

Testimony of Bonnie Kerness

Since 1975, I have been a human rights advocate on behalf of prisoners throughout the country. Currently, I coordinate the Prison Watch Project for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC).

AFSC's Prison Watch is an advocacy project which monitors prisoners and their conditions of confinement. We receive our testimonies through the mail and collect telephone calls from people imprisoned in Federal and state prisons and county jails. We also hear from family members, lawyers, advocates, and correctional staff, with whom we often consult or provide technical assistance. An important backdrop of our work is the United Nations Conventions and other international and regional treaties that the United States has signed, including the Convention Against Torture.

In 1984, we received a letter from a prisoner who was being held in the Management Control Unit at what was then Trenton State Prison. He said he had been placed in isolation and had no idea why. He asked us to monitor him, his mental and emotional state, and his conditions of confinement. We did that through 2000, when after 16 years he was released from that unit. In the 16 years that the AFSC monitored this man, I visited him about once a month. I began to notice as the years passed that there was a distinct increase in irritability and repetitiveness. He reported feeling emotionally deadened.

At one point he was removed from the control unit where his only contact was with six other prisoners every other day for an hour and a half. His move to a punishment unit prompted him to write that he was having trouble "getting used to all of the people there." When I asked how many people he was now seeing, he said 36. He frequently asked us to mail him anything which might be visually stimulating. He told me that he kept his sanity by adhering to a rigid schedule which included getting up at 3 a.m., working out for three hours, listening to the radio for two hours, writing letters for two hours, as well as other techniques. He would report on the changing emotional state of other prisoners there, noting which ones began to break down emotionally and physically. There were at least two men there who refused to ever come out of their cells. Another began to masturbate whenever officers or other correctional staff came onto the tier.

Since that time, the AFSC's particular focus has been to monitor the escalating use of extended isolation in United States prisons in the form of control units, supermax prisons, security threat group management units, and administrative segregation units. We receive about 1,800 letters and calls of concern each year. One result of our monitoring solitary confinement is our awareness that the majority of reports on the use of devices of restraint are coming to us from men, women, and children living in isolation cells. My work day is punctuated with vivid descriptions of the worst things that one human being can do to another.

These past years for me have been full of thousands of calls and complaints of an increasingly disturbing nature. The proportion of those complaints coming from women living in isolation has risen dramatically. In January, I was invited to speak before the

United Nations Committee on Women, and I'd like to share with you some of the testimonies that I carried there.

One voice was that of Judith V., a 45 year old mother of three serving a life sentence in New Jersey. Judith wrote of her depression and desperation. In her first letter she reported that she had stopped bathing and stopped combing her hair. She said, "I was locked in isolation. I was scared and cried a lot. I sat there day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. Not once was I ever taken out of my isolated cell. I was in a separate building and was not allowed to buy canteen, was not allowed recreation, library, television, or church. I was prevented from making telephone calls or having visits. I was allowed a short shower, after which I was locked back in my cage. My cell had a window that was four inches wide and three feet long. The window was wide enough to fit one eye. I needed fresh air so badly that I started to rub my nails against the rubber seal around the window. It was thick and hard rubber, but I wanted air. I rubbed for months. My nails broke down but I continued to scrape. The pain and blood didn't disturb me. It took me 8 months to get a tiny opening. I felt worse than a caged animal. I spent three years there and have phobias where I still need to be enclosed in my cell." Judith's story doesn't end there. Judy was abused sexually by two members of the correctional staff. When she finally came forward to report the abuse, she wrote that "they took me to an isolation cell, had me stripped naked and searched."

A woman from Texas writes, "the guard sprayed me with pepper spray because I wouldn't take my clothes off in front of five male guards. They carried me to my isolation cell, laid me down on my steel bed, and took my clothes off. They left me there in that cell with that pepper spray on my face and nothing to wash my face with. I didn't give them any reason to do that. I just didn't want to take my clothes off."

Another woman from Arizona wrote, saying that "the only thing you get in isolation here is a peanut butter sandwich in the morning, a cheese sandwich in the afternoon, and for supper another peanut butter sandwich." She reported drinking toilet water when she got thirsty.

A woman named Sharon wrote of her sense of humiliation in an isolation unit in Wisconsin and described the women there being "housed in cells with no windows. The toilet, shower, and everything else is in one room. I eat, sleep, shower in this cell, only showering on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. We go outside in a cage similar to the size of this cell on Monday, Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday. Every time we come out of our cells we are shackled. If we see a doctor, a nurse and an officer are in the room. It is very embarrassing to have an officer pull down your pants and underwear for your pap smear. We are issued an orange shirt, orange pants, bra, a pair of socks and we recently were allowed to have two pairs of panties in our cells. We have to wait until an officer makes rounds to get sanitary napkins and sometime we are denied the request."

Keisha, a New Jersey prisoner in a county isolation unit who is in her late 50's, tells us that a number of the women are suffering from mental illness, including herself. She talks about her depression, her suicidal feelings saying, "We are forced to sleep on the floor in the middle of winter with bad backs and aching bodies, cold air still blowing in from the

vents no matter what the temperature is outside. At two o'clock in the morning they wake you and tell you to clear the cell. They go through your personal belonging and put them in the trash." Each woman who wrote reported feeling that they were in isolation because they were active in protesting conditions or their sexual mistreatment.

We recently received a letter from a man being held at the same county jail as Keisha who talked about being forced to wear what he called "a chicken suit" in isolation. He said that the suit was made of a clear material and could be seen through. The man was a minister imprisoned for lack of child support, and was mortified at the exposure of his body.

A man writes from Ohio State Prison telling us of the suicide of a man in isolation at Ohio State Penitentiary. He says that no one told this man why he was in segregation. He had no violence on his record. He was transferred with no conduct report, no notice, no conference, and did not know why he was here. In a letter to his family he spoke of having "no hope here."

Another man wrote from the Federal facility in Florence, Colorado, talking about his disorientation. He described sleep deprivation because of the lights never being turned off, the constant banging of electronic doors, the echo of his own voice in the steel and concrete cell, and the thought that he was already in his grave. He said that after weeks of scant sleep, it became difficult for him to concentrate. "There are counts every hour, with people knocking on the door and putting a flashlight in my eyes all night. I'm unable to read and find myself drifting, not able to absorb a thing."

In a visit with one prisoner, he said "if I locked you in your bathroom for 22 hours a day, you're not going to get into too much trouble. But when they let you out, you're going to get into trouble you would never have seen before." He started crying as he added, "I have never met who's been exposed to isolation and abuse whose attitude didn't harden." Sitting in a small, sealed cinder-block booth in the visitors' room, speaking through a telephone, the man could see me through the glass, but hardly anything else. He said the control and humiliation "presses into my face" all the time. This 56 year old man noted that one of the "most difficult things about what passes for life is the non-contact visits themselves. I haven't touched my three daughters since 1989. That's something that plays with my mind a lot."

Another testimony described a new supermax prison unit saying, "I got a concrete bunk, felt strip mattress, a steel toilet, and a telephone booth sized shower in the cell to further restrict our movement out of cell. Water comes out in 90 second sprays making me feel like a house plant. The outer door is solid steel with a peepshow panel of plexiglass. Through this door is a small trap of dead space, then a second door of steel bars. Can't see left nor right – only the wall across from the cell. Meals are in the cell. Lots of strip searches and cell shakedowns. All movement is in restraints. Outside rec is an area at the base of the cell block. High concrete walls. The surface is concrete and very uneven. Look straight up, and it's crisscrossed with I-beams covered with steel mesh. Look through this and you can see a patch of blue. Inside rec has sound resistant plexiglass

walls which separate each rec cell and only one prisoner per solitary rec. The only 'program' I'm in is sleep deprivation. This is pain."

The prisoners describe an environment so devoid of stimulation that it is toxic to mental functioning. I've spoken with people who begin to cut themselves just so that they can "feel" something. I once asked a man why he threw feces, what could possibly compel him to do that. He said it was the only power he had left.

People tell me that they experience a progressive inability to tolerate ordinary stimulation. Many describe having panic attacks and problems with impulse control and irritability. In a long conversation by mail with Ben, who was in a prison in South Carolina, we talked about his fervent desire to get out of the isolation unit. He also held grave doubts about his ability to adjust after six years there. For the six months after his release from that control unit, he described the experience of trying to adjust. He wrote over and over again about the feeling of being watched, of knowing people were out to "get" him. As the months went on, he spent more and more time in his cell, completely unable to deal with different personalities, demands on his time and emotions. He had grown to hate what he called "all that freedom." He finally wrote of deliberately spitting on an officer, knowing this would lead to being removed to solitary confinement. He repeated this pattern twice more over the course of several years.

Some of the most poignant letters I receive are on behalf of the mentally ill being held in isolation, like that man in California who spread feces over his body. The staff response to this was to put him in a bath so hot it boiled 30 percent of the skin off his body.

Mentally ill prisoners are disproportionately confined in sensory deprivation settings. The isolated mentally ill suffer cruelly, with many prisoners decompensating, becoming so psychotic they are eventually removed for brief hospital stays. It is unimaginable to me that so many refuse to leave isolation, saying they can no longer adjust to people, noise, and paranoia. I've had my Master's in Social Work and have additional training as a therapist. In the past thirty years, I have treated hundreds of ex-prisoners for symptoms of post traumatic stress. Once released, the prognosis for those who have lived in long-term isolation is not good. Symptoms of post traumatic stress often take years to heal.

I have had the good fortune over the years to form some remarkable relationships with many front line officers, teachers, mental health workers, administrators, and other members of the departments of corrections, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, police, and court staff. I've had the privilege of being able to voice my concerns candidly with all my biases showing. In one very recent dialogue, a New Jersey correctional officer talked to me at length about his experiences working in an isolation unit. David talked about two CO friends of his who had lost their positions because a prisoner hung himself. He said that they were charged with checking all of the cells every 15 minutes. Despite having done this, when the prisoner died they were released from duty. He said that he felt personally safer when the movement of prisoners was controlled, saying, "There is very little you can give to isolation prisoners, except to check on them regularly, to let them hear a voice, and to know that I'm there and that I know they are there."

He also talked eloquently about the stress of working in a control unit environment. He talked about friends of his going on stress leave, often taking smaller pensions. He said that the attitude of many of the prisoners was that “you can’t do anything else to me.” He said the people in the isolation units with that attitude were often agitated or enraged. “When I see a human being who is reduced to throwing feces and urine, it wears me down. To many of us, this is just a job. I believe there is a place for isolation, but I am breathing the same canned air, sitting under the same fluorescent lights, listening to the same noises. I don’t believe this is good for the officers or good for the inmates. It’s too much for both. You can’t leave someone in a cage month after month after month for the duration of their sentence.” This particular 20 year officer served in Vietnam. He went on to talk about seeing symptoms of madness in people who were POWs there, going on to say that “there’s no difference in what was done there and what we are doing in long-term isolation here.” My conversation with David reflects many that I’ve had over the years with corrections staff.

The AFSC has become so concerned that we have gathered hundreds of haunting testimonies in a pamphlet called “Torture in U.S. Prisons, Evidence of Human Rights Violations.” The AFSC also felt compelled to produce a “Survivor’s Manual,” which some prisoners have said saved their lives. Over the years, these testimonies which come in my mail daily have rocked my soul. I’ve come to believe that departments of correction are more than a set of institutions, they are also a state of mind.

The practices that the prisoners have testified about are in violation of international treaties and covenants that the United States has signed. The practice of extended isolation violates the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Forms of Cruel and Unusual Punishment. In May of 2000, the United Nations Committee on Torture cited the “excessively harsh regime” of supermax prisons as violations of that treaty, adding that such violations are widespread in the United States. The UN Human Rights Commission has specified that “prolonged solitary confinement” is prohibited and is a form of torture.

Thirty years ago, if you had interviewed me I would have fought any implication of torture in the United States. Now it pains me to know better. The testimonies I read and hear daily have enormous implications for all of us. Whether or not we are particularly aware of these issues, we are paying in many ways including fiscal and human costs. In a system where 95 percent of prisoners return to our communities, the impact of these practices is felt beyond prisons. To take away someone’s civil rights is something we can and should debate regularly as a society. To take away someone’s human rights isn’t negotiable. Isolation is torture and violates not just international law, but human decency as well.

The wall of silence that has been built around prisons and prisoners needs to be broken down. I am so grateful to the Commissioners for your willingness to listen to these testimonies which represent the experiences of so many people in prison throughout the country. Thank you for giving often voiceless people a voice.