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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Victoria Law](#) | January 24, 2014

This past September, in response to continued criticism around its use of solitary confinement, the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) [began an internal audit of its restricted housing operations](#). As [noted earlier by Solitary Watch](#), no womens prisons are listed in the [Scope of Work](#) provided by the team hired to conduct the Special Housing Unit Review and Assessment. The BOPs Public Information Office was unable to comment on this apparent omission. (*See update at the end of this article.*)

Although they are absent from the audit, each womens prison has its own Special Housing Unit (SHU) where people are locked into their cell 23 to 24 hours each day. In some cases, women are confined because of behavioral problems or rules violations. But the BOP also has a recent history of isolating people based solely on their political beliefs.

In 1986, the BOP opened a segregated unit specifically for women political prisoners. It was built in the basement of the federal prison at Lexington, Kentucky. I looked around and was overcome by the sheer whiteness of the space, recalled former political prisoner Susan Rosenberg in her memoir *An American Radical*. It was a bright, gleaming artificial white, the kind of white that with any lengthy exposure could almost sear your eyeballs. It was the kind of white that can make you go mad. Rosenberg and Alejandrina Torres, a member of the Puerto Rican independence movement who had been sentenced to 35 years for plotting the bombings of U.S. military bases, were the first two women transferred to the unit. They were later joined by political prisoner Silvia Baraldini and two women not convicted of political actions, Debra Brown and Sylvia Brown. They had no contact with the rest of the prison population.

Prison officials labeled this a High Security Unit. Rosenberg described conditions in the High Security Unit:

Every day was filled with confrontations between us and the COs [correctional officers] over every human need: getting hot water for a cup of instant coffee, taking a shower, going outside, getting medical attention, getting a book. We were allowed to come out of our cells and talk with each other but stayed locked on the tier, not allowed beyond the gates. There was a camera at each end of the tier and three gates between the end of the tier and a hall that led to the rest of the unit. Our cells had windows we could see out of only by standing on tiptoe on the bed; the view was of shrubs at ground level in the main inner courtyard of the prison.

Human rights advocates, attorneys, family members and outside supporters launched a campaign to shut the unit down while the women filed suit. In 1988, following Rosenbergs testimony in court, a judge ordered the unit closed immediately. The women were transferred to other federal prisons.

While the High Security Unit was shut down, the practice of solitary confinement continues inside every womens prison. The Federal Medical Center at Carswell, Texas, opened in July 1994 with an Administrative Maximum Unit for women who are labeled special management concerns because of escape attempts, violence or other behavioral problems. But, as in the High Security Unit, women imprisoned for their political actions, such as war resister Helen Woodson, eco-activist Chelsea Gerlach and Pakistani national Dr. Aafiyah Siddiqui, have also been confined there. Not much is known about the unit other than that the women are entirely separated from the larger prison population and are often subject to lockdowns.

Other federal womens prisons have Special Housing Units where people cycle in and out. However, as the BOPs Special Housing Unit Review and Assessment indicates, these units have garnered much less attention and outrage than SHUs in mens prisons.

Lashonia Etheridge-Bey has had repeated experiences with the SHU at the federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut (the prison made famous by the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*). Etheridge-Bey recalls that the SHU was always overcrowded, forcing prison staff to place two people in each cell. At some points, they were so overcrowded that we'd be triple bunked with one woman sleeping on the floor, she recalled. The women stayed in their cells nearly twenty-four hours a day. Women did their best to get along under such cramped conditions. You couldn't just move to a different cell unless there was a physical fight, Etheridge remembered. You were just stuck.

Staff shortages prevented the women from being taken outside to the yard during the scant hours they were allotted for out-of-cell recreation. Instead, they were taken from their cell to another cell. It was just an empty cell. There was nothing in it, she stated. Women were not allowed to bring any of their personal property with them. Women passed the time by talking to each other or by reading the

books from the cart brought around by staff members on a weekly basis.

The overcrowding too led to longer stays in the SHU. Etheridge-Bey recalled being written up and sent to the SHU for smoking a cigarette. (The federal Bureau of Prisons banned smoking in 2004.) Although her sentence was twenty days, she spent another 22 days in the SHU waiting for a bed to open up in general population.

In Florida, Yraida Guanipa experienced being locked in two separate SHUs. In 1996, shortly after her trial, she was sent to the SHU at the federal prison in Miami. Guanipa recalls that, even before her arrest, she had experienced years of problems with her menstrual periods. During her trial, her bleeding was so heavy that her trial had to be put on hold. Nevertheless, while incarcerated in Miami, she was told that the Bureau of Prisons would not provide medical services unless there was an emergency. I told people I was bleeding too much, but no one listened, she recalled.

At the time, Guanipa worked in the prison kitchen. I spent ten to fourteen hours a day standing on my feet and doing dishes, she said. One Sunday, she informed her supervisor that she had been heavily bleeding for a week and requested medical attention. He refused. Guanipa then told him that, if she could not receive medical care, she wanted to go to mass. My supervisor told me that I could not go to mass and that I could not go to medical, so I refused to do the dishes, she stated. Guanipa was sent to the SHU for disobeying a direct order.

The SHU in Miami took up one floor inside the prison building, Guanipa remembers. There was a small window in the wall at the top so at least you could see the light. And you can hear noise. Oftentimes, that noise was the sound of other people screaming. Many had mental health issues. There would be someone screaming all day or pounding her head against the wall. When the women screamed, the officer on duty would simply tell them to shut up. Only when medication was dispensed would the screaming stop but only temporarily.

After being transferred to the Federal Correctional Camp in Coleman, Florida, Guanipa submitted requests for more programs for moms to be able to spend time with their children. She received no response. The Bureau of Prisons rules state that when a prisoner goes on hunger strike, she is supposed to be placed in a medical institution, *not* solitary confinement, she recalled. So, being the trusting person that I am, I believed them. Fed up with the lack of programs and lack of response, Guanipa went on hunger strike in 1999. In response, BOP officials transferred her to the federal prison in Tallahassee where she was placed in the SHU. It was solitary confinement *inside* solitary confinement, she remembered. Those cells are just for one person. Other SHU cells [such as the ones in Miami] are for two people, so at least you can talk to someone. It was the worst inside the worst.

Inside the one person cell was a sink and a toilet. Guanipa remembered that prison staff did not provide her with water. The only water you could get is the water from the sink, which is next to the toilet. It smelled awful.

After 16 days on hunger strike inside Tallahassee's SHU, Guanipa passed out. She was taken to the hospital inside the prison where a nurse told her that her kidneys were failing and administered an IV. Less than a week later, Guanipa was returned to the SHU where she remained for another two weeks.

The SHU was separated from the rest of the prison in its own building. Within that building, there's the solitary confinement inside the solitary confinement,' she described. Unlike the SHU in Miami there were no windows. You don't hear anything, you don't see anything. I was afraid I was going to lose my mind.

Twice a day, the prison psychologist walked past the SHU cells. But in the SHU, if you tell a doctor you're feeling suicidal, they put you in a worse situation in the hole without your clothes on, so you don't say anything, she said.

When she was finally released from the SHU, the experience had shaken her to the core. I was so scared after that that I vowed never to do another hunger strike again, she said.

As in state prisons, women who report sexual assault by staff are punished with solitary confinement. Guanipa recalled a woman whom she met at FCITallahassee who had been sexually abused by an officer. After the officer ejaculated on her, she took the evidence to the investigative unit. The prison responded by placing her in the SHU, then transferring her to a different prison. Guanipa never saw her again, although she did see the officer regularly. Nothing happened to him.

When asked about the practice of solitary confinement, Guanipa, who has been out of prison since 2007, declared, It doesn't serve any purpose. It's derogatory. It scars you for the rest of your life. You lose the capacity to communicate. I would not recommend this type of treatment for any human beings or for animals. It's torture.

UPDATE, January 27, 8 pm: Prior to the publication of this article, the Bureau of Prisons and National Institute of Corrections did not respond to repeated requests for comment about the inclusion of women's prisons and the selection criteria for the assessment. In an email dated January 27, Edmond Ross of the BOP's Office of Public Affairs wrote:

In response to your questions, some of the assessment locations were prescribed as part of the Statement of Work, and others were left to the discretion of the contractor in consultation with the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). There will be a total of nine BOP locations assessed. I can tell you the plan includes assessing a female facility. However, we are not making the locations of these assessments public at present.

Victoria Law is a freelance journalist and author focused on incarceration. Her books include *Resistance Behind Bars*, *Prison By Any Other Name*, and *"Prisons Make Us Safer"* and *20 Other Myths About Mass Incarceration*. She tweets @LVikiml.

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September 29, 2022

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Not mentioned in this piece is eco activist and political prisoner Marie Mason, who has been stuck at Carswell for three years now. There is actually an active campaign to have her moved out of the isolation unit and into general population (where she was prior to her banishment to Carswell for no reason). Find out more about Marie and the campaign to have her transferred at <http://www.movemarie.com> and <http://supportmariemason.org/>

United Prisoner Breeding Nation is giving high priority of God in life; see Samuel P. Huntington figure given in WHO ARE WE (http://www.manipulatedtrial.de/DD_I_Huntington%20WHOAREWE.gif). World Leading Jailer Land give proof of its culture. Governors and alike claim for security, a model to the world. Beware of US Justice.

This is the situation in all prisons in the United States and no one seems to care. Most consider inmates to be throw aways. Confinement should be enough punishment but it never is for so many of these cruel prison employees. Many of these people need to be fired. It all just makes me sick!

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