

US Solitary Confinement: The World's Largest Prison Population Increasingly Comprised of the Mentally Ill

Mismanaging and Abusing

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As of late receiving much needed publicity and attention is the topic of solitary confinement, especially mentally ill offenders serving time in prisons throughout America. Similar to this unsettling trend, many inmates waiting on death row have been found innocent through DNA evidence that has prompted more states to suspend capital punishment – 18 now and growing. And the long needed reform of how the US justice system has clogged up and weighed down both courts and prisons across the nation with so many drug offenders comprising half the federal prison population with an increase of thirteen fold in state prisons since the 1980's. Or the disproportionate racial inequality of how America's court system treats those accused of crimes with African Americans constituting just 13% of the US population but making up half the country's prison population. Or the US as the world's most blatant human rights violator when it comes to incarcerating so many of its own citizens – upwards of 2.3 million currently behind bars, well over ten times the next nation and [one quarter](#) of the planet's entire prison population despite comprising only 5% of all humans on earth.

All of these glaring facts reflect a very broken, shameful and inhumane track record of unfairly meting out both justice as well as punishment in America. And though many among us who are not in prison or do not know anyone in prison may take a myopic, "out of sight, out of mind" view of such unpleasant and unsettling prison statistics, it is high time for major reform and fundamental change. As fellow human beings, we need to take an honest hard look at the way our justice system treats those who commit crimes. Something is terribly wrong when those committing the most egregious and extensive crimes against humanity on a massive global scale continue getting away with it due to money and power that buys immunity while those poorest and generally darker skinned amongst us continue forever getting the proverbial shaft. For US leaders in a so called democracy (oops, I mean oligarchy) to constantly boast such highfalutin principles as justice and equality for all, it is long past time they finally start putting their money where their mouth is instead of spouting off pious platitudes of lies and hypocrisy everyone in the world knows to be pure bullshit.

Turning to some encouraging [news](#) for a change, last Thursday Congressman Cedric Richmond (D-LA) brought before the US House of Representatives a bill he is sponsoring called the Solitary Confinement Study and Reform Act. Incarcerating an inmate in a single cell for 23 or 24 hours a day with only an hour spent outside the cell daily without contact with the fellow prison population is simply inhumane and unjustified.

Human beings are social animals, needing others in order to both thrive and survive. Depriving people of the opportunity to interact with others for at least brief periods of time is highly detrimental to both physical as well as psychological health. Yet solitary confinement has been a standard punitive weapon historically used in the United States for many years, perhaps even centuries, against this nation's civilian as well as military prison populations. Over the last several years both human rights activists as well as professional mental health advocates have applied increasing pressure on the prison system to change its policies toward this abusive practice that has never been governed with any oversight or accountability. With alarming rates of teenagers as well as adults killing themselves after being kept in prolonged isolation that demonstrate excessive use of solitary confinement, the first steps toward positive change appears to be finally underway.

Louisiana Congressman Richmond believes that for too many years long-term solitary confinement has been used as an abusive form of "cruel and unusual punishment" arbitrarily inflicted on prison populations throughout America.

In recent years Angola State Prison in Louisiana has come under intense criticism for its mishandling of "the Angola Three" who have spent decades in solitary confinement. Two of the three inmates were convicted in 1972 of allegedly killing a prison guard and were subsequently placed in isolation cells ever since. They have maintained their [innocence](#) throughout claiming they were blamed because they had opened a chapter of the Black Panthers inside the prison. The third member who had his conviction for allegedly murdering a fellow inmate overturned was released in 2001 after 29 years in solitary confinement. Last year Herman Wallace just three days prior to his death was freed after four straight decades. Only Albert Woodfox now in his early 70's remains still serving his last 42 years locked away in solitary confinement.

Angola prison officials have feebly attempted to justify retaining the trio in special confinement for many decades on the grounds that these senior citizens posed a dangerous threat to younger inmates. Such blatant injustice has attracted a firestorm of criticism with several documentaries, Amnesty International and South African religious leader Desmond Tutu all speaking out against such excessively harsh and deplorable punishment. United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture [Juan Mendez](#) called the Louisiana prison's treatment toward the Angola Three outright torture. The human rights expert on torture stated:

"The circumstances of the incarceration of the so-called Angola Three clearly show that the use of solitary confinement in the U.S. penitentiary system goes far beyond what is acceptable under international human rights law."The UN defines [torture](#) as:

"any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity."Accordingly, the common US prison practice of imposing solitary confinement on any inmate constitutes torture that is internationally recognized and defined as another extremely serious human rights violation of the first order. Not only is the US the biggest worldwide offender with millions of humans incarcerated, but it also ranks globally at or near the top as a systematic and pervasive violator torturing thousands upon

thousands at any given moment presently sitting in solitary confinement behind bars isolated from all contact with other human beings. And this is only considering what the US is doing to its own citizens, much less the thousands of foreign nationals being systematically and unlawfully detained and tortured in secret locations throughout the world. Obviously America ranks number one in that human rights violation as well.

Representing the Angola Congressional district, Cedric Richmond became involved in the plight of the Angola Three, feeling it was incumbent upon him to make every effort to correct this longtime wrong being committed in his own backyard.

Richmond's bill co-sponsored by six other Democrats calls for a commission to be established to arrive at federal guidelines of uniformly applied specifications that warrant brief use of solitary confinement throughout the prison system. Any states with prisons violating the federal policy would lose [15%](#) of their annual prison funding from the federal government.

Though critics favor complete abolishment of solitary confinement, Amnesty International's Jasmine Heiss concedes that Richmond's bill is at least a good first step in the right direction.

Few can argue the benefit of isolating a human being away from all contact with other human beings. Imposing solitary confinement on any individual is clearly a sadistic and inhumane practice that only causes a person's psychological condition to degenerate over time with full blown psychosis invariably the end result in most cases.

In another positive recent development, three weeks ago New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio appointed prison reformer [Joseph Ponte](#) as Department of Corrections Commissioner. Ponte is credited with reducing solitary confinement in the state of Maine's prisons by 60%. The average length of time in Maine confinement dropped from 90 days to two weeks, and any instances lasting longer than 72 hours needed his personal approval. In view of the notorious rise in use of isolation for prisoners at Rikers Island, the correctional officers union has already made it known that Ponte's authority over the Rikers prison guards is not welcomed. But human rights, mental health and prison advocacy groups are very encouraged by this latest change.

Back in February UC Santa Cruz Psychology Professor [Craig Haney](#) testified in Sacramento warning the state government of the dire perils of solitary confinement used so extensively in the California state prison system, faulting the state for both the magnitude of prisoner numbers in isolation as well as length of time in isolation. Haney has been studying the effects of isolation on inmate populations for forty years. He described to the legislators his observations:

"Many inmates become deeply and unshakably paranoid, and are profoundly anxious around and afraid of people (on those rare occasions when they are allowed any contact with them). Some begin to lose their grasp on their sanity and many others report struggling with it on a daily basis." Haney added, "Nearly a hundred have been there [in solitary confinement] for 20 years and over 500 for 10 years or more."

Many of the estimated 20,000 to 80,000 US inmates currently serving extended time in solitary confinement are either juveniles and/or mentally ill. According to the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, approximately [25%](#) of the inmate population in America suffers

from some form of mental illness including such severe disorders as Schizophrenia, Major Depression and Bipolar Disorder as well as such personality disorders as antisocial, borderline, and intermittent explosive disorder. Additionally, estimates that half the prison population in America have substance abuse disorder, a serious mental or emotional disorder or dually diagnosed with both. Since prison guards have little to no understanding of mental illness and mental health issues, inmates afflicted with often undiagnosed and untreated mental and emotional disorders are particularly vulnerable to being singled out and placed in solitary confinement, typically in response to their bizarre, antisocial and/or unpredictable behavior symptomatically displayed.

As the United States moves into hardcore economic austerity with rapidly declining, disappearing, under-funded social services offered this nation's mounting poor and needy population, prisons are increasingly becoming de facto psychiatric facilities for a swelling disenfranchised underclass. Yet prisons severely lack the needed mental health services to even adequately address this mushrooming disaster of a problem.

But in recent years with the proliferation of the prison industrial complex that includes privatization of newly built prisons for profit and refurbished prison labor camps, Homeland Security, FEMA and the US military already have an ambitiously demonic plan for relocating and [resettling](#) thousands upon thousands of Americans. Last week's Supreme Court decision to endorse Obama's 2012 National Defense Authorization Act assures that the government will utilize the vast resources of US military personnel to execute FEMA roundups to imprison a portion of the US population.

A federal judge ruled last month that California's excessive use of pepper spray and solitary confinement on mentally ill inmates violates their constitutional rights against cruel and unusual punishment. US District Court Judge [Lawrence Karlton](#) ordered the Department of Corrections to stop its current policy that systematically uses chemical grenades and pumping an inordinate amount of pepper spray on the 33,000 mentally ill inmates that comprise 28% of the California inmate population in the major state prisons. After viewing leaked videos of mentally debilitated prisoners in solitary being horribly abused, the Sacramento judge gave the mandatory order to revise its inhumane policies within a reasonable 60-day timeline.

Many prisons that systematically engage in segregating prisoners do so for the sole purpose of making it conveniently less difficult to manage their inmate populations often in overcrowded conditions that in itself cause violence. If an inmate is prone to violently acting out, unstable or unpredictable behavior, prison guards will arbitrarily misuse their authority to punish those prisoners they view as troublemakers, those perceived as challenging their authority, or simply inmates with whom they tend to clash and have personality conflict. The disparate hierarchical power structure between prison official and inmate populations within the punitive milieu inherently lends itself toward a proclivity for potential abuse. Convincing prison administrators to regularly approve requests for targeted prisoners to be punished in solitary is simply business as usual in most prison settings. Yet the debilitating effects of prolonged isolation only confirm that inmates already predisposed to impulse control and aggression problems are propelled toward further bouts of unmanageable, out of control behavior, making only for an escalating vicious cycle. It is time to change prison policies to prevent torture amounting to cruel and unusual punishment for thousands of individuals in the name of honoring universal human rights for every human being.

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