



Kids in Solitary Confinement: America's Official Child Abuse

By Jean Casella and James Ridgeway

Molly J said of her time in solitary confinement: “[I felt] doomed, like I was being banished...Like you have the plague or that you are the worst thing on earth. Like you are set apart from everything else. I guess [I wanted to] feel like I was part of the human race—not like some animal.”

Molly was just 16 years old when she was placed in isolation in an adult jail in Michigan. She described her cell as “a box”: “There was a bed—the slab. It was concrete...There was a stainless steel toilet/sink combo...The door was solid, without a food slot or window...There was no window at all.” Molly remained in solitary for several months, locked down alone in her cell for at least 22 hours a day.

No other nation in the developed world routinely tortures its children in this manner. And torture is indeed the word brought to mind by a shocking report released by Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union. *Growing Up Locked Down* documents, for the first time, the widespread use of solitary confinement on youth under the age of 18 in prisons and jails across the country.

Ian Kysel, author of the 141-page report, interviewed or corresponded with more than 125 young people who had spent time in solitary as children in 19 states. To cope with endless hours of extreme isolation, sensory deprivation and crippling loneliness, Kysel learned that some children made up imaginary friends or played games in their heads. Some hid under the covers and tried to sleep as much as possible, while others found they could not sleep at all.

“Being in isolation to me felt like I was on an island all alone dying a slow death from the inside out,” a California teen wrote in a letter to Human Rights Watch.

One young woman, who spent three months in solitary in Florida when she was 15, described becoming a “cutter” while in isolation: “I like to take staples and carve letters and stuff in my arm...

each letter means something to me. It is something I had lost.” She started by carving into her arm the first letter of her mother’s name. Another girl who cut herself in solitary said she did it, “because it was the only release of my pain.”

In fact, solitary confinement has been shown to cause severe pain and psychological damage to the tens of thousands of adults who endure it every day in American prisons. On children, the report states, the practice has a “distinct and particularly profound impact.” Because of “the special vulnerability and needs of adolescents, solitary confinement can be a particularly cruel and harmful practice when applied to them.” This is all the more true because for many of these kids, “developmental immaturity is compounded by mental disabilities and histories of trauma, abuse, and neglect.”

Yet prisons and jails commonly use isolation to punish kids for violating prison rules, including both violent and nonviolent infractions. One boy who entered a Colorado jail at age 15 said the guards doled out stints in solitary for crimes that would, in any other setting, be deemed normal adolescent behavior: “15 days for not making the bed; 15 days for not keeping the cell door open; 20 or 25 days for being in someone else’s cell.”

On Rikers Island in New York City, more than 14 percent of adolescents between the ages of 16 and 18 spent some period in “disciplinary segregation.” This is despite the fact that nearly half of all adolescents on Rikers have been found to have a “diagnosed mental disorder.”

Other kids are isolated as a form of “protective custody,” because they are vulnerable to physical or sexual abuse. Still other children are placed in solitary confinement for “treatment” purposes, especially after threatening or attempting suicide—even though isolation has been shown to sharply increase the risk that prisoners will take their own lives.

“There is nothing to do so you start talking to yourself and getting lost in your own little world. It is crushing,” said Paul

K, who spent 60 days in solitary when he was 14. “You get depressed and wonder if it is even worth living.”

No one knows precisely how many children live in these conditions, since many state and local correctional systems do not keep such data. But the overall rate of solitary confinement in American prisons is thought to be about 5 percent, and anecdotal evidence suggests that, in some systems, children may be isolated at even higher rates than adults. Given that nearly 100,000 youth under the age of 18 pass through adult prisons and jails annually, there exists the staggering possibility that thousands of children are spending time in solitary confinement each year.

Ian Kysel said in an interview: “I think one of the greatest impediments to change is trying to unravel the policy issue that is at the root of this problem: a criminal justice system that treats kids as if they’re adults without providing resources *or* guidelines for their care.”

For this reason, Human Rights Watch and the ACLU recommend that state and the federal governments “prohibit the housing of adolescents with adults, or in jails and prisons designed to house adults.” However, “regardless of how they are charged and held,” Kysel says unequivocally, “we need to ban the solitary confinement of young people across the board. There is simply no reason that a child or adolescent ever needs to be held in a cell, alone, for 22, let alone 24, hours at a stretch.”

For this to happen, however, the American public will need to accept what numerous international bodies have already concluded—that solitary confinement is cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, and clearly rises to the level of torture when levied against vulnerable populations, including children.

“If my story can stop another kid from coming” to solitary confinement, one Florida teen wrote, then, “Hopefully my pain serves some purpose.”

This article was originally published in The Guardian on October 10, 2012.

Voices from Solitary: Loneliness Is a Destroyer of Humanity

By Jesse Wilson

Editor's Note: The author is imprisoned at United States Penitentiary, Administrative Maximum (ADX) in Florence, Colorado, the most secure supermax prison in the nation. Initially sentenced to five years in prison when he was 17 for grand larceny, he was given a life sentence for the murder of a death row prisoner in Mississippi's Unit 32. He has been in solitary confinement for eight of the last twelve years. Wilson describes his time in solitary as consisting of walking around in circles and losing his social skills. A collateral consequence of his time in solitary, he's written, is having families members "watch you get older and crazier."—Sal Rodriguez

I refuse to embrace the solitude. This is not normal. I'm not a monster and do not deserve to live in a concrete box. I am a man who has made mistakes, true. But I do not deserve to spend the rest of my life locked in a cage—what purpose does that serve? Why even waste the money to feed me? If I'm a monster who must live alone in a cage why not just kill me?

Our country has thousands of its people confined to concrete cages. Years pass, lives pass. The suffering does not. Our families suffer most, watching us grow old and go crazy in a cage. This is my biggest pain, knowing my mother and sister suffer with me. I can not see how this is helpful to society. Most men will spend years in a cage

alone and be released back into society filled with hate and rage. It is an ugly truth. We as a country are blind to the reality of our prison system.



It has become normal. And we the inmates are voiceless. Our voices are not heard. If they are heard, they are thought of as lies. I heard the head of the BOP in Congress (on radio) saying they do not have insane inmates housed here. This is what should be thought of as a lie. I have not slept in weeks due to these non-existing inmates beating on the walls and hollering all night. And the most "non-insane" smearing feces in their cells.

This is reality.

This place is horrific, with the solitary, and the lack of communication outside these walls. I've been in prison without release for over twelve years, and eight of them I've been in a cage walking around in circles. I was released for 23 days in 2000 after completing a boot camp/drug program. I was rearrested for drinking beer, a violation of probation. So I am pretty in tune with the concept of solitary. Prison. Cages and craziness.

Out my window I see into a concrete yard surrounded by red brick walls. There is a drain in the middle of it and out of it weeds are growing. I thought they were weeds until a few blossomed into these beautiful yellow and brown flowers.

Every now and then a pair of owls roosts on the security lights. This spring they had two babies. We watched them grow up and fly away. On any given day the sky here is breathtaking. The beauty out my window stays in my mind. I look around this cage at plain concrete walls and steel bars and a steel door, a steel toilet, and I endure its harshness because I am able to keep beauty in my mind. The window helps greatly.

I'm in the hole so there is no TV. Books help me escape better than my words could ever explain, but most of all it's the love of my family, the memories of beauty, and the knowledge of humanity.

Loneliness is a destroyer of humanity.

About Solitary Watch

Solitary Watch (www.solitarywatch.com) is a web-based project aimed at bringing solitary confinement out of the shadows and into the light of the public square. Our mission is to provide the public—as well as practicing attorneys, legal scholars, law enforcement and corrections officers, policymakers, educators, advocates, and people in prison and their families—with the first centralized source of background research, unfolding developments, and original reporting on solitary confinement in the United States.

The print edition of Solitary Watch is produced quarterly and is available free of charge to currently and formerly incarcerated people, to prisoners' families and advocates, and to non-profit organizations. To receive a copy, send a request to the address or email below.

We also welcome accounts of life in solitary confinement, as well as stories, poems, essays, and artwork by people who have served time in isolation. Please send contributions to "Voices from Solitary" at the address below.

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Closing Tamms Supermax

By Beth Broyles

On January 4, 2013, Tamms Correctional Center in southeastern Illinois officially closed its doors forever. The state supermax prison, where hundreds of men were held in complete isolation in concrete boxes for 23 to 24 hours a day, was notorious for its extreme conditions and inhumane treatment of prisoners. During its 15-year history, Tamms also became the focus of a decade-long battle by local activists, lawyers, and the prisoners themselves—a battle to end what opponents of solitary confinement saw as torture in their own backyards.

Opened in 1998 at the height of the supermax prison boom, Tamms was supposed to hold only the most dangerous individuals—those with a history of assaults on prison staff or fellow prisoners. In fact, no one received a hearing before being placed in the supermax. Most of the men in Tamms had not been convicted of any violent crime after entering the prison system. Instead, according to a report published by the American Civil Liberties Union, “Tamms was populated by men who had sued the Department, filed grievances, and otherwise complained about illegal conduct by prison officials—wardens were looking for a way to get rid of these headaches.”

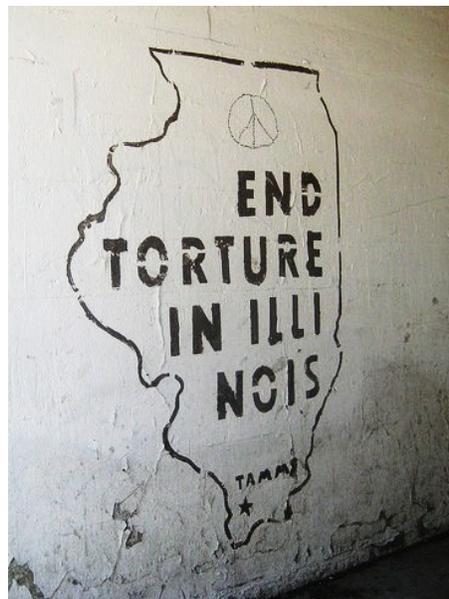
There were likewise no hearings to determine who should be released from Tamms and no means for prisoners to earn their way out. The supermax had supposedly been designed for short-term stays, yet many of men who had been sent to Tamms when the prison opened were still there 15 years later.

Even men who had entered Tamms as mentally healthy individuals soon developed deep psychological scars. Many others had been shipped off to Tamms for committing acts which were caused by serious mental illnesses—and for them, the trauma was even worse. Denied adequate treatment, their mental health further deteriorated under the inhumane conditions.

The story of Faygie Fields, which was revealed to the public in 2009 by reporting in the *Belleville News Democrat*, exemplified much of what was wrong with Tamms. Faygie Fields, who suffered from schizophrenia, spent much of his early life in mental institutions. At age 25, he received a 40-year sentence

for homicide. Prior to being sent to Tamms, he had multiple disciplinary offenses. “He threw Kaopectate, milk cartons, urine, tomatoes, Kool-Aid, a food tray. He grabbed at keys. He pulled away from handcuffs.” After arriving at Tamms, his mental health deteriorated. He cut himself with any sharp object he could find, swallowed broken glass and smeared excrement on his cell walls. In response, the prison punished him, often by taking away his clothes.

These were the conditions under which Fields was imprisoned for six years, until his case was investigated as part of a lawsuit filed on his and other prisoners’ behalf. Psychiatrists testified during the proceedings that Fields was a schizophrenic and needed mental health treatment. The prison doctor who treated Fields’s self-inflicted wounds testified that, in suturing Fields’s wounds, he did not always use anesthetic because massive scarring from the patient’s frequent



cutting caused numbness. The prison’s supervising psychologist, however, testified that prisoners mutilated themselves as a game, and that Fields was faking his mental illness in order to get better conditions in prison.

The court found that Fields was indeed a schizophrenic and ordered the prison to provide treatment for his mental illness. But by then, Fields, who was originally eligible for parole in 2004, had been given 34 additional years for offenses committed in prison—offenses that were caused by his untreated mental illness.

He will now be eligible for parole in 2038, when he is 79 years old—if he lives that long.

Efforts to improve conditions at Tamms began with the men who were held there. In 2000, they staged a prison-wide hunger strike that lasted 36 days. The participants were protesting everything from the indiscriminate gassing of prisoners to the replacement of normal food with “nutraloaf” as a form of punishment. They ended their strike without a single demand being met, but some believed that the strike had raised awareness of the harrowing conditions at Tamms.

In time, that awareness grew through friends and family members of the men imprisoned at Tamms. Artist and activist Laurie Jo Reynolds met the mothers of two men at Tamms, and was “appalled and heartbroken” to learn what their sons were enduring. Reynolds and others began sending letters and poetry to everyone held at Tamms. Some wrote back, she recalls, saying: “Hey, you know this poetry is great, but could you tell the governor what they’re doing to us down here?”

That, Reynolds says, led to the birth of Tamms Year Ten, a full-blown campaign to end the suffering at Tamms. “We introduced legislation,” she explains. “We had lobby days, press conferences. We had a huge public education campaign with dozens and dozens of events: interventions and tactics that included blues concerts and fine art events and performances and panel discussions and state-wide prayer vigils and cultural projects and media correction projects and parsley eating contests. I mean, we had everything. We tried to saturate the market with information about the effects of long-term isolation.”

As one of its projects, Tamms Year Ten had volunteers take photographs for prisoners at Tamms. They invited the men “to request a photograph of anything in the world, real or imagined,” and promised to find volunteers to take them. “We wanted to give them a chance to see something they want to see, used to see, or may never see.” Another project was the creation of “mud stencils” on Chicago walls and sidewalks. (See photograph).

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Legal battles against Tamms were waged primarily by the Uptown People's Law Center. According to the ACLU, in July 2010, a court found that "every prisoner who had been transferred to Tamms since it opened had been denied a hearing which complied with the minimum requirements of due process. The court ordered that every man be given a hearing, and a written explanation of the reason he was sent to Tamms...The answer turned out to be that most did not need to be at Tamms at all."

The evidence against Tamms grew. Although it had been built to reduce violence, a 2001 study found the rate of assaults on guards either stayed the same or increased. The supermax was also outrageously expensive. According to another report in the *Belleville News Democrat*, it cost over \$26 million per year to operate—about \$85,000 per year per prisoner, as opposed to \$15,000 to \$24,000 per prisoner at other facilities.

This mounting evidence finally succeeded in convincing Illinois governor Pat Quinn that keeping Tamms open

was simply too costly, in both financial and human terms. Although his efforts to close the prison were resisted by local politicians and the prison officers' union, Quinn finally triumphed.

As 2012 drew to a close, buses began leaving the supermax for other facilities. Some of the men of Tamms were released into less restrictive settings, while others remained in solitary, but with some chance of earning their way out. And Tamms Correctional Center, now sitting empty, became a symbol of hope for opponents of solitary confinement across the nation.

NEW YORK – An important new report on solitary confinement was released in October by the New York Civil Liberties Union, entitled *Boxed In: The True Cost of Extreme Isolation in New York's Prisons*. Based on a year of research, correspondence with more than a hundred people in prison, and multiple open records requests, this report offers a detailed and powerful picture of how solitary confinement is used and abused in New York.

New York City and New York State isolate their prisoners at the rate of about 10 percent and 8 percent, respectively—both rates more than double the national average. More than 5 out of 6 are in solitary for nonviolent misbehavior rather than violent offenses, yet many remain there for months and even years.

The report received widespread media coverage, and resistance to the use of solitary confinement in New York is growing. An article by Solitary Watch following the release of *Boxed In* noted: "Until recently, it seemed like New York's penchant for solitary confinement might be irreversible... But a growing number of activists are working to combat the overuse of solitary in both the city's jails and the state's prisons."

WASHINGTON, DC – In February, the office of Illinois Senator Dick Durbin announced that the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) had agreed to undergo a review of its solitary confinement practices. Durbin stressed the importance of this development, citing the ever-growing number of prisoners held in solitary in the United States, a number higher than that of

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any other country. In 2010, a spokesperson for the BOP said that federal prisons held approximately 11,150 prisoners in some form of segregated "special housing."

According to Durbin's statement, "this first ever review of federal segregation policies comes after Durbin chaired a hearing last year on the human rights... of solitary confinement." Durbin continued: "I am confident the Bureau of Prisons will permit a thorough and independent review and look forward to seeing the results when they are made public. We can no longer slam the cell door and turn our backs on the impact our policies have on the mental state of the incarcerated and ultimately on the safety of our nation."

Critics of solitary confinement were concerned to note, however, that even as it promised a review of its solitary confinement practices, the federal government was completing purchase of a new prison in Illinois that would hold supermax-type prisoners.

CALIFORNIA – In March, a court-appointed consultant, forensic psychiatrist Dr. Raymond Patterson, reported that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) had failed to combat the large and escalating problem of suicides in the California prison system. Patterson complained that his recommendations over many years had gone unheeded.

According to reporting by the *Los Angeles Times*, Patterson's March 13 report notes that prisoners housed in

segregation units have a 33 times higher chance of suicide, and that 13 of the 15 deaths were attributable to some form of "inadequate assessment, treatment or intervention." According to Amnesty International, between 2006 and 2010, there was an average of 34 suicides in the California prison system a year, 42 percent of which occurred in segregation units.

The report came as a U.S. District Court judge was preparing a decision on whether or not California's health, mental health, and dental care must continue to be monitored by federal courts. Both the CDCR and California governor Jerry Brown are seeking to end federal oversight.

INTERNATIONAL – On March 12, United Nations Special Rapporteur Juan E. Méndez (the UN's chief torture investigator), along with the American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights Watch, testified before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in its first-ever briefing on the overuse and damaging effects of solitary confinement. Citing the torture of extended isolation, the organizations asked the IACHR to examine the abusive use of solitary. Méndez called on the IACHR to restrict the use of isolation on prisoners, stating: "The use of solitary confinement can only be accepted under exceptional circumstances, and should only be applied as a last resort measure in which its length must be as short as possible." He also stated that solitary should never be used on children and people with mental illness.

News Briefs by Lisa Dawson