



News from a Nation in Lockdown
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Dear Chairman Durbin and Ranking Member Graham,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the issue of solitary confinement that has come before the subcommittee. Our names are James Ridgeway and Jean Casella and we are the editors of Solitary Watch, a web-based project aimed at bringing the widespread use of solitary confinement and other forms of torture in U.S. prisons out of the shadows and into the light of the public square. Solitary Watch's mission is to provide the public—as well as practicing attorneys, legal scholars, law enforcement and corrections officers, policymakers, educators, advocates, and prisoners—with the first centralized source of background research, unfolding news, and original reporting on solitary confinement in the United States.

The use and abuse of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons is one of the most pressing domestic human rights issues in America today—and also one of the most invisible. Part of the mission of Solitary Watch is to provide prisoners a chance to relate their own experiences in solitary, through a feature called “Voices from Solitary.” In that connection, we have received hundreds of letters from prisoners in segregation, many of them eager to share their stories. Some wish their words to be published under their own names, while others prefer to remain anonymous to prevent retaliation. What follows is a small selection of writings by prisoners in solitary confinement in U.S. prisons and jails.

Pennsylvania state prisoner in solitary for two years: “I sit in solitude alone in my cell, with thoughts of freedom running wild in my head like a child in a walker, I shiver from the bitter cold that these concrete walls give off, I can't do nothing but lay in the corner on the cold floor naked the only light enters through the bottom of the steel door—I'm so cold—hunger sets in as the only food I will be eating is some stale bread and if I'm lucky a piece of rotten fruit. I scratch the days into my skin with hopes of being released from these psychological confines of this concrete jungle, with no windows, no lights, no bed no running water, just a toilet that doesn't work with the strong smell of years of urine, this is sure to make any man lose his mind. This is the reality of a man in prison with the support of no one, do you think he hurts?”

California state prisoner subjected to additional punishment for disciplinary problems while in solitary: “For 30 days.... I was placed in a tiny isolation cell in the middle of a desolate hallway by itself. It was the only cell in the entire hallway. The cell was only large enough to accommodate a bunk, sink and toilet. There was only room to take about two steps. I couldn't even flush the toilet myself; I had to wait for an officer to pass by so I could ask them to push the bottom outside my cell to flush it. It was humiliating. I was not allowed any personal property, not even writing, reading or hygiene products. I couldn't even receive my mail. The only items I was allowed to possess were a blanket, sheets, a t-shirt, boxers, socks and toilet paper (if I was lucky). I was fed a brick diet twice a day which consisted of different foods smashed together in a ball.”

Oregon state prisoner who spent 12 years in solitary: "I've learned, from other prison psychiatrists that PTSD is common in prisoners who have spent many years incarcerated. It is akin to serving several tours in a war zone. People become hypersensitive and you can literally feel the stress and tension on people. I've known it for years but didn't know it was PTSD. I startle easily. If a pen rolls off my desk and hits the floor...even that small sound can throw me into fear. If the officer knocks on the cell door or shuts the cuff port hard, a door slams, an odd sound...every one of them can throw me into fear...I have recurring nightmares."

Texas state prisoner, now age 30, who has been in solitary almost continuously since the age of 16: "Being subjected to years of solitary confinement is a terribly unique experience; quite unlike any other form of time, one of the things in life that you've kind of either been through or you haven't. However mentally tough you may be, years of sensory deprivation, total isolation, lack of mental/physical stimuli, and otherwise enduring the struggle that is a part of it all, takes a tremendous toll. Nearly without fail it instills a bitterness and hatred in you. After a number of years it often becomes difficult to do any other type of time; being around people in typical or normal [environments] becomes uncomfortable and even unbearable...Any time you leave your cell you're handcuffed with a dog leash attached (they refer to it as a 'tether' I believe) and otherwise treated like a straight up animal. I've often compared it to having a dog in a kennel or cage and keeping him there for years, while poking sticks at him, playing vile games against him, making him go periods without water or food, etc...and when you eventually loose that dog, do you really expect anything other than pure aggression, hatred, anti-social, etc?"

Nevada state prisoner placed in medical solitary after several escape attempts: "[They] put me in this cell [in the infirmary] where I have been locked away, and it seems they have thrown away the key, I have no shoes of any kind. No clothes except a pair of underwear and a T shirt. I have a blanket and a mattress. That's it. They won't even let me keep a toothbrush and toothpaste in my cell. I have to use it and give it right back to the guard. There is no window to the outside. And they painted everything in this cell Orange...It's like I live in an orange box. It seems like I am stuck in some weird room in the Willy Wonka factory. They posted a "No Communication" notice on the outside of my door. The regular COs are not allowed to talk to me or even come into the vestibule outside my cell. When they feed me a sergeant or lieutenant has to be present. And they feed me using this box that they put my food in, then they lock it. Then open the inside part, sliding it open so I can reach in and pick up my tray. They treat me like Hannibal Lector and I've never once acted aggressive towards any staff."

New York state prisoner with mental illness who tried to kill himself by burning down his solitary cell, and was given an additional six years for arson: "It's hard in here for me. I feel like killing myself most of the time like I said but end up cutting myself to relieve the pain or just do things that help me relieve pain. Cutting myself seems the best way but one day I'm going to really cut myself and not tell noone so I can bleed out. That's how I am feeling nowadays. My life's gone down the drain."

Louisiana state prisoner: "We are even forced to have all sick call visits and psychiatric visits while we are in our cells in the hearing range of all the other inmates and guards. Social workers, psychiatrists, nurses etc. stand in the hall (on the cat walk) in front of our cells. Our cells have only one opening. This is the equivalent of no treatment at all with people being mocked and ridiculed by what they say."

Missouri state prisoner: Since I've been in this demoralizing place I've seen people go absolutely insane...They have got people that talk to themselves all day. They got people who curse people out all

day. They got people that attempt suicide for stupid reasons. They got people that eat or play with their own bodily wastes. Human beings don't do this. Animals do. Uncivilized people do. Staff here created an environment that makes a person uncivilized. When I say uncivilized, I'm talking about stripping away their humanity. First, they say to the person "I don't know if you will ever get out of the hole." They make the person lose hope for anything. Then they don't give the person much to exercise his mind. They only provide us with one reading book a week ... While in the hole, we can't order magazines or newspaper ourselves, [and] they forbid us from passing along these items so the ones that are fortunate to get magazine or newspaper subscriptions from people helping them on the outside, they can't even let someone else read it. Making matters worse, we stay in our cells 24/7 unless we need to get medical, attend classification hearings, or visits... We stay in these cells day after day, month after month, year after year. We want ad seg reform. We need ad seg reform. Help us obtain ad seg reform.

Washington State prisoner: A question rises in my mind... "I am still alive, aren't I?" And as ridiculous as the question seems, it holds my attention because it's hard for me to be certain of anything in this place anymore. I haven't spoken in months. What do I actually have to verify that I am still alive? A heartbeat? It strikes me that someone dead may still perceive his heart as beating. Breath? Dead people probably think they're breathing too.

I look at the heavy steel cell door beside me. That is something—what keeps me sealed inside this concrete box, this IMU cell. If I am no longer alive, would it still do this to me?... The thought scares me. Deepens despair. Hell, in my mind, not the fiery nether world of Christianity. How can I adopt an abstract when I know something worse, a thousand times more concrete?

Focus. I redirect my mind, aware that it is necessary to keep it on a short leash here, to rein it in when I feel it slipping, or run the risk of it leaving altogether. Strange things happen to minds in this place—things, I suspect, people in the free world know nothing about. Weak minds break quickly. Strong ones, later on.

Utah state prisoner: Go to your bathroom door and kick a hole in it. Now lock yourself in tight. Throw all your hygiene items, except a tooth brush and toothpaste tube, out the hole. Everything. Now go to your tub and flip it over. This is where you'll sleep. Now sit. The light switch disappears and the shower spigot. A little speaker replaces them. It listens and sometimes speaks to you. Laughs at you. Taunts you. Tells you your suffering is entertaining. You can't shut off the light with no switch and you'll have to shower using the sink...

A day passes this way. "My god," you say, "what have I done to deserve this?"

A week passes. You cry.

A month. You attempt suicide but your vein closes up before death.

A year. You are now talking to yourself and running around naked. You are convinced the food you seldom receive, that's halfway edible, is poisoned. As you eat the rotten "meat" your beard and mustache get in the way of the teeth chewing. You couldn't cry if your life depended on it. And it used to. But you've forgotten why.

Two years. You can't remember. You've forgotten. Forgotten what? You don't know. The "squatter enemies" come around and you look at them. They look at you. They laugh. You start to laugh too. You forgot why. But you do.

Three years. You sleep 20 hours a day. You can't help it. But your floor is clean. You keep it spotless. You don't know why. But you do. You're skinny. You've lost an easy 60 lbs. Your skin is turning yellow and your legs cramp up and atrophy. You don't want to die anymore. Why bother? You'd rather sleep and dream. The dreams are so vivid. More real than these walls.

Five years. You go home, you leave your bathroom, this year. They tell you that. But why? Where do I go? I don't want to leave now. I like my tub and sink...

Federal prison in the U.S. Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: In a hole, within a hole, inside a prison is where I dwell--the Special Management Unit at USP Lewisburg. Days to nights, nights to dawn. I roll out my rack to the sight of nothing...

The tiny space I call home allows me a few feet before I am at my door peeking out of a rectangular shaped window that permits a view to a blank tier and adjoining cells. This particular prison was constructed in 1932. Its concealed conditions are inhumane and utterly unpleasant. Anywhere but here, yet this it...

Wall to wall- hardly enough room to shape my physical--I push up as if the weight of the world rests heavily upon my shoulders. When I can go no more, I go further, harder. The associated matters, which modify my course of development provoke me to exert the force within. One of the few positive pushes permissible and, for now, it's this or staring at the walls in effort to impede the ever-tightening grip of this unilluminated dungeon.

From down the tier I hear the cries of another inmate. Although I can place no face--"LET ME OUT!", he wailed. His sanity gone forever. What he was going through I know so well. Had I not been afraid of my cries falling on deaf ears, I too would holler LET ME OUT!!!

Federal prisoner in the U.S. Penitentiary, Administrative Maximum (ADX) in Florence, Colorado: The moment you set your eyes on it it's a mixed ball of emotions and feelings that hit you...The psychological intimidation starts without even setting one foot into the ADX and the remoteness also adds a touch that you are no longer to be a part of the world the moment you arrive you realize you've reached a level of solitary living that is specifically designed to keep you totally separated from human contact--it's a chilling feeling.

The sensory deprivation starts from the moment you arrive into the intake, the deadly silence adds to the reality that you're not in a normal prison...what was normal was the humiliating experience of becoming a new inmate. After the intake process I was shackled and box-cuffed and escorted by a number of corrections officers with black batons at hand and ready to beat me down if I made a wrong move.

I was escorted down a series of never ending, lengthy wide and tall hallways that were painted an off white and were at a downhill angle which make your ears pop as you move down them. It's just another drop added to the emotional and psychological design and purpose of solitary life. I was then housed in the famous D-Unit...The confined space that you are housed in is a 7-by-9 foot sound proof cell that comes with a concrete slab and a thin mattress for a bed, a shower within the cell with a timer to conserve water and prevent flooding, a sink with no taps, just touch buttons...a toilet with a valve that shuts off the water after two flushes automatically for an hour, an immovable concrete desk and concrete stool, a polished steel mirror riveted to the concrete wall and a thirteen inch black and white television encased in plexiglass to prevent tampering.

I have been to many different prisons and none can compare to ADX's conditions. Of course I'm not taking away the fact that the animalistic treatment isn't the same when it comes down to the beatings, torture, and psychological abuses...These places are designed to drive you crazy, you can feel the madness closing in on you. You can feel it eating away at you and there is nothing you can do to stop it...you can slow it down by writing and reading but that's all it does, slow down the process of mental madness.