

ACLU report documents horror of solitary confinement in US prisons

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Last month, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Texas released a report documenting the brutal and horrifying conditions facing prisoners in solitary confinement in US prisons.

There are more than 80,000 people imprisoned in solitary confinement in the US. Solitary confinement involves the isolation of prisoners from face-to-face human contact, sometimes for years or decades at a time, and has been declared a form of torture by the United Nations.

There are 6,000 people in solitary confinement in the state of Texas, which was the focus of the report. The average Texas prisoner in solitary confinement languishes there for almost four years, and over 100 Texas prisoners have spent more than 20 years in solitary confinement. These prisoners live in a tiny cell for 22 hours a day with almost no direct human contact and no access to educational or rehabilitative programs.

“Everyday from dusk to dawn there’s noise, banging, clanking, yelling, screaming,” said Alex, one of the prisoners quoted in the report. “Everyday someone is getting hurt or hurting themselves. Everyday there’s fire and floods and complete chaos & hate. Everyday there’s loneliness. I woke up last night to someone screaming ‘Let Me Out of Here’ (again) over and over with so much anguish there was no doubt he was screaming from his very soul. But he was just screaming what we are all thinking. Everyday is a challenge here. A challenge against insanity.”

The 60 square foot cell that Alex is forced to live in has no windows and is the size of a bathroom. His only contact with the outside world is a slot in his door for a food tray and two thin slits that officers can peek in at any time. Weeks can pass by before he is able to look another human being in the eye. According to the report, “He hasn’t seen the stars in 10 years.” Alex is also banned from any educational or counseling programs. The

constant screams from other prisoners drive many prisoners to madness.

Alex also keeps a journal nicknamed “Wilson” after the volleyball that is Tom Hanks’ only companion in the movie “Castaway.” In it he writes, “I have to be honest, when your back here and the guy next to you is so crazy he’s cutting on his face or eating his feces. It makes things even worse because you don’t know if they came into [solitary] this way, or the walls, this place, has caused it. So you begin to wonder, am I next?”

Despite international agreements calling for bans on keeping mentally ill prisoners in isolation, there are over 2,000 people with diagnosed mental illnesses in solitary confinement in Texas jails. The prison officials provide only cursory checks on the mental health of inmates, if at all. People in solitary confinement are five times more likely to commit suicide than prisoners in the general population.

According to the report, 95 percent of prisoners surveyed said they developed some sort of psychiatric symptom as a result of solitary confinement. Thirty percent recorded having oral or physical outbursts, 50 percent reported suffering from panic or anxiety attacks, and 15 percent reported hallucinations.

Dr. Craig Haney, a University of California professor, served as an expert in the prisoners’ rights case of Ruiz v. Estelle and documented the psychological impact of Texas’ use of solitary confinement on inmates finding that, “high numbers of prisoners were living in psychological distress and pain.”

He added, “The bedlam which ensued each time I walked out into one of those units, the number of people who were screaming, who were begging for help, for attention, the number of people who appeared to be disturbed, the existence, again, of people who were smeared with feces, the intensity of the noise as people began to shout and ask, Please come over here. Please talk

to me. Please help me. It was shattering. And as I discussed this atmosphere with the people who worked here, I was told that this was an everyday occurrence, that there was nothing at all unusual about what I was seeing.”

The judge presiding in the Ruiz case wrote that the solitary confinement cells in Texas were “virtual incubators of psychoses—seeding illness in otherwise healthy inmates.” The judge ruled that solitary confinement constituted cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Eight Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

As one of the prisoners surveyed told the ACLU, “I am an honorably discharged combat veteran diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety disorder, panic disorder, etc. Isolation is torture. There can be no other word for it. ‘Isolation’ simply means you are single-celled. You are not removed from the effects of other inmates’ extreme behavior. People flood the areas by plugging toilets. Fires are routinely started so you wake in the middle of the night choking on black smoke. Electricity gets turned off. People scream, yell nonsensical gibberish all night. They bang doors 24 hours... .”

The cruel and barbaric use of solitary confinement is one part of the overall inhumanity of the American criminal “justice” system. The US incarcerates a greater share of its population than any other country in the world. This month, the Vera Institute of Justice reported that American jails have become “massive warehouses” for the poor, while the equivalent of debtors’ prisons exist in Missouri, Alabama and other states.

The massive expansion of prisons, particularly since the 1980s, has paralleled the growth of social inequality. The victims of poverty and social misery are warehoused by the millions in US prisons, under increasingly brutal conditions. Meanwhile, the real criminals in society, those at the Pentagon, the White House and Wall Street, are never charged, much less punished, for their crimes.



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