

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2019/01/23/voices-from-solitary-death-would-feel-so-much-better/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | January 23, 2019

The following piece was compiled from a series of letters written to Solitary Watch by Tashon Burke, a 26-year-old man who describes himself as having mental health issues, and who is serving time on a firearms charge at State Correctional Institution (SCI) Houtzdale in Pennsylvania. He has been in prison for six years, but once he finishes his initial seven-year sentence, he will serve another one to three years for spitting on a corrections officer. Burke wrote of the incident: Although I regret it, I could only take so much. There are times they wouldn't feed me or shower me, and my anger led to that mistake.

In 2015, after a Department of Justice [investigation](#) condemned Pennsylvanias routine placement of people with intellectual disabilities and serious mental illness in solitary confinement called Restricted Housing Units (RHUs) the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PA DOC) [settled](#) a lawsuit with the Disability Rights Network and ACLU of Pennsylvania, agreeing to stop placing people with serious mental illness in solitary and instead provide them treatment. But [critics argue](#) that the PA DOCs definition of serious mental illness is so narrow, and oversight is so lacking, that many people with psychiatric disabilities continue to languish in solitary.

In this account of his struggle to survive in the RHU, which he asked Solitary Watch to publish, Burke describes the kind of vicious cycle often experienced by people with mental health needs when they are placed in isolation. Unable to control his emotions or follow random orders, and without the benefit of treatment, he racks up month after month of time in solitary for disciplinary violations. (What he calls 15s, 30s, 60s, and 90s refer to the numbers of days in the RHU he received for each violation.) Burke has spent most of the past two years in solitary, sometimes turning to self-harm in a desperate effort to get help, which never comes, and trying to resist the feeling that death would be better than the life he is living.

Leading up to the publishing of this piece, Solitary Watch received an elated letter from Burke letting us know that he had just been released from solitary. Valerie Kiebal

On December 12, 2016, I went to the hole up in [State Correctional Institution] Somerset because I was under investigation for an inmate assault. Once they decided to find me guilty, I was sentenced to a 60-day sanction in the hole. While doing my 60-day sanction, a C.O. [corrections officer] wouldn't give me soap to shower. He told me buy it from commissary, but I didn't have any money. The green jailhouse bar of soap is free, but I was denied it.

I suffer from mental problems I started hurting myself, banging my head, punching myself, and making a mess with my blood. They laughed and kept me in my cell for two hours before I went to POC [Psychiatric Observation Cell], and that's only because I broke a plastic cup and started cutting my wrist.

Now here's the thing. I was given a bunch of 15s, 30s, 60s, and 90s in solitary consecutively. Those were for threatening the staff and refusing to obey orders. For the broken cup, though, since I used it as a weapon on myself, I was given a flat-out 210 days in solitary. The jail handbook says I am to be placed in RHU for a period not to exceed 90 days per charge, yet I was given 210 days.

Well, I was told I was going to be transferred to Houtzdale, and I didn't know why. I was just given some report stating I'm on AC [administrative custody] and just finished a DC [disciplinary custody] sanction, awaiting transfer. Before I left, C.O.s kept banging on my door, harassing me, provoking me, and bringing out my mental health issues to feed off their provocation.

I told the Lt., we argued, and I spit in his face. That's how I got a staff assault. I saw the hearing examiner up here in Houtzdale for that assault and was given 90 days the max. Once I was done with that, I saw Houtzdale's PRC [Program Review Committee], and they told me I still have a shit load of time to do, up to two years. When I showed them my report stating that I had finished that DC time, they said that they called Somerset and Somerset admitted to having made a mistake.

I've been in the hole since December 2016, wrongfully sanctioned. I will max out my time in the hole on February 28, 2019. I already completed my 90 days for the staff assault, but they are telling me that I still owe Somerset time. How is it that my staff assault sanction is shorter than my refusing to obey orders, threatening staff, and contraband sanction of 210 days? Staff assault is the worst of my

charges, yet its over before all my other charges, including my 210-day sanction for a piece of cup.

Im tired. I cant do all this hole time. Im having heavily suicidal thoughts. My demons are having a field day. Im always depressed. I hurt myself a few times. I hurt myself badly. This hole is killing me! curse people out that arent there. I want to kill myself so bad, but Im scared.

You get one book a week and only get to watch four channels on the TV. I cant breath but this only happens sometimes. I have bad thoughts. I get weaker every day. Im hungry. Theyre decreasing the portions on our trays. Im losing weight. Im heavily depressed always. I keep hurting myself. I try to get help, but the psychologists always ignore me or theyre never there. The C.O.s tell me Im not supposed to tell them that Im going to hurt myself, just do it and theyll come get me when Im done.

Im really losing all my sanity. Death would feel so much better, but Im too pussy to do it. I have no family and no one to confide in. I need to get out of this hole. This is Satans domain. Sometimes we dont even get our hour outside because too many people may sign up for yard and the guards get lazy. I caught more write-ups here in solitary because this place causes negative behaviors. Im losing it. I just want to die. Time moves so slowly, and freedom from the hole is getting no closer. I dont know how much more I can take. I need help. Im tired of just being drugged. Ive been done wrong in my sanctioning. All hope feels lost. Everything I explained is the truth.

Update: Today, May 6, 2018, in the RHU (the Hole) on Block C, where Im housed, a man hung himself. Hes dead. I saw the body when they brought him out. This man has been asking for a psychologist, but he was continually denied. Also, he was discovered late, due to the fact that the C.O.s doing rounds never looked in there. He had a lot of hole time. It was too much for him.

I told you how I wanted to do the same. Well now Ive seen the traumatic effect it had on the guys in my pod, and I dont want to depress people like that. Well I just thought I would let you know how we have a bunch of people here who dont care at all about our safety. I hope I can help you all in stopping long-term solitary confinement.

Update: I caught four more write-ups, so Ill probably never get out of the hole. Ive been getting denied my medication I lost it. It hurts, you know. I suffer some mental issues and my medication is being played with. So what do I do? 24 hours in a cell, a mental health inmate, fighting a losing battle, not only with my demons but with the people who are supposed to help me learn to get back and live in society. So I snapped out. I broke my nose and banged up my head. I was sprayed with pepper spray.

You know, they got this rule that the only time guards can use deadly force is if the inmate is a threat to the guard or himself. Does that make sense? Here I am hurting myself and theyre hurting me more, telling me to stop hurting myself. HA! Basically saying, we cant let you hurt yourself, but well be more than glad to hurt you. We cant let you kill yourself, but well be happy to end your sorry ass life for you.

I fear for my life because I know my grievance will be denied, and the chain of command will ignore my cries for help. Ive been having suicidal thoughts again. The C.O. makes me feel that way. He heightens my symptoms, and no matter what I do or who I tell, hell continue to torment me without discipline.

So do I hurt myself again before he can hurt me? I dont know; Im scared and confused. Ive seen the excitement these guards get by hurting helpless, handcuffed, shackled inmates. Then they talk about it with smiles and amazement. I had a C.O. ask me why I keep fucking myself up. Why dont I just hang it up? Well 1. Im scared shitless to. 2. I have to be strong. Im already here. Might as well deal with it. 3. I worry what people will think and say about me

Being mentally unstable and all, I dont know if all of this is making me stronger or weaker. I am tired of hurting myself. Well Ill let you know how this turns out. Dont be surprised.

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

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My heart breaks for him. I pray that God will deliver him from the pits of satans belly. May he continue to fight for his sanity and his life. I pray for healing over him in the name of Jesus!!!

I understand this young man totally Im 67 years old and have been on medication for depression for over 35 years. I have attempted to be taken off a couple time early on with no success. My doctor advised me some individuals are never able to produce the chemical needed to control your depression.

This is totally ridiculous for him to be treated in such a way. My son has been incarcerated seven years and told me all about the brutality they suffer at the hands of some guards.!!

My heart goes out to him for not having any support on the outside or anyone to go to bat for him.

I would love to write him some encouraging words. God Bless this child.

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