

Testimony of Susan Rosenberg, Formerly incarcerated person for the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights: Reassessing Solitary Confinement II: The Human Rights, Fiscal, and Public Safety Consequences

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I spent 22 months in solitary confinement in one of the first isolation units built for women. Before it was standard practice for people to be placed in isolation for months and years, sometimes for decades I was in one of the early High Security Units of the Bureau of Prisons from October of 1986 through August of 1988 for a total of 22 months. This isolation unit was built into the basement of the Lexington Kentucky Federal Correctional Institution for Women. Women prisoners were designated to the High Security Unit directly by the Bureau of Prisons. There was no release date from the unit and there was no mechanism of due process that would allow for good behavior to get one out of solitary and back into general population. It was a 16 cell, completely sealed off prison, within the prison within the prison. There was a separate segregation unit where women prisoners were sent for short stays for bad behavior. For the entire life of the unit there were only 5 women placed in these conditions. The conditions included all white surroundings, silence, constant video surveillance, sporadic "recreation" and no contact with anyone other than BOP personnel. I had no visits for 14 months and one 20-minute phone call a week. It was a cruel form of solitary confinement. The High Security Unit at Lexington FCI was closed due to successful litigation and public condemnation. However, the decision was overturned on appeal in favor of the Bureau of Prisons. (See *Thomburgh v. Baraldini*)

The current equivalents to this unit are: the CMU's and the solitary confinement in the AD Max prisons of the Federal Bureau of Prisons; the isolation units in the Medical Centers of the BOP; the segregation units within everyone of the BOP facilities.

My experience there has marred me for life.

Let me try and paint a picture for you of what it was like to live in.

Imagine living in a space the size of your bathroom and never being able to leave it. On top of that imagine living in that space and having absolutely no capacity to have anything that you need without engaging in a hostile interaction with someone on the other side of the door that either hates you or is afraid of you or doesn't view you as a full human being. Imagine that you have nothing to do except live through the time where only your mind is working. No distractions and no contact. What

happens over time is that you lose pieces of yourself. Your memory, your physical relationship to time, your circadian rhythms that are so important to your mental and physical health quickly deteriorate. In order to get water to drink or toilet paper to use, or food to eat, or have any human contact of any kind you have to scream and yell for attention and then you have to communicate through a steel door. It makes one rage. One is constantly on high alert in order to be prepared for something hostile to happen. It is like being in a war that never ends. The fight or flight reaction gives over to traumatic stress that only intensifies the mental anguish of the isolation. In the case of solitary confinement one exists in a state of nothingness. And that nothingness comes from loss. What is lost? The power of self-determination, the power of control over aspects of your life, a sense of purpose, your relationships to the outside, your commitments to family, your obligations/responsibilities to all the connections of your past life, your own agency, a human connection to the natural world – the seasons – the rhythms of being alive, your memory, and with time and age and lack of care or pure neglect you lose control over your own body. It is existential death.

As all these losses accumulate and you are stripped barer and barer the world gets smaller and smaller, narrower and narrower and the reduction of personality, of self, of your very being where you become a miniature replication and are stripped to the most basic component of who you are. It drives you to utter despair because you live it, feel it happening, and experience the losses bit-by-bit, emotion-by-emotion, and memory-by-memory. And to feel that is enraging. One is destroyed bit by bit and eventually the psychic toll can result in complete loss of purpose and sense of self.

The relationship of all those losses is imposed by force, control, regimentation, and abuse.

To survive it, to hold fast, to keep one part of you free from that process of disintegration takes an enormous effort. When people have no tools or skills upon entering the experience they only have personality and ego to resist there are no channels through which to navigate. The terms of life inside that box are such that living gets reduced to survival through violence, aggression.

There is nothing redemptive or rehabilitative about this experience. It is solely for the purpose of incapacitation. As Tom Wicker once said: “why would you think putting a person in a cage and then treating them like an animal will make a better person.”

Thank you for your time.

Susan Rosenberg

Susan Rosenberg is a human rights and prisoners rights advocate, adjunct professor, communications consultant, award-winning writer, public speaker and a formerly incarcerated person. Her memoir, *An American Radical*, details her 16 years in federal prison as well as her conclusions about her prison experience and her past. She was released from prison in 2001 through executive clemency by then President Bill Clinton. Upon her release she worked at American Jewish World Service for 12 years beginning as a writer then becoming the director of communications. Post-AJWS Susan has worked extensively in the nonprofit communications field with a focus on human rights and international development.. She is the founder of a small communications-consulting group. She is also an adjunct lecturer at Hunter College and a member of the prison writing committee of PEN America.