

In Society's Name

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The following is a first-hand account of this writer's experiences in a Special Housing Unit (SHU), also known as a control unit, or a super-max prison. It is not the sour grapes of a disgruntled recalcitrant prisoner adversely affected by the conditions of his incarceration. In fact, it is the experience of a model prisoner, who at the time of his placement in Maryland's super-max prison was "infraction free", had been certified by the United States Library of Congress as a Braille Transcriber, who earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Applied Psychology, graduating Summa Cum Laude and class valedictorian, and who still remains "infraction-free" after being incarcerated for almost thirty-four years in the Maryland prison system.

I wrote the account of what happened to me at the beginning of this century because, I felt that people, prisoners who had never been to a SHU or free persons with an interest in the treatment of prisoners would want to know about the conditions in a super-max control unit.

I believe that I've actually understated the psychological impact on persons sent to Maryland's SHU. If the current SHU in Cumberland Maryland is anything like the old super-max prison in Baltimore, which is now occupied by federal prisoners, I feel for those sent there. Incarceration for a crime when one has been justly convicted is punishment enough without the added tortures of a control unit's sensory deprivations.

If, after reading this account, you feel that such punishment IN YOUR NAME is acceptable, then, at least, you have an idea of what takes place in such places. If not, by all means, try to abolish such institutions by disseminating the information in any way you feel will accomplish that goal.

Many criminals are just people who got caught up in circumstances that led to their doing horrible things, but they remain human beings capable of positive change. The worst of the worst can be redeemed, but certainly not after enduring the psychological scars of inhumane treatment that act to prevent the development of empathy, feelings of remorse, or a desire for rehabilitation.

Dostoevski wrote, "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." According to the latest figures compiled by The Sentencing Project, The United States incarcerates close to 900 men and women out of every 100,000 of its citizens. That figure is almost twenty times the incarceration rate of Western European nations. With so many prisoners, something had to be done with prisoners who posed a risk to themselves, other prisoners, staff, or the institution. Those prisoners were usually placed in segregation cells apart from the general population, but since so many older prisons used cells for segregation that were next to, underneath, or sandwiched between cells that housed general population prisoners, the type of security required for segregated persons could not be achieved.

After the federal government built a separate prison to house its unmanageable prisoners, states across the country began to copy the Marion, Illinois, control unit, built in 1972. While segregation confinement was usually

temporary, with the proliferation of control unit construction across the nation, large numbers of prisoners were segregated much longer under much harsher conditions.

In spite of the fact that Maryland's super-max prison had been cited for human rights violations by the federal government, specifically The United States Justice Department, and even after the United Nations Convention Against Torture had been ratified in 1994 by the same federal government, evidence was mounting that the conditions of and reasons for confinement in the Maryland Correctional Adjustment Center (MCAC) were causing permanent psychological damage among its prisoners. Since widespread use of SHU's came into being, groups throughout the country have tried to have SHU's, super-max prisons, and control units closed. Psychiatrists and psychologists have repeatedly testified in regard to the effects on the mental and physical health of prisoners kept in locked-down, solitary, sensory-depriving control units. Well beyond the angst generated by all prisons, super-max causes intense feelings of anger and anxiety, periods of uncontrollable rage, hallucinations, mild to severe claustrophobia, insomnia, appetite loss, self-mutilation, and suicide. The fact that every aspect of daily existence in a control unit was purposely designed is reprehensible. A panel of psychiatrists, psychologists, and corrections officials produced the symptoms listed, reportedly to make prisoners want to do everything in their power to avoid ever returning once released from the punitive aspects of a control unit.

Many psychological studies repudiate punishment in severe form as having a positive effect on behavior, but a more noteworthy fact is that many of those confined in control units will be released to neighborhoods filled with men,

women, and children who the traumatized know did nothing to alleviate their daily and long-standing suffering. While the truth is that most of the public are ignorant to the harsh conditions of a control unit, those suffering from what amounts to Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder are not forming opinions with stable minds. Honest citizens frightened by the get-reelected-rhetoric about violent crime's increase believe that a control unit is needed for the prison system's "worst of the worst." I'm living proof that is not the truth.

Mental patients whose behavior is not quite severe enough for Clifton T. Perkins State Hospital or the Mental Health Unit at the Patuxent Institution, but who cannot function in a regular prison for their own safety or the safety of others, are given stays of various durations in a Maryland control unit. Prisoners with enemies in other prisons wind up in super-max custody. Prisoners who have tried to escape or have records of assaults on other prisoners or staff are sent to super-max. Those who receive long punitive segregation sentences for rule violations or just get too many infraction notices, known as "tickets", are sent to super-max. Currently, known gang members are housed in super-max to disrupt gang activities or for other perceived security reasons. Finally, there are prisoners who have no rule violations, have not been placed on administrative segregation, but are being investigated for allegedly having done "something"; they get sent to super-max for a minimum stay of a year and then are returned to another prison's general population, where for a reason that no one can logically explain, they no longer are a danger to the institution or to others. I know that scenario well.

Once sent to super-max for any of the stated reasons, the horror story begins. Upon arrival, all accumulated property that was allowable in all other

institutions must be sent to an address provided by the prisoner. Long-term prisoners whose family and friends have died, moved away, no longer visit, or just don't care anymore are told that if they have no address to send their property, it must be donated to some place - usually a guard's snitch, friend, or relative - or give approval to destroy his television, radio, headphones, cassettes, CD's, hot pot, fan, book light, bowls, cups, utensils, hardback books, clothes, shoes, and commissary foods or cosmetics - also another way the property winds up with a guard, their snitch, friend, or relative.

If after a set amount of time and the prisoner's behavior warrants, or if he makes transfer from the super-max unit to a prison's general population, he must purchase everything new as if he was just starting his sentence. Even if the prisoner provided an address to send his allowable property, it can never be sent back. The Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) cares little about the immense financial burden that's placed on the prisoner, his friends, or family. With no funds and no job while in super-max, all of the things mentioned are lost forever. That was the first of many injustices with more to come.

Prisoners sent to super-max should pray they arrive in the spring or summer, because they are not issued sweat shirts, sweat pants, long johns, or a coat. The heat in the cells is turned on very late in the season, close to or beyond winter. Cold air blowers rarely work in the hot months and periodically blow in the coldest ones. All fans are taken, and no ice is distributed, even on the hottest days, so there really is no good season to arrive.

You are issued two orange jumpsuits, two pairs of orange sweat-shorts, three

white undershirts, three white undershorts, three pairs of white socks, one pair of tennis shoes, two white washcloths, two towels, one laundry bag, two sheets, one gray wool blanket, one small shampoo, one bar of soap, one toothbrush, and four packets of toothpaste. You have no pillow, no drinking cup, no pen, no paper, no envelopes, no stamps, and if you did have money in your Spending Account where you came from, it usually takes from two to six-weeks before it reaches you at super-max. If your transfer was sudden, no one will know where you are for weeks, since you cannot write without a pen, paper, envelope, and a stamp. No one was allowed to make phone calls in MCAC. I can only hope that the new super-max in Cumberland, North Branch Correctional Institution (NBCI) has upgraded the Spartan conditions of the Baltimore super-max.

The cells were approximately eight by fourteen feet with three small shelves, a desk and stool bolted to the floor, a concrete slab bed with open storage areas underneath for your clothes, and a stainless steel mirror attached to the wall over a stainless steel toilet-sink combination. There was a three-part fluorescent light directly opposite the bed. The lower bulb is three-feet long and can be turned off or on by the prisoner. The top bulb of the same length is controlled by the observation unit for use during shake downs and counts. A one-foot high-intensity bulb is in the center of the fixture and stays on at all times. It is hard to sleep with the light on 24/7, but at least your nightmares are not in the dark. You also have enough light to watch the roaches and mice scampering about happily on you walls, ceiling, and floor.

An old time movie star used to say, "I vant (Sic) to be alone." She would have been right at home in super-max. The prisoner should quickly get used to

isolation. On Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays, they're locked-down all 24 hours. The recreation schedule is on a two week rotation. You get one-hour out of your cell on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday one week and Tuesday and Thursday the next. You must shower during that time. Be quick or your recreation time will be gone. One week you'll get two showers, and the next week you'll get three. Weather permitting, outside recreation is available in a metal cage. That option is only available if it isn't raining, snowing, or too cold. When that happens, sometimes there is no inside recreation. It's conveniently forgotten. The one-hour, limited, rotating recreation is given at the convenience - or whim - of the correctional officers working your pod. A pod is a group of ten cells, five upstairs and five downstairs. Just like in a regular prison, each guard has his own way of doing things. They decide what schedules to follow and what rules to enforce or overlook, but never the same rules in the same way. Keeping the prisoner off balance has been reduced to an art form by some guards.

There was never any contact with other prisoners. Overcrowding has currently forced the doubling of most cells in the Cumberland super-max. When I was in MCAC, if I was out of my cell for recreation, a shower, a medical appointment, called to classification, or for a non-contact visit, I was handcuffed, waist chained with the black-box cuff cover, and put in leg irons. The restraints are put on and taken off through the food slot in each cell door. Every time anyone left their cell for any reason, after restraints were put on, the prisoner waited just outside the cell and, two correctional officers thoroughly searched the cell for contraband. You had nothing. You went nowhere, and, still, the cells were searched, most likely as a form of harassment.

If someone wanted to trim their fingernails, toenails, or beard prior to a shower, they had to use common clippers used by all other prisoners. While the clippers were sprayed with disinfectant, it was almost impossible not to think about the many prisoners who are either HIV positive or had Hepatitis C.

Three meals are served to everyone everyday. Since there are no jobs where prisoners can earn a nominal monthly pay, outside support is definitely needed to purchase a few snacks from the commissary to supplement a diet high in sugar and starches with no fresh vegetables except the occasional serving of chopped lettuce they call a salad. Food portions are very small, and hunger is common, but I guess they figure that all the prisoners lay around idle all day. Severe weight loss is common. Being able to purchase a daily multiple vitamin will also require outside generosity. Not being able to buy the vitamins was just one more thing to worry about.

Everyone in super-max tries to stay healthy. If a prisoner gets a headache, he can't purchase aspirin or Tylenol, so he puts in for Sick Call. By the time they are seen, four, maybe five, headaches have come and gone. Then, after going to Sick Call and having a prescription written for a pain reliever, be prepared for a wait of a week to ten-days to finally receive the medication. After delivery begins, it never comes two days in a row at the same time, even if the prescription was written for diabetes or high blood pressure. Some days the prisoner is told that his medication just didn't come in. If he complains too much, too often, or files an administrative remedy, the nurse will put him on 90-day bed rest, which means fully idle, no recreation, and the prisoner learns to put up with the intentional denial and deprivation. Some men would complain of chest pains. Most of the time it was just due to anxiety, but they

were all put on 90-day bed rest. Word got around quickly to just go hard and bear the stress. As stated earlier, every operation was designed to purposely isolate, irritate, deprive, discourage, and frustrate the prisoner to make him never do anything that would cause him to return to super-max once released from its diabolical clutches. The permanent scars on a man's psyche mattered little.

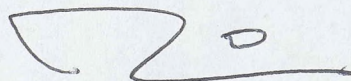
All movement and administrative activities are controlled from a central observation area prisoners call the "Bubble." Officers can speak by intercom from the Bubble to a man in his cell, control all his lights, electricity, water, and supervise served meals, commissary distribution, mail delivery, laundry services, and pass distribution to go to an out of cell appointment. If a prisoner wants the Officer's attention, he waves a piece of paper out his cell door and hopes it's seen. Banging on the cell door gets quick attention and a Notice of Infraction, called a "ticket." So if it's really a heart attack and they do not respond to the waving flag, which can't be waved anyway because of the severe chest pain, take pleasure in knowing the super-max stay is over.

Some prisoners think super-max is worse than Hell. A group of convicted felons are held with no job, no educational opportunities, no religious services, and a library that only sends fifteen-to twenty-year-old love novels. Laundry pick-up is between one to two A. M. on Friday mornings, so there will be no sheets to sleep on until they return laundry late that evening. Noises, odors, voices, would-be-drummers banging on anything to annoy others; guards shining flashlights in a sleeping prisoner's eyes during count, intentionally trying to wake him, and banging doors or shaking keys if the flashlight failed; many mentally retarded or mentally ill prisoners singing, yelling, throwing urine

or feces; no mops, brooms, paper towels, or disinfectant to keep a cell clean; cell-searches two, three, or more times a day whenever a prisoner leaves a cell - getting finger-sticks and insulin had me leaving my cell, at least, three times every day - that is what super-max is like. If someone wants to file a legal complaint, it usually takes asking all three shifts for the necessary form. All out-going mail must be unsealed, so reaching its destination is always in doubt. With all the other things to worry about, that causes additional worry and stress. Copies of the rules that are challenged or are wanted for review by a prisoner must be purchased, and complaints must be written with the floppy flimsy innards of a caseless pen that wiggles worse than some suppers. It's the only pen sold by the commissary available to the prisoners, so they have nothing with which to stab others. Wrapping the pens with the sticky medication labels to stop them bending while trying to write with them almost makes them usable. The jury is still out on the question of super-max being worse than Hell.

It's hard to put the psychological impact of a super-max prison into words. I've tried my best. In my case, an Administrative Law Judge ruled that I was sent there in violation of the rules and without just cause. I can only hope that those sent there for a valid reason are never released in my family's neighborhood. No one can predict the actions of a crazy man. No one should have to if a public cry to end SHU's prevails. I pray that this article causes that. I'll appreciate your help stopping what the DPSCS is doing IN SOCIETY'S NAME.

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