

13 Reasons to Shut Down California SHUs *

- 1. SHUs don't work.**
Rates of gang activity, yard violence, illegal drug sales and assaults on staff are increasing in California, while decreasing in other states. Maryland has recently closed its SHU.
- 2. SHUs add violence to the prison system.**
The psychologically brutal and degrading conditions of long term SHU confinement encourages violence and harassment by guards and enrages inmates.
- 3. SHUs cause short, medium, and long term psychological breakdown and social deterioration.**
SHU inmates have no physical contact with anyone for years on end and rarely are able to talk to anyone else in the prison.
- 4. SHUs do not serve public safety.**
Inmates are often released directly from the SHU to the general public without skills that would help them survive. They are thus often less well equipped than non-SHU inmates to function in society. Staff working in SHU units have higher rates of drug use, family breakdown, and spouse/child abuse.
- 5. SHUs are enormously expensive.**
SHUs costs twice as much to run as ordinary prison, primarily due to salaries of guards. Closing all SHU facilities in California would save \$150 million a year.
- 6. SHUs destroy families.**
Visits are limited to 1 to 2 hours, sometimes even shorter depending on the number of visitors and visiting booths available, even though family members come from very long distances to visit such as out of state. Visits are behind glass with no physical contact with any family members including children, and are only allowed on the weekends. Inmates receive no phone calls. Family ties are often unraveled by SHU incarceration.
- 7. SHUs serve no real penological interest.**
There is no evidence that SHUs help maintain order. SHU inmates are not tracked to learn about re-offense rates or adjustment in prison or society.
- 8. SHUs normalize torture and brutality in the rest of society.**
Allowing such torture in our society in one area breeds and fosters it in other areas of our government and society.
- 9. SHUs keep California and the U.S. out of step with the international community of civilized nations.**
SHUs violate United Nations human rights treaties that the U.S. has signed and ratified as guidelines for our legal structure.
- 10. SHUs are overused and misused.**
SHUs provide prison officials with opportunities to exercise abuse of power. Many inmates are assigned to SHU as gang members on false or trivial evidence in an attempt to demonstrate power and control over all inmates.

- 11. SHUs are a dumping ground for the mentally ill.**
While prohibited by the U.S. court from housing the mentally ill in the Pelican Bay SHU, many inmates with mental illness are held captive in SHUs at Corcoran, Tehachapi and Valley State Prison for Women.
- 12. SHUs cause physical deterioration.**
The lack of sun, fresh air, and ordinary physical movement and exercise takes it toll. Medical care is much more difficult to deliver, and doctors and nurses adopt custodial attitudes and deny care as further punishments to sick inmates. Those inmates with serious illnesses suffer excessively from SHU confinement.
- 13. SHUs routinely sexually harass women inmates.**
Male custodial staff view women while bathing, dressing, and at toilet as they walk the tiers, and in some cases verbally harass and intimidate women with sexual references.

The strife and trouble in California prisons can be lowered, and the high recidivism rates can go down. What works to reduce conflict, lawlessness of staff and inmates, and brutality in prisons? Inmates who don't need to be in prison should be released, including those inside for victimless drug offenses, two and three strikers in for petty crimes, men and women who committed crimes primarily caused by their mental illness, the elderly, the very sick, and battered women who defended themselves or committed a crime under threat of assault. The remaining inmates need literacy training, job training, education, support groups, and other activities that help them find a stake in their own future and the future of their communities. That is the way to clean up our prisons and make them a positive force in our communal life.

*Security Housing Units or SHUs are free standing prisons within prisons designed to isolate and punish inmates who have broken rules or who are assigned there for administrative reasons. Inmates are locked in their 9' by 6' cells 23 hours a day. The only window available is opaque, allowing for only a few hours of exposure to direct sunlight over the course of a week. Inmates eat their meals in their cells. There are no work or vocational training opportunities, and no educational programs. Many inmates without funds to buy one do not have a TV or radio. No congregate religious services are permitted. Thousands of inmates live in the SHUs for years on end with indeterminate SHU sentences based on draconian anti-gang regulations. Five thousand men and women are housed in California's SHUs.

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