



Torture At Home: Documentary On Solitary Confinement in U.S. Prisons Misses the Mark

By Alexandra Smith, AlterNet

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Rarely do the horrors of solitary confinement get a spotlight as bright as the National Geographic's "Explorer: Solitary Confinement." Despite the 80,000 Americans who live for months or years cut off from the world and even the rest of the prison population, we are much more likely to hear about torture overseas and at U.S. prisons abroad. Scant attention is paid to the torturous practices in domestic prisons.

This new documentary, aired last Sunday, provided a window in to the isolated world of people suffering alone in solitary confinement. It debunked some myths of solitary, especially how many individuals in solitary confinement aren't charged with violent crimes, but end up in solitary confinement after not complying with prison regulations.

Movingly, Dr. Stuart Grassian discussed how the most vulnerable individuals, in most need of support, tend to end up in solitary confinement. The isolation has a worsening effect on people, he explained, leading them to exhibit more impulsive, violent behavior as a result.

"Ninety-five percent of these people will get out and be released back on the streets. All isolation will have done is make them as violent, crazy and dangerous as possible when they get out," he said. Josue Gonzales, who spent seven of his 20 year sentence in Colorado State Penitentiary, said of living in isolation: "It does seem to break something inside you."

Unfortunately, the documentary also depicted a "dilemma" of prison officials struggling with a "dangerous" population, while omitting the abuse the incarcerated often face at the hands of guards. Even more disappointingly, staff at Colorado State Penitentiary seems to rely on isolation as the sole solution for dealing with non-compliant prisoners even though many people's behavior tends to worsen as a result.

And watchers could have missed that ending this practice is a real time problem -- just last week, Colorado's legislature decided to spend \$9.37 million adding 316 solitary confinement cells to Colorado State Penitentiary, while cutting back on services for prisoners such as re-entry programs and mental health services.

National Geographic also held an online “experiment” this past week to depict what it is “like to watch three people voluntarily spend a week living completely alone in an 8 by 10 room” -- and they missed the mark even further.

While National Geographic is well intentioned in educating the public about the horrors of solitary confinement, for those new to understanding life in solitary, this depiction of a voluntary vacation into boredom and talking to yourself may have caused more harm than good. Unsurprisingly, media reports focused on the voyeuristic, gabbing about living in solitary like a reality TV competition. A friend commented that the cells didn't seem “so horrible after all” and that it would be more torturous if people were in the dark.

In particular, National Geographic left out three aspects of solitary confinement in their experiment that define the experience of living in “the box.” First, solitary confinement is not a choice for most people in prison. While some alone time may be tolerable for the National Geographic participants, removing a person's agency makes the cramped space quickly feel like a suffocating trap.

Second, unlike these volunteers, prisoners in solitary confinement don't have in the back of their minds that they can leave isolation on a whim. Most people end up in solitary confinement for long periods of time, with additional time added to their sentence if they act out as their mental state begins to deteriorate, as it inevitably does. Escaping the box is only a distant fantasy to those forced to languish there for years at a time.

Finally, these volunteers are not truly alone. They knew that people were watching them online; they could tweet and knew they had an audience. In contrast, the 4,300 people placed in isolation in New York are essentially voiceless. Some get to write letters and occasionally meet with visitors, but human contact is limited to guards, who are often abusive. Time away from cells is just one hour of “recreation” alone in cement cages, often without exercise equipment. Traveling from their cells to “rec,” prisoners are shackled, and many of them choose just not to leave their isolation at all.

On top of all that, people with mental illness disproportionately end up in solitary confinement. In New York State, an increasing number of people with mental illness are ending up in the prison system. Although designed and operated as places of punishment, as a result of the de-institutionalization process prisons have become de facto psychiatric facilities, but still often lack the needed mental health services. While the prison population has been decreasing, the population of people with mental illness has increased over the last few years.

People with mental illness fare less well in prison overall and tend to remain in solitary longer. The size of the room is not the biggest challenge for these individuals; it's the isolation, the lack of human contact, and the abuse from guards which prove to be most menacing. Even without any mental illness when a person enters solitary confinement, they are likely to develop psychiatric symptoms once in there.

Unsurprisingly, suicides occur more frequently in solitary confinement than elsewhere in prison. The National Geographic volunteers did not replicate that experience. I watched them juggling, and laughing, surrounded by comforting amenities in the cell, including omelets for breakfast and steak for dinner. That is not the reality of life in the real box.

We have made some progress in New York. In 2007, the Disability Advocates Inc. won a lawsuit requiring that people with mental illness in solitary confinement in New York be provided with more treatment outside of the box. And in 2008 then Governor Spitzer signed legislation requiring that people with mental illness be diverted from solitary confinement. Unfortunately, those prisoners have to wait until 2011 for the law to be implemented.

National Geographic deserves applause for shedding light on the issue of solitary confinement. While the documentary proved a powerful expose, their experiment missed the reality that that people are suffering in the box, with no support, forgotten and alone. While I hope these efforts sparked conversation, by omitting such key aspects, National Geographic's risked perpetuating misconceptions about the ease of what it is to be in solitary confinement in the U.S.

Alexandra Smith is a criminal justice advocate at the Mental Health Project at the Urban Justice Center. She is also the coordinator of Mental Health Alternatives to Solitary Confinement, (MHASC), and is a member of Rights for Imprisoned People with Psychiatric Disabilities, (RIPPD).

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