

Prisoner Narratives

Introduction:

Solitary Confinement v. AdSeg in Missouri *by Hedy Harden*

A November 9, 2018 article in the Scientific American entitled “Neuroscientists Make a Case against Solitary Confinement” talks about how prolonged social isolation can do severe, long-lasting damage to the brain.

The article talks about Robert King, one of the “Angola Three” who spent 29 years living alone in a 6 x 9 foot prison cell. Angola prison in Louisiana is named after the plantation it used to be, where many of the slaves were from the African country of Angola. The “Angola Three” were framed for the killing of another prisoner because they fought for humanitarian treatment as members of the Black Panther Party.

Released in 2001 after a judge over-turned his 1973 conviction, King has dedicated his life since his exoneration to raising awareness about the psychological harms of solitary confinement.

“People want to know whether or not I have psychological problems, whether or not I’m crazy—‘How did you not go insane?’” King told a packed session at the annual Society for Neuroscience meeting. “I look at them and I tell them, ‘I did not tell you I was not insane.’ I don’t mean I was psychotic or anything like that, but being placed in a six by nine by 12-foot cell for 23 hours a day, no matter how you appear on the outside, you are not sane.”

The article estimates that 80,000 prisoners are in solitary confinement in the U.S., but I suspect the number is much higher. For instance, I wonder if that number includes all the prisoners locked down in what Missouri calls administrative segregation (or adseg), where most are forced to cell with another prisoner.



Imagine living in that same tiny cell with another person—who may be your sworn enemy—cramped in with you. Missouri Revised Statute 217.375 requires that an “offender in an **administrative segregation unit...shall be situated so that the segregation of such offender from the other offenders of the correctional facility is complete.**” Despite the clear wording of this law, Missouri has practiced forced double celling in segregation for decades.

Even if not strictly solitary, such confinement constitutes **social isolation and sensory deprivation**. This, according to neuroscientists, can exact severe physical, emotional and cognitive consequences.

Besides sharing such a tiny space, being forced to cell with another person in segregation can be worse than being alone for many reasons:

- A person often needs time alone to think about what one wants to do with one’s life
- Double-celling promotes homosexuality in many ways
- There is no privacy
- “Cabin fever” can increase conflicts
- Cellies see each other on the toilet, with no partition or separation
- Male prisoners in adseg are only allowed to wear boxers, sometimes with a t-shirt
- Often men have been locked up so long that they get aroused just seeing flesh on another human being
- Some men masturbate while in the bunk with their cellie
- People get raped, assaulted, even killed, in lockdown conditions

Often petty conduct violations are characterized as major ones to make room in general population.

Mentally ill prisoners are subject to be put in adseg for “acting out,” which may be a symptom of their illnesses. Whether or not mentally ill when put in segregation, the conditions can bring about or exacerbate mental illness.

Many Missouri prisoners have remained in adseg for years at a time. Two men wrongfully convicted of killing a guard back in 1975 were locked down for 17 years before being released to population. The United Nations recommends banning solitary confinement for more than 15 days, saying any longer constitutes torture.

A common practice in Missouri prisons is to place prisoners in adseg for “investigation” for up to 6 months, without being found guilty of anything. They are stripped of privileges—including contact visits, phone calls, personal property, and access to canteen purchases—and placed in conditions that can be cruel and hostile.

Some prisoners are placed under investigation as retaliation for filing grievances or speaking out against abuses. After a period of lockdown, they may be released and charges dropped. Or they may be transferred to another prison as further punishment.

One Missouri prisoner described conditions in adseg as follows:

“There is a rodent infestation due to trash not being cleared, and coffee, milk and juice cover the floors most of the day or longer. The mice live in the walls and in the utility closets between cells.

“We are forced to live in cells with individuals who many times do not get along with each other. As of 8/17/18 many convicts requested PC (protective custody) to get out of these hostile cell arrangements, but due to the overcrowding of the adseg housing units there is nowhere else an inmate can be placed. If (one) refuses the same cell he came out of, he is punished with a conduct violation and disciplined.”

A common form of discipline in ad-seg is described as follows:

“We are forced to sit on an iron bench with our hands handcuffed behind our backs, attached to the bench, and our legs shackled to the bench. The hand-cuffs and shackles are so tight that they result in bloody incisions and bruises to our hands and ankles.”

Medical personnel are supposed to check handcuffs and shackles to make sure the prisoners are not in pain.

“They either refuse to comply or look past the fact that our wrists are bleeding. We are refused all meals, and water as well, while on the bench and are given limited bathroom breaks, some-times resulting in inmates urinating or defecating on themselves.”

Prisoners living in such conditions have made a list of issues they are asking the administration to resolve as follows:

- 1) Relief of overcrowding in adseg units by:
 - a) Limiting investigation to 45 days
 - b) Letting individuals out of adseg after their disciplinary segregation terms are over
 - c) Ending “term adseg” (which is used in Missouri as punitive in addition to disciplinary segregation)
- 2) Access to incentives found in other Missouri prisons for those assigned to long-term indeterminate adseg confinement and those placed under investigation:
 - a) Possession of personal property (appliances, books, clothes, etc.)
 - b) Ability to buy food and all hygiene products from canteen
- 3) Access to privileges for those placed under investigation:
 - a) Ability to use phone at least 3 times a week
 - b) Allow contact visits at least twice a month.

This article barely skims the surface of the inhumanities that are wrought upon prisoners in segregation. Beatings by guards are common, especially against prisoners who speak out against abuses. Any campaign against solitary confinement must also fight to eliminate the conditions of forced double celling in administrative segregation.

