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Interview with a Former Corrections Officer Who Worked in Prison Isolation Units

by [Aviva Stahl](#) | April 27, 2016

Recently, Solitary Watch had the opportunity to sit down with X, a former corrections officer who spent almost two years working on a segregation unit in Pennsylvania. (The guard requested complete anonymity in exchange for the interview). X, now 48, worked for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections between 2006 and 2009, and in the Special Housing Units (SHU) from 2008-2009. He spoke with journalist Aviva Stahl about what drew him to work in the hole, what he saw while he was there, and what he thinks about the growing movement to reform the use of solitary. This interview has been edited for length and clarity

AS: Did you start working in the SHU or did you work in general population first?

X: Its always general population first. Always. You dont work in solitary confinement until youve established yourself as a CO. They want to see how you react. How you handle yourself. How you are with the other COs, how you interact with inmates. And they take that all and you get to know your lieutenants, your captains, your majors, and your other staff members, your peers, your other COs. Whether or not they can trust you and you can trust them before youre ever considered for down there, the hole. We used to call it the hole. People want to see what youre made of.

AS: Do you remember the kind of people who were there for disciplinary or punishment, do you remember the range of stuff they had done to warrant being put in the hole?

X: Mm-hm. It could be an offense towards an officer. It could be, any inmates if they got in any kind of a fight or something both of them automatically go down. Normally a couple days, you have a trial, find out whats going on, bring the officers in that seen it. Yeah I seen this, the inmate so and so you know initiated it. So normally the one that didnt, theyd get released back to general population. They could be down there for, I mean, stealing, whether it had been in the chow hall, from one of the workshops trying to bring things in, offenses that they committed during visiting when they were visiting family and friends during visiting hour. There would be state offenses against officers like spitting, hitting. Anything.

AS: A lot of people whove been in solitary confinement, in the hole, talk about the way it sounds or the way it smells. Do you remember anything distinct about what it sounded like?

X: It was always cold. It was always hollow. Everything was cement. Cement or iron. So it was always cold and it was always, it had a hollow echo. But the whole prison, even our upper blocks, the prison was built in 1878/1879, so it was all the cement floors, cement brick and iron. Thats it. So there was an echo wherever you went but particularly down in the hole, because it was not as tall of a ceiling, there was no really open space.

AS: Was the food fed through a slot?

X: Yes, there would be like a mail slot. Just folded down and secured back. Just a general lock, came down, you set it there. The inmate would have to stand at the back of the cell, hands out to the front of him, palms exposed, youd go forward place the tray on there and after youd stepped away then he could come and get it.

AS: And in the SHU, did prisoners go to the yard or the showers by themselves or in groups?

X: Yeah, it was just one. Whenever youd move each one of them, it was cuffs, shackles, you know leg shackles and handcuffs depending on if they would spit youd put a spit guard on them. So it was always two on one. Two COs to one inmate. Theyd shower by themselves. A five-minute shower, seven minute shower. And then youd escort them back. Yard was a half hour.

AS: So in terms of being shackled to go to the shower or being shackled to go to the recreation, was that the most human contact that people had?

X: Yeah, that was it

AS: Did you ever see people go crazy in the SHU?

X: Oh yeah. Yeah it was, we had one inmate, he was in his 70s We had another inmate being transferred from another institution and he said yeah, he would take a cellie. Well, ended up, both celled together. It was the second night together and the younger inmate who was like 24, raped the 77 year old inmate. And I remember when [the 77-year-old] came out of there, the Lieutenant comes out and we had him on a stretcher and I mean this man, we thought he was going to have a heart attack, a stroke or he was just horrified that this had happened.

AS: I think you told me you walked in on someone who had hanged himself, right?

X: We had one inmate, he was dead when we got him. He snapped his neck from hanging himself. Had some that the genitalia, tried to cut it off with a plastic spoon.

AS: And the people who tried to commit suicide in solitary or who cut themselves, do you think it was because they were in solitary? Do you think it was the solitary that was driving them crazy?

X: No, I think it was just incarceration. And situations that happen while they were in there, if they had a loved one that died or their spouse or their child or someone you're going to know what happens when it happens. The inmates don't take time to tell you. They'll tell you what happened. But they can't go on anymore and they'll tell you they don't want to live anymore. They'll write Dear John letters. It's the same as what happens out here. They start giving away everything, they write a note, they start, they lose all affect for anything. You don't want to be involved anymore and they withdraw. It's a norm. [In fact, 50 percent of all prison suicides take place among the approximately 5 percent of prisoners held in solitary.]

AS: The other thing I was curious about that we talked about when we met was forced cell extractions. I don't know if you want to talk about that, what it was like to participate in those or kind of what it looked like.

X: Basically, where we would be doing, whether it would be a fence, they would grab ahold of one of the nurses, when it was pill-passing time. They would mix up stuff, they would defecate all over their cells, they would paint the windows, so you have to be able to see, no matter what, you have to be able to see to do your count, make sure for the safety of the inmates. You have to be able to see in that cell. And they would cover the windows with feces, it was bad. And man, it stunk. But you don't know if they were dead or what was going to go on there. If they had something they had made shanks out of. We had one inmate he took towels and kind of strapped his shanks to his hands and he was like come and get me. And so you have to go in, that's just it. So a team assembles and you give them several chances to come to the grill to be cuffed and he comes down there, he's the one giving the order, and no matter what happens before the cellies direction or any sort of pepper spray or anything there's always a lieutenant there. He's the one giving the order. I'm ordering you to inmate so and so, I'm giving you a lawful order and you need to come to the pie hole to be handcuffed. No. Come on and get me.

If they didn't want to come out then be cuffed up, you have no other choice but to go in. Or you have to hit them with pepper spray. We had our teams for them with our batons and our pepper spray and everybody has a set of cuffs on them. You used to have to overpower them and take them down. I mean you came out with some bangs and bruises on you but, you got done what had to be done.

AS: How often would that happen?

X: Sometimes you may not have a cell extraction for a week or two. But normally it was probably 2 or 3 times a week. Yeah, it happened quite frequently. If you believe somebody had something in their cell, a weapon, and they wouldn't come out, you'd have to go in and get it.

AS: Earlier we were speaking about fishing how prisoners would use lines and cardboard to send notes or other materials between each other's cells. What did you think when you first saw the fishing? What did you think of it?

X: It's kind of crazy. You kind of look at it like, What in God's name? You start look out and they explain to you, that's how they exchange information while they're inside. So it could be a letter from this guy, this inmate is dating this other inmate's cousin. So they communicate, they'll put letters inside of magazines, or whatever so when it's fished. Anything they could get the string out of and not get caught for damaging state material so if it was their jumpsuit or socks or towels or whatever. They would un-strand them and use it. But yeah, it's pretty cool to see it, it's just like a network. You always hear them, you can always hear the whisks of something going over the cement. You look and you have two inmates in a cell, the one is looking for the other one, which was to go so he can cross lines with whoever it is that he's trying to get something from.

AS: When I think about it, the idea of being alone with my thoughts for that long. With no human interaction or touch, it's scary for me but I also have never been there so I don't know if that's scary for you or if it maybe looks different when you've actually been on the SHU.

X: Yeah I mean if you're a people person, it would be extremely hard. And I'm a people person. What I do now for a living [nursing], I love. I think if you were in solitary housing by yourself it would be one of the loneliest feelings that would ever be

AS: There are a lot of human rights advocates, doctors, scientists, as well as people who have been in solitary, who say that it's torture. What do you think of that?

X: No. They've never been there. Until you've been there, until you've worked it, like I said some inmates prefer to be that way. They know they're going to be in there for their life, they want to spend it by themselves. As far as torture, no. Because I tell you, inmates have so many rights, that it's not like what it was probably back 100 years ago. It's nothing like that. They still have interaction out in the yard, they're able to see able to talk, able to do all that. It's not like being put out in the sweatbox somewhere. But emotionally and mentally

draining? Absolutely. Absolutely. We have nothing to do but sit in a cell and rot and think about what you did. And then some of the activists and liberals who are out there, it wasn't that crime committed against their families. I mean, how would you feel? If somebody came and killed your mom or your sister or somebody like that? You're not going to care if they rot.

AS: Some prison guard unions have been fighting really hard against changes to solitary, so for example in New York City, they changed the laws on how long people could be kept in solitary in Rikers, and the prison guard union has been saying that any limits on the uses of solitary are going to endanger prison guards. Do you think that's true?

X: I think that's a textbook response, because they don't want to change. So their feeling is probably if it's not broke, don't fix it. But there's a lot of things in the judicial system that are broken. It's just who's going to step up and get it done. Who wants to step forward. But I think a lot of them band together because if they don't they'll be looked down upon by their peers. I know I think that's a huge one. Because how one thinks everybody should think that way. That's old school. That's gone. Things have to change at some point.

Aviva Stahl is a Brooklyn-based reporter who writes about science/health at the intersection of mass incarceration, national security, and trans rights. She's written for the New York Times, Wired, BuzzFeed News, Solitary Watch, and other outlets. Find her @stahlidarity and at stahlidarity.com.

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September 29, 2022

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Sonni, you obviously know nothing about the society within a prison, and even less about the men and women who choose to work there. Majority of those working in this environment are ex-military, and have earned Associates and Bachelors degrees in Criminal Justice. As for the administration, or upper staff as you put it, looking the other way, you need to check your source. We are held accountable for every action and decision we make, just as your friend who has spent ten years incarcerated. If he has spent that time in SHU it is because of his behavior, and/or has been a security threat to himself or others. Taking the word of someone who couldn't live by the laws of society, placed in a correctional facility, and still couldn't follow the rules and policies of that institute should and does not have weight. In addition, if he says NO you know he's lying? That has to be the dumbest thing I have ever heard, you must be a special kind of stupid.

There is a man I have a blog for mynameisjamie.net. he is sitting in ad seg in Tx. Even if he makes it out of there they always find a way to put him back even filling false cases. I know how bad it's been. He's been in over ten years. But this time he has learned not to react to what anyone says or does. He stays respectful no matter what. In these small towns when the hire guards they hire men who are nobodies with little education, put a uniform on them and it puffs up their ego. They get off on having the authority to abuse inmates knowing the upper staff will look the other way. There are little repercussions for the bad guards. They get away with what they do. They should have to wear cameras like the police. We need to see what they are doing, otherwise those guards who are abusive will continue to do the things they do. Where was the question in this interview that asks, Have you seen or do you know of guards who have done criminal acts or intentionally harmed the inmates? If he said no you know he's lying.

Excellent and truthful points.

Im a wee bit late looking at comments. None the less, thank you

SHAME on the United States of America (the land that preaches human rights to the rest of the world). The civilized nations of the world are appalled at your barbaric, brutal, cruel, degrading, inhumane, uncivilized and vile treatment of your incarcerated people. SHAME !!!

I couldn't have said this better. Yes, Im an American who is embarrassed by our country's preaching to other countries about our excellent human rights record, which is a huge lie. Our prisons torture people. It's a disgrace.

This guard forgot to mention how they encourage the mentally ill to kill themselves. He forgot to mention how they brutalize and kill prisoners in solitary. This guard is a typical lying person concealing how they torture prisoners. Two of my mentally ill incarcerated friends killed themselves because the guards encouraged them to commit suicide daily as well as brutalizing them.

Thank you Erika.

You're welcome.

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