

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

February 11, 2014

Assemblymember Tom Ammiano and Senator Loni Hancock, Chairpersons
Joint Legislative Committee Hearing on Solitary Confinement
Sacramento, CA

To the Joint Legislative Committee Hearing on Solitary Confinement:

Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) is profoundly concerned about the use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons, including those in California. As psychologists, other mental health professionals, and behavioral scientists, we stand firmly against the use of solitary confinement as it has been proven to be destructive to mental health, even in relatively short periods. The use of solitary confinement is even more harmful when used for longer periods. As such, solitary confinement can be considered cruel, unusual and inhumane treatment, which is in violation of U.S. law.

[Dr. Craig Haney](#), a psychologist and expert in the assessment of institutional environments has written:

Empirical research on solitary and supermax-like confinement has consistently and unequivocally documented the harmful consequences of living in these kinds of environments. ...Evidence of these negative psychological effects comes from personal accounts, descriptive studies, and systematic research on solitary and supermax-type confinement, conducted over a period of four decades, by researchers from several different continents who had diverse backgrounds and a wide range of professional expertise...[D]irect studies of prison isolation have documented an extremely broad range of harmful psychological reactions . . . (pp. 130-131, references removed).

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture, [Juan E. Méndez](#), called for banning solitary confinement when used as a punishment or extortion technique in October of 2011. In his report to the UN, he stated, "Solitary confinement is a harsh measure which is contrary to rehabilitation, the aim of the penitentiary system."

The most recent report of the [UN Committee against Torture](#) included in its Conclusions and Recommendations for the United States the following article 36:

The Committee remains concerned about the extremely harsh regime imposed on detainees in "supermaximum prisons". The Committee is concerned about the prolonged isolation periods detainees are subjected to, the effect such treatment has on their mental health, and that its purpose may be retribution, in which case it would constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (art. 16).

The State party should review the regime imposed on detainees in "supermaximum prisons", in particular the practice of prolonged isolation. (Emphasis in original.)

Decades of psychological research have established the severe psychological effects of solitary confinement. Thus, Psychologists for Social Responsibility believes that solitary confinement should only be used as a rare last resort for periods short enough to not cause psychological harm. We join the UN Committee against Torture and the United Nations Special Rapporteur in calling for a total ban on prolonged solitary confinement.

Respectfully,

The Steering Committee of Psychologists for Social Responsibility

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