

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2017/09/28/escape-attempts-can-lead-to-a-lifetime-in-solitary/>

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by [Madeline Batt](#) | September 28, 2017

***Update, July 2018:** Recently Dennis Hope, whose story is featured in this article, shared with us the [complaint from a lawsuit](#) he has filed pro se in federal district court in Texas. Hope challenges the constitutionality of his nearly 25 years in extreme solitary confinement, and particularly the lack of justification or any meaningful review process for his ongoing isolation. Attorneys who might be interested in taking on his case pro bono can email info@solitarywatch.com or contact Hope directly at Dennis Hope 579097, Polunsky Unit, 3872 FM 350 South, Livingston, TX 77351.*

According to Dennis Hope, life in the Allan B. Polunsky Unit is like being in a never-ending torture chamber, where he must constantly fight to keep his sanity. He has seen others lose the battle hanging themselves or slicing open their wrists and faces. Some in Polunsky have responded in even more extreme ways: In 2004, Andre Thomas, a man with paranoid schizophrenia, gouged out his eye and ate it.

The Polunsky Unit is a maximum security Texas prison that houses Texas Death Row, and is notorious for its restrictive conditions. The men held in its most secure sections are confined to small cells for at least 22 hours per day, and even the few hours they are allowed out are spent in isolation. Most remain there for years or decades.

There is a growing consensus, encompassing everyone from mental health experts to the United Nations, that forcing people to live in such circumstances amounts to torture. Solitary in Texas has faced particularly harsh condemnation. A [report](#) from the University of Texas, titled Designed to Break You, concluded that solitary confinement in Texas is a form of torture that violates international human rights standards. Even Texas largest corrections officers union [has advocated](#) for the use of solitary confinement in the state to be curtailed unusual, given that prison unions tend to oppose reform.

But Dennis Hope, who was convicted of aggravated robbery with a deadly weapon in 1990, is not facing the death penalty. Nor was he placed in the Polunsky Unit as a result of violent acts in prison. Hope, like hundreds and perhaps thousands of others across the country, is being held in indefinite solitary confinement because he is considered a permanent escape risk.

In September 1990, Hope slipped out of his handcuffs while correctional officers were loading him into a van. He took off running, not pausing when an officer threatened to shoot him, and stripped down to his underwear. When a police officer approached him, he claimed he was training for a triathlon, and the officer let him go.

Eventually, Hope was caught and returned to custody with ten years tacked onto his sentence. In 1994, after the appeal for his case was denied, he escaped again. This time, he and two others turned off the power to the unit, disabled the backup generators, and jumped the fence. Correctional officers shot at him but missed. He ran 26 miles to another town, but was caught again a little over two months later.

This time Hope was given 25 years for the escape and placed in solitary confinement, where he has been ever since. Because his cumulative sentences add up to more than a life sentence, he will likely remain there until he dies.

While Hope is reviewed every six months to determine his eligibility for release from solitary, the outcome of the hearing has never once, in 22 years, been positive. Each time he is reviewed, he is told that he will remain in solitary because of his 1994 escape. That will never change, Hope wrote in a letter to Solitary Watch, so what's the purpose of the hearings? We are denied meaningful reviews and they could care less how it effects our mental health.

Hope is not the only one suffering indefinite isolation in Polunsky for escape. Steven Jay Russell, a nonviolent con artist convicted of stealing over \$200,000, also escaped multiple times, including by feigning a heart attack and faking his own death from AIDS. He once walked out of a facility after using highlighters to dye his prison uniform green, the color of the prison doctors scrubs.

These glimpses of the free world were relatively short-lived, and happened decades ago his most recent re-capture was in 1998. But they permanently cost Russell his freedom. With 144 years on his sentence, he too will spend the rest of his life in prison and, almost certainly, in solitary confinement.

Though Administrative Segregation, where Hope and Russell are imprisoned, is separated from Death Row, the increased security and more extreme restrictions affect the entire unit. Hope describes more lockdowns, fewer hot meals, and a greater number of forbidden items (the list includes everything from nail clippers to boxer shorts with elastic). He also alleges that the guards beat up prisoners who speak to them the wrong way, to teach them a lesson about respect.

The harsh conditions at Polunsky have deeply affected the mental and physical health of the people incarcerated there. Hope says he deals with anxiety daily and rarely manages more than two hours of uninterrupted sleep. He also struggles to maintain focus and remember words during conversations. Russell, meanwhile, is in a wheelchair due to osteoarthritis that contributed to a hip fracture, and that was likely aggravated by long-term confinement in a small cell.

Yet compared to some of the others incarcerated at Polunsky, these men are relatively healthy. Hope says he manages the madness through routines to keep his mind and body in shape. Even so, the chaos of Polunsky with its constant cacophony of people yelling, talking to themselves, cursing, and banging on walls threatens to overwhelm him sometimes. If you don't block it out, he says, it will consume you and you'll be the one arguing with others, cursing out the officers or trying to kill yourself.

The practice of placing escapees in indefinite solitary, with no chance to ever get out, is a national phenomenon. Amy Fetting of the American Civil Liberties Union's National Prison Project says that it is common to find prison systems inflicting permanent isolation on prisoners who attempt to escape even years or decades after their attempt no matter what their behavior has been in the interim.

Richard Matt and David Sweat, for example, made headlines after escaping from Clinton Correctional Facility in New York State in 2015. Both were eventually shot; Matt was killed and Sweat was wounded and captured. Sweat is now [imprisoned in solitary](#), where he is confined for 23 hours a day in a cell specifically designed to limit movement.

Meanwhile, Joyce Mitchell, the correctional officer who helped them escape, received a sentence of up to seven years in prison. The disparity between the consequences for Sweat and Mitchell reflects a dynamic typical of prison escapes: Escapes are, Fetting says, all too often linked to staff misconduct, incompetence or both, but it is the prisoner who takes the fall.

Fetting attributes this outcome to prisons reacting with humiliation and extreme vengeance against escapees. Nothing angers prison staff more than an escape, even a failed one, especially if it has garnered media attention. And since it is prison staff alone who determine who gets placed in solitary confinement and how long they remain there, most captured escapees don't stand a chance. Even in states that are reducing their use of solitary confinement, offering step-down programs to individuals with records of violent behavior in prison, escapees are usually exempt.

Russell agrees, describing his placement in solitary as political. His current physical disabilities would appear to render him incapable of escaping again. But his multiple successes at tricking the prison system which in 2009 became the subject of a [feature film](#) caused extreme humiliation to his captors, and brought down a response that to many seems grossly disproportionate to his entirely nonviolent crimes.

Such revenge-based policies, Fetting says, are unnecessary and counterproductive. They ignore the basic security problems that lead to escape, as Russell puts it, prisons' failure to keep the front door locked.

Ultimately, placing escapees in indefinite solitary confinement doesn't lead to safer, more secure prisons, Fetting says. It leads to inhumane institutions that harm people and fail to learn from mistakes.

Banner Photo: Police stand over David Sweat after he was shot and captured near the Canadian border June 28, 2015, in Constable, N.Y. | AP

Madeline Batt is an incoming Vanderbilt Scholar at New York University School of Law. In recent years, she has worked in partnership with incarcerated people and survivors of solitary to challenge torture and abuse in Connecticut prisons.

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 [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

If you're committing violent crimes and the best way to ensure you don't commit more is solitary then solitary it is. And don't be fooled into thinking Dennis Hope never hurt anybody he never shot anybody but he sliced an old man's hand to the bone who kindly agreed to give him a ride and objected when Hope robbed him of his truck. If he had continued someone woulda gotten killed. So his solitary is

severe but if thats what it takes its what it takes

If youre committing violent crimes and the best way to ensure you dont commit more violent crimes ,like murder, is solitary then isnt that torture worth the protection of the citizens being victimized. No doubt

You cant be given the opportunity to continue terrorizing people regardless of the cost to your mental sate.

When your this used to imposing your will on someone and they decided to stand up for themselves their probably dead.

In the case of Dennis hope you cant say he never hurt anyone he pulled a knife on an old man he tricked into giving him a ride and when he resisted sliced the webbing of his hand clean through. Held countless cashiers at gun point who didnt resist thank God. And said after his last capture to media one day they will turn their backs and Ill be gone again. So I feel for you lifes gotta be miserable but whos life could be ended if your allowed another robbery spree

A lot of people leaving responses here should learn how to read.

Stating that there all killers in belong on death row. Most of these prisonersCommitted felonies and should serve their time but a few are convicted of armed robberySentence to 5 or 10 years and then escape. They should not have to end up in solitary confinement with a 100 year sentence added like Mr Pope, these sentences are worse than people convicted of murder, rape or both, even terrorists get lighter sentences, the prison system where the escape happens is embarrassed and rightly so, their incompetence lets it happen as anyone who escapes has some wits about them, prison guards, some of them are passes, and the wardens and bureaucracy behind them are crooked as the rest of law enforcement. Really 144 years in a 23 hour a day lockdown? Osama bin laden would have surely gotten the death penalty, if not killed, and would have pled guilty to avoid death and gotten the same sentence or less. Assholes in Texas are the worst in corrections department, I hope change comes,or the prisoners bring it on vengeful.

Again anyone who is guilty of a crime should be punished, but this shit is cruel and ridiculous.

THIS IS ABOUT NON KILLERS NON RAPISTS, ETC.

Cry me a river. The man is a serial armed robber. Nothing about armed robbery is non violent. I dont feel sorry for him. All these bleeding hearts on here are the problem in our society. He is a violent offender who has a history of escape. Lock him in a cell and throw away the key. Today, they complain that not having cable is cruel and unusual. Bull crap. There people everywhere that cant afford cable. You gonna buy it for them? They should be putting these idiots back on road work detail with guards with dogs and shotguns.

US has highest prison population per person of any 1st world democratic nation that has to say something lot of it boils down to lack of individual physiological evaluation. Some people will never be able to control their impulses to live in a civil society. I have my own theory its genealogical human survival is not that much different then animal who take advantage of the weak. These genes still exist in some people just see civil society as weaker people to take advantage of. Hope like I said before if he escaped but instead of laying low getting out of the US he fell right back into his old ways robbing people so he was easily caught. His escape plan ended once he got back to the city his old impulses went right back. Super max prisons have their place, but to they really protect the public? If one man is so dangerous that we need to spend millions to lock up 100 people at ADX super max then something wrong with society.

I have to agree, Jade Marks, that your attitude is the problem. You are doing exactly what the article complains of. The whole point is that we have unregulated judge-jury cops managing based on their subjectivity. That is a danger to all of us. I know Steven Russell, and I correspond with him at TDC. He did some balsy things to escape, but he isnt a violent person at all, not a drug trafficker, not anything like that. If you read his story, he was the most polite jail breaker in history. He pissed off cops by making them look bad, and they ruined what was left of his life. He didnt do that to himself, some unregulated bad control-freak cops did it because they could. Two wrongs dont make a right. Nobody is excusing either of the people mentioned in the article, but the jailers reactions are pretty corrupt.

hello guyz please can any one help me out my name is ehtisham and i live in pakistan i want to contact dennis wayne hope through letter can any one tell me the exact way how can i contact him what will be the procedure of contacting a person in US from pakistan hope some one will answer my question.

You can write him a letter at the following address: Dennis Hope 00579097, 3872 FM 350 South, Livingston, TX 77351. There is no ban on foreign mail. However, all mail can be read by staff and rejected by them more or less at will. All you can do is try writing to him and take your chances.

If you read that whole article you will see that two men who are mentioned is not a murder.not-sweat-But how a government hold an individual in solitary confinement for 25 years .This system needs to be fixed.I mean they must be a place to put them instead of solitary.In colo,the doc haves a new program where they take individuals out of solitary and put them on a move up program ,and they are allowed to be out of their cells all day on the unit .This is differently working this is what every state should

Solitary confinement is mind stripping. 35yrs is almost x2 a full retirement. How does the system expect to reform a young man age 26 after 35yrs? The genome changes its DNA.

The hippocampus area of the brain deletes its memory and can no longer record memory. The stress is too great. If they make it they become sage. (IF) they make it And what becomes of them in society? What happens after release? My image is frightening. Something needs to be changed. These humans are being MIND STRIPPED. And that should bother the rest of us. We need better assessments. Heinous killings should face the death penalty. I think there should b a cap on all sentences and less than 10 yrs! The person should b allowed to try again. One man gets 30 yrs another gets 4 for the same offense is ridiculous! Theres no justice or equality in our system .Nobody should have to live inhumanely. All should be allowed his dignity and the right to his 5 senses. Tho it b caged he should not be subjected to torture and it IS torture and the Guards are sadistic for beating on unarmed and restrained men. That needs reprimanded! And we wonder why those men attempt to escape that HELL?

Jess he would have been Paroled most likely either way if he was a model prisoner. Canders as far as Solitary depends on the person I saw an interview with Ted Kaczynski the unibomber he said he likes Solitary confinement. He had spent 25 years living in a shack in the wilderness hated being around people. I spent 10 years living alone estranged from my family I didnt live in a concrete box I dont really like being around people that much most people annoy me.

If you look at his actions not like he escaped and laid low he fell right back into his old ways of armed robbery. There are people who

escape and live out normal lives for years there have been a few who were able to live into their 70s before being caught. People make mistakes but if you continue to rob people with guns danger to society. Im not for long sentencing I would rather see people get a 2nd chance with careful monitoring. Some will never be able to control their impulses have to be kept in prison for safety of the public like child molester who cant really stop doing that just an example. If you get out of prison and go right back to crime what can you do.

Oh one last thing Kelly what you said is not accurate. Dennis hopes initial charges where in 1990. There were 8 of them. All were 30 yrs except one for 20 yrs and one for 80 yrs. Im not sure if that was consecutive or concurrent but much longer than 25 yrs as you said. That charge in 1995 was his second and last escape that he received 25 yrs for. His first was in 1990 few mths after being sentenced. Although yes with parole boards he may have been out by now had he not escaped but as far as the amount of yrs he got no he would not.

Those conditions for life in my opinion are worse than the death penalty. I can see giving them that for a period of time for an escape but not life in solitary. Again people who are not violent and are not killers as jade who cant read said.

Those conditions for life in my opinion are worse than the death penalty. I can see giving them that for a period of time for an escape but not life in solitary. Again people who are not violent and are not killers as jade marks who cant read said.

Wow I didnt read all the remarks but after I commented I read more of jade marks ignorant post. My gosh you couldnt sound more ignorant. What are you talking about killer? Did we even read the same article no one was talking about the men in solitary because they are on death row. Please actually read what you are commenting on b4 you speak.

Jade marks are you slow and cant read the whole article is talking about escapes. None of the men they are actually writing about here are in for murder. I agree with you if that was at all what was said but it said escapes some with completely non violent crimes like being a con man. Dennis hope impersonated armored cars without using a weapon. However I believe he has been charged w armed robbery before as well. The point is this article specifically was talking about solitary confinement for people who are not murderers some completely none violent bit still being held for decades the same as people on death row. Thats messed up. Cant hold someone that long just the same way you hold the worst of the worst that get death.

Dennis Hope if he had not attempted to escape would be out of prison by now his original sentence of 25 years in 1995 for armed robbery was fair sentence the escape attempts added on now he is in for life.

Hello! I just ran across this site and couldnt leave without commenting..I was kept in Solitary for 5 years by the Military for an Escape in 1999..Its hard for me to read these stories because it reopens those old doors deep inside my head that I have crammed far far away

Isaiah 59:16

He was amazed to see that no one intervened
to help the oppressed.
So he himself stepped in to save them with his strong arm,
and his justice sustained him.

These losers are on death row because they are killers. They get what they deserve. They should suffer just like their victims and their victims families. So tough shit

The problem with people like you is that you fail to realize that he was not sentenced to solitary confinement by a judge or jury. The prison system itself is the judge, jury, and executioner. There is no due process, and no external review. And is easy to say that everyone there is guilty, but there have been many people exonerated due to DNA evidence as well.

Basically you just support giving the prison system a Carte Blanche to do whatever they want to people, instead of ensuring that they do not abuse their power, which at one time was the whole philosophy of America. Im all for punishing criminals, but I do not have a they deserve whatever they get attitude when people are killed in scalding hot showers, through starvation, brutal force, or other prison abuses. In those cases the prison guards and wardens are criminals that get literally get away with murder.

Name one case where all that shit you said happened.

<http://www.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/12/16/florida.dna.exoneration/index.html>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/03/20/an-inmate-died-after-being-locked-in-a-scalding-shower-for-two-hours-his-guards-wont-be-charged/>

<http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/16/us/jamycheal-mitchell-hampton-roads-virginia-jail-lawsuit/index.html>

Should I keep going?

Looks like the justice system works then

News flashDeath row IS solitary confinement 23 hours a day. Hes not a Boy Scout hes a KILLER

Alrightythensoon as you figure out a better way to run a facility full of mostly schizophrenic, psychopathic criminally conditioned malignant convicts contact your state representatives to get that shit rolling. Life is what you make of it. The path you end up on depends on choices so spare me your BS

Excellent post

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