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USA: Isolation Units in California's Prisons – Facts and Figures

PRISONERS IN ISOLATION

Between 1980 and 2009 the US prison population quadrupled to reach more than **two million**, an increase largely driven by heavier penalties resulting in more people serving longer sentences than ever before (US Department of Justice).

As many as **25,000 prisoners** are estimated to be held in isolation facilities across the USA (Urban Institute, 2004 and US Department of Justice, 2005)

California is one of more than **40 US states** to house prisoners in high security isolation facilities, often termed “super-maximum security” prisons.

More than **3,000 prisoners** in California are held in high security isolation units known as Security Housing Units (SHUs) (US Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation).

No other US state is believed to have held so many prisoners for such long periods in indefinite isolation.

SECURITY HOUSING UNITS IN CALIFORNIA

Pelican Bay SHU, which opened in 1989, was one of the first super-maximum security facilities constructed with no communal space for recreation, education or any other group activity. Around 1,000 people are held in isolation there.

California **State Prison at Corcoran** opened in 1988, and currently holds over 1,300 inmates in isolation (US Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation).

California has also built a SHU unit at the California Correctional Institution at **Tehachapi** (housing some 840 prisoners in 2011) and a smaller unit at California State Prison, **Sacramento** (US Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation).

A smaller SHU unit at **Valley State Prison for Women** was transferred to the California Institute for Women – where 64 inmates were held as of June 2012 (US Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation).

LENGTH OF DETENTION IN ISOLATION

More than 500 prisoners serving indeterminate SHU terms had spent ten or more years in the Pelican Bay SHU; of this number, more than 200 had spent over 15 years in the SHU and 78 more than 20 years. (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2011).

CONDITIONS OF DETENTION

Isolation cells are **under eight square metres** (most hold one prisoner but some, two).

The cell doors are constructed of heavy **gauge perforated metal** which significantly blocks vision, light and fresh air.

REHABILITATION

Prisoners in isolation units are confined for at least **22 and a half hours a day**, with no work or meaningful rehabilitation programs or group activities of any kind.

In Pelican Bay, prisoners are allowed to **exercise** for an hour and a half a day, alone, in a bare, concrete yard.

They may **correspond** with their attorneys, families, friends and outside organizations, subject to certain restrictions. All **visits** are non-contact, taking place behind a glass screen.

Some prisoners have spent more than a decade without visits from their family.

SHU inmates are also denied **telephone calls** with their families.

Only inmates undergoing "debriefing" are allowed to call their relatives at regular intervals; other SHU prisoners are only allowed a telephone call in an emergency, such as the death of a close relative.

Only 37 prisoners out of over 1,000 prisoners in Pelican Bay SHU were enrolled in an **educational program**. 22 others enrolled in college correspondence courses in November 2011 (Amnesty International).

On average, 900 inmates were released on parole annually directly from Pelican Bay and Corcoran SHUs during the ten year period from 1997 to 2007. Many were released directly to the street, often with no **transitional programming**, in some cases after years of solitary confinement ("Parole, Snitch, or Die: California's Supermax prison and Prisoners, 1987-2007, by Keramet Reiter, Institution for the Study of Social change, UC Berkeley, 7 July 2010).

HEALTH IMPACT

Prisoners have reported serious **medical and psychological problems** as a result of their detention in isolation, including: deteriorating eyesight as a result of years of deprivation of natural light and confinement in spaces which obstruct vision, problems due to lack of natural light (causing vitamin D deficiency) and exercise; chronic asthma exacerbated by the enclosed conditions; severe insomnia and memory loss.

Data from various jurisdictions shows that **suicides** occur more frequently in isolation units than in the prison population generally (Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons, 2006).

REFORMS

The California Department of Correction has proposed reforms which, it says, will ultimately reduce the numbers in the SHU by changing the criteria for assigning alleged gang members or associates to isolation units and providing access to a step-down program.

In August 2009, a three-judge panel ordered California to reduce overcrowding in its 33 prisons to 137.5% of its design capacity, after finding that overcrowding was the "primary reason" the state had been unable to deliver adequate medical and mental health care to its inmate population. The order was upheld by the US Supreme Court in May 2011.

California has since enacted several bills to move low level offenders from state authority to the counties (local authorities) under a process known as "realignment". Under this process, less serious offenders will now serve their sentences in local jails instead of state prisons and most people on parole will be supervised at county rather than state level.

By June 2012, the state prison population had fallen to some 136,000 inmates - down from a peak of 173,000 in 2006 - with further reductions anticipated for the future.

In May 2012, the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) filed a **federal lawsuit** on behalf of prisoners at Pelican Bay who have spent between 10-28 years in solitary confinement. The named plaintiffs included several leaders and participants from the hunger strike. The class action suit, alleges that prolonged solitary confinement violates Eight Amendment prohibitions against cruel and unusual punishment, and that the absence of meaningful review for SHU placement violates the prisoners' right to due process.