

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#) | February 28, 2014

The following post is a chapter from an unpublished book by Mary Buser, who worked in various capacities in the mental health system on Rikers Island. In Buser's own words: I worked in the Rikers Mental Health Department as a psychiatric social worker for five and a half years, leaving Rikers in 2000. I started off as a student intern in the island's sole women's jail [and] returned to Rikers to work in a maximum security men's jail [then] was promoted to assistant chief of Mental Health in another jail, where I supervised treatment to the island's most severely mentally ill inmates. From there, I was transferred to my fourth and final jail, which was connected to the Central Punitive Segregation Unit, aka, the Bing. Here, I supervised a mental health team in treating inmates held in solitary confinement determining whether or not someone warranted a temporary reprieve based on the likelihood of a completed suicide. Although I had become disillusioned with the criminal justice system, the Bing was my Rikers undoing. The final section of my manuscript is focused on my daily trips to the Bing, the inmates who occupied these cells, and my struggle to justify doing this work. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved in the episodes Buser describes.

As jails have come to replace psychiatric hospitals as repositories for people with mental illness, Rikers become one of the nation's largest inpatient mental health centers (second only to the L.A. County Jail). A disproportionate number of these psychiatrically disabled individuals end up in solitary confinement, doing Bing time for rule infractions precipitated by their illness. Buser's account of her time overseeing treatment in the Bing is of particular interest now, when [years of activism](#) by the Jails Action Coalition and [two scathing reports](#) commissioned by the New York City Board of Correction have finally spurred efforts to reduce the use of solitary and improve mental health treatment on Rikers. These efforts have thus far yielded at best [mixed results](#). James Ridgeway

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At the end of a long cinderblock corridor, a guard in an elevated booth passes the time with a paperback book. Across from the booth, a barred gate cordons off a dim passageway. Along the passageway wall are the words: CENTRAL PUNITIVE SEGREGATION UNIT.

The guard looks up as I approach, and nods. As acting chief of Mental Health, I'm a regular over here at the Bing, an unlikely nickname for this five-story tower of nothing but solitary cells 100 of them on each floor. Designed for Rikers Island's most recalcitrant inmates, the occupants of these cells have been pulled out of general population for fighting, weapons possession, disobeying orders, assault on staff. The guards refer to them as the baddest of the bad, the worst of the worst. I'm not so sure about that.

The guard throws a switch and the barred gate shudders and starts opening. Around a bend, I step into an elevator car. Since the problem inmate is on the third floor, I hold up three fingers to a corner camera, waiting to be spotted on a TV monitor. This is no ordinary elevator: no buttons to push here, likely engineered for some security purpose. The sweaty little box starts lifting, and as the muffled wails of the punished echo through, my stomach tightens the way it does every time I'm called over here, which is often. Solitary confinement is punishment taken to the extreme, inducing the bleakest of depression, plunging despair, and terrifying hallucinations. The Mental Health Department looms large in a solitary unit doling out anti-depressants, anti-psychotics, and mountains of sleeping pills. If these inmates had no mental health issues before they entered solitary, they do now. But even the most potent medications reach only so far, and when they can no longer hold a person's psyche together when human behavior deteriorates into frantic scenes of self-mutilation and makeshift nooses were called to a cell door.

The elevator rattles open on the third floor. Ahead, a foreboding window separates two plain doors, each one leading onto a 50-cell wing. Behind the window, correctional staff hover over paperwork. A logbook is thrust out, I sign it, and point to the door on the left, 3 South. When the knob buzzes, I pull the door open and step into what feels like a furnace. A long cement floor is lined with gray steel doors that face each other twenty-five on one side, twenty-five on the other. Each door has a small window at the top, and on the bottom, a flap for food trays.

At the far end, Dr. Diaz and Pete Majors are waiting for me. I hesitate for a moment, dreading the walk through the gauntlet of misery. The smell of vomit and feces hangs in the hot, thick air. Bracing myself, I start past the doors, trying to stay focused on my colleagues. Still, I can see their faces dark-skinned, young pressed up against the cell windows, eyes wild with panic. *Miss! Help! Please, Miss!!* They bang and slap the doors, sweaty palms sliding down the windows. *Were dying in here, Miss were dying!* Resisting my natural instinct to rush to their aid, I keep going, reminding myself that there's a reason they're in here that they've done something to warrant this

punishment. The guards, themselves sweat-soaked and agitated, amble from cell to cell, pounding the doors with their fists, spinning around and kicking them with boot heels *SHUTTHE FUCK UPPP!!*

I keep going. Dr. Diaz, a silver-haired psychiatrist, greets me with a weak smile. Pointing to a door thats slightly ajar, he says, We got a head basher. He hands me the inmates chart. The label on the manila folder reads Troy Jackson. Hes been going downhill for a while now, Diaz explains. Ive upped his meds, changed them weve talked to him but at this point, were out of options.

Hes been in for two months now, says Pete Majors, the lanky therapist who works with Diaz. With *three more* to go.

I wince at the length of punishment. Two entire months spent inside an eight by nine foot cell just enough room to pace back and forth about the only activity the cramped quarters allow. No phone, no TV, with one hour of rec which amounts to a shackled walk to an outdoor cage to stand alone and glimpse the sky. Although the maximum punishment for any single infraction is ninety days, theres nothing to stop the infraction tickets from piling up, which is apparently whats happened in this case.

All right, let me talk to him, I say, with some vague hope of dispensing calming words that might enable Troy Jackson to hang on a little while longer.

The guard pulls open the creaking door and steps back. Inside, a black youth stands trembling, beads of sweat dripping from his chin. Hes barely out of his teens. Behind him, a little mesh-covered window transforms the days brilliance into grayness. A dingy sheet is strewn across a cot; across from it is a tiny metal sink and toilet. *Please miss, please*, he whispers. *Help me*

For a moment, Troy Jackson and I stare at one another. In his jeans and tee-shirt, he looks no different from every other kid on the street. With his wiry youthful frame, I can easily picture him shooting basketballs on a city playground, or bounding up subway steps headed for school. Instead, hes trapped inside a cement box on Rikers Island. As his eyes plead with mine, blood seeps through his scalp, running down behind his ears. *How could his young life have derailed this badly?* I feel a clutch in my throat and my mind starts swirling back to my more familiar days on Rikers, when I would have worked with him, listened to his story, helped him to find a better path for himself. But my days as an upbeat therapist are already feeling like something from a distant past. As a newly appointed administrator, I remind myself that Im not here to get to know Troy Jackson, or even to find out why hes in solitary. Im here to make sure of exactly one thing that he remains alive. Mr. Jackson, Id like..

I cant.. he interrupts. *Im telling you I cant. Please, Missplease. Im begging you.. Im begging*

The blood is trickling down into his eyes, and I realize that were well beyond any therapeutic dialogue. Okay just give me a minute here, okay?

Pete, Dr. Diaz and I huddle to the side of the cell, once again finding ourselves at a familiar miserable impasse. Although we have the authority to provide temporary relief in these situations, doing so is hardly a cut-and-dried matter. In the outside world, someone banging his head would be treated with a sense of urgency and alarm. But in here its different. Behind bars and especially in the Bing these drastic acts are common, and the Mental Health Department is under fierce pressure to not give in to the inmates goal of a reprieve from solitary. When I arrived here a few weeks ago, one piece of advice summed it up If you authorize the release of every inmate who cuts himself, bangs his head, or fashions a noose youll wind up with 500 empty cells.

Of course, its also up to us to make sure that nobody actually dies. Im still comprehending the reality of my new job, but its already clear that it entails walking the thinnest of a tightrope.

The question we now have to ask ourselves is if the breaking point has truly been reached. If we agree that death or severe injury is likely, then Troy Jackson will be bussed to a smaller more specialized unit in another jail down the road. The bus-ride alone seems to offer the isolation-weary inmate enormous relief. We call it bus therapy. Once hes a little better, though, hell be shipped right back here to complete his sentence. Like the weary swimmer treading water but starting to go under, hell be pulled out to catch his breath, and then thrown back in. I cant help but feel that this has the earmarks of torture. But I brush the word from my mind. After all, I live in a civilized country that prohibits such things. Besides, Im still new to this post and there must be something about this punishment that Im missing. Although frankly, Im hard pressed to figure out what it could be.

Dr. Diaz mops his forehead with a bandana. Medical can stitch him up, he says, but if we put him back in, hell just tear out the stitches smash his skull right open Im sure of it.

If we let him out, says Pete, were going to get copycats, but if we dont, this is only going to get worse.

As acting chief, they look to me for a final answer. I want to give this kid a break, and am just relieved that these two veterans of punitive segregation seem to want the same. I dont think we can let this go any further, I say. If somebody else tries the same thing, well just have to deal with it.

Agreed, says Dr. Diaz.

Listen, Pete says. We better do something quick.

A loud moan comes from Jacksons cell, and we rush back in just as the young mans head thuds against the concrete. Blood is freely spilling now, the gash in his scalp revealing a patch of glinting whiteness.

Please, Mr. Jackson, I say. Were trying to help you. Were going to get you out. Just give us a chance here! Troy, please!

But Troy Jackson, beyond words, crumples to the floor.

Youre coming out, says Dr. Diaz, leaning over him. Its over its over now!

Captain! the guard shouts. We got one comin out.

Dr. Diaz and Pete will resume their rounds, while I start back down to the clinic to begin the mountain of paperwork that this transfer requires. On my way out, I move quickly past the cells, past the clamoring fists and pleading palms. In a day or two, well be standing at any one of these other doors, faced with another scene of human desperation. Most wont be as lucky as Jackson. For most, we simply offer words of encouragement and walk away, deeming them not yet decompensated enough to warrant the bus trip out. I try not to think about it. One day at a time.

On the ground floor, the big barred gate is inching open to allow a new shift of guards to enter. I hustle through, eager to get out. Wending through cooler corridors, I walk alongside GP inmates who are headed to work details and the Law Library. Passing by the jails main entryway booth, guards glance up and wave. In some ways its almost pleasant. I manage a weak smile and with a quivering hand, I wave back, all the while struggling to blot out the image of Troy Jacksons skull.

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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On Wednesday April 16th an inmate suddenly attacked a young female intern, breaking her jaw & eye socket. If you want to see more people brutally attacked like her its easy, just do away with solitary confinement, and continue the harsh punishment that is filed on the few staff left that actually protect & serve.

After reading Mary Busers account of the bing I feel wrung out as this has been no part of my lifes experience. Reading the added comments shows how difficult it is to balance both sides in this very complicated issue. I cant help thing that as a society we have neglected to really assist the last and the least in our society. Parenting, family life, good education and some hope for a possible future would help our young people. I shudder to think what is ahead for our supposedly civilized society. Thank you Mary for acquainting me with life in the Bing. Let me know when your book hits the street.

you dont deserve to be a social worker. It isnt a delicate balance, it is torture. Quit being a social worker, you are not a human. I truly pity anyone that you have ever provided service to.

I applaud Mary Buser for opening this situation to the light of day. The more people understand about the warehousing of the mentally ill in our jails perhaps people will begin to realize that this is inhumane and ultimately not an effective use of resources. The excerpt also made clear how dehumanizing the experience is for the people trying to make this system work.

I applaud Mary for her fine and courageous work in sharing with us her experiences at Rikers Island; experiences about which most of us know so little. She certainly affirms for me my confusion about our entire penal system and certainly confirms my belief that solitary confinement, as it exists today, should be used rarely if used at all. We are creative, intelligent human beings and should be able to find better ways of dealing with criminals both for the well being of the criminal and, in turn, the betterment of society. I anxiously await the publication of Mary Busers book.

With my deepest regrets, this is the harsh reality that inmates as well as correctional facility staff are faced with every day. Is our correctional system rehabilitating inmates or is it just setting the stage for increased mental illness, desperation, and manipulation of the tax payers dollar? It will only change when an awareness of the mental health issues are brought to the front lines. It is difficult to treat someone as a human being when you dont see them as an equal, painstakingly far too many law enforcers/ correctional officers as well as the public have dehumanized and condemned these individuals to the point where they cant move on with their lives even after they have served their time. They have given up because they have no hope for tomorrow. After being in a dark and dreary place such as the Bing for a long period of time, would you?

Keep in mind, pleading for the welfare of the staff is what the nazis did to try to garner misplaced empathy over the concentration camps. They are complicit in torture, plain and simple.

The author has a real talent for conveying and bringing the reader into the experience. Very well done. I also would like to commend the author for her courage and tenacity. This is a real issue that needs to be brought out into the open, and it must have been a very difficult experience to relive in order to enlighten and inform the average citizen , who other wise would remain in the dark. I hope Ms Buser publishes the book, not just so I can continue to have insight through her eyes, but because it is necessary and the right thing to do. Thank

you for putting it on your sight. . Karen Cassidy

I found this to be a wonderfully written piece about a nightmare situation. I felt as if I was the one walking down that corridor. Thank God I wasn't, I can't imagine being anyone in that scenario inmate, guard nor therapist. Kids can't raise themselves, and until we can somehow get that under control as a society we will continue to get overwhelmed by the fallout. Great job Mary, I'd love to read more.

Author Note: In response to Jeanne, who asks how the term Bing came about, in my years at Rikers, no one seemed to know the answer to that question. However, Sister Marion Defeis, a 23-year Rikers chaplain, had a very telling explanation. She told me that a long-term prison captain explained it as such: When some prisoners come here, their minds go bing.

NPR recently had a report from a prison warden who spent 22 hours in solitary confinement just to see what it was like. He couldn't take any more. And he was amazed at how little time it took before he absolutely HAD to ask a guard what time it was, even though he had resolved not to.

I am going to start off by saying this is a very well written piece.. however replying as a Corrections Officer that has worked in CPSU(Central Punitive Segregation Unit) for a little over 3 1/2 years see the setting in a different light. The description of this unit is exact but the part that I've never seen is these guys screaming help me. The first thing you hear when you walk through the gate is curse words and any other disrespectful words you can imagine. Let's also keep in mind that all the guys that are in this unit are not mentally ill at all. It's a ploy that some of them use to get a lesser sentence, and they don't really take the meds that are prescribed to them. These guys are criminals that try to beat the system and are opportunists. I am not saying that this unit isn't in some ways inhumane but these guys that occupy these cells are there because they have committed crimes within the jail..it's not my job to know why they initially ended up in jail but to provide care custody and control. These guys can be very violent and on a daily basis secrete urine and feces at anyone who passes their cells if they're not having a good day. They are also given the opportunity to appeal their cpsu sentence and get released from the unit with good behavior. I can go on and on..But I just want the writer and the readers to understand that this is not a situation that needs sympathy but a clear understanding from both ends. It should be a better way to punish these guys but them being in solitary lessens the chances of them hurting us and other inmates. The threats of committing suicide is just that..it's a manipulative gesture that they use to get out of the cell for a few hours..If a person has made up their mind to kill his or herself we wouldn't know until we discover the body and hopefully in a timely manner. The ones that are not serious are the head bangers and fire starters these guys are what I consider to be attention seekers.. I am speaking about my personal experience and opinion and not on behalf of the department of corrections. I am also looking forward to continuing this read !!

I am not religious, but I truly hope that there is a special place in hell for people like you; the indifferent and spiteful witness to torture.

This is very compelling reading. Unlike many other good reports about our jail system, this takes you right inside with the writer so you have a unique opportunity to see and hear and feel exactly as she does. This vivid story must be told. I hope it will have an impact on policy making in New York and beyond. I can't wait to read the book.

The US penal system has so many complex layers and each situation requires a judgment call that is not easy to make. Those who have been charged with the task of handling these situations have a very tough time on their hands. Mary B, this is a very compelling excerpt. I look forward to reading the full book.

Very well written. I felt I was in her head and heart as she grapples with the shifting, slippery realities of prison life, the criminal psyche and the penal system. I wonder about the long term effect of this work environment on those who find themselves in these daily almost impossible decision making positions. I would love to read more.

Haunting. One day at a time is all that you can do. A lot of prayer may help. Keep fighting the good fight. Someone has to. Great work Mary B.

I've read article after article about this horrible practice, and I feel moved to do something to help change it, but most articles don't address that point.

If you know of something, please share.

Mary Buser's moving account of her experience as a mental health worker inside the Rikers Island jail is evocative, accurate and profoundly disturbing. As a psychologist, I have been aware of the consequences of de-institutionalization (purportedly effected for the good of the mentally disabled), but I have not seen better expressed the harrowing effects this policy has engendered. That we as a society have condoned using jails, and even worse, solitary confinement, to deal with people who clearly have major mental illnesses is in my mind, criminal. Solitary confinement, in addition to being cruel and unusual punishment, is enough to drive people over the edge. Buser speaks about this as having the earmark of torture. What kind of culture are we that we condone treating anyone, much less those who have had the misfortune of being born with a brain that doesn't work well (the mentally ill) in such an inhumane way?

Having had a close relative spend time behind bars, I can fully relate to Ms. Buser's work. I look forward to reading the entire piece! Nicely done!

A very interesting read. A riveting yet disturbing insight on how our justice system works. It would be helpful to learn how the term Bing Time was established. Perhaps the author could shed some light on this.

Haunting story that really gets you thinking about our jail/prison system and changes that should be made

these excerpts are an alarming and frightening insight to a world I can't imagine or even begin to comprehend. A world traveled by very dedicated and special people given an impossible task. Well written by a gifted author with first hand experience. Bing Time will prove to be an eye opener. I'm very anxious to read it.

With the closing of forensic psych units from sea to shining sea, we end up with the emotionally handicapped being warehoused and

cared for by guards who are unprepared to deal with mental health issues. Hopefully Ms. Buser's work can add to the national conversation and shed a light on the problem with the lack of competent mental health institutions in our country today.

Why do we think anyone can be rehabilitated by being subjected to treatment like this? Ms. Buser writes that he was barely out of his teens. I imagine that his anger toward society only increases. What happens to his mind and psyche after this? I recently saw the former NY police commissioner Bernard Kerik on TV speaking of his experience in jail and that he believes the system needs major reform. Seeing his interviews and reading this piece make me believe so as well. What a valuable book this is. Its courageous of Ms. Buser to have written this. I think a lot of people would be interested to read more.

I don't understand how in this day and age situations like the one about Troy Jackson can go on. We live our lives from day to day believing that the justice system is fair and impartial. But when I read the above chapter I was astounded to find that people who are mentally ill could face the same type of punishment as hardened criminals. Since most of my criminal justice knowledge comes from reruns of Law and Order I look forward to reading this book and learning more about some of the people who occupy the cells on Rikers Island.

Great piece. What an experience. Makes me question our current system. What are we doing? How does it help? Are we not better than this? How different are we from other countries when it comes to how we treat our mentally ill? I look forward to reading more about Ms. Buser's experience in what appears to be a very chaotic system.

I've never been much of a reader myself, but I was captivated by this piece. So interesting to hear about what happens AFTER an individual is locked up. Its so easy to forget that their lives continue after they are convicted, and a new challenge arises for those responsible for the inmates well being. I hope the book gets published. I would definitely purchase it.

Ms. Buser's clear, concise and engaging writing style has me desiring to read more about her experience inside Rikers. I feel moved and hopeful that through her voice as an advocate for the mentally ill our culture of torturing the incarcerated can begin to change.

For me this is a subject matter that got me thinking, and passionately, with both anger and compassion and ultimately has me on the fence. On the one hand, if Troy indeed committed a violent crime on another human leaving them physically or emotionally tortured and scarred or dead for that matter, then there is a sense of justice and deserving to the animalistic depths of solitary confinement and to take from him all privilege. I would think that along the path that led Troy to this fate, he had a sense of right or wrong but made the choices that were wrong that had a domino effect leading him to the bed he has made for himself. It can be perceived maybe that his violent outbursts on himself and banging his head against the wall is how he acts out at any given time or place when agitated and had there been another person with him whether out in the world or in the common area of the jail that it would have been their head he would have banged against the wall, and only solitary confinement saved a lucky someone from that kind of attack. One might say Troy turned it on himself due to lack of outside resources. It sounds as if, regardless of solitary confinement, that Troy behaved the same way wherever he was. Do we risk a guard or a therapist getting violently killed so Troy won't be violent on himself? It seems that in any environment Troy will produce blood. That of someone else first, and if not available, that of his own. Now, there's the other side. The side I believe the author is pointing out, the side that takes a look at Troy himself maybe being a victim. A victim of his upbringing maybe, of his genetics, of learned behavior, of mental illness? Are we as a society guilty of not providing solutions in the early stages of Troy's mental illness or learned behavior so there are no victims on either side and do we recognize that Troy himself is a victim and we should have a sense of compassion to still hold him accountable but in a way that is more humane and protects Troy and others from his mental illness and violence but in a way that doesn't further victimize him or others? I don't know. I do know however that I am intrigued by the story and the images it brings to my mind. Like a movie. It also provoked my thoughts and feelings on this matter passionately and has me opening my mind to other more humane and forgiving points of view than my own reaction of an eye for an eye. I look forward to the book and to find out what did become of the author, and Troy after the bus ride or if he even got on it.

The system is overwhelmed and broken. Mary and others like her will continue to face moral dilemmas on a regular basis until people stop the cycle of destructive behavior that got them in trouble in the first place. That being said, solitary confinement is no place for people with mental health problems. Its a huge problem and I'd like to read more of the book and see what solutions may be offered.

What a great read. I can't wait to get my hands on the book. I found myself feeling like I was walking down the corridors of the prison with the author. It was devastating to learn about the grim reality for those involved- inmate and doctor/psychologist alike. How difficult it must be to know that your decisions could determine whether someone takes their own life. Upon completion of the chapter I just wanted to know more about the world inside the walls of Rikers. Really looking forward to reading on.

I have heard about the dilemma of solitary confinement on news reports (actually, just this past Thursday on NPR). I've heard commentators talk about how cruel it is yet how it is believed by many to be a necessary enforcement tool in the penal system; but the reality of it never impacted me before I read this excerpt from this book. I could really feel and smell and see the horror of it. This has changed my opinion. So I have to ask, why is this an unpublished manuscript?

Author Note: With regard to Mr. Smullens' comment, please note that for the purposes of this piece, Troy Jackson is a completely fictitious name. This incident is an example of a typical encounter with a typical inmate in solitary confinement someone arrested on a run-of-the-mill drug-related charge.

Will love reading this book. Sounds fascinating! The very reason I am in mental health. We need to remove the stigma so it gives a glimmer of hope to all children to rise up and feel a life-changing commitment to our communities. It takes a community to raise a child.

Mr. Smullins, I understand your point, and your anger. However, I also know of people put in solitary for infractions as minor as going back for a spoon when he discovered that soup was being served, eating an apple, seeds and all when he was hungry, and then again for not eating the next apple served because he was afraid to, having a non-violent disagreement with another student over seating in a classroom, not attending class when he had a summons to go get another prison uniform, etc.

In addition, we have to consider the fact that there are people in prison who committed horrible crimes because they were insane. Solitary will not help them. We may fear such people, and loath their actions, but insanity comes to people unbeckoned. It is a disease as

real as cancer that affects people without regard to social status. As such, we, as fellow humans should try to give them relief, not more punishment than the disease already doles out.

No sympathy tough luck needs to be where he is Raped a 13 old girl on a rooftop and then cut her throat. At Rikers he slashed anothe prisoner with a razor and tried to strangle a corrections officer to death. What they really need to do with him is open the feeding port, slid the barrel of a 12 gauge shotgun in, blow him away, drag his body out, hose the interior down and out and put the next one in there.

Another important piece of evidence in the overflowing file that is testimony to how long term solitary confinement is indefensible in any civilised society. Incarceration is the punishment and we cannot be responsible for causing/exacerbating mental health problems in the vulnerable people we imprison, we must find ways to help those people. I hope that other former Board of Corrections workers will speak out and current employees will look to change things from within instead of being part of the problem. The status quo is no longer tenable the world is watching and wondering why.

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