



## U.S. needs prison reform

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More than once, the late Supreme Court Justice William Brennan told me: “This nation will not be civilized until it ends the death penalty.”

But how civilized are we now, when, according to extended research by the Center for Constitutional Rights:

“Tens of thousands of individuals across the country are detained inside cramped, concrete, windowless cells in a state of near-total solitude for between 22 and 24 hours a day. The cells have a toilet and a shower, and a slot in the door large enough for a guard to slip a food tray through.

“Prisoners in solitary confinement are frequently deprived of telephone calls and contact visits. ‘Recreation’ involves being taken, often in handcuffs and shackles, to another solitary cell where prisoners can pace alone for an hour before being returned to their cell.”

Says Luis Esquivel, a prisoner plaintiff in a CCR lawsuit: “I feel dead. It’s been 13 years since I have shaken someone’s hand, and I feel I’ll forget the feel of human contact.”

The Center for Constitutional Rights, which I have been referring to in my column for years, continues: “Researchers have demonstrated that prolonged solitary confinement causes a persistent and heightened state of anxiety and nervousness, headaches, insomnia, lethargy or chronic tiredness, nightmares, heart palpitations, and fear of impending nervous breakdowns,” among other things.

Is this civilized, legal punishment in these United States?

I will be surprised if a candidate for the presidency or any public office in 2016 brings up the issue of solitary confinement while campaigning.

Meantime, let’s look into what the New York state prison system is doing to humanize solitary confinement.

In a 2014 New York Times lead editorial, we learn that corrections officials have at least agreed “to new guidelines for the maximum length prisoners may be placed in solitary.”

And dig this for what should be a national standard: “The state will also curb the use of solitary for the most vulnerable groups of inmates.

“Those younger than 18 will receive at least five hours of exercise and other programming outside their cell five days a week, making New York the largest prison system yet to end the most extreme form of isolation for juveniles.”

Moreover, “solitary confinement will be presumptively prohibited for pregnant women, and inmates with developmental disabilities will be held there for no more than 30 days.”

The Times’ next revelation may shame some of us who believe that the United States, for all its faults, is at least more civilized in its official punishments than other nations:

“This (information on solitary confinement) will come as no surprise to most other advanced nations, where solitary confinement is used sparingly, if at all. A 2011 United Nations report called for the banning of the practice in all but extraordinary circumstances, and even then only for a maximum of 15 days.”

At long last, the U.N. is a role model for us!

Furthermore, this may not surprise you: “Prison guards are opposed to the changes, fearing a breakdown in prison order and risk to their own safety.”

However, they should be told that “states like Maine and Mississippi have substantially reduced the use of solitary as punishment without an increase in prison violence.”

One last thing to keep in mind about solitary confinement: “Ninety-five percent of prisoners,” says this Times editorial, “eventually return to society, (and) it is crucial that their treatment while in prison give them the best chance possible to succeed on the outside.”

So why on earth don’t we help secure this return?

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