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A Tour of the Special Management Unit, Developed As an Alternative to Solitary, Reveals Both Meaningful Changes and Serious Challenges

by Valerie Kiebala | January 6, 2020

We stood in the middle of the Cook County Jails Special Management Unit dayroom, its perimeter lined with cells. Five African American men sat on steel stools connected to small steel tables, each with shackles around his belly, hands, and feet, bolted to the center of the table.

The SMU, located in the maximum security Division 9 building, housed 173 men in four separated living units as of last month. They used to call this the Thunder dome, the sheriffs Chief of Staff Bradley Curry said, leading us into the most secure of the four pods. Youd walk in here and it would be rockin. The place used to be called segregated housing, another name for solitary confinement. Now they call it a rehabilitative unit.

The unit houses mostly individuals who have allegedly assaulted guards or other detained men. The table with shacklesvariations of which are now used in a number of prisons and jails around the countryis meant as an alternative to round-the-clock lockdown, a way to get people out of their cells without risking more violence.

This past April, Sheriff Tom Dart caught the attention of criminal justice reformers when he wrote a *Washington Post*op-eddeclaring, Since May 2016, we have not housed any detainee in a solitary setting, not for even one hour. Instead, we created a new place in the jail called the Special Management Unit (SMU) to house detainees who resort to violence and/or break the rules.

Even in an era of increased awareness about thedeep psychological harmscaused by solitary confinement, this was a bold move. Only one state prison system, Colorados, claims to have eliminated solitary, and no other local jail system has done so. Upon request, the sheriffs office agreed to provide a tour to myself and three advocates, so we could see for ourselves what the self-declared end of solitary confinement at a major city jail looks like. The increased out-of-cell time, programming, and the ability to socialize set the SMU apart from solitary confinement.

Still, the men living on the unit, advocates, and mental health experts raised several concerns about the inadequacies of the program. One man held in the SMU had experienced solitary confinement previously, which he said made him feel suicidal. But to him, solitary versus SMU is not a big difference the increased out-of-cell time in SMU is no big difference due to the uncomfortability with the box chain and shackles. Another man called the SMU conditions inhumane, referencing violent behavior from the officers, poor food quality, scant phone time, and a lack of meaningful mental health care.

Located on Chicagos Southwest Side, bordering the Sanitary and Ship Canal, Cook County Jail is a 96-acre complex encased in high fencing topped with spirals of razor wire. The largestsingle-site jailin the United States, ithousesabout 5,800 people, 98% of whom are being held pre-trial, according to figures from last month. The jails population is 73.2 % African American, 16.5% Latinx, and 9.5% white, in a city whose population is almost evenly divided between the three groups. Within the labyrinth of brick and concrete towers, nearly 4,000 county employees work under the leadership of Sheriff Tom Dart, who was elected in 2007.

When our tour reached the SMU, a guard yanked open the door of an unoccupied cell, revealing beige walls covered with faded chicken scratch and one meticulous drawing of a handgun. Other than that, the parking space-sized room contained a bright fluorescent light, bare metal bunk beds, a steel desk, toilet and sink unit, and shelf.

In his op-ed, Dart defined solitary confinement as holding individuals alone in roughly 7-by-11-foot concrete cells for up to 23 hours a day with little human contact and no access to natural light. For as few as 60 minutes a day, they are allowed out of their cells to pace about another concrete area no larger than a dog run. That is what this pod used to be like. Since it was converted to the SMU, the men are supposed to get out of their cells for at least four hours a day, with opportunities for group programming and social interaction. While individuals in this pod are always shackled during group activities, they may transition to other SMU pods where they would not be shackled in the dayroom.

The change was an initiative of the sheriffs Justice Institute, created by Dart four years ago to infuse social justice in a system that is usually unjust, said Hanke Gratteau, the director of the institute. Gratteau sat us down in a vacant unit of the jail to explain the work her office does. She spoke carefully, with contemplative pauses between thoughts.

Im a former journalist, she said, looking through pointy-rimmed glasses, and I can tell you theres no way I could work for a law enforcement official other than Tom Dart. This is Sheriff Darts vision and one we carry out every day.

Jail Staff Cite Positive Impact of SMU

Two years ago, you couldnt walk on this tier with the noise level, said chief of staff Curry. But we brought in programming, we brought in different staffing techniques, tried to get more interaction, dayroom time. We just changed the whole philosophy on how we do discipline.

The men in the SMU are provided with group programming in the dayroom on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. On the other days, they can talk to each other, you know, do things across the table, things like that, Curry said. The whole goal was to have them come out and be able to communicate with each other, be able to have that interaction with the fellow detainees, and the staff in here.

Lieutenant Despina Atsaves, a sturdy woman with her dirty blonde hair pulled back, said the new approach keeps these guys focused on what they need to work on in order to better themselves and exit out. In all honesty, it is working.

Its the data that tells you its successful, said Sheriff Dart in a phone interview. You start with [the fact that] attacks on staff hit historic lows The numbers of assaults on staff and assaults among detainees have plummeted. Theyre at the lowest levels ever. So far in 2019, the data on the jails maximum security units bears out his claim, not only for attacks by incarcerated people, but for staff use of force as well.

My best exemplar for how it is working and working well, Dart said, is that the average amount of time that anyone spends in this unit is 10 days.] And as you know, there are people around the country that are in goddamn solitary for years! The most recent government survey, from 2012, showed that 20% of people held in U.S. jails had spent time in solitary in the previous year, and 5% had spent more than 30 days in solitary. On any given day, more than 20,000 people were in solitary confinement in local jails alone, with 60,000 more in solitary in state and federal prisons.

People who commit serious disciplinary infractions in the Cook County Jail can be punished with five to 60 days in the SMU. But the sheriff has set a maximum of 29 consecutive days, at which point individuals are sent to general population for a few days before returning to the unit.

I didnt really know what I was getting into I always sort of thought there would be a better playbook out there, Dart said. After investigating jails around the country, however, he found that no such models existed for a jail system. Some other large jail systems, including Rikers Island in New York, have greatly reduced their use of solitarybut none has eliminated it. But once we figured out that if we came up with some method where people that needed to be separated could be allowed out amongst other people for extended periods of time, they just couldnt harm other people, then it was like okay, now anybody in the country can do this.

Dart spoke about the resistance he initially got from both staff and other sheriffsa common experience for reformers around the country, where even modest reductions in solitary are often fiercely opposed by corrections officers and their unions. Yall thought I was nuts. Yall thought I was letting the inmates run the asylum, Dart recalled, And everyone was going to take advantage of it and everyones going to get hurt and everyones going to get the message that they can do what they want. But now, he said, The biggest advocates for it are my staff that work in those units.

In the SMU, Atsaves said that at first she did not want to work in the unit, but she had a change of heart. Ive been here 17 years in the county. This is the first time in my entire career herethe two years that weve been [in the SMU]where administration listens to the staff and takes their ideas seriously, she said. Because everything is perfect written on paper, but in practicality, in reality, it just doesnt work out the way you have it written out, so you have to adjust.

Detainee Describes Being Stuck in a Cell Outside of a Cell

The detained men in the SMU, in contrast, had many complaints and calls for change to share. Lewayne Patterson, a forthright 28-year-old with a neatly shaped afro and star tattoo on his neck, spoke first. Its very frustrating. We chained up, he said, pulling at the shackles joined to the table. We only get phone calls fifteen minutes a week. Like you can barely get a conversation out of it Its like basically youre still stuck in a cell outside of a cell, shackled up. Thats it. A chorus of voices rose in agreement.

Cordell Frank, sitting next to me, said, We only get three hours out of our cell. What about the rest of the day? Thats 21 hours in your cell all day long This right here, it feels like were really monkeys in here. Real live monkeys.

Another man said, I got two kids. I got a lot of family. I cant talk to everybody in fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes [a week] is not enough We dont get fed enough Its the same thing for breakfast and a repeat continuation of meatballs. Every other day is meatballs.

The men said it is a problem that, when detained in the SMU, they cannot order food from the commissary, only hygiene items. Gratteau agreed. I overheard the guy say how horrible the food was. It is We have a dietitian, we have a vendor who provides the food. Its nutritionally adequate. But if it tastes like crap and you dont eat it, its not nutritionally adequate.

And despite policy changes, the captive men are still subject to the actions of rank and file correctional officers, who they say dont all play by the rules themselves. Theres a lot of things that go on up in here that a lot of people dont know about, Patterson said. We be in the cell, and they might come to your cell and get to messin with you You aint hear about [officers] gettin physical, touching and everything back here.

Frank recalled, One of [the officers] got physical with me, and I said something back to him cause he was talking to me crazy. He didnt even let me out my room the next day When you first get locked down here, you gotta wait 24 hours until you can come out for your next dayroom. My 24 hours was up. He still aint let me out.

In a letter he wrote following our visit, Patterson described the retaliation he faced in the SMU after getting into an altercation with an officer. On the elevator, I was punched and kneed multiple times by several correctional officers I asked for medical attention, to no avail The correctional officer in charge of property threw all my property away except for my personal mail. Days later, Patterson wrote, he was jumped again by three correctional officers [and] was given 60 days segregation time and 60 days visiting restriction.

Joseph Ryan, spokesperson for the Cook County Sheriffs Office, said the county has implemented a model system to identify, review, and address uses of excessive force and hold officers accountable. Ryan said, Since 2014, the office has moved to fire or suspend more than 75 officers in cases related to excessive force. He added, The way in which we address excessive force was one of the many reasons the jail was released from more than 40 years of court oversight in 2017 to applause from a federal judge and the U.S. Department of Justice.

Dart, a former prosecutor, believes the SMU still needs to demonstrate that people will face consequences for their actions. He said, We cant walk away from the fact that there is evil in this world and there are bad people so theres got to be repercussions I cant have this little kumbaya thing, theres got to be repercussions, where that person needs to be separated, that person needs to be told this is conduct you cant do. His goal is to make this point without the use of solitary.

Jessica Sandoval, of the ACLUs National Prison Project and one of the advocates on the tour, expressed a somewhat different perspective. Sandoval, who oversees a national anti-solitary campaign called Unlock the Box, said that truly ending solitary confinement will require thinking outside of this framework. People like those in the SMU, even those who have engaged in violence, actually need the most services, not the least. And so, I think moving away from the punishment paradigm is what needs to happen.

Sandoval said that since nearly all people in jail will eventually return to society, public safety demands that policies and practices be aimed toward rehabilitationand any level of isolation is antithetical to that. In Cook County, she said, Theyre moving in the right direction, but people are still being penalized by important services being taken away, like phone time with their families.

Back in the dayroom, Edward Abrams, a more soft-spoken man, weighed in. His bicep bore a long scar with what looked like fresh stitches, and a white medical wrap covered his forearm. The staff, they treat us pretty good, if youre, say, P2 or P3 [lower risk mental health status], said Edward Abrams. If you really need to talk to somebody, youre fucked back here. Just to keep it real.

A LosingStrugglefor Adequate Mental Health Care

The SMU is not meant to house people with serious mental illness. The jail has a separate unit run by Cermak Health Services of Cook County for people with acute medical and mental health needs. But, in reality, jails across the country are nowoverflowing with people needing mental health care, and narrow definitions of SMI mean that many end up mixed in with the regular jail population. Without adequate care, they are at high risk of self-harm and suicide, especially if they are placed in solitary.

Gratteau told us aboutone manwho has been in and out of the jail over the past few years. We called him the man who ate the jail, she said. He would literally swallow anything he could get his hands on, and had so many abdominal surgeries that for a time, he was at an outlying hospital for months in restraints because every time he would be healing from an operation, he would rip open his wounds And he didnt have a psychiatric status [Cook County Health and Hospital staff]said, Nothing, no problem here. Move along. Yeah, Gratteau sighed, [They claimed]*that*was manipulative behavior. Holy moly. I know Im just a layman but it looks crazy to me.

Homer Venters, the former chief medical officer of New York Citys Correctional Health Services and author of the new book Life and Death in Rikers Island, explained in a phone interview, We believe that people with serious mental illness have the most concerning risk for lots of bad mental health outcomes. But the fact is there are a lot of people who have mental health problemsand behavioral health problems, addiction problemswho dont meet the kind of clinical criteria for SMI, or serious mental illness.

He continued, A lot of suicides involve impulsivity, involve reacting against ones environment. Those suicides are often among people who dont have SMI designations people who dont happen to get this one clinical criteria, for which theres a great amount of racial disparity for how its applied. It just makes one more connection between exposure to solitary and death that the mental health service in many of these settings is not effective at mitigating.

In the case of Edward Abrams, the man with the gash on his arm, behavioral issues related to mental illness led to him spending several months in solitary confinement at the maximum-security Pontiac Correctional Center before he returned to the jail, where he was remanded for a clinical mental health evaluation, he wrote in a letter after our visit.

Ive been on suicide watch over ten times, Abrams wrote. Due to depression, anxiety attacks, family tragedies, emotional lows, no support. Ive attempted suicide fourteen times. Overdosed off pills, hung myself, and self-harm by cutting. Cook County does nothing for self-harm. Abrams has since been sent to live in solitary confinement through August 2023 at Menard Correctional Center, where he is serving the remainder of his six-year sentence for robbery.

In a phone interview following our visit, the Sheriffs First Deputy Chief of Staff Tarry Williams said the jail has seen two suicides so far in 2019, including 27-year-oldGiovanny Gomezon May 8, two days after we toured the facility. Last August, 24-year-old Anthony Mbanu committedsuicideby hanging himself in his cell in Division 9. Another man, 23-year-old Richard Smith, was foundhangingin his cell a few months before Mbanu died.

Abrams said that an improvement in the SMU is that the groups are now conducted by mental health workers, instead of correctional staff, but they do one group a week, which is not enough treatment, he wrote. I like the groups because it gives me a chance to express my thoughts and feelings.

Dr. Jane Gubser, a clinical psychologist and assistant executive director of programs at the jail, said in a phone interview that men in the SMU are offered six mental health-focused groups every week. Half of the groups are administered by her staff and the other half are administered by mental health specialists from Cermak.

The groups target emotional regulation, anger management, coping skills, things of that nature, Gubser said. The facilitator typically comes in, theyll check in with the individuals, see how theyre doing that day, typically theyll come in with a topic to discuss, like a worksheet to go over and then theres a discussion around it.

When asked if the men are provided therapy, Gubser took a long pause. Its kind of a hard question. I wouldnt say that theyd be on an individual-therapy caseload, but if they request to meet with a mental health specialist, which is part of the medical provider, they will be seen.

Otherwise, group therapy in the SMU takes place in the presence of other incarcerated men, with guards surrounding the perimeter of the dayroom. While group programming serves an important role in providing constructive social interaction, critics say that the depth to which participants are willing to open up is inhibited around men they may encounter in a different context, or officers they may fear could retaliate.

Venters said that increasing the presence of mental health staff does not counteract the danger of subjecting people to violent conditions. At the mental health units at Rikers that were developed as an alternative to solitary confinement, he said, people would be put in these units for some punishment of jail rules, and then extra mental health staff would be there to take care of them.

But really what would happen was the mental health staff would run around these units but not with the capacity to provide meaningful treatment because the thing that was making these patients much worse was exposure to, not just solitary, but high levels of violence from the security staff. [Mental health staff] really were just bearing witness, but not able to provide meaningful care. The chaotic and violent environment of Rikers, Venters said, could alone become the main driver of much of this behavior, [which] included self-harm and death.

What It Is Now Should Not Be the End

Abrams said he had never personally experienced physical abuse, but said, a lot of guys get physically assaulted in the elevator. Theres cameras everywhere except the elevator in Division 9.

Based on his experience representing people held at the jail, Alan Mills, the executive director at Uptown Peoples Law Center, said that the county has made good progress, and their policies in theory are very good. But they have a long way to go before those policies are fully implemented and before they really have a handle on use of force at that jail. Mills referenced a policy demanding that footage be pulled from all cameras relevant to an incident, but in the use of force reports that weve reviewed, that never happened. You might have one camera but not all of them were pulled.

Sheriff Dart readily admitted that his efforts at Cook County Jail are a work in progress, and said he is open to further change. Because were going into unchartered territory, he said. Theres no ego here as far as saying weve nailed it, weve got it down a hundred percent Now, its just a question of adding more bells and whistles as far as programming and more sort of unique twists to it that are all, you know, making it up as we go along, but all thoughtful.

Advocates point out that being safe from retaliation and other forms of abuse is a basic human right of detained persons, and that even such lesser complaints as excessive shackling or inadequate programming go well beyond what could be considered bells and whistles. The procedural reformsand, more importantly, the culture changeneeded to create a truly rehabilitative environment may have begun, but they still have a long way to go.

Another person on the tour, Dolores Canales, is community outreach director with The Bail Project. She spent time in solitary confinement herself, and her son, who was in solitary for years at Californias notorious Pelican Bay, is still in prison. Canales said she was struck by what she did not encounter in the unit. The smell of urine and feces was not present at all, which a lot of times you have in [solitary]. The screaming was not present in the SMU at all.

Canales said other county facilities should follow Darts lead, but agrees that the SMU still has a lot of work to do to live up to its name as a rehabilitative unit. Part of rehabilitation is how one feels. Thats part of why [incarcerated people] do what we do. Part of the trouble comes from [the fact] that weve always felt less than. Weve always felt not enough. Weve always felt angry. Its a lot about feelings. The SMU may be a significant improvement over what came before it, she said, but what it is now should not be the end.

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Photos by Valerie Kiebala

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Update: This piece has been updated to clarify jail officials response to allegations of excessive force raised by men in the SMU.

Valerie Kiebala was a contributing writer and editorial and project manager for Solitary Watch, and is now the media director of Straight Ahead, which is building a decarceration movement throughout Pennsylvania. Her work has also appeared in The Root, Truthout, the Chicago Reporter, and Shadowproof.

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