

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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In New York's Prisons, Drug Addiction Can Be Punished With Isolation Which Only Intensifies the Urge to Use Drugs

by [Voices from Solitary](#) | August 27, 2019

The following piece was written by Kyle Ruggeri, who spent a total of twelve months and 25 days in solitary confinement in the New York State prison system. Arrested for burglary, which he says he committed while he was withdrawing from heroin and cocaine, Ruggeri served three and a half years in six different New York prisons, with the longest stretch at Collins Correctional Facility. Ruggeri says he was sent to solitary five times, all for non-violent drug use.

In his essay, Ruggeri writes about the dangerous, counterproductive effect that solitary confinement had on his drug addiction. Besides failing to provide treatment and failing to prevent access to drugs, solitary caused severe depression and pain that intensified his desire to feel the temporary relief drugs provided him. A 2015 New York Civil Liberties Union [settlement](#) prohibited placement in solitary confinement for first-time drug offenses, but did not prevent solitary from being used as punishment for repeat drug use especially harmful for those like Ruggeri, who need treatment and support rather than deprivation and isolation to overcome their addiction. Paradoxically, even as it continues to punish drug use, the New York State prison system also has a long waiting list of incarcerated people who want to take part in voluntary drug treatment programs while they serve their sentences, and not enough spaces to accommodate them.

Since Ruggeri's release, he has been involved in drug treatment programs, working to become a sponsor of others dealing with addiction. Ruggeri now runs his own website, [Sober Dogs Recovery](#) (a tribute to the rescue dogs who give him unconditional love and help him stay clean). On the site, he provides a space for people who have struggled with addiction to connect, and provides information, guidance, and resources for people in recovery or working toward recovery. Valerie Kiebala

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I was in solitary for 60 days for failing a drug test. My first failed drug test. This was day 29, and I was sitting behind a glass wall with shackles around my wrists, waist, and legs. On the other side of the glass wall was the prison steward. This woman worked in an office in the front of the prison every day. She oversaw accounting and ordering for the jail. She did not work with inmates, she didn't have any experience with mental health or addiction, and she had minimal guard training, yet here she was, deciding on punishments for inmates.

This was a common practice in New York State prison. Men and women who did clerical jobs in an office separated from the inmates were responsible for deciding the fate of prisoners like myself. I don't say, deciding the fate lightly. Solitary was a life or death experience for me. Suicide, stabbings, rapes, psychotic breakdowns, and inhumane treatment by the guards were everyday occurrences in solitary.

I was here because five days prior, I had been caught with a stack of pills. I couldn't tell you what kind of pills they were because I don't know. I was suicidal beyond control; I was losing my grip on reality at an unbelievably fast pace and decided I could not take it anymore. It's hard to end your life in solitary, so I tried the only way I knew: buy all the pills I could and swallow them. I had bought about 25 pills from the guys in cells near me. But then I was brought out of my cell to see the counselor, and the guards found the pills.

So on day 29, I had a disciplinary hearing. I got a tier III ticket for the pills they found. I stated my side of the story during the hearing, the steward listened, she read the guards report, and she left the room. A few minutes later she came back in the room and said, Mr. Ruggeri, I find you guilty on the charge of possession of medication that is not your own. **Im adding 90 days onto your solitary time.** I thought it was a mistake. I thought she had read it wrong. I thought this was a nightmare and I would wake up. I was on day 29 of 60, and in a matter of two seconds, she changed that to day 29 of **150.**

150 days in solitary five months. I was a drug addict who was put in solitary for using drugs. The jail classified me as a level 2 mental health risk, which is the second to highest out of six levels. I'm in prison for stealing jewelry from someone's house to get money for drugs. In prison, I get depressed and smoke some weed to escape reality, get caught and they send me to solitary. In solitary, I try to kill myself because I cannot take the pain and hopelessness of being locked in a cell for months on end, and I get caught trying to kill myself. Instead of providing treatment, they add 90 days onto my solitary time. The crazy cycle was going on and on and on. I didn't

know what to do. Never in my life have I felt so hopeless.

I always think about the definition of insanity doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. I was in solitary with guys who got caught bringing weed, pills, cocaine, heroin, fentanyl and K2 into the prison. They were sent to solitary for the same amount of time as guys who got caught smoking a joint or doing heroin, and the staff wondered why they weren't putting any type of dent in the drug use. They were turning casual drug users into full-blown addicts, and they took full-blown addicts like myself, stressed us out beyond comprehension, and wondered why we got high.

The next week after my hearing in solitary, my stomach felt like I was right at that top point of a roller coaster. I was put with a new Bunkie named Paulie. Paulie stopped me from killing myself on our first night together. He saw the pain on my face the moment I entered the cell. About ten minutes had passed since I left the hearing, and I was still unable to talk.

That night, I tried to hang myself from the top bunk. Paulie woke up to the creaking sound of the bed. He pulled on the sheet to loosen it from my neck. I was furious with him. What fucking right did he have to stop me? To this day, if I think about spending 150 days in solitary, the only thought that comes to my mind is suicide. Anything is better than the box. I gave my next eight meals to Paulie because I was unable to eat. My body was shutting down from depression.

Paulie was in solitary for 210 days (seven months). This was Paulie's third time in solitary, all for nonviolent drug use.

I managed to make it through the next three months. The guy two cells down got K2 in from a visit with his mom. He sold Paulie and me a bunch, and we got high for weeks. If it was not for the drugs, I don't know if I would have made it through that time.

Six years prior, I had suffered my fifth concussion in college football. It was a devastating blow. After this last concussion, my world flipped. My drug use went wild, my depression and mood were unstable at times. And I suffered debilitating migraines. The prison had all this documented.

I was released from the box on day 123 of 150. I got 27 days knocked off my sentence because I was a level two mental health patient. Basically, that meant I was on depression meds and saw the psych doctor every 2-3 weeks. The guards came to my cell and I said bye to Paulie and was brought out of the box. I don't remember the day I was born but I assume it was like the day I was released from the box.

On the walk to the van, I took that first step outside and was blinded. I thought there was a spotlight on me. It was the middle of the day, nothing special, but the sun was so bright I couldn't open my eyes for about ten minutes. Being locked in a room for 123 days with minimal exposure to sunlight dulls your senses. The noises, smells, and sights were all alien to me. It was like I was experiencing all these things for the first time. The last four months, all I had smelled was my Bunkies and my own B.O. All I had seen was the inside of my cell. All I had heard was other guys screaming for help.

I was sent to a new prison where I was thrown in general population. I didn't know anyone. I was nervous, anxious, scared, and overwhelmed. I had that sickening uncomfortable feeling that you can't quite figure out. I am a drug addict in a new prison, depressed and confused, and the only way I knew to help this feeling get high.

So half of my body was screaming to get high, and the logical half was screaming, Don't get high you idiot, you will go back to solitary. I was stuck between a rock and a prison wall. I held out for about 40 minutes, telling myself no solitary, no solitary, no solitary, but then I caved. Drugs are everywhere in prison even in solitary, so it didn't take long for me to smell guys smoking some weed and K2 in the bathroom.

Over the next three weeks, I got high every time I could. Weed, K2, Suboxone, and heroin. When I was high, it was the only time I was not suicidal. Then I got called for a drug test.

I tried to put water in the test cup because I knew I would fail. Anything was better than solitary. Didn't work. I failed, and went right back to solitary. This time I was at Mohawk Prison in central New York. I was thrown in Mohawk's solitary unit, which is all single cells, no Bunkie. My first night in Mohawk solitary, they cut me off my anti-depressant.

The new superintendent of the prison thought it would deter people from getting high if they knew they would lose their medications. HA HA. Basically, they took a bunch of drug addicts who have mental health issues, gave them no treatment, flooded the jail with drugs, locked them in a room with no human interaction, and cut them off of their life-saving medication. *Yeah, that will stop drug use not.* In fact, not only did his plan not work, the prison got more violent after that. All these guys who needed these meds to keep their sanity now went crazy and got violent.

It didn't take long for the inevitable to happen. On my fifth day in the Mohawk Box, I tried to kill myself. This time with a sheet tied around my neck and a bar on the door. I guess God had bigger plans for me, because one of the guys two cells down from me started to go crazy and a guard just happened to look in my cell on his way to that guy.

They burst in and took the sheet off my neck. I was put in a weighted gown, or the Barney Rubble suit, and thrown in the suicide cell. The cell had no bed or toilet just an empty square room with a guard sitting outside your cell 24/7. Instead of getting treatment for trying to end my life, I was yelled at by the guards for causing them to have to fill out more paperwork.

Over my last two and a half years in prison, I was sent to solitary four times for a total of twelve months and 25 days. All four of those infractions were for nonviolent drug use. Each time I was released from solitary, my drug cravings got worse. This is because each time I went to solitary, I lost a little more of myself.

Solitary stole a lot more than thirteen months of my life. Solitary has caused me to fear many situations and places I never did before, like elevators, bunk beds, small bathrooms, and windowless rooms, just to name a few. Solitary took my depression from a four up to a seven on a scale from one to ten. Solitary dulled my senses. Before I went to prison, I used to watch those shows on TV about jail and prison, like Lockup. I tried to watch an episode of Lockup after prison, and when they showed the solitary unit, I started to shake

uncontrollable almost to the point of a seizure.

Worst of all, solitary increased my need for drugs. Never in my life have I wanted drugs more than I did in the box. I would rather go through the worst two weeks of heroin withdrawal than spend one more day in solitary. Most addicts use drugs to escape something in their lives. Some pain or trauma from their past or present is causing them to want to get high. Solitary makes the cycle of addiction ten times worse. I have been in recovery for almost two years now, and the only thing that can instantly trigger a drug craving for me is thinking about solitary.

Since I have been released from prison, I have told multiple people about why I was in solitary for so long. No one believes me. They all say the same thing: What did you really do? I say, Im telling you the truth. No one can believe our prison system sends mental health patients who are also drug addicts to the box for months and years on end for smoking some weed or using dope. Something has to change.

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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Kyle, my brother, I give you so much credit for talking about your past and trying to help others not go through what you did. I thank God everyday you are still here in my life. Keep up the good work spreading your message and continuing your sobriety! Love you brother.

Kyle, After reading your solitary story, i am very sorry to hear what you had been through. Had no idea you experienced and endured so much. You are the strongest person I will ever know. the penal system is so messed up and doing more harm you have enlightened us with your story and you could show them a thing or two on how what they are doing to you in solitary is cause and effect for more depression and suicide. You are a pillar of strength and soberdogs is very enlightening and educational.thank you for all you do and teach us about what you have endured

Thank You all for the wonderful love and support, I appreciate it so much. Yes it was brutal but hopefully my story can help others or help change the system. Solitarywatch does great work fighting the pain of solitary confinement.

Kyle,
Thank you for sharing your story.
I believe you.
Im so sorry for what you have been through.

I know with Gods help, you can be an overcomer.

Im wishing you the best and praying for your continued recovery, peace, and strength.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth

I am an RN who has worked in pain management and I am totally disgusted at our barbaric penal system treatment of physical and mental issues. I am at a loss for words and sickened. I cant begin to address it all, but feel a complete sense that all of these individuals like yourself could have been intercepted earlier on medically. Please accept my concern for you as well as all that are nameless well being.

Kyle, Im total stalker mode right now upon reading this : I just added you on LinkedIn and our stories are eerily similar. A recovering opiate addict myself and prison survivor, I went from graduating valedictorian, nationally ranked runner, Wendys Heisman State Finalist and a mere two rotations away from graduating a Physician Assistant when a surgery started a vicious opiate addiction that eventually led me down the darkest of roads. It culminated with a two + year prison sentence with a plot not that far removed from yours. And youre the first to convey the deeply agonizing and traumatic ordeal that being moved, transferred, or any entity of change is and how it can affect, more like exponentially worsen, preexisting depression and overall well being. Its what caused me to so carelessly and with complete abandon take 45+ Neurontin pills in a desperate bid for escape and subsequently die only to find myself in the ICU and then

eventually transferred to another facility where I was punished with 41 days of solitary confinement in the clothes I had lost control of my bowels when I died, completely crusted over in my own filth for the entirety of my stay. The system is nothing more than the polar opposite of what those with the disease of addiction need and the synonym rehabilitation falls so exceedingly short, it is seriously an issue that demands our attention and the fight to prompt any change. I hope you accept my invitation and regardless, thanks for sharing your story and doing your part to peel back the curtain and reveal the horror show that is prison.

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