Statement on Solitary Confinement in the United States

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I am a professor of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who has been studying the psychological effects of imprisonment in general, and solitary confinement in particular, for more than four decades. Because of my role as an expert witness in numerous legal cases challenging the constitutionality of prison conditions, I speak from the unique perspective of someone who been given unprecedented, court-ordered access to solitary confinement units in more than half the state jurisdictions and many federal facilities throughout the United States, where I have interviewed thousands of persons confined in them.

I can tell you from direct experience that normative conditions of solitary confinement in the United States range from truly terrible to shockingly bad. Prisoners in these units are typically housed on average upwards of 22 hours a day, often in filthy cells that are the size of small bathrooms or car parking spaces, are denied access to meaningful social contact and human touch, lack access to meaningful programming, activities, and positive environmental stimulation. In varying ways and degrees, everyone subjected to these deprivations suffers physically and mentally.

Exposure to these conditions presses far beyond the outer bounds of what most humans can psychologically tolerate, serious forms of mental illness are caused or exacerbated by this exposure, including widespread depression, acute anxiety disorders, cognitive dysfunction, uncontrollable rage, paranoia and psychosis, and self-harm and suicidality (the latter of which occur in solitary confinement units at far higher rates than anywhere else in prison). It is not uncommon in these units to encounter prisoners who have smeared themselves with feces, sit catatonic in puddles of their own urine on the floors of their cells, or shriek wildly and bang their fists or their heads against the walls that contain them. In some cases, the reactions are even more tragic and bizarre, including grotesque forms of self-harm and mutilation—prisoners who have amputated parts of their own bodies or inserted tubes and other objects into their penises—and are often met with an institutional matter-of-factness that is as disturbing as the behaviors themselves.

These are not isolated or extreme experiences. There are an estimated 100,000 persons who are currently suffering and being harmed in these draconian, dismal, and dehumanizing places in the USA. Yet the nation lacks any overarching system that mandates monitoring and oversight to protect the persons housed in these dismal, dehumanizing, and damaging places. The application of international principles of dignity and human rights is desperately needed to address these profound injustices.