

# CAGED

*Inmates say staffers at Oregon State Penitentiary are abusing the system and overusing solitary confinement*



STREET ROOTS ILLUSTRATION

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Solitary confinement in Oregon's prison system is "overused, overly long and characterized by isolating conditions." That's the conclusion of the Vera Institute of Justice's October 2016 assessment of the Oregon Department of Corrections' use of confinement, often called segregation.

More than 150 years of research has shown the combination of boredom, isolation and sensory deprivation an inmate experiences in solitary confinement can cause extreme mental duress, exacerbate pre-existing mental conditions, and often drive inmates to self-harm.

In 2014, the United Nations Committee Against Torture found the United States' excessive use of solitary confinement was a violation of a U.N. convention against torture and inhumane punishment.

Despite those findings, solitary confinement is still commonly used in Oregon's state prisons as punishment for nonviolent infractions and to isolate inmates during the course of internal investigations.

Inmates say they can find themselves in solitary confinement for months on end with no physical evidence of wrongdoing and no real recourse for what they see as false imprisonment within the prison. Often additional penalties, such as loss of privileges and steep fines, accompany solitary confinement.

When the Vera Institute of Justice took a

snapshot of Oregon prisons in April 2015, nearly 8 percent of the prison population, more than 1,100 inmates, was in some form of solitary confinement.

Street Roots has been in contact with several Oregon state inmates; obtained other inmates' testimony collected by a private investigator; and reviewed inmate complaints and disciplinary hearings and documents.

What is revealed is a pattern of bad practices at Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem with regard to its use of solitary confinement and the internal investigations into inmate misconduct that lands prisoners in it.

Most inmates took issue with a specific employee. He's a lieutenant with the Security Threat Management team at Oregon State Penitentiary, and he assists with internal investigations into prisoner misconduct.

While the private investigator was hired to inquire about him specifically, the problems inmates had with his conduct could be systemic. For this reason, and because to date no lawsuit has been brought against this employee, Street Roots is withholding his name from this report.

According to prisoners, he coerces false statements from confidential informants to incriminate inmates he targets.

They've accused him of using racial slurs, threats, bribery and other questionable tactics to pressure inmates into becoming

informants and submitting testimony that he designs.

Documents obtained through a public-records request for complaints filed against this lieutenant echoed many of these accusations and revealed how difficult it can be for prisoners to get due process within prison walls.

At the heart of the problem is an internal punitive system within the prisons that can send nonviolent inmates to solitary confinement based solely on the accusations of other inmates who have incentive to give testimony.

Inmate Enrique Bautista at Snake River Correctional Institution explained it like this:

"How does one become a confidential reliable informant? Well, if I know who's been doing drugs, I can say so-and-so has meth. He gets tested and (it) comes back positive for meth. Now I'm reliable. Next time I need a cell move or job change or my contact visits back, I can even make shit up and they'll believe it because I've proven myself to be reliable. ... How can anyone dispute or disprove what an anonymous source says about you?"

Inspector General Craig Prins said investigators do not go on the word of one inmate alone and will continue to investigate until there is a "preponderance of evidence," which in some cases is multiple confidential informants.

Why should we care if inmates aren't

getting a fair shake in prison and are sent to solitary confinement when they break prison rules? For one, 95 percent of Oregon's prison inmates will, at some point, be released back into society, and if they've spent a long time in solitary, they will be more likely to re-offend.

This has been shown with data from correctional facilities in several states, including Texas and Connecticut. There is an especially high rate of recidivism if they are released directly from solitary to the streets, as is common practice in Oregon.

Second, given what we know about the effects of solitary confinement, it begs the question: Where is the line drawn between what's acceptable and what qualifies as cruel, although not so unusual, punishment?

## Solitary Shane

When inmate Shane Staggs was approved for a transfer from Snake River Correctional Institution in Eastern Oregon to work in the call center at Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem, he was ecstatic. He could finally be closer to his 8-year-old son and fiancée who lives in Portland.

"I was one of the top three salesmen in all of OCE (Oregon Corrections Enterprises) call centers, so that was my ticket to OSP," he said in a letter.

Six months after he arrived, his trouble

See SOLITARY, page 5