

California's Prison System

The Living Hell in Pelican Bay Prison

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Crescent City is far north in California, about 20 miles from the Oregon border. In 1989, 275 acres of dense forest near there were chopped down to build the \$277.5 million Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP). Today, more than 3,000 people are locked up in this prison, infamous for its inhumane conditions and extreme abuse.

More than 1,000 prisoners at PBSP are locked up in an X-shaped cluster of white buildings set apart by electrified fences and barren ground. This is the Security Housing Unit (SHU), a supermax control facility where prisoners are subjected to sensory deprivation, isolation and brutality.

Many prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU, and their lawyers, have bravely fought to expose the torture that is going on. They have written letters and articles, and filed lawsuits. Against heavy repression and censorship they have struggled to connect with people on the outside who are fighting for the rights of prisoners.

Dehumanizing Sensory Deprivation and Isolation

Solitary confinement is a hidden world within the larger hidden world of the prison system, and prisoners in solitary are an invisible and dehumanized minority within the larger population of prison inmates in general—who also remain remarkably invisible and dehumanized...

—Solitary Watch, an information clearinghouse on solitary confinement

If you are in the SHU at Pelican Bay Prison you face two extremes: minimum human contact and maximum sensory deprivation.

Think about everything that makes you human, that keeps you physically and mentally alive, that connects you with the world and other people, that gives you a reason to live, to love, to learn and think. All this is what the SHU tries to extinguish.

If you get put in the SHU you're locked up in a small, windowless concrete cell for 23 hours a day, without any face-to-face contact with another human being, not even a guard. You may or may not be allowed reading material. You get only one hour outside the cell, by yourself, in a small indoor space. You never see sunlight or a blade of grass. Whenever you leave your cell you're handcuffed and shackled, hands-to-waist, ankle-to-ankle.

Many mentally ill prisoners are put in the SHU at Pelican Bay. And the SHU literally drives many prisoners crazy. What does this mean? There is evidence that long-term isolation can alter brain chemistry and produce psychopathologies, including panic attacks, depression, inability to concentrate, memory loss, aggression, self-mutilation, and various forms of psychosis. These things occur as a result of other forms of confinement. But they happen at a considerably higher rate to prisoners subjected to long-term isolation. And there are prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU who have been suffering this form of torture for 20, 30 or even 40 years.¹

These crimes against prisoners also carry over to their families. Prison officials purposely prevent prisoners in the SHU from having physical contact with their loved ones. A prisoner in the PBSP SHU isn't even allowed to take a photo of himself to send to his family. No phone calls are permitted.

If you live in San Francisco and have a son, a husband, or a father at Pelican Bay, you have to drive 370 miles to see them. If you live in Los Angeles the drive is 750 miles. And when you get there, you're only allowed to visit for one and a half hours through thick glass, no touching.

Brutality Aimed at Breaking Bones and Spirit

The prison population in the U.S. has skyrocketed—from 500,000 in 1980 to more than 2.3 million today. In California 33 new prisons were built between 1984 and 2005 (12 prisons had been constructed in the state in the previous 132 years). Human rights groups in the U.S. and internationally have documented the inhumane conditions of this mass incarceration. And recently the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that conditions in California prisons constitute “cruel and unusual punishment.”²

Indeed if you look at the brutal conditions in U.S. prisons, which have been clearly documented, it becomes clear that the prison system in this country is not about helping prisoners or even treating them like human beings. And for decades now, there hasn't even been the *pretense* of prisons being about “rehabilitation.”

Mass incarceration in this country is about locking up a whole section of society—especially poor Black and Latino men—to whom this system offers no future. Prisons in the U.S. are aimed at *punishment*—degrading, dehumanizing, and breaking people. And the SHU at Pelican Bay is a *model* in doing exactly that.

For example, guards carry out brutal “cell extractions”—which they say are done if a prisoner won't leave his cell. But prisoners in the SHU have said that cell extractions are carried out for such minor infractions as refusing to return a meal tray, banging on the cell door, or insulting a guard. This description of a cell extraction is corroborated not only by many prisoner accounts, but also by explicit Department of Corrections procedures:

“This is how the five-man cell extraction team proceeds: the first member of the team is to enter the cell carrying a large shield, which is used to push the prisoner back into a corner of the cell; the second member follows closely, wielding a special cell extraction baton, which is used to strike the inmate on

the upper part of his body so that he will raise his arms in self-protection; thus unsteadied, the inmate is pulled off balance by another member of the team whose job is to place leg irons around his ankles; once downed, a fourth member of the team places him in handcuffs; the fifth member stands ready to fire a taser gun or rifle that shoots wooden or rubber bullets at the resistant inmate.”

After such a beating, a prisoner may be kept hog-tied in his cell for hours.

A former guard at Pelican Bay testified about how he was targeted by other guards because he didn’t go along with all the vicious brutality he was supposed to carry out. He said: “They called D-Yard SHU, ‘fluffy SHU,’ because we didn’t hog-tie inmates to toilets or kick them in the face after cell extractions... There was one officer in there who used to take photos of every shooting and decorate his office with them.” 4

Doesn’t this sound a lot like the soldiers in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan who carried out massacres and then proudly collected body parts like souvenirs and posed for photos they could use to brag about their exploits?

The “Catch-22” of the SHU

How does a prisoner end up in the SHU? For exhibiting any violence. For anything prison officials deem “insubordination.” For contraband—which includes not only drugs but cell phones—or even having too many postage stamps. 5

Prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU have submitted a Formal Complaint—“On Human Rights Violations and Request for Action to end over 20 years of state sanctioned torture to extract information from (or cause mental illness to) California’s Pelican Bay State Prison Security Housing Unit (SHU) Prisoners”—to the State of California lawmakers and the Secretary of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. One of the issues addressed in this complaint is the way many prisoners end up in the SHU at Pelican Bay because false and/or highly questionable “evidence” is used to accuse them of being active/inactive members of a prison gang. Prison officials say supermax facilities like the SHU are for the “worst of the worst.” But as the Formal Complaint says, “a review of these so-called demonized ‘worst of the worst’ PBSP-SHU inmates, who are party to this complaint, will reveal they are actually free of being guilty of serious rule violations for many years and zero illegal gang-related acts in prison.” And the complaint also alleges that many of those sent to the SHU are “those who utilize the legal system to challenge illegal [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation] policies and practices, and encourage others to do the same.”

The Formal Complaint states:

“If they want out of the SHU, they have to provide staff with information and be willing to testify on other prisoners, free citizens, including family members that only harms others and this has to be known by everyone. This is a Catch 22 situation—become a notorious informant (and thereby place yourself, possibly your family, at serious risk for retaliation) or die or become mentally ill in the SHU.”

This is called “debriefing,” which, the complaint goes on to explain, “requires a SHU inmate to provide CDCR staff with ‘sufficient verifiable information that will adversely impact the gang, other gang members and associates to the extent that they will never accept them back.’”

The complaint goes on to say: “This makes the inmate (and possibly his family members) a target for reprisal, potentially for life ... many of these inmates are serving “term-to-life” sentences, and they have been eligible for parole for the last 5 to 25+ years, but they are told that if they want a chance to parole they have to debrief—period! The CDCR-PBSP-SHU policies and practices summarized violate both the U.S. Constitution and International law banning the use of torture and other cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment or punishment as a means of obtaining information via coercion, and/or to punish for acts or suspected acts of misconduct...”

Crimes Against Humanity

Earlier this year, Laura Magnani, author of the American Friends Service Committee 2008 report, “Buried Alive: Long-Term Isolation in California’s Youth and Adult Prisons,” was on KPFK radio’s *Michael Slate Show* and talked about conditions in SHUs (interview excerpt at <http://revcom.us/a/237/Magnani-interview-en.html>). At the end of the interview Slate spoke to the importance of prisoners “transforming themselves and really becoming something different from what they may have been when they went in, even if they weren’t political prisoners there.” He brought up how the isolation works to rob them of the ability to do this, of dreaming, of taking part in revolutionary activity. Magnani responded:

“It’s not even just dreams, it’s actually punishing you for having an intellectual life, for actually thinking outside the box, or for thinking at all. So the idea of barring people’s access to certain kinds of thought, which is what censorship is, is extremely frightening. And we know from research that one of the best things that can happen to somebody doing a long prison sentence is for them to develop an intellectual life and start reading and start studying and start thinking for themselves. That’s a way where you can really create a new life for yourself, or you can make your life meaningful even if you never get out. But if you do get out, you make yourself a more productive member of society, because you have a life. You’re a thoughtful, educated person. What could be better? And instead they’re trying to really prevent that from happening.”

Crimes against the very humanity of people are being carried out *every single day* at Pelican Bay Prison—and in other prisons all over the USA. This is an intolerable outrage. And a mass and determined movement outside the walls is urgently needed to expose and demand an end to these high-tech torture chambers.

Notes

1 “Confronting Torture in U.S. Prisons: A Q&A With Solitary Watch” by James Ridgeway and Jean Casella, June 17, 2011 (solitarywatch.com/2011/06/17/confronting-torture-in-u-s-prisons-a-qa-with-solitary-watch/)

2 “[Cruel and Unusual Punishment in California Prisons](#),” *Revolution* #235, June 12, 2011

3 “‘Infamous Punishment’: The Psychological Consequences of Isolation” by Craig Haney, National Prison Project Journal, Spring 1994

4 “Rural Prison as Colonial Master” by Christian Parenti, available at: pelicanbayprisonproject.org/history.htm

5 Ridgeway and Casella

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