

# Notes on the social crisis in America

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## Jailed youth mentally damaged by solitary confinement

A report by Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union found juvenile prisoners suffer severe psychological and developmental damage from being held in solitary confinement.

More than 95,000 US prisoners are under the age of 18.

“Locking kids in solitary confinement with little or no contact with other people is cruel, harmful, and unnecessary,” said Ian Kysel, Aryeh Neier Fellow with Human Rights Watch and the ACLU and author of the report. “Normal human interaction is essential to the healthy development and rehabilitation of young people; to cut that off helps nobody.”

The practice is widespread throughout the US jail and prison system, with some young people forced to spend weeks, months, or even years without human contact. In the New York City corrections system, more than 14 percent of all adolescents were subjected to solitary confinement during their imprisonment. At Rikers Island, the average length of solitary confinement was 43 days. Nearly half of Rikers’ juvenile prisoners have diagnosed mental health problems.

Young prisoners interviewed for the report described emotional distress, suicide attempts, self-harm, and hallucinations. Those allowed out of their isolation cell reported being permitted to exercise only a few times a week, alone, in small metal cages. Several said they were denied books, magazines, writing implements and classes. Others said the most difficult aspect of solitary confinement was being denied visits and “not being able to hug their mother or father.”

“Being in isolation to me felt like I was on an island all alone, dying a slow death from the inside out,” said “Kyle B.” from California.

“In segregation you either implode or explode; you lose touch with reality, hear voices, hallucinate and think for hours about killing yourself, others or both,” said “Douglas C.” of Colorado. “The anger and hurt gets so intense that you suspect everyone and trust no one and when someone does something nice for you, you don’t understand it.”

“Alyssa E.” of Florida explained, “I cut myself. I started doing it because it is the only release of my pain. I’d see the blood and I’d be happy.... I did it with staples, not razors. When I see the blood and it makes me want to keep going. I showed

the officers and they didn’t do anything.... I wanted [the staff] to talk to me. I wanted them to understand what was going on with me.”

Juan Mendez, the United Nations’ rapporteur on torture, has called for a complete ban on solitary confinement as a cruel and inhuman punishment. In April, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry recommended that any youth confined in isolation for more than 24 hours should be evaluated by a mental health professional.

## Facing foreclosure, Florida mother kills two sons, self

A Florida mother who took the lives of her two children before committing suicide last month was facing foreclosure and desperate financial straits, Clearwater police reported.

On the night of September 22, 34-year-old Dawn Brown drowned her sons Zander, 9, and Zayden, 5, then hanged herself with an electrical cord. Murphy Brown, the father of the children, reportedly found his family early Saturday morning; the boys had been tucked into their beds.

Last year, Brown was charged with welfare fraud and was facing a court date October 1. She had entered a plea of not guilty 10 days before her suicide.

According to the *Tampa Bay Times*, Brown had wanted to be a teacher, but had lost her scholarship and dropped out of college shortly after her arrest. After that, a neighbor told the paper, “She fell into a depression, and really just never came out of it.”

“It ruined her life,” another neighbor told the *Tampa Bay Tribune*. “She loved kids so much. It’s hard to see now, but she wanted to take care of children. She wanted more kids.”

The family was also confronting a looming foreclosure. Court records revealed that the Browns had been in foreclosure proceedings at least three times in the past 10 years.

The Brown family had been living without electricity for weeks. “They began cooking meals on a charcoal grill,” the *Times* noted. “To heat up frozen dinners in a microwave, they ran an extension cord to a neighbor’s outlet.” Neighbors said that Dawn Brown had despaired over not being able to read books because of the electric shutoff.

Murphy Brown, who had been working irregularly as an independent mechanic, was without money to bury his family. He and his neighbors plan to sell off all the family's possessions and strip the house.

### **Wealthy New Yorkers complain about swelling homeless shelters**

An October 10 Associated Press article, "NYC homeless boom puts shelters in lap of wealthy," reports the dissatisfaction of upscale Manhattan residents about a new homeless shelter that has been opened in their "neighborhood of multimillion-dollar brownstones."

"It sort of felt almost like a bomb landing," commented one resident of the Upper West Side. "We just have lots of concerns about safety. And no one really seemed to care about what we thought."

The city's homeless population has soared in recent years. The most recent count of shelter residents found that more than 46,000 people sought help each night—the highest ever recorded. New York City is home to 14 percent of the nation's homeless population.

Absurdly, billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg attributed the rise in need to improvements in shelter conditions. "We have made our shelter system so much better that, unfortunately, when people are in it—or fortunately, depending on what your objective is—it is a much more pleasurable experience than they ever had before."

As the AP points out, however, in reality, "The crisis stems from a lack of affordable housing and the city's ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor, one of the widest in the US and comparable to that found in sub-Saharan Africa."

Shelter occupants said that the cots were infested with bedbugs, and the living spaces were full of roaches and mice. Following a state-level funding cut for housing assistance, the Bloomberg administration has refused to provide rental subsidies to assist the homeless to help them leave the shelters.

### **New Jersey unemployment benefits system critically understaffed**

As few as 34 unemployment appeals case workers have been managing the 3 million applicants to the New Jersey jobless claims system since 2008. On October 8, the Department of Labor and Workforce Development acknowledged that the understaffing had created delays that were "clearly a due-process problem," or an infringement of the rights of laid-off

workers. Fred Zavaglia, the state Labor Department's chief of staff, said that the agency was training eight new workers.

The New Jersey *Record* reported that thousands of applicants have dealt with appeals and uncertainty. Monica Menjon, a secretary who has never before been out of work, lost her job in August when the construction company she worked for went out of business. Since that time, she has received only a single unemployment check. Menjon told the paper that she was now worried about missing her mortgage payments. "It's scary," she said. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

Only one in four appeals typically result in any change to benefits, according to the *Record*. State workers are concerned that a boom in appeals is coming with the expiration of a federally extended emergency unemployment compensation program in December. Some 100,000 unemployed workers will be left without benefits when that happens.

### **Suicide epidemic among American Indian youth**

Indian teenagers and young adults are taking their own lives at more than triple the rate of other young Americans. On some reservations, investigative news organization 100Reporters found, the teen suicide rate was 9 to 19 times higher than among other youths. Several tribes have declared states of emergency to establish crisis-intervention programs.

"It feels like wartime," South Dakota's Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation child-welfare official Diane Garreau said. "I'll see one of our youngsters one day, then find out a couple of days later she's gone. Our children are self-destructing."

Behind the suicides are a complex of social, historical, and economic issues. Indian children face extreme poverty, hunger, substance abuse, lack of health care and mental health counseling, and other ills. Unemployment on some reservations stands higher than 80 percent.

A study last year found that one in five adolescents thought daily about historical traumas affecting their communities, including loss of land and language. "Our kids hurt so much," Garreau said. "Many have decided they won't live that long anyway, which in their minds excuses self-destructive behavior, like drinking—or suicide."



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