

Solitary Confinement: Social Workers Call for an End to This Torturous Practice

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Between 80,000 and 100,000 prisoners are detained in solitary confinement in U.S. prisons every day—some for months, some for years, and some even for decades. One in five adult inmates in state and federal prisons and 18% of those in local jails spent time in restrictive housing over the course of a year in 2011–2012, including in solitary confinement or other types of isolation (Beck, 2015). They live inside cramped, concrete, windowless cells for 22 to 24 hours a day and are frequently deprived of telephone calls, educational programs, contact visits, and exercise. Often, they live their lives in handcuffs and shackles. Those in solitary are at risk of suicide and self-harm, and the practice is especially dangerous for the elderly, children, youths, and those with developmental disabilities or mental illness. Solitary confinement is a torturous, cruel, and inhumane practice that violates United Nations Conventions and Covenants (U.N. General Assembly, 1966, 1984). Still, it continues in the United States and in many other countries (Center for Constitutional Rights, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, and California Prison Focus, 2014). Juan Mendez, the United Nations (UN) Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, has called for its prohibition (Mendez, 2014; UN Human Rights, 2011). Himself a survivor of torture, Mendez stresses that prolonged use (more than 15 days) is torture and is damaging to all who endure it.

In its November 2014 "Concluding observations on solitary confinement as expressed in its 3rd and 5th periodic reports of the United States of America," the UN's Committee Against Torture (UNCAT) questioned the United States' statement that it does not systematically use solitary confinement; it recommended that the United States

- (a) Limit the use of solitary confinement as a measure of last resort, for as short time as possible, under strict supervision and with the possibility of judicial review;
- (b) Prohibit any use of solitary confinement against juveniles, persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, pregnant women, women with infants and breastfeeding mothers in prison;
- (c) Ban prison regimes of solitary confinement such as those in super-maximum security detention facilities;
- (d) Compile and regularly publish comprehensive disaggregated data on the use of solitary confinement, including related suicide attempts and self-harm. (UNCAT, 2014, ¶20)

In the United States, social workers provide services in those very prisons and jails that keep prisoners in solitary confinement units. Often these social workers find themselves aware of—or even witness to—abusive practices that challenge their obligations to the profession's Code of Ethics. The Code rightly calls on social workers to help people in need, to challenge social problems and injustice, and to respect the dignity and worth of every individual.

In April 2014 social worker Mary Buser, formerly an assistant mental health chief on Rikers

Island, wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* titled "Solitary's Mockery of Human Rights," which exposed the horror of solitary confinement on Rikers Island (Buser, 2014). Spurred on by this op-ed, in October 2014 social workers and allies from around the United States formed the Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement (SWASC) Task Force to combat the use of solitary confinement within our national borders.

The SWASC Task Force applauds CSWE's commitment to advancing human rights (CSWE, 2015). We also affirm the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW's) International Policy on Human Rights, which states that

NASW must speak out against inhumane treatment of people in whatever form it exists. As social work practitioners and advocates of human rights: . . . Recognizing that social workers who advocate on behalf of human rights can become subject to reprisal, NASW should ensure that social workers who are threatened are given the full support of the profession. (NASW, 2000, ¶20)

Speaking out against injustice and supporting social workers that take the risk to speak out, therefore, are priorities for our task force.

We work with national and international social work institutions and allied organizations to provide alternative humane measures for disciplining and protecting inmates. We encourage criminal justice systems to devote increased resources to treatment and other alternative programming consistent with human rights.

We have provided testimony, organized public education efforts, and incorporated information about solitary confinement in our teaching and writing. SWASC plans additional actions, including writing a shadow report to submit to UNCAT at the time of its next periodic review of the United States.

We urge members of the CSWE as well as the NASW and our international allies (particularly the International Association of Schools of Social Work, the International Federation of Social Workers, and the International Consortium for Social Development) to join their voices with ours as we work with individuals and organizations to put an end to solitary confinement. You can learn more about SWASC Task Force goals and accomplishments and how to join by going to www.SocialWorkersasc.org.

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Solitary Watch: solitarywatch.com

US Human Rights Network website: <http://www.ushrnetwork.org>