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Former New York City Correction officer (1987-1999)
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My name is Lorenzo Steele Jr. and I am a former New York City Corrections officer that served the department during the years 1987-1999. These were the most violent years in Rikers Island history. I worked at the adolescent reception detention center (ARDC), and we averaged 30-40 razor slashings a month. Working in a violent and abusive environment, solitary confinement was an area that was used to separate attackers from the general population detainees. I worked several tours and later was a steady officer in the adolescent solitary unit.

I write this letter because, resigning from the department after serving 12 years, I now look at solitary through "different eyes". I look at solitary from the eyes of a civilian and now an advocate, bringing awareness to mass incarceration and youth in solitary confinement.

First, many do not realize that during those years, 1987-1999, officers were not trained in mental health, counseling, or to be social workers. Our job and responsibility was to make sure detainees followed the institution's rules. As an officer, I didn't see that young men were "suffering in silence", locked in an 8 foot by 6 concrete coffin. A good day in the unit is where 33 adolescents are not banging on the cell door, flooding their cells, or setting their clothes and mattresses on fire. This was a disrespect for officers and many officers were "heavy handed" and used force as discipline.

What I now realize is that humans need physical contact. Locked in an 8 feet by 6 feet coffin removes all contact from an individual, which becomes a form of torture. I had to ask God for forgiveness for the things I was aware of and things I wasn't. My solitary experience I will never forget and it will be a cross on my back forever. Not knowing young men were suffering in their small cell, not receiving counseling, treatment or compassion. Inside the small cell detainees had to deal with themselves for the first time, it's like the cartoons with the devil on one side and God on the other, both trying to survive. Many detainees choose the "dark path" and created ways to get out of the cell. Sometimes this meant throwing feces on other detainees or officers taking a tour. Many flooded their cells by breaking their toilet and many set mattresses on fire. At this time, the officer has to open the small cell to put the fire out or stop the flood. At this time, the officer has to open the cell to let the detainee out. I now realize that it was his mind that told him to do anything to get out this cell.

Out of his cell, many times detainees were beat because it was a disrespect to the officer. The detainee now has to go to the clinic for medical treatment. He's free out of the small cell for only a short while until he has to be taken back. Some detainees go so far to get out of their cell they will swallow razors, batteries, slash their wrist, and even put a rope around their necks taking their own life. This is what happens in solitary.

As I write this letter someone is suffering in silence and has committed suicide. Karma works in mysterious ways. My son was arrested for a parole violation as was housed on Rikers Island,

this happened years after I resigned. I received a call from his mother that he was assaulted by a corrections officer and she wanted him transferred to solitary. The department transferred him to the same facility (ARDC) where I worked for 12 years. He was in solitary for 2 months and I never forget what he told me. He shared that there was an officer that came by his cell at night just to talk to him. This, he said, keep him sane and from committing suicide, which he had thoughts of. This is the same thing that Kalief Browder went through, he just wanted someone to talk to.

As I close this letter, I wish I would have talked to the young detainees I was in charge of, but I didn't, and it will be a cross on my back. It still haunts me. I see the faces, hear the yelling and screams in that unit. Individuals in solitary cells across America are more than inmates, prisoners, and convicts, they are human-beings in a small cell without a voice. I am now one of those voices.

I want to ask a question, what would you do if you received a phone call in the middle of the night and your adolescent child was arrested? You would want your child to be safe from jail harm by officers and other detainees. What if your child had to be taken to a jail? You would want your child safe from the violent jail population. They would be placed in solitary, locked in a cell for 23 hours. You would want them to be "looked after". You would find someone on a higher level that could make that happen. This is what my son's mother did and this is what you would do as a concerned parent. Please have the compassion for individuals in solitary that we have for our children. As an elected official, you have the power to save the life of someone in solitary confinement, you have the power to stop someone from self-mutilation and committing suicide.

This is my favorite bible verse, I hope it finds your heart, Hebrews 13:3 "Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body". May God bless you and your decision on this matter.

For all of the above reasons and more, the proposed regulations by the Governor and the State Commission of Correction are deeply problematic and much more needs to be done to end the torture of solitary confinement for all people. In order to benefit both Correction Officers and people who are incarcerated, the Governor and the New York Legislature should pass the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, A. 3080 / S. 4784, and in the meantime the State Commission of Correction should adopt HALT's provisions as its new regulations

I had to put faces to this letter. I am the officer in the photo that wrote this letter and the young adolescent behind the cell door is a 15-year-old locked in solitary for 23 hours, God bless.