

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | March 31, 2021

The following piece was written by Chez-Armand Blackwell, who is currently serving a fifteen-year sentence for burglary at the Florida State Prison in Raiford. Blackwell has spent the past twelve years in solitary confinement, in what the Florida Department of Corrections (DOC) calls Close Management. In 2019, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) filed a [class action lawsuit](#) against the Florida DOC, claiming that the states excessive use of solitary confinement violates the 8th Amendment and the Americans with Disabilities Act. The most recent data shows that Florida state prisons hold ten percent of their population or 10,000 people in solitary confinement, at a rate more than twice the national average. An [SPLC report](#) found that over 60 percent of those held in solitary in Florida are Black, while only 16.9 percent of the states population is Black.

Before coming to prison, Blackwell was a chef in St. Petersburg. Throughout his time incarcerated, Blackwell said he has studied the culinary arts and science with every resource available to him, and developed business plans and menus for when he can return to his career. Blackwell does not expect to be freed from solitary before his release from prison in the spring of 2021, but he writes, I've done everything in my power to prepare myself for success after prison. In this piece, Blackwell describes surviving over a decade in solitary confinement and expresses his hope for change across the prison system. Valerie Kiebala

One would think that after twelve years of being in solitary confinement it would get easier. That a person would get used to being trapped in a cell for 24 hours a day. Unfortunately, it never gets easier. You never get used to it. It doesn't take long behind the door to realize that the human mind and body are not built for these types of conditions. Even if you're able to find a way to use this time to get better as a person, this only highlights just how inhumane and unnecessary it is to be treated like this. Sure, you find ways to adapt and survive but really, what choice do you have?

You lose a lot when you come to prison. You lose even more when you come to solitary. From the small things like the ability to run the track at rec, or the ability to buy canteen items to stave off the hunger that comes with a prison diet, to the more consequential things like losing contact with your family and friends because months go by without being given access to the phone and it being 2021, who writes letters anymore? The one thing you can lose that carries the greatest consequence is hope.

During the darkest moments in solitary when you're sprayed with chemical agents (pepper spray) for something as seemingly innocent as talking on the window to your neighbor (Florida State Prison is a no talking prison); when you're forced to eat your meals mere inches away from a toilet filled with human waste because the guards refuse to flush your toilet; or when you're denied food all together for writing a grievance during these moments, it is difficult to have hope. You lose hope in a place where, despite your efforts, things only seem to get worse.

It is hard to have hope when the guards, realizing they can get away with it, become more and more oppressive. Hope ceases to exist for someone in solitary when your grievances go unanswered, investigations end without results, and months, sometimes years go by without any word from the outside world. You can't help but wonder: Is it that society doesn't know, or simply doesn't care?

Perhaps it is difficult for people in society to be sympathetic to the plight of prisoners. I'm sure there is a portion of society who thinks, it's prison, not summer camp. Maybe people think that the conditions we are forced to endure are just part of the punishment for the crimes we committed. True enough, prison is supposed to be difficult, but prison is also supposed to be humane. Trying to improve the conditions of prison isn't about turning prison into summer camp. Nor is it about avoiding accountability.

When you're in solitary confinement, accountability becomes much more than an abstract idea. Inside of these four walls, accountability has an actual presence. Accountability becomes your roommate. You converse with it. You argue with it. Eventually you come to terms with it. Still, it never goes away. One does not spend twelve years, or any amount of time for that matter, in solitary and not come to terms with how you ended up there. In spite of the mistakes I have made, and perhaps because of those mistakes, I am still a human being. No one deserves to be subjected to the inhumane conditions of solitary confinement. It never gets easier. You never get used to it.

You also never stop worrying about your survival. Not just for your physical survival, but you worry that these four walls will win the battle for your humanity. It is a battle that never ends. A battle you feel like you're losing when you wake up each morning, find yourself staring at a spot on the ceiling, and realize that in all likelihood, a good portion of your day will be spent staring at that exact spot.

It's a battle you feel like you're losing when, despite knowing the exact dimensions of your cell, it begins to feel like the walls are closing in on you and the cell seems smaller today than yesterday. It's hard to feel like you're winning the battle when the very nature of solitary confinement makes you feel like less of a human and more of an animal each day. Combine that with the corruption and oppression from the guards, and at times you feel like less than an animal. If you have a dog at home and he misbehaves, pees on the carpet, scratches the furniture, you still feed your dog. Here, we are not afforded such treatment. Any rule violation, written or unwritten, real or perceived, can result in missed meals. Imagine the uproar if it was discovered that someone in society was treating a dog like that. It never gets easier. You never get used to it.

I often find myself in conversation with younger guys just coming to solitary confinement for the first time. When they find out I've been in solitary for twelve years, their first question is almost always, How do you do it? How do you survive? I tell them that it is more important than anything to find out who you are as a person. Not who you think you are or who you want to be, but who you actually are. It is not an easy task but no matter what you discover, you must put the work in to become a better person. There is little you can do on a day-to-day basis to counter the oppression and isolation that comes with solitary. You have to use this time to put yourself in the best position possible to handle what solitary forces you to endure.

The best way to survive the isolation of being trapped in a room with only yourself as company, is to figure out how to like yourself. I tell people that the worst roommate I've ever had was myself. It is impossible to pretend to like yourself. By putting the work in to identify who I am and how to get better, I feel like I can better deal with the years of isolation. Because of this, I can say with all honesty that the *best* roommate I've ever had was myself.

I believe that everyone possesses the strength necessary to overcome even the most inhumane conditions. In that regard perhaps the septic tank that is solitary confinement has a silver lining. It forces you to find strength. It forces you to find focus. It forces you to keep peeling away the layers of the onion and understand the part that you played in your circumstances. My debt is to society. One in which I pay without complaint. My debt is not to some corrupt guard who amuses himself by picking at random people to spray with chemical agents. No one deserves that. My debt is not to a DOC administration that turns a blind eye, not just to the abuse and corruption by their employees, but to the harm that confining human beings under these conditions for so long causes. It never gets easier. You never get used to it.

I recognize that the fight for change is an uphill battle. There is no question that things today are worse than they were a decade ago. Nonetheless, I still believe in change. Part of that belief comes from having the honor to meet and work with groups and organizations in society that are committed to bringing change not only for those confined to solitary, but throughout the entire prison system. Because these groups and the people in them have not forgotten that, despite the mistakes we have made, we are still human and deserve to be treated as such.

I write these words because I believe in change. Author James Baldwin once said that you write in order to change the world. If you alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change it. The most effective weapons in this battle for change are our words and our voices.

My time in solitary will never end. Fortunately, my time in prison will. In the coming months, my sentence will come to an end, but my fight for change is just beginning. I will fight for those whose time in prison may end decades from now, or may never end. Less than three months from now, I will be back in society doing my part in order to be a productive member of a society that I've taken from in the past. No matter where the road of life takes me I will never forget those I will leave behind these walls. For me, that is what being a productive member of society means. Fighting for change, being a voice for those who have no voice.

I will never forget the things I have been forced to endure over the past twelve years. The isolation, the desperation, feeling like my family, friends, and society have abandoned me. It would be disingenuous for me to say that I am not angry for having to endure the oppression of solitary. Only I refuse to let that anger change who I am. Oppression and injustice are worthy of my anger. They are not worth destroying the person I am. Instead I will channel my anger into strength and determination to keep fighting for the thousands of people who will remain in confinement after I am gone. 10,000 in the state of Florida alone.

I am, without a shadow of a doubt, a better person today than when the door first closed behind me. It has been hard, perhaps the hardest thing I will ever face in my life. Still, if the things I have been through means that one day change will come, then I would gladly do it all again.

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](#)

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