

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2017/11/27/five-unforgettable-stories-from-inside-solitary-confinement/>

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Top Posts from Voices from Solitary, the Series That Reveals the Lived Experience of Prison Isolation

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | November 27, 2017

Years ago, when we were down in Louisiana working on a story about the notorious plantation prison called Angola, a man who had served nearly 20 years shared with us what he thought to be a common misconception about prisons. He knew that most people looked at the wall around the perimeter of a prison, and believed its purpose was to keep the incarcerated from escaping. But the wall isn't there to keep prisoners in, he said. It's to keep the rest of you out.

This has nowhere been more true than in solitary confinement units, the prisons within prisons that are kept strictly off limits to the public and the press, where tens of thousands of people have suffered in silence for years or even decades. That silence has been broken only by individuals with the fortitude to reach out and to risk retaliation from prison staff in order to share their stories of life in solitary.

Over the last eight years, we have been privileged to receive more and more of these stories most of them sent to us by handwritten letter and to develop relationships with hundreds of people in solitary confinement. Their writing has informed our reporting, and has been published on our site in the series we call Voices from Solitary. Last year, some of them were compiled in the first anthology of writing from solitary, [Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement](#). Today, we feature the five stories that you have chosen as the most compelling, the ones most read, most shared, and most commented upon.

The work we do shining a light on one of the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal justice system, and connecting with the people who experience it first-hand is made possible only through the support of our readers. If you believe this work is important, we hope you will consider making a gift to Solitary Watch this year perhaps tomorrow, on #GivingTuesday. Through December 31st, every donation you make up to \$1,000 will be *doubled* through the [News Match](#) program, funded by the Democracy Fund, Knight Foundation, and MacArthur Foundation. So please read these stories, share them and donate what you can to ensure that they keep coming across the prison walls.

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5. [WHERE COLD, QUIET, AND EMPTINESS COME TOGETHER](#) by Cesar Villa

Cesar Villa wrote this essay in 2013 while in his twelfth year of solitary confinement in the Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit (SHU). Like thousands of others in California prisons, Villa had been placed in solitary indefinitely after being validated as a gang member on questionable evidence. A longer version of this piece, which traces the gradual breakdown of the mind and spirit in isolation, appears in our 2016 book *Hell Is a Very Small Place*.

Nothing can really prepare you for entering the SHU. It's a world unto itself where cold, quiet and emptiness come together, seeping into your bones, then eventually the mind. The first week I told myself: It isn't that bad, I could do this. The second week, I stood outside in my underwear shivering as I was pelted with hail and rain. By the third week, I found myself squatting in a corner of the yard, filing fingernails down over coarse concrete walls. My sense of human decency dissipating with each day. At the end of the first year, my feet and hands began to split open from the cold. I bled over my clothes, my food, between my sheets. Band-aids were not allowed, even confiscated when found. My sense of normalcy began to wane after just 3 years of confinement. Now I was asking myself, can I do this? Not sure about anything anymore. Though I didn't realize it at the time looking back now the unraveling must have begun then. My psyche had changed I would never be the same. The ability to hold a single good thought left me, as easily as if it was a simple shift of wind sifting over tired, battered bones.

4. [A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A WOMAN IN SOLITARY](#) by Sarah Jo Pender

While most individuals in solitary are men, women are not immune from being placed in long-term isolation. Some, [as we have reported](#), are sent to solitary in retaliation for exposing abuse and sexual assault by prison staff. And because incarcerated women are even more

likely than incarcerated men to have a history of trauma and underlying mental illness, they often break down in solitary. Sarah Jo Pender, who spent five years in solitary at the Indiana Women's Prison after a nonviolent prison escape, wrote a detailed account of a typical day in the prison's isolation unit.

Women who enter sane will become so depressed that they shut down or hurt themselves. I watched a woman claw chunks of flesh from her cheeks and nose and write on the window with her blood. My neighbor bashed her head against the concrete until officers dragged her to a padded cell. Right across from my cell, a woman slit her own throat with a razor and was wheeled out on a gurney. Two others tried to asphyxiate themselves with bras and shoestrings. Now no one has shoestrings and we shuffle around in floppy tennis shoes with loose tongues. Another woman cut her wrists using the metal band around a pencil eraser. Now, all our pencils are stripped naked. It is always the poor prisoner porter who is forced to clean up the blood puddles and shit smears left behind when someone's mind spirals down the rabbit hole.

3. [**THE WAR OF ALL AGAINST ALL**](#) by Thomas Bartlett Whitaker

Writing from Texas Death Row, where he has been held in solitary confinement for more than 12 years, Thomas Bartlett Whitaker describes the impact of living in isolation while awaiting execution. The title of his piece comes from the description that 17th-Century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes gave to human existence in a state of nature. The founder of a [blog for prison writing](#) and winner of several awards for his own writing from prison, Whitaker also contributed a (different) essay to *Hell Is a Very Small Place*.

It's not always easy to see how this place creeps up on you. It twists you up in contradictions. I have to stalk myself almost constantly, to make sure that I don't say or do anything dishonorable. I was messed up when I came here, and in many ways I have far more self-control. But at the same time, I feel frayed, like I've been living in the face of this sandstorm for 11 years, and it's worn my soul down to a pathetic little nub. They don't really kill you when they give you a date. You are pretty much already dead by that point. This place ruins people. Some it makes insane. Some, like me, it forces to go so deep that they aren't ever able to crawl back out again. Some people get so hard that discipline simply can't ever imprint on them again. The irony is that they built these places to house a theoretical super-predator that didn't really exist at the time, and ended up actually building that very individual. [The men on death row] have seen through that to the truth, that it's just one group applying power over another, and this just makes them laugh. Once you truly see the world *as bellum omnium contra omnes* [the war of all against all] you don't ever really come back from that.

2. [**AMERICAS MOST ISOLATED MAN DESCRIBES 10,220 DAYS IN EXTREME SOLITARY CONFINEMENT**](#) by Thomas Silverstein

Thomas Silverstein (who created the drawings above) has been held in solitary confinement under a no human contact order for more than three decades. He is currently at ADX Florence, the federal government's notorious supermax prison in the mountains of Colorado. Earlier, he was housed at the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta, where he was placed in a windowless underground cell measuring 6 x 7 feet and denied any possessions, including reading materials or clothing other than underwear. The following comes from a lengthy declaration written for a [2011 federal lawsuit](#), in which Silverstein argued that his record of prison violence more than 20 years earlier did not entitle the state to subject him to torture. The suit was dismissed by the court.

The cell was so small that I could stand in one place and touch both walls simultaneously. The ceiling was so low that I could reach up and touch the hot light fixture. My bed took up the length of the cell, and there was no other furniture at all. The walls were solid steel and painted all white. Shortly after I arrived, the prison staff began construction, adding more bars and other security measures to the cell while I was within it. It is hard to describe the horror I experienced during this construction process. As they built new walls around me it felt like I was being buried alive. Due to the unchanging bright artificial lights and not having a wristwatch or clock, I couldn't tell if it was day or night. Frequently, I would fall asleep and when I woke up I would not know if I had slept for five minutes or five hours, and would have no idea of what day or time of day it was. I now know that I was housed there for about four years, but I would have believed it was a decade if that is what I was told. It seemed eternal and endless and immeasurable.

1. [**A SENTENCE WORSE THAN DEATH**](#) by William Blake

First published in 2013, this shattering account of 25 years spent in continuous solitary confinement in New York has received more than half a million hits on Solitary Watch alone, and was republished on dozens of other sites around the world. Thousands more have read it as the lead essay in *Hell Is a Very Small Place*. Blake sets out to convey what year after year of abject isolation can do to that immaterial part in our middle where hopes survive or die and the spirit resides and succeeds, as few others have before or since, in describing the visceral experience of living for decades in the Special Housing Unit, or SHU. Nearly five years after the essays publication, Billy Blake is still in solitary and still writing.

I've experienced times so difficult and felt boredom and loneliness to such a degree that it seemed to be a physical thing inside so thick it felt like it was choking me, trying to squeeze the sanity from my mind, the spirit from my soul, and the life from my body. I've seen and felt hope becoming like a foggy ephemeral thing, hard to get a hold of, even harder to keep a hold of as the years and then decades disappeared while I stayed trapped in the emptiness of the SHU world. I've seen minds slipping down the slope of sanity, descending into insanity, and I've been terrified that I would end up like the guys around me that have cracked and become nuts. It's a sad thing to watch a human being go insane before your eyes because he can't handle the pressure that the box exerts on the mind, but it is sadder still to see the spirit shaken from a soul. And it is more disastrous. Sometimes the prison guards find them hanging and blue; sometimes their necks get broken when they jump from their bed, the sheet tied around the neck that's also wrapped around the grate covering the light in the ceiling snapping taut with a pop. I've seen the spirit leaving men in SHU and have witnessed the results.

[su_button url=https://www.newsmatch.org/organizations/solitary-watch target=blank style=flat background=#2ed992 color=#000000 size=10 center=yes radius=5 icon_color=#000000 class=font-family: Arial !important; font-size: 16px !important; font-weight: bold !important;]Please Support Solitary Watch Today. All Donations Doubled Through December 31st.[/su_button]

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and

the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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

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No amount of time in solitary confinement improves the mental well being of the inmate and no amount of time facing the depravity of that environment reduces violent tendencies. A human being is a product of its environment. Historically we have evolved over thousands of years in nature, in a social context, and with a variety of stimuli. My brief experience of over two months in administrative segregation turned me from a somewhat depressed university graduate with a thriving tree care business, into a temporarily violent, devious, and dangerous individual. Killing someone is a heinous act that social values help us to understand. It is an act that causes great damage rippling outward from the victim to those around them and onward. But an inmate forced into solitary confinement loses social values, social context, and I think loses social constructs that help to determine right from wrong. My Bible and the inmates around me were my spice and as Maslows Hierarchy of needs acknowledged, love and self value are paramount in determining a persons ability to be a productive member of society and not a killer. I am saddened to think of how little time I did in solitary and how egregious the damages and my thoughts were. I can safely say I love my country, its people, and that love can guide anyone to happiness and prosperity if properly directed.

This makes me so sad. Im a Gen Z teen- almost out of high school, and sometimes I feel like crying when I see and hear about the things that my ancestors and our countrys past generations have left for us to deal with. Solitary confinement is a cruel and unusual punishment and should be retired. It is shocking to me that people still find this a reliable and good way to detain inmates as well as punish them. It is entirely horrifying that our country is ignorantly okay with this kind of cruelty. I cannot imagine the torment this trauma would leave for people to deal with. Unfortunately, most people are not educated enough on this subject to realize the massive amount of injustice that we are doing in our prisons. Rather than forcing our prisoners into solitary confinement, they should be treated with more respect and dignity. Prisons should spend money on getting people medication for their mental or physical wellbeing, rather than on building more devices to torture them. Despite the fact that many people might disagree with this, from my perspective, they are still human. They deserve to be treated as such, even if they have committed a crime that they will pay for with the rest of their lives. Luckily, people like Bryan Stevenson are doing good deeds to help spread awareness for this, and hopefully, this will allow for changes in our prison systems in the near future.

I went to jail for possession of something I never ever possessed. Obviously I knew jail was no five star resort, or 1 star even.. but The way I was treated in there.. i cant even find the words to describe it and every time I try, tears come out and I have to force myself not to think about the traumatizing shit I had to go through. The people who work there are inhuman. I had to fake commit suicide three times just to get someones attention and ask for food.. I was pregnant and they knew, but I went days without eating . If I wanted to drink I could drink toilet water: when I faked killing myself I could hear the guards and the inmates clapping, laughing and cheering outside of my cell because they thought I was dead.

Ill never be the same and any time I hear or read a story about an inmate who killed them selves in jail or attempted to, I cry for them and pray for them because I know . I know that feeling and its so sad because I bet you a lot of them , like myself , never deserved it. I have never been in trouble before, i was a 25 year old girl with a great job , I always kept to myself , I never did drugs , never even smoked weed, and Ive only drank alcohol probably 6 maybe 7 times in my life , but i recently went through an awful break up, and finally decided to let another guy into my life . He was very sweet to me, never saw a bad quality and he was the most respectful Ive ever been with. I left work one day and picked him up from his job, so we could spend time together that night. I didnt know he was on probation when I got pulled over for a traffic violation. I also didnt know that he had drugs and a few fully loaded guns in my car. I had to witness firsthand the abuse of power and what its like to be completely powerless, have absolutely no voice whatsoever. I was treated like I was nothing. No one gives a fuck about you or what happens to you. You are truly irrelevant in every sense of the word. As I mentioned before, I was pregnant. That didnt stop the guards from kicking me in my stomach repeatedly and telling me they hope they killed my baby. No one has sympathy for you .its like you dont exist

We are so sorry to hear about what you went through and glad you survived it, because we know many do not. Thank you for sharing your story with us and our readers.

By all means put them into solitary confinement but not for as long as some of them that have been there. I am a great believer in the saying, if you can't do the time then don't do the crime. But leaving them in there for long periods of time without proper clothing, blankets and food is pathetic, as a dog owner I treat my dogs way far better than that. So it's time to cut down the time that people are put into isolation for and put them back into general population where they can get better food, clothing and bedding.

What I have learned, first hand, from inmates in the prison and jails, is that the reality is that this is happening all the time, and it's not just violent offenders. Those that come into prison because of a crime related to their mental illness, are particularly vulnerable. Many people with a mental illness (depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, etc.) often have not been medicated for their illness. Many start self-medicating because they know things aren't right and want to feel better. And as they turn to street drugs to help themselves, they fall farther and farther into the life of an addict and crimes eventually evolve. They end up in prisons. When they then become depressed (because they do have an illness already) they are put in solitary. I can't think of a worse place in the world to put someone who is experiencing extreme depression, than in a concrete room with a concrete bed (no mattress at all at first) and often they are naked. And then they keep getting worse and worse. This is inhumane. There are much better solutions to treating and dealing with those with a mental illness than this. They are kennelled like a dog, but not even given the amount of time to run around like a dog is. And the biggest de facto mental institution in this country is the prisons. I know one man who was out, in a half-way house, but his depression became bad and they needed to put him somewhere safer than a half-way house, but no beds were available in a hospital so, guess where he ended up? Back in prison in solitary. For days, and days, and days. That really helped the depression, I can tell you. So yes, there are much better answers than what we are currently doing. But most people just want to say, they get what they deserve and don't look any farther than that. People don't want to know. They don't want to have to think about it. After all, these are all just throw away people, right? Why not just take them all out behind the prison and shoot them, right? Regardless of their crimes. But many of these people are salvageable. They can become productive, contributing members of society. But not the way the system is now. So we continue the revolving door of in and out of prison, which (if you don't care about humanity perhaps dollars will make a difference to you) costs the taxpayers way more money. Treating them and continuing to provide support services, or even better, up front services, is wayyyyy cheaper than housing them in a prison. But instead of trying to fix the system, we continue to build more prisons.

Don't commit the crime if you can't do the time.

The best kind of violent inmate is a DEAD ONE

Remember the escapees from Clinton?

Too bad they BOTH weren't taking a dirt nap.

Hope Sweat dies in Attica!

I have to disagree with you here. The purpose of incarceration is to punish AND rehabilitate so the inmates may integrate into society and be functional members of it. If we keep using solitary confinement or extended periods of time, we will continue to see the people that come out of it be mentally unstable. I'm not 100% against it, but I am against keeping a human in a solitary cell for months and years. Long-term solitary confinement is against the general goal of prison.

Well we can agree to disagree.

A guy who steals a Hershey bar from 7-11 should be dealt with differently than a violent criminal.

I simply have no sympathy for violent criminals and I won't lose any sleep if they get brutalized.

Violent criminals belong in ADX FLORENCE the one they call the Alcatraz of the Rockies.

Better yet, a good old fashioned Southern chain gang would work, too. Ever see that 1930s film I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang?

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