

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/06/03/lessons-from-solitary/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#) | June 3, 2010

Editors Note: David Chura has spent forty years working with and writing about kids in the system: at-risk children in foster care, group homes, homeless shelters, psych hospitals, drug rehab, special education, and alternative high schools, as well as in juvenile and adult corrections facilities. (Chura's blog is kidsinthesystem.wordpress.com.)

As a teacher in the Westchester County Jail, including its Special Housing Unit, Chura observed the effects of solitary confinement on children growing up in 23-hour-a-day lockdown in adult prison. He documented this experience in his powerful book on the subject, [I Dont Wish Nobody to Have a Life Like Mine: Tales of Kids in Adult Lockup](#), which we featured on Solitary Watch a few months back. In this guest post, he exposes and debunks a little-discussed aspect of the public's perception of solitary confinement.

I had just finished reading Safety and Security, a chapter from my book *I Dont Wish Nobody to Have a Life Like Mine: Tales of Kids in Adult Lockup*, at a recent book event. It describes a morning I spent proctoring a state exam for a student who was locked up in solitary confinement at the county jail where I taught high school for ten years.

Each time I read that chapter the horrors of that morning come back to me: the emergency response team dragging in an inmate, struggling, crying, screaming that he couldn't breathe, that he was dying, couldn't anybody please help him, until the glass and metal door of his cell slammed shut on his pleas. That morning I knew that I had seen something that no civilian was meant to witness. And I knew, as well, that every man on that block, locked in his own cage of silence, had had a similar story of despair to tell.

After I finished reading the chapter that evening, my listeners sat in stunned silence, caught in the nightmare of solitary confinement. Then, tentatively a hand went up.

I was married to a man who was in solitary for several years, a woman in her 60s said. When I asked him how he made it through, he told me that he practiced walking meditation, and that he got to know, really know, every concrete block in his cell. He said he learned a lot.

I didn't doubt her husband's experience or her perception of it. Yet I sensed in what she said an attitude I'd heard before from people trying to make sense of this brutal practice. It is an attitude, I suspect, that offers people comfort: solitary confinement as the monks' cave, as the scholars' study, as the New Age guru's retreat; a time for meditation, yoga, reading; self-discovery.

It's a romantic image: the lone prisoner triumphing over his keeper that's been around for awhile and has made its way into the general consciousness. Burt Lancaster in *The Birdman of Alcatraz*; Robert Stroud serving a life sentence in solitary surrounded by his books and birds. Or Denzel Washington in *The Hurricane* as Rubin Carter studying his way to personal liberation from his isolation.

Nothing could be further from the truth for the majority of men and women in prisons across the country buried in isolation cells, some for years.

As often as I could I visited my students some as young as 15 who were locked up in solitary. (Luckily, state education law mandated that an incarcerated high school student must receive some kind of education even in solitary confinement.)

Contrary to that romantic image, the men young and old I saw on my escorted walk down the blocks hallway had triumphed over nothing. The cage, as my students called it, reeked of unwashed, long neglected bodies. The walls were scuffed and gouged where shackled inmates writhed and kicked as they were dragged in. The cell door windows were smeared as prisoners jammed their faces at odd angles against the glass, desperate to see anyone, anything, hungry for visual stimulation. If the men weren't sleeping (and many slept for 15, 16 hours a day, barely waking for meals) they were screeching, howling through the walls, trying to make contact with each other, with another human being, even if those shouts were indecipherable and incomprehensible.

That evening, listening to the woman's comment, I couldn't help thinking about those inmates I saw. Few of them, for whatever reasons, had any of her husband's resources, especially the young men children really that I taught whose lives were fractured, some seemingly beyond repair, and whose identities were too fragile to withstand the assault of solitary.

Put in isolation, for behavior the department of corrections deemed dangerous and uncontrollable, a threat to safety and security behavior

considered less than human those individuals were made to live in subhuman conditions in order to learn how to act human. But the only lesson learned is one that most locked up people have known all their lives: There is no end to how cruel we can be to each other; and how easily we are able to justify that cruelty.



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.

I spent 28 days in solitary although it was termed CC cellular confinement. It wasn't nice at all, the only thing that kept me going for that relatively short period was knowing it was going to end. I do pity and feel for the guys locked up in solitary for years on end. It should be discontinued except in the cases whereby the individual keeps killing and assaulting others.

God, this makes me sick that statement about what most locked up already know is true. I never been in prison but been in a hell hard school and you do come to see that sad reality for those who have a hard time with standing it. I understand well this pain many want to know what hell is like. You need only look in a seg unit at Supermax to see what hell is like. I seek to bring light to the darkness of justice. I born to the care of a court. Know the tribunal has no care so I pray and fight haveing made it out may there be light in the darkness of justice for the court that wards you cares not for you woe to those who be under the tribunal's care for they fight a war like no other. Let us be there light in the darkness of the void.

This is a difficult matter. On one hand they are dangerous to the society, thus they need to be kept away from the society. On the other hand, they do need to be fixed too. Hard call I guess.

This cruel and barbaric practice has definitely got to end, especially with juveniles. And that's why I'm going to vote for Kamala Harris for California District Attorney. I believe it's a beginning if she wins. Check her out on Youtube.

A friend sent me The Ballad of Reading Jail written in 1896 by Oscar Wilde. Strange how things have gotten worse. Here's an excerpt if allowed.

This too I know and wise it were
.If each could know the same
That every prison that men build
.Is built with bricks of shame,
And bound with bars lest Christ should see
.How men their brothers maim.

I thought of it again reading the last paragraph of your article.

Mr Chura, will you mentor me?

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News

