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## **USA: Amnesty International condemns housing minors in Wisconsin supermax prison**

*Isolation conditions in Wisconsin's supermaximum security Boscobel prison are harsh and in breach of international standards, Amnesty International said today, asking for under 18 inmates to be urgently removed from it.*

*Prisoners at Boscobel prison are allowed no outdoor exercise and can see their relatives only through a video screen. In the most restrictive custody levels, inmates are confined alone for 24 hours a day in sealed, sparsely equipped, concrete cells with no view of the outside, and are deprived of reading and occupational materials, educational and other programs, and even watches or clocks to enable them to tell the time.*

*"These conditions would constitute 'cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment' when imposed in any case for a protracted period, and they should never be inflicted on vulnerable young inmates," Amnesty International said. The organization noted that international standards contained an outright ban on the use of punitive solitary confinement the case of incarcerated juveniles.*

*Further concern stems from the fact that at least two of the juveniles sent to Boscobel prison had histories of mental illness or emotional disturbance and one of them had tried to hang himself just months before his transfer to the facility. Both have undergone further punishments while in the facility, including being stripped naked and left for days in cells without a mattress or bedding.*

*"How can such punitive conditions encourage positive behaviour patterns and aid rehabilitation in the case of disturbed young inmates?," Amnesty International asked.*

*Eight minors -- all of whom were tried and convicted as adults -- have been sent to Boscobel prison since it opened in 1999. Five have since turned*

18. All were reportedly transferred to Boscobel for fixed-term disciplinary offences, which means they cannot participate in in-cell programs which enable other prisoners to earn their way to less restrictive custody and could thus spend their entire time in the most restrictive custody levels, or even have their term extended for further indiscipline.

Those whose release Amnesty International is seeking include:

**Canyon Thixton:** serving a four-year sentence for car theft and fleeing from a police officer, was sent to Boscobel last April, aged 17. Despite a history of emotional disturbance and at least one prior suicide attempt, he has remained in the most restrictive unit -- Alpha Unit -- ever since, locked in a cell for all but four hours a week and deprived of all possessions apart from a bible. For the past two weeks he has reportedly been held naked in a concrete cell with no mattress or blanket or hygiene items, after damaging wiring and causing a small fire -- a desperate attempt, according to his mother, to be removed from isolation. It was also reported that Thixton was beaten while naked, after corrections officers in full riot gear entered his cell to subdue him when he became agitated after being told his court papers were missing. Amnesty International is calling for a full inquiry into this incident.

**Anthony Hall:** raised in deprived circumstances, he was sentenced to three years for slapping a counsellor at a juvenile mental health treatment facility. He was transferred to Boscobel in July 2000 when he was only 16. He, too, has been held in Alpha Unit since his arrival and has also spent time naked in a bare cell.

Amnesty International remains concerned by conditions for other prisoners at Boscobel supermax as well and has called on the authorities to reduce isolation periods and to ensure that all prisoners are treated in accordance with international standards.

### **Background**

The Wisconsin state legislature is considering legislation which would prohibit inmates under the age of 18 being sent to the supermax facility. Both parties

have agreed such a clause in a budget bill, which is due to be voted on in the Assembly today. The bill will then go to the State Governor who could sign or veto the legislation.

Amnesty International has urged the Governor and the Department of Corrections to support the measure.

A lawsuit backed by the American Civil Liberties Union claims that conditions in the prison violate the prohibition of "cruel and unusual punishment" under the US Constitution. This is currently pending in federal court.

An Amnesty International delegation which visited Wisconsin last May met with prison officials, but was refused permission to tour the prison.

Wisconsin is one of 38 US states to build "supermaximum security" prisons in recent years. Although conditions vary, prisoners are typically confined to solitary cells for 23 hours or more a day, with no work or vocational programs. Other states also allow minors sentenced as adults to be held in supermax prisons and Amnesty International is currently researching this issue.

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