

Testimony regarding Solitary Confinement

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Solitary confinement is immoral. It is also, as my experience teaching in New York State correctional facilities with the Bard Prison Initiative has shown, debilitating and counterproductive. There are many obstacles to getting an education behind bars. Solitary confinement is the most disruptive, preventing students from completing coursework and forcing some to drop out of the program altogether. Add to this the lasting scars on the psyche - fear of closed spaces, chronic depression, social anxiety, and even psychosis, and it is clear that solitary confinement sets incarcerated people back, making it harder for them to emerge from behind bars as responsible citizens. Let me share some of my students' reflections on solitary:

- “The SHU is a living death.”
- “I was confined to the box in Riker’s Island and it was chaotic. I didn’t have anyone to talk to but my neighbors in the cells next to me through the vent over my sink and toilet.”
- “It’s a nightmare. It’s not a correctional facility, it is the complete opposite.”
- “When you get into confinement, they continue to degrade you and mess with your mentality. Turning off lights for no reason. Denying showers. You can’t even eat because you can’t trust what they did with the food. Nine times out of ten, you’re in the box – solitary confinement – because an officer just doesn’t like you.”
- “The thought that my time of confinement can be extended at the whim of an officer’s discretion alarmed me. I’ve seen people do years in the box and come out different.”
- “Solitary confinement is, in essence, sensory deprivation.”
- “I’ve spent over five times in the “Box” for periods of 6 months or more.”
- “Food is scarce in the “Box.” We are reduced to the bare minimum portions.”
- “No one sleeps. It’s constant banging on gates or screaming all night long. You’re fed through a slot (hole) in the door.”
- “God forbid if you have children coming to see you because you are locked in a cage and shackled the entire visit.”
- “Solitary confinement eliminates social interaction and causes anti-social behaviors. It causes more aggression, more harm, than good.”

- “You adapt to the animalistic treatment, in turn losing a grip on sanity.”
- “Confinement causes mental breakdown. Psychotic behavior. Insomnia.”

The men who shared these words with me are extraordinary and like all the alumni of BPI and other such programs are poised to make substantial, meaningful contributions to society. We mess them up at our peril. But not just them. All people in jails and prisons deserve to be treated humanely and they do *not* deserve to endure conditions that traumatize, that will damage them further, rendering them dysfunctional, antisocial and more likely to fail upon release.

Slippery slope – we are not going to have confinement except when we really have to or only for the very least amount of time necessary. These are dangerous terms because these are the terms that make a wedge, that open up the possibility for situations like one of my students who was in solitary from 2001 to 2004. Three years. That’s inhuman. That’s totalitarian. We’ve seen that happen in China with the Uighurs. You cannot have this happen. It is immoral. It is wrong. It doesn’t work.