

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/02/24/the-vicious-cycles-created-by-solitary-confinement/>

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | February 24, 2013

In 1993, [Dr. Stuart Grassian](#), following extensive interviews with men in California's Pelican Bay State Prison Security Housing Unit (SHU), reported that extensive periods in solitary confinement lead to what he referred to as a syndrome particular to prison isolation units. Anxiety, ruminations, panic attacks, aggression, paranoia, and psychotic symptoms were observed as a consequence of prolonged solitary confinement. Prisoners already presenting problems with impulsivity, aggression, and other problematic mental health and behavioral problems may become far more aggravated in solitary confinement. This contributes to what Dr. Craig Haney has referred to as a vicious cycle in which emotionally troubled individuals placed in solitary become more aggravated and cause more problems, leading to longer or repeated terms in solitary confinement, and thus creates more negative behaviors in the process.

Unsurprisingly, it has also been well-established that inmates in solitary confinement have higher recidivism rates upon release from [incarceration](#). An August 2012 [report](#) commissioned by the American Friends Service Committee found that prisoners released from Arizona supermax custody are emotionally and mentally harmed by the experience of solitary. Further, the report found that supermax inmates are inadequately prepared for release, as they are prohibited from educational and vocational opportunities and are limited in visitation during their incarceration, which contribute to inmates being deeply traumatized and essentially socially disabled.

Presented here are profiles of two prisoners, in Washington and Utah, who have written to Solitary Watch about their experiences in isolation. Both report extended periods in solitary confinement, which they report has had the effect of increasing their hostility against authority and leading to increased feelings of anxiety, respectively. They report receiving no constructive, rehabilitative programming, which they argue only contributes to escalating problems as they neither learn to become productive and are left at rock bottom.

Washington State Penitentiary (Walla Walla, WA)

C. is a self-described 45 year old revolutionary Chicano from southern California. Incarcerated since 1997 on second-degree assault and arson charges, he is now serving a life sentence. He writes to Solitary Watch during his 10th stint in Washington's Intensive Management Unit.

Following an assault on other prisoners, he was sentenced to a two year term in the solitary confinement unit. He is currently six months into this term.

He spends 23 hours a day, five days a week in his 712 foot windowless cell. For one hour he is allowed to exercise. On weekends, he spends his entire time in his cell.

C. claims that his frequent placements in the IMU has contributed to an increasing hostility against correctional officers. You are not shown how to assimilate or become productive. Just the opposite, so defiance and refusal to submit have become the motivation.

Whenever I must leave this four walled entrapment, I have to do a full strip search, he writes, get dressed, turn around to get handcuffed through the cuffport, walk forward a few feet to kneel down while on a tether, four guards then enter the cell to place leg restraints on me with a sergeant present and then they all escort me to shower.

Every day, he goes through the same procedure, my personal property, mattress and bedding are placed on a cart and taken down the hallway to be searched, to make sure that I have not made a weapon or instrument that will harm any staff.

Further, a rolled up mattress has been placed up against the front of the cell door so that DOC is assured that I cannot fish in contraband from others on the tier.

His prolonged confinement in isolation, as well as perceived racism and abuses on the part of the guards, has contributed, he says, to his tendency to lash out against others.

He writes, When people are pushed into a corner, tortured and given no option of running away and no peaceful way to fight back they will be forced into a violent response.

Utah State Prison (Draper, Utah)

R. has been incarcerated since he was 17 years old, convicted of aggravated assault. Currently 22, he has spent over 4 1/2 years in Utah State Prison, Drapers control units, Uinta 1 and Uinta 2.

Classified as having a Kappa (assertive and sometimes aggressive) personality, he spends most of his time in his cell. He is currently held in the prisons gang management unit, Uinta 2. Most in Uinta 2 are held two men to a cell, though many, like R., are not.

Like others in his unit, he is only allotted 1 hour and 15 minutes of recreation time every other day. He reports no educational opportunities, jobs, or programming.

There is rarely interaction with anyone other than the 32 other inmates in the section socially people are limited and damaged, he reports, I find myself feeling nervous even visiting my mom.

His brief time in general population was marked by anxiety, The time I spent in pop I wasn't used to interacting with people I still felt comfortable being in my cell.

While in the control unit, a family tragedy occurred, I have had 5 family members pass in a car accident when the case worker pulled me out he said he couldn't even offer me a phone call imagine being in a cell 48 hours at a time and the thoughts that could arise.

Like many in isolation units, one of the only means of maintaining a sense of control is by sticking to a rigid routine.

He reports that the stress and anxiety of close confinement have led him to seek mental health assistance. Which, apparently, amounted to the lady suggesting for me to basically live in a fantasy imagining things throughout the day.

He has had to find an alternative means of coping with his confinement meditation has helped me cope to deal with being away from family I would recommend anybody in solitary to look into the meditation and the Buddhist psychology, he says.

The goal of the system is to rehabilitate! How do you rehabilitate with NO resources? Being locked in a cage, how do you better yourself and prepare for release? Then they wonder why recidivism is so high, I was a kid when I was locked up I have nothing so I'm starting rock bottom.

Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watch's first and most prolific intern. Based in Los Angeles, he served as an editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register and the Press-Enterprise, and is now the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

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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I did 9 years on the SHU. And I am messed up . ex gang member and I'm finally off parole . but I still suffer . and I can't get a job and I live on the streets and I don't have identification or disability check no help my situation .
I am addicted to meth and I don't know where to go for help

F-cking disgusting. Someone should break them all out. I would laugh if someone did that. Stupid pigs wouldn't know what hit em.

This Friday March 1st, the NYC Council will hold a hearing on violence in New York City jails. The Chairwoman had received the endorsement of the Correction Officers Benevolent Association when she ran in 2012 for State Senator and was defeated. While the agenda has not yet been disclosed, I imagine union officials and the Commissioner of Corrections will blame gangs as a cause for increased violence, even though the trend of decreasing prison population and crime in New York City continues to decrease. The union will call for hiring more correction officers and blame violence on a more aggressive inmate population and poor management on the part of the Administration and Correction Commissioner Schirio. The fact is decent correction officers are discouraged from reporting excessive force, brutality, and dehumanizing action by sadistic prison guards. I say guards because any officer that rules with brute force is not a correction officer but a criminal in uniform. It must be made clear brutality by officers against inmates will not be tolerated. The President of the Union must make clear brutality and excessive force will not be tolerated and those individuals who believe their job requires brutality should not be supported by COBA. The Schirio Administration must provide programs for inmates and not 23 out of 24 hour lockup in solitary confinement. Minimum Standards dealing with solitary must be adopted by the Board Of

Correction. COBA must work with the DOC and the Commissioner so when inmates are released they do not return to prison 66 percent of the time five years after release. Brute Force is not a program , it is not a treatment for the mentally ill. Brute force and solitary will not rehabilitate inmates. The criminal injustice system is a failure and the public will pay the price creating a population of mistreated and untreated inmates at Rikers Island and city jails.

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