

VOICES FROM SOLITARY CONFINEMENT IN NEW YORK STATE

Torture in the Box

The SHU is intended to be mental torture. It is designed to break you. There is constant noise, arguing, and yelling. There are no rehabilitation processes at all. What is the sense of being here? There is no purpose other than painful idleness and mental anguish. Where's the rehabilitation? **I have been in solitary confinement nearly 11 years.** The box is starting to get to me. I suffer from anxiety. Very often, I will all of a sudden start having fast-paced breathing and I can't stop it. I have begun to suffer high blood pressure after being in the box. I also suffer from hallucinations some times. I think people are calling my name or I think I see people walking by, but there is no one there. Last week, I heard a train going by and no one else heard it. It makes you so crazy! **The box plays tricks on your mind.** I also suffer from outbursts. I will make a big deal out of something that is not a big deal, getting angry over some minor, trivial thing. Some guys definitely go nuts in here. This box has a major impact on my family too. **I haven't been able to hug my Mom in 10 years.** My biggest fear is that I will get a letter saying that my Mom has passed away. I have to see my fiancé and my fiancé's daughter through a gate. That is the only way that little girl knows me. Yesterday was my birthday. It was really hard to spend my birthday in this box, alone, without any of my family or any other human being. Something has got to change...No one else should have to endure this torture in the box. — Attica, more than 11 years in solitary confinement

Buried in a Cage

I have spent the last four years in solitary confinement. **Being in the SHU is torture. If you don't have anything to do in a cell, you go crazy.** You start reading things on the wall. You lose touch with reality and have to snap yourself back. **This prison can demolish the sensibility of a man.** All around you, there are always people banging on their gates and yelling expletives to each other. The noise itself can drive you crazy. I try to create earplugs for myself from tissues and saran wrap, but you can't fully block out that noise. I rarely ever go to recreation. In the winter, it is cold and so I don't like to go out. I sometimes go in the summer, but recreation only means going to an empty cage so I often do not see the point. So most days I spend 24 hours a day in my cell. I try to still better myself while I am in the SHU. I read a lot, mostly about philosophy and self-help. I also have a passion for writing poetry. And I write to my wife, my children, and my parents. I also get lots of visits from my family, which really helps me a lot. My family members are so strong and wonderful to come to visit me. But even with all of these efforts, the SHU takes its toll. **I suffer from anxiety and a lot of stress. I have trouble sleeping and have lost a lot of weight in the SHU. I also am on the OMH caseload.** Overall, **I feel buried in a cage. This is torture, plain and simple. Something has to be done to stop the torture of SHU.** —Great Meadow, more than four years in SHU

Sources: Correctional Association of NY, <http://www.correctionalassociation.org/news/voices-from-attica-2>; <http://www.correctionalassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Testimony-by-Jack-Beck-11-13-2014-re-Mental-Health-Services-FINAL.pdf>

Questionable Diagnoses of People in SHU

They give too much SHU time for tickets, and I don't care who you are, **long term SHU affects you mentally.** Then when you try to get some mental help, they say you're faking. I been in prison 25 years and it affected me mentally but **mental health thinks everyone is faking.** **Also since they now have to put you in a mental health program if you are diagnosed with certain things, they just don't diagnose you with it.** They just say its depression. I cut my wrist in Upstate, and I feel depressed a lot. **Most of the time I wish that I would go to sleep and never wake up. I lay there at night and think of different ways to kill myself.** I'm very unhappy with my life and I don't think it will ever get better. —Clinton, unspecified amount of time in SHU

The Mental Health Impact of SHU

The impact [of SHU] has made me hate the world. Hate authority and administration. Lost my ability to have emotion or to show feeling. Very anti-social...**I've withdrawn from family and friends and lost a lot of my passion for life. SHU has become the cruelest punishment and has stripped my ability to feel like a human.** All I have is thoughts of hurting people out of anger for this whole prison system. **In no way am I innocent, but I am not an animal either.** We should not be treated like scum because of our mistakes. SHU in no way works as a deterrent to anything. It de-sensitizes emotions and feelings and only makes a person worse. It cuts you off from family and friends and acts as a trigger to suppressed anxiety, aggression and depression. **Solitary confinement should not be used as a weapon.** It gives authority a false sense of control and allows mistreatment to go unchallenged. This confinement is demoralizing in every aspect. If it does anything, it's only to make a person hate and become filled with aggression and the lack of care for anyone or anything. In which case it only makes those returning home a more dangerous person...**It's a terrible idea and way of life and should be banned from prison.**

—Green Haven, more than eight years in SHU

I Would Rather Die Than Go Through SHU

My many SHU stays add up to a total of over 10 years. I have just become a real mental mess. There is no help. I am college educated and yet all my past childhood sexual abuse and rape combined with being trapped in these places forces my PTSD and more. To the point where I want to just die. **So dark and depressed.** I am currently an OMH Level 2 patient. I talk to mental health once a month, but it does little to relieve the main underlying matters. I never go to recreation – it is too much trouble to go. I suffer from anxiety, depression, and hallucinations. I have sensitivity to sights and sounds, and feel disoriented and paranoia. I have lost weight and have trouble sleeping. I also am a "cutter." I feel the need to end my life and the need to cut myself. Last month, I cut open my wrist while I was in the SHU. I was sent to an RCTP and then back to SHU. **It is hard to put into words the impact solitary confinement has had on me.** I have had a full mental break down to the point **I would rather die than go through SHU.**

—Southport, 11 consecutive months in SHU and 10 total years in SHU