From: Richa

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Re: Solitary confinement

Dear members of Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights:

I speak from personal experience as well as the knowledge that comes from years of studying and paying attention to the issue of solitary confinement. As a young man (many years ago now) the federal prison system kept me in solitary for most of the two-year sentence i served. Since then some jail administrations and police have held me in solitary confinement on a number of occasions.

In all those situations i have never acted violently in any way, or threatened to do so. Rather, police and jailers have typically used solitary confinement in attempts to make me submit to their oppressive authority or to punish me for not submitting. That authority has been designed not for the protection and/or betterment of those imprisoned, but for the "efficient" running of the institutions, and has often been exercised in an inhumane and/or arbitrary manner.

I will give a few examples, starting with my first arrest,which, it should be said,was apparently discriminatory based on my appearance (long hair and a beard, casual clothes): the police singled me out from many people doing the same thing (crossing the street between crosswalks, aka "jaywalking"), and the judge made a clear derogatory comment about me as i was called up. On being taken to the Hennepin County (Minneapolis' County) Workhouse, they put me in solitary because i would not agree to do labor at their whim (slave labor - yes, i know it is Constitutional, but it is still wrong). It was a cellblock, but i was the only one imprisoned there the entire time of my five day sentence. A guard opened the window directly across from the cell during a week that temperatures seldom if ever rose above zero degrees fahrenheit. They brought bread and water twice a day, and a regular(?) institutional meal on the third day only after i reminded them that they were required to do so by law. That meal was so bad that i nearly threw up after eating about half of it.

In federal prison (for refusal to participate in government-sponsored mass killing) they first put me right into solitary because i declined to shave. Only after keeping me there a week or so and then forcefully shaving me did they let me out. They shortly after shipped me to another prison where they again immediately put me in solitary before sending me to a prison camp. When after a week i participated in a nonviolent protest at the camp they brought me and a protest leader back to solitary. In passing another solitary cell we noticed another prisoner chained and naked with nothing to sleep on except a stone tile floor. In outrage and solidarity we removed our clothes and shoved them out to the corridor underneath the door. It did not take long after that for the prison administration (after threatening us with "mutiny" for a very minor protest) to move us to semi-solitary cells in "administrative segregation".

They kept shunting me back and forth between the two for the remainder of my sentence. At times that included beatings, being chained to a bedpost, removal of all clothes and bedding (like the person we initially saw), and refusal to provide food for one period. That last stopped after i was able to get a letter out to Federal Bureau of Prisons administration in Washington, D.C. (a chancy endeavor; some such letters were illegally intercepted by prison staff and never sent).

The only time they seriously considered taking me out of solitary confinement was to further threaten me in order to get me to submit to prison authority. In that case the threat was to put me in a section of the prison where they believed i would be raped. The threat of rape was explicit. Fortunately(?) for me they first carried this threat out against another young man who they felt was not being sufficiently "cooperative" (prison jargon for submissive). That young man was quickly knifed and raped by three men; however, he had outside contacts and support that resulted in national publicity, which stopped any further such threats.

Much more recently staff at Kent County jail, in Grand Rapids where i now reside, repeatedly put me into solitary confinement after repeated arrests for, essentially, being visibly homeless (it is quite okay in Grand Rapids to be homeless, but one is supposed to keep oneself hidden or at least avoid being too visible). On two occasions they put me in with no mattress and nothing but a paper gown because a jail social worker who i challenged could get back at me that way.

Being in solitary confinement for a long time while in prison, i would periodically get bored and frustrated and do something to break the monotony, such as bang on the door, go on a fast, etc. Often those things would get me moved, breaking the monotony.

I could cite more experiences, including some of others i have personally known. The point is, solitary confinement has long been used and continues to be used for the convenience of the institutions rather than for the good of those who are imprisoned. And it is almost inevitable that this will happen when solitary confinement is available in jails and prisons.

Worse, when i was in prison people were generally not kept in solitary for so long; i was the exception. Now it is relatively common for people to be kept in solitary for much longer periods - in some cases decades. This is nuts! And it's horrible.

Human beings are social; that is a great deal of what makes us human. We are not meant to be isolated for extended periods. There is plenty of research on this. And that is exacerbated by the destructive reality of jails and prisons - again backed by research, but plain to see for anyone who opens their eyes.

Please take all measures possible to educate more people to the reality of solitary confinement, and to firmly and finally end the practice.

Thank you.

Richa