

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2017/05/16/voices-from-solitary-welcome-to-the-round-house/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | May 16, 2017

In 2004, Mathew Davis was arrested in Alton, Illinois, and charged with first degree murder. He was twenty-four years old. By his own account, while awaiting trial, Davis was held without bond for two years in a strip cell, a 64-foot concrete cell with no clothing, furniture or bedding, 24-hour artificial light, and only a baseball-sized hole in the corner to use as a toilet. On October 18th, 2006, he was sentenced to life in prison. Davis says he spent the next five years hopeless with nothing to lose, dangerous. During this period, he was constantly transferred between prisons and in and out of segregation units.

At age thirty, on the verge of giving up entirely, Davis says he discovered hope. He writes about this discovery and the impact it had on his life in the blog [Hope for Inmates](#), which he coauthors with Krista Billingsley. Davis writings can also be found on a private blog, [Behind Concrete and Razor Wire](#). Davis, now thirty-six, is currently serving a six-month sentence in solitary at the Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill, Illinois. In what follows, Davis offers a vivid description of his experience surviving extreme isolation in a panopticon prison. Mary Read

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I have been back in isolation for five months now. In March I was caught tattooing and received six months punitive segregation. It has taken me a while to adjust back to the mentality of isolation confined to my cell 24 hours a day, five days a week, surrounded by madness. We go to the yard five hours on Saturday and Sunday. There are moments when I feel my sanity slipping and I have to fight to get it back. Some people aren't so lucky. Not everyone is built for this. I've spent a total of 12 months out of the last three years in isolation. In March of 2014, I got 6 months for 3 1/2 bottles of homemade alcohol, which was later proven to be kool-aid (but not before I served all of those 6 months in isolation). I'm here most recently for tattooing smile now, cry later on a guy's hand. These last two times are nothing compared to my first two years in isolation. At least this time I have clothes, a toilet, running water, a mattress, and other basic items. I am, however, thankful for those first two years because if not for that I may not handle my current situation quite as well. That's the scariest part for me, that I could have been part of this madness.

I'm currently housed in F-house at the Stateville CC. F-house is the last functioning round house in America. The round house is just that, a circular building with 4 levels of cells around the outer ring with a central tower, allowing, by the use of backlighting, a single observer to watch over an entire cell house. This is a great source of pride for Stateville officials, not so much for those of us housed within.

A round house is an architectural figure called a panopticon. The panopticon was designed by J. Bentham in 1791, and its design is based on the idea of mental, as opposed to physical, subjugation. Bentham himself described the panopticon as a millstone to ground upon the criminal mind. In Michel Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish*, the panopticon is described as a tool to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. I myself have come to understand the function of the panopticon as one of self-policing. By placing unseen guards inside the central tower, who can peer into any cell at any time, one will unconsciously, or consciously, follow the rules. While we do not know if we are being observed, we do know we COULD be observed. This form of mental subjugation and oppression has been proven more harmful than helpful, and the use of round houses has been discontinued in America, except for in Stateville.

Because the building is round, not only can the Tower Man see every cell, every cell can almost see every cell. This allows me to observe firsthand the madness brought on by lengthy stays in isolation when combined with the mental pressure of the panopticon. I will look out upon the cell house right now and describe what I see

Imagine the mouse cages in a laboratory stacked four high and 60 long. I see about 100 men just standing in their doors watching. There are about 20 or so guys texting each other by using a rudimentary sign language. I count 10 cells on suicide watch. That means the hospital and x-house are full, so there's probably 20-30 guys on suicide watch. There are so many guys kicking their doors it is hard to count or concentrate. It's a constant BANG BANG BANG BANG so loud and constant. I must have tuned it out because I'm just becoming aware of it. There are nearly 500 men over here, most yelling about something. It sounds like the dull roar of a football stadium. There is movement everywhere.

I just noticed what most of the commotion is about. Four cells to my right, in 146, there is a puddle of blood slowly oozing under the

door and out onto the gallery. Three police are standing outside the cell watching. I can only assume the guy is cutting himself Orange Crush will most likely be here soon to do a cell extraction on him. Cutting is a very common thing back here. Mental health people come around once a week to ask if we are okay. If we say we're not, they schedule an appointment with mental health, usually in three weeks. (Uuuuh, I'm not okay right now, dummy!) Here comes Orange Crush. There are seven of them dressed in bright orange riot gear. They just sprayed, I'm guessing, an entire canister of mace into the cell and all seven ran inside. It took them a long five minutes to subdue the guy. Now they are marching him naked and backwards down the gallery. He's bleeding from a self-inflicted cut on his arm and a fresh gash on his head that was most likely not self-inflicted. He is taken out of the building. Maybe he will be back, maybe not. This has really set the building off, probably 100 doors are being kicked. Trash is raining down. Insults fly. It's not even noon yet. Welcome to the round house.

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 19, 2022

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September 6, 2022

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I hope the new generation reads this and feels like being in that situation. This blog could enlighten many lives not to be impulsive and always choose to be good to each other.

The things he has experienced boggles the mind. Thank you, SW, for shedding light in such a dark place.

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