

US prisons rife with violence and torture against mentally disabled prisoners

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15 May 2015

Mentally disabled prisoners in the bloated US prison system are subject to violent and even deadly abuse, according to a new report. Individuals suffering a range of mental illnesses, unable to find proper treatment in mental health facilities, are punished as a result of their disabilities in the nation's prisons and jails.

A new report from Human Rights Watch, "Callous and Cruel: Use of Force against Inmates with Mental Disabilities in US Jails and Prisons," details the cruel and inhuman treatment of mentally disabled prisoners, including minors and the elderly, by jail and prison staff.

Some of the abuses described in the 127-page report include denial of medical attention, violent beatings, repeated use of toxic chemical sprays in an enclosed area, and decades of solitary confinement. Many prisoners have died as a result of abuse, and experts fear that the rate and level of abuse against mentally disabled prisoners are increasing.

The nation's prisons incarcerate an estimated 2.4 million people, nearly 25 percent of the world's prison population. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) show that in federal prisons, 61 percent of women and 55 percent of men have at least one mental health problem.

These figures are even higher in local and state facilities: in state prisons, 73 percent of women and 55 percent of men have at least one mental health problem, while the rates are 75 percent among women and 63 percent among men in local jails.

Numerous Department of Justice investigations and class-action lawsuits surrounding treatment of mentally disabled prisoners have demonstrated that abuse is systemic and widespread. "The violence that we have found against prisoners with mental disabilities is not by-and-large the result of 'rogue' officers or a few bad apples," says Jamie Fellner, author of the HRW report.

Although national statistics on the prevalence of use of force against prisoners in the US do not exist, state-level statistics reveal that force is used disproportionately against the mentally disabled.

For example, in Colorado, chemical spray is involved in cell extractions of mentally ill prisoners at a rate 12 times higher than with other prisoners. In four California facilities, use of force against prisoners with mental illness constituted 87-94 percent of force incidents, even though those prisoners composed, at most, half the population.

Under US constitutional and international law, force may be used against a prisoner only as a last resort. However, force is routinely used against "disruptive" prisoners exhibiting symptoms of mental distress, and applied long after prisoners have been restrained or subdued.

One case cited by the report is that of Nick Christie, a 62-year-old man who was tortured to death in a Florida jail. The prisoner was stripped naked and sprayed over a dozen times with pepper spray over the course of 36 hours while immobilized in a restraint chair after asking for his car keys and being "loud and belligerent." Christie was eventually taken to the hospital, where he died shortly thereafter.

The 5,100 jails and prisons in the United States serve as the country's de facto mental health care facilities. Correctional facilities house at least 360,000 people with serious mental illnesses, three times as many people housed in public mental hospitals.

What accounts for a situation in which serious psychological disorders, including depression, schizophrenia and trauma-related disorder, are rampant among prison inmates, and prisoners are punished for these disorders instead of being treated?

An estimated one in five prisoners in the United

States has a serious mental illness, including schizophrenia and major depression. According to Bureau of Justice Statistics' figures, individuals with severe mental illness are three times more likely to be in a jail or prison, and 40 percent of those suffering from a severe mental illness will have spent some time either in jail, prison or community corrections.

The drive to deinstitutionalize, or shut down, public mental hospitals began in the 1950s and accelerated in the 1970s. In 1955 there were 333 beds per 100,000 Americans. Thirteen states closed 25 percent or more of their total state hospital beds between 2005 and 2010. According to the Treatment Advocacy Center, the number of public mental hospital beds per capita has now plunged to 14.1 beds per 100,000 Americans, or to 1850 levels.

Prison and jail custodial staff are rarely screened to check whether they can manage prisoners calmly and professionally. Steve Martin, a use-of-force expert and former corrections official, said that most correctional staff are “marginally trained” or not at all and see behavior of mentally ill prisoners as simply misbehavior.

“Corrections staff throughout the country do not get sufficient training in techniques to avoid the use of force, nor do they get sufficient training on how to handle a mentally ill prisoner,” said Eldon Vail, former Washington State secretary of corrections.

Prisoners can spend months, years and even decades locked in solitary confinement, spending only three to five hours a week of “recreation” alone in caged enclosures. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture regards the imposition of solitary confinement of any duration on persons with mental disabilities as cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

As with police killings, the growing number of mentally disabled prisoners—and their systematic mistreatment and torture—is one more indication of the increasing brutalization and violence of the US ruling elite in response to growing social problems and tensions.



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