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USA: Arizona urged to curb inhumane use of prison isolation units

Arizona's cruel prison isolation regime is dehumanizing inmates and the authorities are failing to care for their basic physical and mental health, said Amnesty International in a new report today.

The report *Cruel isolation: Amnesty International's Concerns about Conditions in Arizona Maximum Security Prisons* describes how more than 2,000 prisoners are confined for months or years in conditions of extreme isolation and sensory deprivation.

More than one in 20 of the total prison population in Arizona is held in isolation - a disproportionately high ratio in a country believed to house more prisoners in solitary than any other in the world.

More than a dozen children of between 14 and 17 years are also believed to be held in solitary confinement in the state in a special minors unit for children tried and convicted as adults.

"Solitary confinement in Arizona is inhumane," said Angela Wright, researcher on the USA at Amnesty International. "Everything from the cells to the lack of health care and rehabilitation opportunities seem to be specifically designed to dehumanise prisoners."

"Isolation should only be used as a last resort and for short periods. It should never be imposed against children or prisoners with mental illnesses."

Most prisoners in isolation are held in the Special Management Units (SMUs) at Arizona's state prison complex at Eyman. SMU prisoners spend nearly 24 hours a day in small, windowless cells with little access to natural light or fresh air. They don't have access to work, education or rehabilitation programmes. They are only allowed to leave their cells a maximum of three times a week for up to two hours each time to shower and exercise alone in a small yard which rarely gets any sunlight.

Visits with relatives or lawyers take place behind a screen without any physical contact.

In a letter sent to Amnesty International, a prisoner held for years in Arizona's isolation units, described conditions as unbearable - with food, urine and faeces stuck onto walls in some units. Many prisoners reportedly suffer from staph infections affecting their skin.

Prisoners held in solitary have been classified by the authorities as presenting the highest risk to the public and staff. However, not all prisoners appear to fit this criterion; some for example have reportedly been placed in isolation for repeated, minor infractions.

Many are mentally ill or have behavioural disabilities – conditions that are likely to deteriorate because of the conditions of their imprisonment.

Health experts said isolation such as that imposed on inmates in Arizona can cause serious psychological harm, including anxiety and depression, perceptual distortions and psychosis – even in those with no pre-existing illness.

Studies and data from various sources reveal that suicides occur more frequently in isolation units than in the prison population at large.

Between October 2005 and April 2011, at least 43 suicides took place in Arizona's adult prisons. 22 of the 37 cases where Amnesty International obtained information, took place in isolation facilities.

A number of states across the USA have recently reduced or closed down their isolation units following court orders or to cut costs.

In 2007, Mississippi tightened its criteria for assigning prisoners to its isolation unit and began phased group recreation and communal activities, allowing prisoners to eventually move into general population facilities; the unit was closed altogether in 2010. Authorities claim the changes led to significant improvements in prisoner behaviour and a reduction in violence and the use of force.

“We recognize that prisoners may sometimes need to be segregated for security or disciplinary reasons,” said Angela Wright. “However, no prisoner should be deprived of basic amenities such as adequate exercise, access to natural light and fresh air and meaningful human interaction.”

In conducting its research, Amnesty International's request to tour the SMU units at ASPC-Eyman was denied. The corrections department declined to meet with the organization's delegates when they were in Arizona in July 2011 preventing first hand inspection of the department and its facilities. Amnesty International's concerns are based on a range of sources, including prisoners and prisoner advocates, present and former staff members and Arizona Department of Corrections written policies and procedures.