

# **SOLITARY WATCH**

## **Testimony of Jean Casella and James Ridgeway—Directors of Solitary Watch, for the Charles Colson Commission on Federal Corrections**

**March 3, 2015**

Chair Watts, Vice Chair Mollohan, and distinguished members of the Task Force, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Solitary Watch. We are pleased that Congress created this Task Force and that, as a result, a distinguished group of experts is looking into issues such as solitary confinement.

Solitary Watch is a watchdog group founded to help bring the hidden domestic human rights issue of 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 prisoners—with the first centralized source of information on solitary confinement in the United States.

Solitary confinement and other forms of extreme isolation normally consists of 22 to 24 hour lockdown in a small cell, with terms extending months, years, or decades. The United States Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) holds over 10,000<sup>1</sup> individuals in 23-hour-a-day lockdown, making the Federal government the largest practitioner of solitary and other forms of isolated confinement in the nation, and most likely the world.<sup>2</sup> While the BOP claims that solitary is both a necessary and an effective method of prison management, as of May 2013, the United States Government Accountability Office<sup>3</sup> (GAO) was unable to substantiate this claim. GAO states, “[W]ithout an assessment of the impact of segregation on institutional safety or study of the long-term impact of segregated housing on inmates, the BOP cannot determine the extent to which segregated housing achieves its stated purpose to protect inmates, staff and the general public.”<sup>4</sup>

Available figures indicate that solitary confinement in Federal prisons can cost taxpayers at least three times the average cost of general population.<sup>5</sup> Despite this considerable expense, the BOP remains unable to show how segregation practices enhance prison safety and public safety.<sup>6</sup> Further, it remains unable to measure how solitary confinement affects prisoners and corrections staff and how much the practice costs American taxpayers.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond fiscal considerations, the human costs of solitary confinement are well-documented. Segregation units subject prisoners to dangerously low levels of physical and mental stimulation, endangering their mental health as well as their efforts towards rehabilitation. Studies demonstrate that, even for the average person, experience of solitary confinement can result in complete mental and emotional breakdown in as little as 48 hours.<sup>8</sup> Individuals in isolation tend to experience physical and psychological degeneration from a lack of regular human interaction.

In segregation wards, isolation is total and often long-term as prisoners are prevented from participating in faith-based programs and from keeping in regular contact with family members. When isolation lasts weeks, months and years, prisoner’s experience physical and neurological

changes as they become habituated to solitude,<sup>9</sup> and often find it difficult, impossible even, to readjust to society upon re-entry. Not surprisingly, it is widely recognized that prisoners released directly from solitary units experience higher rates of recidivism.<sup>10</sup>

Isolation can cause damage to even the most resilient people. However, isolation can be life-threatening for those who enter segregation with pre-existing mental health conditions. The problem is significant, given the number of people who experience mental health concerns in restrictive housing. A recent independent review of the BOP's restrictive housing practices<sup>11</sup> found that "a significant proportion of the inmates reported being depressed and/or having medical symptoms related to depression and anxiety (e.g., loss of weight, inability to sleep)."<sup>12</sup> One former prisoner recounts just one way in which these lapses occur: "[I]n the SHU, if you tell a doctor you're feeling suicidal, they put you in a worse situation—in the hole without your clothes on, so you don't say anything."<sup>13</sup> This extreme neglect not only exacerbates recidivism, but also traps prisoners in a costly and inescapable cycle of imprisonment and dependency.

### **Testimony of Prisoners Held in Isolation in Federal Prisons**

At Solitary Watch, we gather information from a great variety of sources. Without exception, our research indicates that solitary and other forms of isolated confinement in federal prisons come with unnecessarily high human and fiscal costs. Monitoring, containing, and ultimately eradicating the use of isolation in Bureau of Prisons facilities will control incarceration costs, create a more humane federal prison system, and serve as a model for states and localities to institute similar changes.

Part of the mission of Solitary Watch is to provide prisoners a chance to relate their own experiences in solitary, through a feature called "Voices from Solitary." In that connection, we have received hundreds of letters from prisoners in segregation, many of them eager to share their stories. Some wish their words to be published under their own names, while others prefer to remain anonymous to prevent retaliation. What follows is a small selection of writings by prisoners in solitary confinement in federal prisons.

***Mustafa Zulu has been in solitary confinement for most of the past 22 years. He is currently serving a 50+ year sentence at ADX supermax in Florence, Colorado:*** My life of solitary confinement begins the first day I enter the jail in 1993. Because it's a jail for adults, all juveniles were segregated and locked down most of the time while awaiting trial. At 18, I was sent to a prison in Lorton, VA where I was locked down 23 hours a day. Soon I was transferred to the BOP where they sent me to Terre Haute penitentiary in Indiana. I stayed there for six months, where for the first and last time I was in general population.

In 1996, at the age of 19 years old, I was sent to the federal supermax prison here in Florence, Colorado, known as ADX or the new Alcatraz of the Rockies. I was sent here nearly 20 years ago for an assault on an inmate...By all measures a 19 year old teenager was and should never be sent to America's most secure federal supermax prison, where they boast of housing the so-called "worst of the worst."

...There is no question that after 20 years solitary confinement has negatively and adversely impacted my mental and emotional well-being and has led to a deterioration of mind and spirit. Solitary confinement has a cruel way of slowly destroying the logical process of the mind. I've witnessed too many friends of mine who were perfectly sane one day, go completely insane the next day! I could never feel secure that this will not happen to me because I work to better myself. No, it don't work that way. This place either destroys you entirely or makes you stronger, but nobody, and I mean nobody, who does an extended stay at the Alcatraz of the Rockies leave here unscathed.

***Robert W. Howe is currently serving his fourth year at ADX Florence:*** The consequences of being physically confined in an extremely small cell for years on end have already begun to take a toll. Since my arrival here, I have suffered prolonged hypertension, necessitating blood pressure medication and chronic care visits. The optometrist gave me glasses and told me that individuals who are confined lose their vision at a higher rate due to the fact that we don't get to use our long distance vision. I have joint pain from the never-ending hard surfaces, vitamin deficiency from lack of natural sunlight and probably others that would take a professional to diagnose.

More often than not, the psychological staff representative at team hearings, which occur monthly, are silent, asking no questions. Yet they base their reports on those two to five-minute interludes... They do not make rounds in the unit. They come to your cell if you request any form of treatment, with your outer door open so that all four of them can get in your sally port. Now everyone on the tier can hear your innermost thoughts.

...Inmates who have diagnosed yet untreated serious mental illnesses should not be housed alongside inmates who are trying to maintain their fragile grips on sanity in a control unit environment. It is not fair to the mentally ill inmate, and it creates an unnecessary burden on those inmates who are forced to deal with seriously mentally ill inmates who would not be in this environment if the administration would follow their own protocol.

What amount of resilience am I going to need to stay sane, much less remain socially acceptable to my peers? I feel like Sisyphus, forever sentenced to roll my boulder up the hill, only to find myself at the bottom with no end in sight... There is no human being that can tell me this environment is conducive to even fair mental health; even those who work and study this environment lead compartmentalized lives.

***Tewhan Butler is 11 years into a 30-year sentence, and has been in and out of solitary confinement in a series of prisons, including USP Lewisburg:*** I thought about life and dreamed of death. I awoke chilled, sweating uncontrollably. My eyes were open though nothing could be seen. Darkness everywhere. I heard ghost-like murmurs. My train of thought was jaded. To myself I asked, "Where am I?"

...Just yesterday, I felt alive. Today, I find it difficult to breathe; suffocating, escaping hope. I've been here before, yet the pain of it all feels more intense. The walls seem to be closer. The dungeon darker. Here, it remains hot as hell.

Buried alive. My cell nailed shut. Rigor mortis has already begun to settle in. My pulse slows. My being is near frozen. Anywhere but here. In the vicinity of this cemented burial site there is no slow singing and flower bringing; Only iron against iron, deteriorating flesh.

***Quaheem Edwards, is six years into a 21-year sentence. He describes his experiences in the Special Management Unit at USP Lewisburg:*** This is a place where speaking your mind can get you handcuffed and shackled with a belly chain. You can be in this position for anywhere from 72-hours to weeks, maybe even months. You are stripped down to your boxers and in a cell barefoot. A cell that may not have been cleaned in months! Imagine having to use the toilet shackled down.....It is impossible to wipe yourself properly. Depending on what side of the prison you're housed in, you may not even get a shower.

Now you're probably wondering what are we doing to get this treatment. Don't get me wrong, there are some of us who raise hell but also, as I mentioned earlier, as little as speaking your mind will get you tied down. And the cuffs and shackles are tight to the point where your skin peels and bleeds. Where I live is far beyond inhumane. the treatment is brutal and has pushed many over the edge to commit suicide.

Imagine being locked in a cage with another inmate holding a shank [knife]. God forbid if you're getting stabbed, the person has at least a 30-second head start before the C.O.s show up. Even then they don't go into the cages until both inmates are cuffed. You could be struggling to find your last breath and may be asked to "Cuff Up".

***Ray Luc Levasseur who spent 15 of his 18 years in prison in solitary confinement, writes about his experiences in USP ADX Florence:*** ...I had never had a new house, a new car or a new apartment but I now had a new prison cell. This is a boxcar cell, designed to suppress human sound and constrain the five senses...When fed through a shoe-box sized slot in the door the meal looked like dog-food on noodles. We missed the regular feeding time and this tray was sitting around somewhere. I hadn't eaten all day so despite my trepidation I pushed the dog food aside and ate the noodles with a plastic spoon. I spent most of that first night retching and vomiting into the stainless steel commode. Food poisoning.

...The boxcar cell is designed to gouge prisoner's senses by suppressing human sound and communication with others. It puts blinders on one's eyes and limits on touching to that which is lifeless. A boxcar cell is designed to inflict physical, psychological, and spiritual isolation. You will feel the pain. You will not leave the boxcar cell except in restraints. Within months it seems endless. Every morning begins with a loud grating of the steel gate opening to the tier. One at a time, each of the electronically controlled doors opens, a guard steps to the second barred door and slides the food tray through the slot, then steps back while the door is closed, with a

vengeance. On down the line, until the last tray is delivered. A half hour later we go through the paces again until the last tray is retrieved, followed by silence.

***Jesse Wilson is at ADX Florence, where he has been in solitary confinement for eight of the last 12 years:*** 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....We as a country are blind to the reality of our prison system....Loneliness is a destroyer of humanity.

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<sup>1</sup>See Federal Bureau of Prisons, *Special Housing Unit Review and Assessment*. December 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See United States Government Accountability Office, *Improvements Needed in Bureau of Prisons' Monitoring and Evaluation of Impact of Segregated Housing*. May 2013.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> See Ross, Jeffrey Ian. *Supermax Prisons Society* 44:3, March/April 2007  
Daniel P. Evaluating the Effectiveness of Supermax Prisons. The Urban Institute, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 30-1.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> See Bond, Michael. "How Extreme Isolation Warps the Mind." BBC Future. BBC, 13 May 2014. Web.  
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<sup>10</sup> See Federal Bureau of Prisons, *Special Housing Unit Review and Assessment*. December 2014.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> "Women in Solitary Confinement: Buried Inside the Federal Prison System." Solitary Watch. 24 Jan 2015. Web.