

Texas prisoners on hunger strike against solitary confinement

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Dozens of prisoners incarcerated in Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) jails have entered the second week of a hunger strike in protest of the state holding thousands of inmates indefinitely in solitary confinement.

Inmates across the Texas prison system have refused food since January 10, opposing the state's brutal practice of keeping prisoners in isolation, in some cases for decades. TDCJ officials claim 72 prisoners initiated the hunger strike, and only 38 are still refusing food. However, advocacy groups in touch with the striking prisoners say at least 138 are on strike.

Texas prisoners in solitary confinement are kept in single-person cells for at least 22 hours a day. When staffing levels allow—which is usually rare—the inmates can get out of their cells to shower or exercise alone in caged outdoor areas. Thousands of prisoners are kept in such inhumane conditions for years.

Texas is currently holding more than 3,000 inmates in what the TDCJ refers to as “restrictive housing.” Of those, more than 500 have been held in solitary confinement for at least 10 years and 138 for at least 20 years. The indeterminate length of a solitary term in Texas has made the state a national leader in the use of this barbaric form of lock-up over prolonged periods.

Three months prior to the strike, the inmates involved presented the prison authorities with a list of written complaints and demands outlining the injustices many were subjected to. In the document, inmates said they were suffering “deprivations of our senses, inhumane treatment and conditions, and long-term mental, physical and emotional harm which endure long after release and cannot be undone.”

The main demand is to replace the current Texas policy of putting prisoners into solitary confinement based on supposed gang affiliation with a “behavioral

based system to address the behavior of individuals—only those who engage in serious rule violations should be placed in restrictive housing.”

Brittany Robertson, an advocate representing the hunger strikers, described the grim state of solitary cells.

“Most units don’t allow calls, no contact visits, no oversight or effective grievance process. Mail is delayed up to a month, there are staffing shortages and with no security checks there are a lot of suicides,” Robertson told the *Guardian*.

Robertson also unveiled a report from a prisoner that recorded what few privileges he was afforded in August 2022. The inmate reported he was only allowed to make one phone call to a loved one, which the state restricted to just after midnight. Furthermore, he was only granted two days of recreation and spent the rest of the month confined to his cell.

According to Robertson, prisoners have reported that their cells are being routinely searched for food. Inmates are also reportedly losing weight rapidly. The *Texas Tribune* reported that an inmate in Anderson County said weigh-ins revealed that several men had lost five pounds or more in one day. Many strikers were beginning to feel dizzy and have muscle cramps.

According to prison policy, those participating in hunger strikes have to be medically evaluated daily and doctors are allowed to force-feed prisoners if it is deemed necessary. However, TDCJ spokesperson Amanda Hernandez said Thursday no medical intervention had yet been required for the strike.

The TDCJ claims solitary confinement is designated as a means to prevent violence between prisoners and gang recruitment. Authorities state they intend to isolate “security threat groups” such as the white supremacist Aryan Brotherhood and the Mexican

mafia.

Inmates are assessed for signs of gang membership such as tattoos and other indicators, and if they are labelled with a gang status are then placed alone in a cell indefinitely, regardless of any behavioral violations or wrongdoing.

In a statement, the TDCJ said “if known prison gang members in state custody do not like their current confinement conditions, they are free to renounce their gang and we will offer them a pathway back into general population. We will not, however, give them free rein to recruit new members and try to continue their criminal enterprises.”

The TDCJ claims that only inmates “who are confirmed members of the most organized and dangerous prison gangs, inmates who are escape risks, and inmates who committed assaults or multiple other serious disciplinary offenses are incarcerated within [solitary]”. Officials also claimed that the prison system had made “great strides” in decreasing the use of solitary confinement, from a peak of 9,186 prisoners in 2007 to 3,172 last year.

Robertson, however, dismissed TDCJ’s conclusion, saying that many of the striking prisoners are in fact men from different gangs who found a way to come together to fight for change.

She added that the prisoners who had joined the protest “truly feel this is in the best interest of all, including the prison employees who are suffering appalling conditions as well.”

Prison officials have said alleged gang members can get out of solitary by renouncing their gang and going through an intensive reentry program specifically for gang members. Many prisoners, however, struggle to get into the program or choose not to enter it, according to the striking prisoners and prison rights advocates, because it often requires them to name other gang members or incriminate themselves.

According to the latest data compiled by the Correctional Leaders Association (CLA) and the Arthur Liman Center at Yale Law School, between 41,000 and 48,000 inmates are held in isolation in US prisons. The CLA-Liman report added that Texas had by far the largest number of prisoners who had been held in solitary for more than 10 years, with only Alabama and the federal prison system coming anywhere close.

Prolonged solitary confinement has long been

recognized as a form of torture. In 2011, a special rapporteur of the UN human rights council concluded that as short a timeframe as 15 days in solitary can amount to “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and even torture.”

The psychological dangers of prolonged isolation are also well documented. “There’s plenty of research showing that after just a few days people deteriorate mentally, can develop suicidal ideation and experience PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] afterwards,” Michele Deitch, director of the Prison and Jail Innovation Lab at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs within the University of Texas, told the *Tribune*.



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