

Solitary Confinement: Prisons Within Prisons

By: Lucine Hamilton

I was recently reading Zachary Heiden's, When it comes to solitary confinement, U.S. fails the mice standard. Heiden begins by sharing that he learned about a law governing the use of solitary confinement from Dr. Brie Williams at a national gathering on solitary confinement reform. A law he had never heard of before. To be precise, it really isn't a law--more like a very strongly worded guideline, albeit one published by The National Research Council, an important federal agency. It says that except as an absolute last resort, solitary confinement should never be practiced. It mandates that when in isolated confinement, there must be an opportunity to socialize, to communicate and to physically interact with others.

Heiden writes that it would be great information for him and others working on solitary confinement reform, except for one thing: the guidelines do not apply to humans; they apply to mice. Wow! So that's what the mice standard is. A U.S. government agency thinks more about mice than people. That blew my mind.

Perhaps it should not have surprised me. Since a prison functions somewhat as a state and prison administrators and guards primary interests is control and order. The prison authorities claim that such an "administrative remedy" modifies aggressive behavior and thereby reduces tensions in the prisons and make possible the rehabilitation of recalcitrant prisoners. However, many independent observers have expressed grave reservations about the use of solitary confinement. Concerns have been expressed that under the guise of eliminating aggressive behavior prison authorities are really seeking to smash the potential challenge of mass incarceration from within prisons, by destroying the minds of the more politically conscious prisoners.

Prison administrators and guards deny that solitary confinement is motivated by political repression or aimed at prisoners who insist on maintaining

their individuality. However, a growing community of prison abolitionist charge that the real problem is the existence of prisons themselves; and that it is a contradiction in terms to think that tensions can be reduced in a repressive environment.

The National Research Council warns that in order to prevent emotional and psychological deterioration of laboratory animals, well-documented consequences of solitary confinement, solitary confinement should not be practiced. No such standards exist for humans. Emotional and psychological deterioration of one incarcerated person may conflict, of course, with the standards necessary to prevent deterioration by another. Giving rise to administrative problems. Thus, the expedient solution for prison administrators is the elimination of all standards. Mice have standards, people do not.

When Dr. Williams brought attention to the strongly worded guidelines it was in the context of a larger discussion of the emotional and psychological consequences of confinement, in general. There were, of course, a number of audible gasps across the room. Those in attendance were no doubt surprised to learn there is a rule that is more direct, more humane, and more respectful of the dignity of mice than any U.S. policy for human prisoners. I wonder aloud how many more would have gasped had they learned that the first time I was sentenced to solitary confinement, innocuously known as administrative segregation, I was isolated four years; or that there were others (and still are) in solitary confinement for two and three and more decades?

According to the United Nations, solitary confinement i.e., the isolation of people for 23 hours or more a day without meaningful social interaction, can and does amount to torture. Torture is a misuse of sensory data. Societies past and present have known about torture, but never before has it been applied as routinely as it is applied today in prisons and jails across America. Right this very minute, the jail in your city, the prison(s) in your state, has someone(s) locked and/or welded in a cell probably the size

of the average bathroom, completely isolated from human contact. When torture is analyzed, it becomes clear that it takes on two forms: sensory over stimulation, and sensory deprivation. Solitary confinement falls into the latter. Not only is it inhumane, but the consequences, which make PTSD look like a headache, cause permanent damage, to both jailer and jailed. There also has been very little research into the effects on people who work in solitary confinement units. Prison employees, unlike prisoners, leave prison everyday and bring back into society the emotional and psychological deterioration they too experience as custodians and administrators of torture. Solitary confinement is a lose-lose for all who come in contact with it.

Furthermore, people in solitary confinement are not only denied meaningful social interaction with other people, but are often denied phone calls, books, and other material that can possibly mitigate some of the worst effects of isolation. Even writing and receiving letters do not mitigate the experience because all letters leaving and entering solitary confinement are read. Influencing a brand of self-censorship that silences and alienates people from their ideas and feelings.

This is by no means an exhaustive writing on the use of solitary confinement in U.S. jails and prisons. Solitary confinement aids prison administrators and guards with a means to manipulate certain individuals' behavior. It is part of a systematic process of reinforcing the unconditional fact of a prisoner's existence i.e., that s/he has no control over the regulation and orientation of his or her own being. It is widely appreciated that like any other form of torture, solitary confinement is designed to emotionally and psychologically weaken people. We should think about what it means to intentionally create such conditions.

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