

NATIONAL

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"segregation" or "special housing" units at non-supermax prisons, according to a recent New Yorker article. ("Hellhole" by Atul Gawande, March 30, 2009)

In Ohio, mid-2007, 1,869 men and 90 women lived in isolation, whether through formal segregation or security levels 4 or 5, according to the American Correctional Association. It's not known how many prisoners reside in solitary confinement at some point during their stay.

Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville and Ohio State Penitentiary in Youngstown can hold prisoners in lockdown for years at a time, even their entire sentences.

Prison administrators and correctional officers refer to the various forms of these 23-hour-a-day cells as "administrative segregation." Prisoners prefer a less euphemistic name: "the hole" or "the box." Besides those names, there are several bureaucratic others. After an alleged infraction, an inmate might first be placed in "security control" for one to 15 days while an investigation unfolds. If deemed guilty, the inmate might spend an additional one to 15 days in "disciplinary control," which can be extended to 30 days for subsequent infractions. An inmate can be referred to "local control" for up to six months if his presence in general population is a security threat or if he's "failed to adjust to population."

"Those criteria are 'broad and subject to wide interpretation,'" says Shirley Pope, executive director of the CIIC. If an inmate's own security is threatened, he can be kept in solitary confinement in local control even though he might not be the cause of the potential disturbance.

After "local control," an inmate can be transferred to 4B, a long-term lockdown where some people spend years in extreme isolation. These lockdown units aren't technically considered "segregation," as prisoners in 4B aren't being punished for particular infractions. But it's "segregation under a different name, the same conditions, the same lockdown," Pope says.

Unlike segregation units, 4B units don't have regular mental-health rounds. Pope is concerned that mentally ill prisoners in 4B aren't properly cared for. The CIIC recently identified 218 mentally ill prisoners in 4B at Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville, "in spite of the known mental-health deterioration stemming from long-term isolation."

Psychological warfare

"It is widely accepted among mental-health professionals that long-term isolation of the mentally ill results in deterioration, not recovery," the CIIC noted in a 2008 report.

Nevertheless, the mentally ill seem propelled toward solitary confinement.

Swain says he was surrounded by people

"who attempted suicide, some multiple times; who threw feces and food; who engaged in rattling their doors and pounding; who yelled from cell to cell or screamed incoherently at all hours."

Prisoners suffered sleep deprivation from the constant noise.

Many suicide attempts happen in segregation units. Inmates attempt to hang themselves with sheets, overdose with stockpiled medications or cut themselves with blades from safety razors.

Ironically, segregation disproportionately houses those prisoners least able to endure the psychological impact of isolation. Advocates point out that the mentally ill rarely belong in prison in the first place, much less in solitary confinement.

The mentally ill might be targeted under

report by Human Rights Watch held that New York State was inflicting cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment by isolating drug offenders while also denying them treatment during lock-up.

"I've had 15, 16 drug tickets, no assaults or anything like that," said Peter G., a prisoner quoted in the report. "I've never been in a treatment program. Now I'm in the box till 2012. I'm a drug addict. If you know I'm a drug addict, why are you putting me in a box?"

Ohio offers some substance-abuse treatment to those in isolation, with programs varying by institution, according to CIIC.

Advocates question the segregation of drug offenders in the first place. They say that to the extent their infraction stems from an underlying addiction, they should be treated

Many drug offenders continue to abuse substances during their incarceration. They can be sent to segregation after they're caught with illegal substances. But solitary confinement does nothing to mitigate or heal their addiction. A report by Human Rights Watch held that New York State was inflicting cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment by isolating drug offenders while also denying them treatment during lock-up.

the "failure to adjust" criterion and then sent to punitive solitary units for behavioral problems related to their illness. Mentally ill state prisoners are nearly twice as likely to physically or verbally assault staff or other prisoners, according to a 2006 study by the U.S. Department of Justice.

The solution is not to stiffen penalties. For mentally ill "feces throwers" at Southern Ohio Correctional Facility, the CIIC reported that "prosecution for harassment does little if anything in deterrence." Instead, state prisons should improve mental-health services. The bipartisan Council of State Governments found that inadequacies in mental-health services "can lead to inmate-on-staff assaults, inmate-on-inmate assaults and other use-of-force incidents."

Meanwhile, for the mentally ill in solitary confinement, their health deteriorates, their behavior worsens and their security level rises. They might be transferred to higher-security institutions.

"If they had a mental health advocate, that wouldn't happen," Pope says. "They require therapeutic interventions before they're 'bumped up in security status and end up at Lucasville.'"

In a sense, the mentally ill are trapped. "Their behavior is destined to deteriorate under those conditions," Pope says. "Then their poor behavior is used to justify why they should be there."

Unsurprisingly, many drug offenders continue to abuse substances during their incarceration. They can be sent to segregation after they're caught with illegal substances. But solitary confinement does nothing to mitigate or heal their addiction. A

instead of punished.

Some administrators say solitary confinement reduces violence and helps maintain order. But the bipartisan Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons found the very opposite.

"The increasing use of high-security segregation is counter-productive, often causing violence inside facilities and contributing to recidivism after release," the commission said.

The commission called for ending long-term isolation in U.S. prisons. It determined that after 10 days, solitary confinement was seriously detrimental to prisoners' well-being.

Some administrators maintain that they have no alternative to locking dangerous prisoners in solitary units. But correctional policies in other nations undermine that claim. The British provide their most dangerous prisoners with opportunities for work, education and programming intended to increase social skills, according to The New Yorker. The Missouri Division of Youth Services recently reduced its use of solitary confinement for juveniles.

Swain calls segregation "psychological warfare."

"The use of isolation not only escalates the inmate's sense of alienation, but also further serves to remove the individual from proper staff supervision," the CIIC found.

To be rehabilitative, prisons must promote integration over isolation, therapy over torture.

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