



CFYJ Submits Testimony to Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Solitary Confinement

WASHINGTON (February 25, 2014) - Assistant Majority Leader Dick Durbin (D-IL) held a second hearing on the use of solitary confinement in American prisons, jails and detention centers.

The hearing was held before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights, entitled "*Reassessing Solitary Confinement II: The Human Rights, Fiscal, and Public Safety Consequences*," examined the widespread use of solitary confinement for federal, state, and local prisoners and detainees.

Leaders of the panel called on federal and state prison authorities to ban the use of solitary confinement for juveniles, pregnant women and the mentally ill as part of a national reassessment of the harshest method of incarceration. Citing the country's extensive use of solitary confinement since the 1980s, Durbin said the extreme conditions contribute to the gradual deterioration of prisoners' mental health. Durbin said more than half of prison suicides take place in solitary.

The United States now holds far more prisoners in solitary than any other nation. Researchers estimate that roughly 250,000 youth are prosecuted in the adult criminal justice system every year and on any given day, approximately 10,000 youth are held in adult jails and prisons. The policy of many jails and prisons to "protect" youth from these conditions is solitary confinement. Many children who are placed in isolation experience harmful consequences, for some children this has meant death. Youth are frequently locked down 23 hours a day in small cells with no natural light. These conditions can cause anxiety, paranoia, and exacerbate existing mental disorders and put youth at risk of suicide. In fact, youth housed in adult jails are 36 times more likely to commit suicide than are youth housed in juvenile detention facilities.

Among the speakers was Damon Thibodeaux, a former Louisiana death-row prisoner who spent 15 years in solitary confinement, for 23 hours a day, before being exonerated in 2012. His cell in a Louisiana jail was 8-by-10 feet with three solid white walls, a toilet, sink, a bed, desk, and chair. Thibodeaux says he had five total visits in his 15 years in solitary.

"I do not condone what those who have killed and committed other serious offenses have done, but I also don't condone what we do to them when we put them in solitary for years on end and treat them as subhuman," Thibodeaux. "We are better than that. As a civilized society, we should be better than that."

Rick Raemisch, Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Corrections also testified. Raemisch spent more than 20 hours locked down in Colorado's administrative segregation unit and published an account of that "mind-numbing" experience.

"This isn't a way to treat an American, we are failing in this area of our mission," he said.

Piper Kerman, the author of the memoir-turned-Netflix-hit, *Orange is the New Black*, testified that though she never spent time in solitary confinement during her 13-month stint in federal prison, women behind bars describe it as a "prison within a prison."

Prison staff, Kerman told the senators in attendance, could keep inmates in solitary confinement for as long as they wanted. Kerman offered the account of a female inmate who did spend time in solitary in her testimony. The woman, Kerman said, felt remorse for her crimes, but "most of all I felt sorry that there wasn't a rope to kill myself, because every day was worse than the last."

Other testimonies were given by: Charles E. Samuels, Jr., Federal Bureau of Prisons; The Honorable Craig DeRoche, Justice Fellowship; and Marc Levin, Center for Effective Justice Texas Public Policy Foundation.

The hearing explored developments since the 2012 hearing, and what more should be done to curb the overuse of solitary confinement while controlling costs, protecting human rights, and improving public safety.

To view this hearing, click [here](#).

Written testimony from the Campaign for Youth Justice can be found [here](#).

Additional written testimonies from CFYJ friends and spokespeople can be found here:

[Statement from Sue Burrell, Youth Law Center, Staff Attorney](#)

[Statement from Grace Warren, Advocate for Juvenile and Adult Criminal Justice](#)