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by Solitary Watch Guest Author | November 26, 2014

*Editors Note: The following is an excerpt from*Locked Down, Locked Out: Why Prison Doesnt Work and How We Can Do Better, *a new book by Maya Schenwar.* Locked Down, Locked Out *shows how the institution that locks up 2.3 million Americans and decimates poor communities of color is shredding the ties that, if nurtured, could foster real collective safety, and how incarceration takes away the very things that might enable people to build better lives. The author, Maya Schenwar, is editor-in-chief of Truthout, and has written about the prison-industrial complex for the* New York Times, The Guardian, the New Jersey Star-Ledger, Ms.Magazine,Prison Legal News,*and others. This excerpt is particularly timely, since the recent loss of the Illinois gubernatorial election to Republican Bruce Rauner brings reopening Tamms supermax well into the realm of possibility.*

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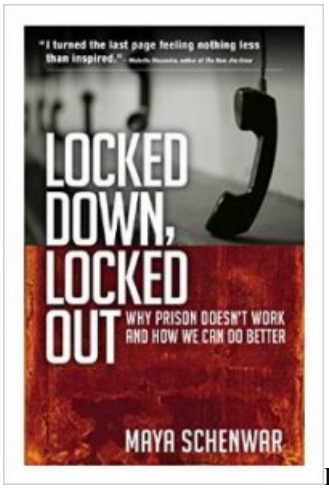
This could be your brother, your son, or your father. This is whats in our future. We have to stop it.

Reginald Akkeem Berry, on the need to oppose supermax prisons



In 2006, a letter was slipped in through the door slat in Johnnie Waltons cell. Johnnie was livingtwenty-three hours a dayin a seventy-square-foot cell furnished with a concrete bed, a solid steel door, and a window through which little light traveled. Through the slat in the door, three times a day, Johnnies meals appeared. For one hour each day, Johnnie was permitted solitary recreation in a small pen just outside his cell.

The same routine went for the roughly 250 other prisoners in Tamms, the supermax prison that had opened in Southern Illinois in 1998. Practices at Tamms were similar to those in other supermax prisons and Secure Housing Units (such as the one Abraham Macas occupies at Pelican Bay) around the country: The prison, with no yard, no chapel, no dining hall, no library, and no phone calls (unless a close relative was dying), was designed to extinguish the outside world for the men trapped within.

By the time the letter came, Johnnie had already been living in isolation for more than two years. He tore open the envelope and stared. Tucked inside was a poem. An accompanying letter explained that the sender was a member of the Tamms Poetry Committee, a group that had come together to provide some contact for these men deprived of almost every type of human connection.

Johnnie was touched but bewildered, he tells me over the phone, almost eight years later. I got that letter, and I thought, A poetry committee? Men are mutilating themselves, slitting their wrists here. What do we need with a poetry committee?

Johnnie wrote back with a thank-you notebut the note went further: He asked for help, for advocacy. So did several of the other men who received poems that year. Artist and activist Laurie Jo Reynolds, who was part of the group that initiated the poetry committee and later

led the effort to fight for the rights of Tamms prisoners, told me, Not to insult us, but at the beginning, it was sort of a social club. It was the men who wrote to us and told us, Its time to do more. You have to tell people whats happening to us in here.

Doing more meant mounting a broad-based organizing effort to confront the conditions atand, later, the existence ofTamms. (They dubbed the campaign Tamms Year Ten, referencing the fact that, though there was supposed to be a one-year limit on prisoners stay at the supermax, many had remained there the entire ten years of its existence.) It meant meeting with legislators at every chance possible and graphically describing the conditions in the prison, guided by the words of the men inside. It meant vigils, press conferences, lobbying days at the capitol, and a community picnic complete with a parsley-eating contest. Tamms Year Ten partnered with dozens of other organizations and sympathetic legislators, mobilizing for a reform bill limiting terms at Tamms and requiring prisoners to be told why they were transferred to the supermax. At the forefront of the struggle were family members of men hidden away in the prison. As several Tamms prisoners were released (by way of parole, appeal victories, or the end of their sentences), they became leaders in the campaign.

In fact, the day that Johnnie got out, he swallowed his postrelease anxieties and spoke of his years in Tamms to a large crowd at a fundraiser in a Chicago nightclub. It was scary, he says. There was lots of noise but I had to start right away, speaking for the people who didnt have a voice. I had to speak about the torture of Tamms.

Reginald Akkeem Berry, another former Tamms prisoner, says that advocating for the men hed left behind in the supermax was tough at first, partly because they were essentially invisible, knocked off the map at the bottom of Illinois without so much as a phone call home. Most people didnt know the town of Tamms, Illinois, even existed, Akkeem says. So when he spoke about the prison, he invoked people on the outside instead. He spoke of family and the ways that solitary confinement harms poor black and brown communitiesespecially at a time when the Illinois prison population was still rising and supermaxes were multiplying across the country. Every time I went to a community meeting, I said, these people in Tammsthis could be your brother, your son, or your father. This is whats in our future. We have to stop it.

Akkeem was the first released man to be interviewed about Tamms, he says, for a 2008 *Chicago Reader* feature titled Hell in a Cell. At that point, solitary confinement was a phrase most folks on the outside hadnt often heard. Media attention intensified. In 2009, the work of Tamms Year Ten caught the attention of Amnesty International, which condemned the prison as incompatible with the USAs obligations to provide humane treatment for all prisoners.[1]

The folks of Tamms Year Ten spoke before legislative budget hearings. In addition to denouncing the human destruction occurring behind Tamms walls, they pointed to the prisons staggering price tag: holding one prisoner at Tamms cost $92,000 per year.[2] Momentum against Tamms caught fireand increasingly, caught the eye of Illinois Governor Pat Quinn. Meanwhile, the prison guards unions and the town of Tamms fought hard to keep the prison, and the struggle unfolded in the media and in the streets, with prisoners families lobbying at the state capital and leading marches in Chicago.

In 2012, despite the many legislators vying for Tamms to stay open, the governor performed a rare line-item veto and simply budgeted Tamms out of existence. Despite challenges by the legislature, the Illinois Supreme Court decided to permit this move, and in January 2013 the prison was shuttered. Tamms Year Ten had triumphed.

Theres more: When Quinn performed his act of line-item rebellion, he also ordered the closing of three other Illinois prisons, citing cost savings. Those included two youth prisons whose elimination had been advocated by Project NIA and other groups, through efforts like a hunger strike, legislative advocacy, and community organizing.[3] Also included was Dwight, a maximum-security womens prison. The Illinois prison system seemed to be shrinking.

Shrinking: In a country where more than 7 million people are bound up in the correctional system, this is how many people working against incarceration frame their goal. You cant pop this balloon with just one pin. Not everyone working to close Tamms was interested in abolishing all prisons, but many were. They were simply starting with one.

Historian and activist Dan Berger points to the importance of such concrete change-makingclosing buildings, reducing prison populations, slashing budgets, dismantling policies that confine people even after releaseto the overall goal of freeing ourselves from the prison nation. He defines this movement as *decarceration:* reform in pursuit of abolition.[4]

The word incarcerate stems from the same root as the word cancel: Both mean to cross something, or someone, out (whether with bars, or lines, or actions). Decarceration, then, is also a movement toward un-canceling peoplenot just by fighting for their release, but by recognizing and supporting their humanity.

The strategy that drove the Tamms Year Ten campaign was about making visible the lives of people whod been canceled in the most extreme way. And Tamms was not the only place in which people in solitary confinement were finding ways to come together and speak out. In fall 2012, more than a year after theyd waged two three-week hunger strikes, prisoners in Californias Pelican Bay SHU announced a historic Agreement to End Hostilities, which was then signed and publicized by thousands of people inside and outside of prison, building a coalition across the state. It read, in part:

Beginning on October 10, 2012, all hostilities between our racial groups in SHU, Ad-Seg, General Population, and County Jails, will officially cease. This means that from this date on, all racial group hostilities need to be at an end and if personal issues arise between individuals, people need to do all they can to exhaust all diplomatic means to settle such disputes; do not allow personal, individual issues to escalate into racial group issues. Collectively, we are an empowered, mighty force, that can positively change this entire corrupt system, and thereby, the public as a whole.

Prisoners emphasized that their actions extended beyond a pursuit of reforms. They were challenging the prison nations assumption ofand instigation ofongoing racial warfare behind bars, which is used to justify solitary confinement and other restrictive policies meant to isolate prisoners from each other.

In June 2013, when prisoners in the Pelican Bay SHU waged a nonviolent hunger strike to demand better conditions and more opportunities to connect with people on the outside, building networks that fostered both action and visibility were key. Tens of thousands of California prisoners fasted in solidarity. An outside movement led by family members of the strikers rose up across the state and across the country to support the prisoners with letters, phone calls to the Department of Corrections, and rallies. The strike garnered unprecedented media attention, appearing in many major newspapers and on radio and television stations.

Isaac Ontiveros of the prison abolitionist organization Critical Resistance tells me about the groups participation in the strike: They hollered at us before the strike and said, Were going to do this thing on the inside, and we need your support from the outside. They came up with solutions for how to resolve harm and conflict inside, without violence. They won some demands, but they also showed usif its possible to do this in solitary, think of whats possible for people in less restrictive conditions.

Whats more, many of the same arguments raised against the scourge of solitary can also be used against imprisonment itself, though with different connotations: Isolation, dehumanization, deprivation of contact, and violence are characteristics of incarceration everywhere. And as Isaac mentioned, the strikers actionsthe historic commitment made through the Agreement to End Hostilities, and the project of coordinating nonviolent resistance despite enormous communication barriersalso point to exciting possibilities for resolving harm and conflict *without* (in fact, in spite of) law enforcement and prison.

However, much media coverage reduced the strikes significance to a protest against specific *conditions* alone, creating the illusion that prisons, and even solitary confinement, can be made humanethat they are fixable. Suddenly, mainstream voices were issuing calls to cease the cruel and unusual punishment, pointing to certain brutal practices as out of the ordinary modes of discipline. Of course, ameliorating conditions is always an important goal: Its crucial, for example, to provide nutritious food and allow prisoners to call their families. But in framing these improvements as ends in themselves, the terms of ordinary punishment are solidified: Caging people is usual, so its fine!

Additionally, small concessions are sometimes used to divert attention from larger ongoing injustices. Several months after the 2013 hunger strike, Dolores Canales of California Families to End Solitary Confinement noted in a *MintPress News* interview that, despite a few reforms implemented by the Department of Correctionssuch as changes in criteria for placing people in SHUsthe basic picture hadnt changed. They can still use solitary indefinitely, Canales said. They dont see a problem with it, with leaving somebody for thirty or forty years in their cell. They wont acknowledge its a problem.[5]

And so, doing decarceration-focused work means bearing in mind long-term impacts. For instance, California Families to Abolish Solitary Confinement sets *ending* the practice of isolation as its ultimate goal. And as the LGBTQ prison abolitionist group Black and Pinks mission statement puts it, Any advocacy, services, organizing and direct action we take will be sure to remove bricks from the system, not put in others we will need to abolish later.

Closing prisons and reducing populations dont blaze a straight path to freedom. It can be jagged. It can be messy. When Illinois Governor Pat Quinn announced in February 2012 that Dwight Correctional Center would be closing along with Tamms, decarceration activists both inside and outside were jubilant. The closing of a prison heralds the possibility of the entire systems crumbling.

But when I received the news of Dwights closing through an elated press release email from an activist group, my own elation wasnt based on the anti-prison victory alone. It also stemmed from the fact that my sister was living inside that prison.

Dwight served as both Illinois maximum-security womens prison and also the intake center for prisoners newly received into the system. Kayla was holed up in Dwight, waiting to be bussed off to a minimum-security spot a little farther south. Even if they closed Dwight the instant I opened the email, Kayla wouldnt be freedshe would be whisked away to another joint. Still, the image in my mind of the prison shuttering its windows looked something like hope.

A year and a half later, in fall 2013, I reflect on that sense of hope while pacing the waiting room at Logan Prison, impatient to be called in for a visit with my sister. Phones and reading material are prohibited, so people are milling around the vending machine. A hazy tension hovers in the air; we have no idea how long well be waiting, and the guards on duty wont drop a clue. One simply says, Theres too many visitors, because theres too many people in this prison.

A short, graying man in a denim shirt whos leaning against the wall near me comments, I bet you we wait here another hour, two hours. We might not even get in before visiting hours are over, no kidding. Like my family, this man drives four hours to get to Logan, he tells me, sometimes to wait about the same amount of time. When he finally gets in to see his daughter, she says she cant get an appointment with the prison dentist to get a severely aching tooth pulled; the waiting list is too long. I describe the way Kayla has been neglected since giving birth; shes suffering a kidney infection, writhing in pain, with little medical attention.

The man shook his head. Its been like this ever since they closed down Dwight.

Its not an unheard-of opinion; Dwights closing wasnt handled well. Before the shutdown, the prison watchdog group John Howard Association warned against rapidly closing Dwight: Absent a clear plan to reduce population, the shuttering of Dwight is likely to exacerbate crowded conditions [at other prisons], which may further undermine the health, welfare and safety of staff and inmates, the association argued, adding that Logans locationfurther from Chicago than Dwightwould make visiting more difficult for most families.[6]

Laurie Jo Reynolds, who helped lead the campaign to close Tamms and also advocated closing Dwight, notes that shutting down a prison isnt always a perfect tactic, nor should it be undertaken unilaterally without consideration for prisoners well-being. Some people talk about it as a strategy where you close prisons and then theres overcrowding, and that results in more pressure to reduce prison populations, she says. But then do you do that on the backs of the people there?

Closing a prison like Tamms was an unequivocal victory for both the prisoners released from solitary and the overall shrinking of the prison system: The supermax was only half-full, and there were empty cells lying in wait at other mens prisons in the state. By some standards, Dwight was a slightly trickier business. In addition to ensuring care for people involved, Laurie Jo urges that advocacy for

prison closings be combined with pushes to reduce populations and change sentencing laws. In other words: Get people out.

Back in the waiting room at Logan, the man in the denim shirt shakes his head. Six more months for my daughter. Really, I just hope shell just never come back here. That would solve this whole problem, wouldnt it?

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by Juan Moreno Haines

October 25, 2022

by Solitary Watch Guest Author

October 13, 2022

by Vaidya Gullapalli

September 29, 2022

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McQuilliams did 7 years in federal prison for bank robbery and was released in 2000.

Austin Police Chief Art Acevedo said, Hate in his heart was part of his problem.

In his rented van was a copy of Vigilantes of Christendom, a 1990 book associated with the Christian Identity movement known as the Phineas Priesthood a right wing extremist movement with RACIST BELIEFS.

It is believed McQuilliams first came in contact with the Phineas philosophy in the Federal Correctional Institution, Texarkana.

FCI Texarkana is located in northeast Texas near the Arkansas border.

The following article by Jorge Antonio Renaud, a UT graduate who spent 27 years in Texas prisons describes the atmosphere there.

http://www.utexas.edu/know/2010/11/22/renaud_jorge/

In Texas prisons, violence and racism reign

Relieved of the certainty that random violence might result in deadly retaliation, incoming gang bangers overwhelmingly black and Hispanic brought their street codes into prison: the drive-by mentality took hold, and it was visited against Anglos.

These cons didnt limit their violence to enemies they adopted the attitude that any white boy was fair game, and that he could and should be broken by continual, unexpected gang beatings administered regardless of whether he fought back, or whether he showed heart.

The unwilling joined white supremacy gangs for protection, while those men weary of constant beatings became sex slaves and cash cows.

This aspect of Texas prisons results in thousands of men leaving the system with a predator mentality or a RAGING RACISM buried so deep it might never be eradicated.

Reducing barriers to reentry is one thing understanding and relieving the trauma this unceasing violence leaves on the thousands of Texans returning to our streets is another.

Considering McQuilliams short reign of terror Renaud had reason to be concerned.

It is noteworthy that it took 14 frustrating years of life as an ex-con to act on his hatred.

Right or wrong, he will be forever remembered for the worst thing that he ever did.

As Renaud so correctly noted understanding the trauma inflicted in our nations prisons is necessary in order to prevent similar acts of violence in the future.

I quote from this weekends The Austin Statesman newspaper,

Before he riddled Austins police headquarters and the federal courthouse with bullets and attempted to burn down the Mexican Consulate early Friday, Larry Steven McQuilliams came to Austin apparently looking for a fresh start he never found.

His neighbor is quoted as saying,

He was incarcerated in Texarkana, and his time behind bars meant a series of failed background checks that led to a nearby car wash being the only place that would hire him. The frustration seemed to wear on him.

This persons comment following the story makes sense given McQuilliams background.

BuilderBob

My take, based on the limited info presented so far, is that his apparent source of unhappiness and dissent perhaps was the criminal justice system and the fact that previous mistakes haunt a person for life and ones ability to rehab oneself from past mistakes/acts is extremely limited due to the inability to ever get a decent job regardless of skills and desire to prove to the world that youve got your live in order and want a second chance and are willing to work for it. Sadly, weve always been taught and been told that the purpose of the prison system was to rehabilitate persons whove committed crimes and that punishment and incarceration would greatly reduce the chances of recurrence, but the lifelong stigma that follows most does the opposite.

His trigger point may have been news fervor and chaos ginned up by the Ferguson decision, which highlights the consistent lack of accountability and transparency by police in following procedures and presenting the facts without bias after incidents of officer involved shootings, and the frustration of many Americans over the governments seemingly eliminating the opportunity for many Americans to make a living in trades and service jobs due to the failure to enforce current laws on employers who hire workers unauthorized to work in the U.S.A.

The New York Review of Books has an excellent review of three additional books titled,

The Disgrace of Our Criminal Justice by David Cole which ends with this,

If mass incarceration is to end, it wont be because courts declare it unconstitutional. It will instead require the public to come to understand that our policies are inefficient, wasteful, and counterproductive. And it will require us to admit, as Bryan Stevensons stories eloquently attest, that our approach to criminal law is cruel and inhumane. Mass incarceration is one of the most harmful practices we as a society have ever adopted, but as Stevenson would say, we are all better than the worst thing we have ever done.

If you have the time you can find it here.

http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/dec/04/disgrace-our-criminal-justice/?src=longreads

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