

OP: The Shu

Damien Brooks

*Staff Reporter*

Everyday, people are subjected to mental and physical torture at the hands of our legal system. The U.S. incarcerates people at higher and faster rates than any other countries. According to the Washington Post, the U.S. makes up only about 5 percent of the world's population, but holds 25 percent of the world's prisoners. The rate at which the U.S. incarcerates people is three times higher than that of Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, while being five times higher than that of Japan. The U.S. incarcerates 478 people for every 100 thousand. The individuals whom this mainly affects are people of color, who make up about 59 percent of the prison population. More specifically, it affects people who identify as Black and African American.

According to the NAACP's national website, African Americans are 5 times more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts. This rate of mass incarceration perpetuates a system of injustice and reinforces the desire for punishment. The punishment I speak of is not simply just going to prison, but a form of punishment that takes place behind the walls of the facility, this punishment is a form of isolation known as solitary confinement.

The dictionary defines solitary confinement as "the isolation of a prisoner in a separate cell as punishment." It's a form of torture where an individual is locked away in a 6-by-8-foot cell for 22-23 hours a day, with no human contact. They aren't allowed to participate in any activities or even allowed to read in some cases. They are forced to sit alone with their thoughts for at least 22 hours a day, until their time in isolation is over. People spend anywhere from one day, to several decades in solitary confinement.

Based on the timeline provided by NPR, solitary was created in 1829. They would place people in cells with just a bible, and said that the time spent there was meant for them to repent and think about their actions. However, after several people reported going insane, committing suicide, or not being able to function socially after being released, the practice was abandoned. Over 150 years later, in 1983, two correctional officers were murdered at an Illinois state prison. After the incident, the prison was placed under a permanent lockdown, placing individuals under a 23-hour-a-day cell isolation. Thus paving the way for modern-day solitary confinement.

Soon after, prisons all around the nation had begun putting solitary confinement cells within their facilities. Some states even began building prisons strictly for the purpose of solitary confinement, for example Pelican Bay was originally designed for the sole purpose of placing individuals under 22-hour lockdown for years or even decades at a time. Solitary confinement is meant to be used as a last resort for individuals who are unable to commune with the general population, usually because that individual has committed a violent act while incarcerated.

However, people have been placed in the box for a wide variety of reasons such as talking back, having cigarettes, talking to a suspected gang member or sometimes for nothing at all. The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that there are currently over 80 thousand people in solitary confinement today. Which means that there are over 80 thousand people at risk of suffering from hallucinations, insomnia, paranoia, uncontrollable feelings of rage and fear, suicide and PTSD.

The effects of solitary are amplified for juveniles and those who suffer from mental illness. Placing someone with a mental illness into solitary and then releasing them into society is not only detrimental to themselves, but it is also a threat to public safety and community health. Solitary also severely damages the developing brains of juveniles, making them unable to create the social skills needed to interact within society. This form of legal torture must be eradicated, it has not been proven to produce any forms of deterrence or positive reinforcement. Which is why it was originally dismissed as a form of punishment in the early 1800s. In recent years, the move to end solitary confinement has been supported by many people, such as President Obama, Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, and Pope Francis. The U.S. Senate is also doing its part by calling for reform from the U.S. Bureau of Prisons. Solitary confinement must end, it is a threat to our communities, an infringement on human rights, a form of legal torture.