

Solitary Confinement - what is missing?
The
Exit Strategy
for SMU Prisoners
To Reduce Custody Levels

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Many need to read more and be more informed about the subject of solitary confinement before making judgments on such critical matters as this ACLU solitary confinement report on Upstate New York prison reveals identical conditions also present in many lockdown units within the United States.

For the record, I worked corrections for 25 years and spent 7 years in solitary confinement as an officer, a supervisor and an administrator. It's a tough way for prisoners to survive and live and many don't stay alive without the creation of a mental illness, chronic illness or suicide / death.

Assigned to the death row unit inside the Special Management Unit II now renamed the ASPC Eyman Browning Unit, I have been personally involved in the management of these lockdown units for many years and find them to be detrimental to the well being of human beings stored there for long and undetermined durations simulating conditions of hell and brimstone as they suffer every time they take a breath of stale and toxic air.

I am not advocating being soft on criminals. I care as much about those innocent victims that are quickly forgotten when a crime is committed and left on their own to cope and survive with their own trauma. I wish society would do more for these victims compared that being done for the prisoners. However, it is what it is and we are spending millions of tax dollars running these high security isolation units that accomplish nothing in the end. Facing reality is one solution to the problem.

Putting violent or misbehaving criminals in segregated units for misconduct and violent behavior is the right thing to do. However, this action is conditional to say the least. The housing criterion must be flexible to house almost anyone the admin needs to lockdown. There should be no political connection or link for this action. It should be based on objective and sound prison policy and practices rather than subjective and biased opinions and judgments created by those in power.

However, once in isolation, the admin must develop an exit strategy based on rule of law and your own policies to avoid litigation and other negative consequences. These costs are excessive and endless terms costs taxpayers millions of dollars a year with approx 100 K for every inmate in isolation. That really adds up since most already know that everything is brought to them to the cell by staffs that are put in danger every time they enter the housing cellblock.

More importantly, beside the costs are the empirical and anecdotal evidence-based reasons for avoiding long or prolonged periods of lockdown for prisoners as it consumes more of the human spirit than one can endure.

The more you isolate them, the more negatively they act out and become more violent. It is not an act of humanity to lock someone away and throw away the key. It's torturous in every sense to do this to a human being. It's like cornering a dog [whether vicious or not] and leaving them no place to go. They will fight and defend what they have left even if it is a small piece of concrete they live in.

I know for a fact that nobody I know will not lock their pet up in a cage for 23 hours a day seven days a week and dictate how often they eat, sleep, walk, without making sure they are taken care of at the least to allow basic functions to live; yet they do this to human beings. Many have demonstrated severe mental illness as well as chronic medical needs that are instantly ignored or neglected once housed inside a special management unit and forgotten for the next several years if not up to decades.

Here is a suggestion:

1. Lock yourself up in an 8x10 closet and make sure the light switch is on the outside and the switch is off making it dark once door is closed.
2. Close the door and sit down on the floor. You will stare at the walls or contents and sit there for prolonged periods of time making minutes seem like hours and hours seem like days.
3. Stay inside there for 23 hours and ask for water, food, toilet paper etc from someone who happens to pass by.
4. Pray someone cares enough about you to actually make a pass and check up on you to duplicate the reality of prison security rounds.
5. Do this for 7 days and 7 nights and see if you can handle it.

It may perhaps not be the best example to write but the bottom line is ~ you don't treat people this way. You must follow the rule of law and follow your own policies to be humane and fair to human beings.

Before you say we "cater" and give them all the amenities, we [the prison officers and society's agents] have the ability to shut off water, electricity, food, toiletry, light, air and when the switch is off, just like in the closet, you need someone to take care of your needs. These actions may be triggered by emotion, retaliation, fear, abuse or deliberate indifference to your civil rights to exist.

These criminals are still persons and deserve humane and fair treatment. Realizing they didn't give their victims any fair considerations, I understand the anger but vengeance is not the answer to isolating prisoners. Behavior modification or therapeutic treatment is they key; not more punishment and non-compliance with the rule of law.

Solitary confinement has a purpose but prolonged solitary confinement is abusive, torturous and strips mankind from their human dignity and self-respect to the point where fighting is one option and dying is the final option.

In most cases, they have already been "buried alive" when they were sentenced to these darkened and poorly ventilated hell-holes designed for one purpose and one purpose only - containment and control.