

## EXILED IN PURGATORY : A FAILED SYSTEM

Having been incarcerated continuously for more than 21 years, since the age of 19, in more than 18 jails and prisons in five states, I have seen my share of a wide variety of prison policies and ideologies in practice. I am originally an Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC) prisoner. Since May 2007 the ODOC has transferred me to Oklahoma, New Mexico and Florida under the Interstate Corrections Compact (ICC). In 2003 I had been transferred, temporarily, to the Ada County Jail in Idaho.

More than 20 years of my time has been in isolation and solitary confinement. With each placement in solitary I felt my sanity slip and my mind detach from reality. I spent 13 years in Oregon's "Intensive Management Unit" with nothing but a radio. When I was moved to Oklahoma I was allowed to have a t.v. in my cell. The first time I turned it on I felt as if I was having a sensory overload from colors, sound, news of the world. I actually cried.

In isolation I have become more aggressive, verbally blunted, and developed mood swings. I've watched deaths, abuses by guards, violence by prisoners and every type of behavior of every possible color and degree. In 2009 I was diagnosed with PTSD, which the psychiatrist stated was exacerbated by solitary confinement.

I believe the arguments against solitary confinement are well grounded. I'm not saying that because I'm subject to it, but because of experience. I also believe there are some

prisoners who need to be segregated to protect other prisoners and staff. The problem is, prisons over use it. While it gives prison administrators a quick fix to immediate prison security needs, it has no genuine affect on the reduction of prison violence. In fact, ample data now shows it actually increases violence not only in prisons but in the communities where prisoners are released.

A prime example of this occurred in 2011 when David "Joey" Pedersen, an Oregon prisoner, who had been incarcerated since the age of 15 under Oregon's "Measure 11" mandatory minimum laws, that allow juveniles as young as 15 to be charged as adults, went on a three state killing spree resulting in four deaths only six months after his release from Oregon's I.M.U. Pedersen had spent more than 13 years in solitary confinement and was indoctrinated by the Aryan Soldiers, a white supremacy group, whose members are all confined largely to isolation due to their propensity for violence.

I have seen case after case like Pedersen's. First time offenders isolated for years who progressively deteriorate, are released, and commit violent crimes. I've seen it in myself. I have become so accustomed to solitary confinement I can't function in a general population setting longer than 60 days. Leaving my cell I have anxiety attacks and paranoia. In my cell the slightest noise startles me and sends me into a rage. I have become emotionally and intellectually blunted. I often dream of the Death Penalty, as it would be a better way to go than this hell. That's not how a prison system should function.

It boggles the mind why any government would choose to continue down the path of a failed prison philosophy. It is a pattern of negligent political decision making reflected in other U.S. arenas, such as the choice to

continually be involved in one failed "war" or another. Each one proving a failure and loss to tax payers. A good example of this is the decades long "war on drugs". Now states are legalizing and decriminalizing marijuana, as well as taxing it at huge profits.

The U.S. lacks a meaningful and affective strategy for prison policy reform. This is due largely to the decline in a representative government and the growth of a two party dictatorship. Take Norway's Halden Prison, for example, which has adopted a radical humaneness practice that is alien to the U.S. prison system in comparison. Yet, as a result, Norway has shown it reduces crime and reoffending. These ideologies are night and day. Norway formally ran its prisons like the U.S. until 1998, then it began a series of radical changes in its penological philosophy putting a focus on rehabilitation, education, job training, therapy and reintegration. The U.S., on the other hand, has continued with a philosophy of harsh sentences, an overreliance on solitary confinement, and racial and economic disparities in incarceration. Norway has proven their method reduces recidivism while the U.S. has seen increases of more than 600% in some situations.

Ironically, Norway's penological approach was once considered by the U.S. In 1967 Lyndon B. Johnson put together a panel that resulted in a report, "The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society", that made recommendations to adopt a penological philosophy that would have resembled the Halden model. Of course, true to U.S. form, the recommendations were not adopted and the U.S., as a consequence, now has the world's largest prison population.

What U.S. citizens are getting for their "tough on crime" practices is a prison population that is getting so bad we now have reality t.v. shows on it. A system that

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warehouses and destroy's the individual by destroying their mind. What you get is an individual, like myself, so mentally deteriorated from isolation they cannot function outside a prison cell. You get a David "Joey" Pedersen who is released to your neighborhood worse than when he went in, who then goes on a killing spree.

Criminals are not the only problem, it is also the poorly ran justice system. And, frankly, until we get someone with the fortitude to change the system, society hasnt seen anything yet.