Building a National Campaign to End Long-Term Solitary Confinement

Checklist for a Supermax Prison Visit

This checklist is intended to help you understand what you’re seeing when you visit a supermax prison. Modern prisons are not medieval dungeons. The damage that they can inflict on a prisoner isn’t physical as often as it is mental. This damage can occur as a result of long-term social isolation from other human beings, sensory deprivation, and other aspects of the prison environment. As you visit the supermax, please consider not only the physical effects of the prison upon the prisoner but also the effects the prison may have upon his/her mental and emotional makeup, and his/her ability to relate to others in society.

Please use the checklist below as an aid to help you observe and understand the impact life in a supermax has on a human being. After your visit to the prison, it may also be useful to discuss your observations and opinions as a group.

Things to observe:

- What is the size of each person’s cell? Is it roughly the same size as a regular bathroom, for instance?
  - Is there space for a desk?
  - Is there anywhere to sit?
  - How large is the bed?
  - What kind of mattress is there?
  - How far is the toilet from his bed?
  - Is there a sink in the cell?
  - Does the prisoner have any privacy in his/her cell when using the toilet?
  - Is there room for any exercise such as push-ups or calisthenics?
- Is there a window that allows the prisoner to look outside? How big is the window? Is there any opportunity to see sky? Grass? Flowers? People?
- What kind of lighting is in the cell? Is it similar to office lighting? Normal kitchen lighting? A dim room? Twilight?
  - Could you read easily by this light?
  - Can the prisoner turn the light off to sleep?
• Is there a lack of color in cells and corridors? What would it be like to exist in a place devoid of sensory stimulation?
• What is the door to the prisoner’s cell like? Is there a window? Is the door solid steel? Is there a food slot?
• Can air get into the cell through the door?
• What is the noise level in the unit like?
  o Is it eerily quiet or constantly noisy?
  o Is there a lot of noise from the prisoners? The doors and locks?
• What is the temperature like on the unit? Is it comfortable to wear street clothes? Sweater? T-shirt?
• What are the prisoners wearing in their cells?
• Do most of the prisoners appear to be sleeping in their cells?
• Is there a call box or intercom in the cells so prisoners can contact correctional officers in an emergency? If not, what happens in an emergency? For instance, if a prisoner is having a heart attack?
• What types of possessions do you see in each person’s cell?
• Are prisoners socializing with one another?
• Is it possible for prisoners to talk with one another? See one another?
• Are prisoners only able to speak with one another by shouting?
• What kind of recreation yard is available?
  o How often can a prisoner go to the yard?
  o How long can s/he stay on the yard?
  o Can s/he associate with other prisoners on the yard or is s/he alone?
  o Is the yard out-of-doors?
  o How big is it?
  o Is there any exercise equipment available? Even a basketball or pull-up bar?
  o What can the prisoner bring to the yard? Water? Book? Hat?
  o What happens when the weather is cold and it snows? Can the prisoner wear a coat or boots when s/he goes to the yard?
  o What can you see in the yard? Trees, grass, sky, parking lot?
  o Could a prisoner feel a breeze in the yard?

Things to ask:

• What possessions can the prisoner have in his/her cell?
  o Can s/he have pictures of friends and family?
  o Can s/he have a radio or TV?
o How many books can s/he have at one time? How often is s/he allowed to get new books?
o Can a prisoner have magazines or newspapers in his/her cell? How many?
o Can s/he have religious texts in his/her cell?
o Can s/he save letters from friends and family?
o Can s/he keep a copy of a child’s drawing in his/her cell?
o What, if any, reminders of home, family, friends, is s/he allowed to keep with him/her?

• How many hours a day is the prisoner in the cell?
• When do prisoners receive meals? Do they eat together? Alone in their cells?
• What type of food do they receive?
• What happens if a prisoner needs a special diet for medical purposes? For religious purposes?
• Is a prisoner able to clean his/her cell? How often? With what materials?
• Are prisoners able to engage in social interaction with one another? Any other human beings?
• Are correctional officers usually posted in the housing units or do they watch the housing units from a control center or guard tower?
• Are there any type of structured activities that a prisoner could participate in?
  o Drug treatment
  o Group therapy
  o Education programs
  o Religious services
• If a prisoner leaves his/her cell for any reason, will s/he be strip-searched or restrained? When does strip-searching or restraint occur?
• How many times a week is the prisoner allowed to shower?
  o Is the prisoner cuffed during the shower?
  o What kind of privacy does the prisoner have for showering?
• Do prisoners in the supermax have access to clergy?
  o How often?
  o What faiths?
  o Are prisoners in the supermax allowed to attend religious services?
• What personal contact with other human beings does the prisoner have during the day?
  o Can s/he shake hands with someone?
  o Can s/he touch visitors?
  o Does anyone ever touch the prisoner?
• How many calls is the prisoner entitled to a week? A month?
• How many letters can the prisoner write? Receive?
• Are the prisoners allowed visits with friends and family? How often do these occur? What times/days are available for visits?
• If a prisoner receives a visit from his/her family, can s/he touch family members or children? Are the visits conducted in-person, behind glass, or by video?
• Is there any evaluation of a prisoner’s mental health before placement in a supermax?
• Is there any on-going monitoring of a prisoner’s mental health in the supermax?
  o If so, what is it? Who does the monitoring?
• What provisions are made for suicide risk amongst supermax prisoners?
• What happens if a prisoner needs psychiatric care?
  o Do prisoners have access to counseling?
  o Does a prisoner have to ask a correctional officer if s/he needs a psychiatrist to visit him/her?
  o Where does the counseling occur? Is it in a private room or does it take place at cell front where others can hear?
  o What happens to a prisoner if s/he has a mental breakdown while in the supermax? Will s/he be sent to a hospital? If s/he gets better, will s/he be returned to solitary confinement?
• What happens if a prisoner needs medical care?
  o What happens in an emergency?
  o How can a prisoner access medical care?
  o Does a prisoner have to ask a correctional officer if s/he needs medical care?
• What kinds of behaviors or violations result in transfer to the supermax? Are there clear guidelines for determining when such a transfer is warranted?
• How long do prisoners usually spend in the supermax?
• How can they get out of the supermax?
• Is there a limit to how long a prisoner can be held in solitary confinement conditions?
• Is there any age limit for prisoners being placed in the supermax? For instance, are youth 18 or under placed in solitary confinement conditions?
  o If youth can be placed in the supermax, are there any special provisions made to accommodate the youth’s age, immaturity and developmental needs?
• If a prisoner breaks the rules while in the supermax, what kinds of disciplinary procedures are used?
• If a prisoner is released back to the community from supermax confinement, what programs are available to help that transition?