In 2021, armed with a veto-proof supermajority and pushed by active bill sponsors, Democrats passed the bill, and the governor signed it into law. The HALT Solitary Confinement Act will go into effect next year. It defines solitary confinement as confining anyone to any form of isolation for more than seventeen hours a day; bans solitary outright for especially vulnerable categories of people; limits its use on everyone else to 15 days or less; and, in cases where longer separation from the general population of a prison is imposed, requires that a person be transferred not to prolonged solitary but to a rehabilitation unit, generally for no more than a year and with access to at least seven hours of out-of-cell congregate programming and activities.

Although DOCCS has never stated its reasons, it was in this context that New Yorks prisons department seems to have begun transferring people out of indefinite isolation. In an email on June 17, a corrections department spokesperson said there were eight people still in administrative segregation down from 18 in June 2019.

For over thirty years, the committee that periodically reviews placement in administrative segregation had left Billy Blakes classification unchanged. Reviews of his placement were virtually identical, all recommending his continued isolation on the grounds that he would pose a threat to security, despite [a decade and a half](#) without any violent infractions. It wasnt until September 2017 that the committee opened the door to the possibility of a transfer, stating that if he continued to exhibit good behavior he could be a candidate for a transitional program.

A year and a half later, New York State prison officials transferred Blake to the step-down program in the Special Housing Unit at Attica. There he was escorted out of his cell to a classroom for two hours a day. After twenty months, he completed that program as well as one in another step-down program. He [wrote](#) in March 2021, I have done it. Now I am awaiting my transfer to a prison population in a maximum security prison unknown. I am ready to return to humanity.

On June 10, Blake reported that prison officials had moved him from solitary confinement at Mid-State Correctional Facility to the general population at Shawangunk Correctional Facility.

Conditions of confinement hold special significance for individuals like Blake who are serving effective life sentences. (Under his current sentence, he will not be eligible for a parole hearing until 2060, when he would be 96 years old.) But the scars left by solitary can make the transition back to daily human contact difficult, no matter how welcome it may be. Blake plans to keep writing during this time, including a diary of his first weeks and months out of isolation, and has promised to send Solitary Watch excerpts for future publication.

From a 2012 letter to Solitary Watch by William Blake:

I often stay awake all night to avoid the bulk of the madness that goes on in the SHU [Special Housing Unit]. Its lonely time, though, and boring time like only SHU can be boring which is boredom of a kind that nobody out there could ever comprehend unless they had lived in the Box before. Sometimes I read till my eyes go blurry, till Ive got nothing left in my cell to read, and I dont have any more letters to write because Ive bothered the few people I write too much already, and then I am out of things to do. So I just sit and watch the cockroaches on the company [cellblock corridor] go by. Sometimes I will go into a sort of stupid state, a fugue youd call it, where Im really not thinking anything at all, just watching the black spots move on the floor. The lights will come on in the morning, and I dont even remember having one thought for the whole night.

Sometimes I watch the roaches and I envy them. In my mind I have fantasized that I was a cockroach, and I maneuver all through the halls of the prison, walk under the locked gates, and stay close to the walls to avoid being stepped on by a CO [corrections officer]. Then I get outside through some crack or under some door, walk through the grass that looks like tall trees to me, being a roach and small and then Im up and over the wall and out. Once I make it, I pop myself back to being human and I walk off into the night, free again, and not even caring if I die that same night, just as long as I can see some trees and feel a breeze and know for an hour or two that I was free again, that I lived to see the outside of prison before my time in this world was over.

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