

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2019/09/24/voices-from-solitary-living-on-death-watch/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | September 24, 2019

The following account was written by Billy Joel Tracy, who has spent nearly nineteen years in solitary confinement in various Texas prisons, including one stint of thirteen straight years in isolation. Tracy, a 41-year-old man with a psychiatric disability, has been incarcerated for 21 years in total, and received a death sentence for the murder of a prison officer. Tracy resides on what he calls Death Watch, a section of the Polunsky Unit that houses people who have received their confirmed execution dates, though Tracy has not received his own. In this piece, Tracy describes the psychological effects of living in conditions of severe isolation around people so close to their deaths. Tracy has also written a [series](#) for Minutes Before Six, expressing his farewells to thirteen of his fellow incarcerated men who have been executed. Valerie Kieba

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I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable. Joseph Addison

Alright Warden, you can take Mr. Tracy to Death Row now. 102nd District Court Judge Bobby Lockhart

November 15, 2017, I was sentenced to die by lethal injection for the death of Timothy Davison, a Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) guard. After being sentenced to death, I was immediately taken from the courtroom by TDCJ transportation officers and driven to the Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas, where the men of Death Row are housed in solitary confinement.

Four hours after being sentenced to die, I found myself inside a cell the State of Texas had spent the previous two weeks modifying for me in anticipation of me receiving a sentence of death.

This specifically modified cell is housed on 12 building A Pod 1 Section and is the section named Death Watch. The Death Watch Section is for those Death Row inmates whose appeals have run out and have received their execution date. Their date to die. They each are given at least 91 days to prepare some last ditch appeals and get their affairs in order before their state sanctioned executions. On this section they are kept away from the other Death Row inmates who have not received execution dates.

The Death Watch Section has 14 cells all with cameras inside the cells in the upper left hand corner with a view of the entire cell. There are monitors inside two separate control pickets, two different wardens officers and a surveillance office where the footage inside the cells can be viewed. A Texas senator even has access to this live footage. There is zero privacy. The cameras were installed years ago under the pretext of helping prevent suicide attempts. Allegedly so Texas could preserve the condemned life until they were ready to extinguish it themselves.

The Death Watch Section has more than one dark purpose. Texas is infamous for getting the maximum amount of suffering it can out of each taxpayer dollar. Texas also houses inmates it doesn't like on Death Watch. Inmates who do not have execution dates.

Under the guise of security, TDCJ puts inmates on Death Watch without an execution date, so they will have to endure living with a camera in their cell, but more importantly so they are surrounded by men with just days from death, constantly reminded of their doom and constantly suffering the loss of friends.

Imagine the only people you are around are those with a few months to live getting to know them, watching them experience their last days, then finally watching them be lead away to be killed. Now extrapolate that over YEARS. Can you imagine the psychological impact this would have on someone?

Three other Death Row inmates have been housed on Death Watch as punishment. Two were moved after nine and thirteen months. The third has been on this section over eight years and has endured over 100 men being led to their death. Fifteen were his friends. In 2018 he gave up his appeals because he could no longer take the psychological trauma of watching men live out their last days. His words to me were, I'm done, Billy, I'm done. He later decided to continue his appeals at the urging of his family, but not because he wants to live.

The cell my captors spent two weeks modifying is a psychological torture chamber. It is the only cell in TDCJ like it. They cut the steel table and shelf off of the wall. They cut out the steel locker box we store our property in, that was welded underneath the bunk. This is so I have no comfortable place to write, eat, or store my property. I must store my property in bags on the floor. This is a very bad situation in prison because the sewage pipes back up all the time. When that occurs, the raw sewage being flushed down the toilets backs up and comes out of the drains set into the floor outside of the cells. One such drain is two feet from my cell door. Multiple times now the drains have backed up and the sewer water has flooded into my cell, causing me to lose everything it touched on my floor. When this happens I must pile all of my uncontaminated property onto my bunk. This leaves me no place to sit or lay, so I must just stand in the sewer water or sit on my toilet, until a maintenance crew can unclog the pipes. Ive had to stand/sit like this for HOURS several times. This creates extreme anxiety in me when I go to sleep. Will the run flood? Im always waking up to check my floor for water. I cannot ever truly relax. With no table to eat from I must set my tray of food onto my sink. My toilet is directly under my tray of food. Eating directly over a toilet is an appetite killer.

TDCJ also welded metal plates with small holes in them over the inflow and outflow air vents. This restricts the heat and air conditioning into my cell to such an extent that its made my cell a hot box in the summer and an ice box in the winter. Its almost always an extreme temperature inside this cell. What is worse is the outflow ventthe vent that sucks the air outbecause slowly the screen will fill up with dust. It ends up looking like the filter in your dryer when you dont clear it out for a long time. With a metal plate over the vent the only way to clear it of the caked up dust is to put my mouth over each hole and repeatedly suck the dust into my mouth and throat and then spit it out. There are thirty holes. I dread doing this. Im left coughing for hours afterwards. I must do it though. If I do not the cell becomes even more oppressive with no air circulation.

My cell door was also rebuilt, adding a steel box over the food slot so that guards can open it and set whatever item inside the box and close it. Then they open a smaller door so I can reach into the box for the item(s). Two layers of Plexiglas were placed over the outside of the door, covering the two observation slits. More metal was welded onto the bottom and sides of the door so the door is sealed. This restricts air flow and makes it very hard for others to hear anything I say.

On top of all this, I am also only allowed to recreate all alone outside with a supervisor standing there watching me the entire time. The rec yard has two cages in itits designed for two people to utilize. Yet, I am only allowed to recreate alone. Alone everyday. Outside and inside my cell. Alone. Alone except for when I have a visitoreven then a supervisor stands directly behind me to intimidate my visitors.

Living under such oppression would be hard for anyone to cope with. Its even harder to endure for someone like me, who has a disability. I have severe organic brain damage. The neurological issues I deal with cause issues commonly seen in people with mental illness. I grew up in and out of mental institutions because my brain damage was unknown and misdiagnosed as one mental illness or another, most commonly, Intermittent Explosive Disorder. Ive never received treatment for brain damage. It went unknown until the day I committed the crime, in 1998, that I received a life sentence for.

TDCJs treatment plan for me has been to warehouse me in long-term solitary confinement. Solitary confinement which is proven to only worsen people with impulse/aggression problems like I have. I have spent almost nineteen of the last 21 and a half years in solitary. At the time of the crime Im on Death Row for, Id been in solitary for nine and a half years. And now, at the time of writing this piece, I have been in solitary for fourteen and a half of the past seventeen years.

As brutal as my living conditions are, the hardest by far to endure, psychologically, isnt this cell, recreating alone and living under constant surveillance, or standing for hours in sewage. It is living around men who are living out their last days.

Over the past eighteen months that I have lived on Death Watch, I have made more friends than in all of my other years incarcerated combined. Something about living so close to death causes most to drop their machismo front and open up with each other. Its how we cope, I guessreaching out to others for help, support, comfort, understanding. I have become very close, very quickly, with several of these men only to watch them taken away and poisoned until their lives are over. Ive watched sixteen men walk away to their death. I have been in mourning since January 2018a mourning that starts over and over, with layer upon layer added and I know it will never end.

I almost wish that all of these men were assholes with repugnant personalities so I wouldnt mourn them. Several times I almost decided to quit getting to know these menjust to hibernate within myself, to armor my heart and not allow anyone in, to shut out the pain, to form a shell around myself so I can get some peace. I know living that way is not psychologically healthy either. For my personality type I need to interact with others as much as possible. I just dont know what to do. Either way I choose to live is great emotional pain, great psychological pain.

I have at least five more years before my appeals would be over and I could be executed. Texas plans to keep me here, in this cell, until that day, whether it is in five years or fifteen years. Can I make it that long and retain my sanity? Will I lose myself in this endless death march?

I fear for my sanity more now that I ever have in all of these years of solitary confinement. Ive seen so many men go crazy from the effects of solitary that Ive always kept myself on a strict sleep and exercise schedule to help counteract the effects of isolation. I get up and go to bed at the same time every day. This stops me from oversleeping which causes depression and saps your will to live. I exercise first thing after getting out of bed and then I do artwork and write to keep my mind active. Stay busy. Stay active. Regimented. Hard core regimentation. Regimentation mandated due to the terror of losing my sanity.

My strict regimentation is not working as well under the stress of living in this torture cell on Death Watch. Lately my weight is going up and down from muscle loss and muscle gain. Weight fluctuation caused by mini depressions, like someone with a mild bipolar disorder. I cant sleep more than an hour or two without waking fully and lying there an interminable amount of time before falling into a fitful sleep. I never feel like Ive slept. Sleep has always been my brief escape from prison. Now I do not have that respite.

I have been tormented with guilt for killing Davison. Guilt that seems to grow each day and not fade. I feel like the character is Poes *The Tell-Tale Heart*, who murdered someone and imagined he could hear his victims heart beating and it drove him crazy. Instead of a beating heart, I constantly hear the imagined voices of Davisons two daughtersnow fatherlessand his brother and niece, now without a brother and uncle Daddy, Daddy, I hear Uncle! Brother! I hear this like a mantra chanted endlessly.

Living on Death Watch has exacerbated my guilt greatly. Every time one of my friends is executed and I mourn them I think of what I put Davisons family through. Then I keep thinking about it over and over.

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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This is a reply to Jonathan Andrews (not a real name but a pen borrowed from inmate in Terrell unit). Billy has been diagnosed with a mental disability that was presented in several of his trials with medical records. School friends from his past had testified he was not violent or in trouble until he turned 17. Combined with his medical diagnosis and head injury he became aggressively violent. His family had sought treatment to no avail.

He became more impulsive and dominant in his behavior as time moved on. On medication, he was passive and more organized with no violent outburst. The days of all his attacks are when he was off his meds just like the female CO said in court that he first attacked. She said as she was walking by she noticed Billy acting like he was off his meds which is her first flag that something was wrong before he attacked her. Medical experts also confirmed this in his trials he refused his meds. This caused a testosterone flood with spiked adrenaline days before the attack. Even his exercise routines became more intense. A bad storm combination.

This doesn't excuse his crimes. At one unit he assaulted 47 COs. He was up to 100 before DR. Not including inmate assaults. They had 3 COs escort him at all times. Except at Telford Unit where once again he was escorted by a new rookie CO alone when he attacked and killed Davison. One CO was cited for not assisting Davison due to being in fear of Tracy. That CO resigned for being written up. He insisted that more than 2 CO should escort Tracy after seeing the training video for new recruits featuring Tracy. In these videos they saw Billy lifting an unconscious CO by her feet off the ground and tossing her over the stairwell (the same with Davison). And him disabling two male COs in recreational yard trying to escape. All of this when Billy was off his meds.

The Telford Unit was partially to blame for Davison's death in neglect to allow a powerful violent inmate with a history of CO assaults such as Billy to be alone with him. According to court testimony.

My suggestion to the Davison family is to sue for gross neglect. Not just Billy being the escape goat.

You know initially when I read your writing on minutes before six I thought to myself, what a good guy. After reading extensively on your cases and conduct, you are a total menace to society, almost killing a female guard. You are a violent violent individual. You the last person to complain about your situation on DR. I also hate how you guys on DR never speak about your crimes rather complain and moan. I also find it odd how all you guys are so afraid of dying yet have absolute no regard for human life. You are a good writer I'll give you that but you deserve being where you are.

Do not be taken in by this man. Billy Tracy knew exactly what he was doing when he committed each crime. The man is a manipulator, and preys on those that are weaker willed than he. If you don't believe feel free to write to him and ask him about his escape plans at another TDCJ facility in which he had planned to take a female hostage and then murder her after getting out. This man is not to be mourned over but rather set as an example of how evil man can become.

Romans chapter 12 verses 17-19 guilty people on death row should not be heard by nobody but God. Innocent people on death row should be heard by everybody and God. Texas is a good instrument of the Lord's vengeance everybody knows crazy is not an excuse in Texas, Bill needs to shut up and take his medicine.

Billy as a former TDCJ officer I have ZERO remorse for you! ROT in HELL! You knowingly took the life of a fellow officer! You knew damn well what your intentions were. No, I was not on the Telford unit when you took the life but I was on the Coffield unit while you served your time there. I so hardy had to escort you to different parts of the unit. I could see and feel the hatred you had within you! God be with you! And I will say this I hope you have FINALLY realized what you did!

Hi Billy sorry to hear about your story it's sad about death row why can't they put ya life on hold until the guy who puts the injection feels for ya or do they have a heart of stone you write a good story about life on death row

Billy my old friend I hope what time you have left in this world improves. I both have empathy for you because I remember us during our

young adolescent years riding our bikes all over the place and later hearing what all youve been through but also as the father of a daughter who was taken by the hands of another I also feel this for your victims family. May we all find peace in heaven. Take care my friend

I read this as Im experiencing anxiety and panic attacks like crazy. The situation Im in justifies it. In my opinion. I dont know how Billy is managing not completely loosing his mind and himself. What has happened to Billy is indeed someones worst nightmare and hes living it. My thoughts are with him even though my gut literally sinks , my heart tightens, and I have to catch my breathe.
You are being heard, Billy.

The way this system works is more than a little bit confusing. But the slow process is exacerbated by the appellate work done for the condemned.

Another brilliant article by Billy Tracy. This one is tragic on so many levels. I almost wish it was fiction. As I have mentioned previously, Billy writes so well, I am able to envision what he describes in detail. He elicits so many emotions with his writings, its incredible.

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