

Coalition For Prisoners' Rights Newsletter

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CONSEQUENCES OF IMPRISONMENT CONDITIONS

What is Safety and Security?

It depends on who and where we are. Prison officials commonly justify censorship as necessary for rehabilitation and the maintenance of safety and security of the nearly two million people currently locked up in U.S. jails and prisons.

In fact prisons are the largest censors in the United States. Single state prison systems censor more books than all schools and libraries combined. Content-neutral bans censor a piece of literature for reasons unrelated to its contents – if, for example, it is mailed from a bookseller that the prison has not approved, if it is hardcover and all hardcover books are prohibited, or because the package has a mailing label on it.

Prison officials commonly justify censorship as necessary for rehabilitation and the maintenance of safety and security. The rationale that censorship should be used to accomplish these goals is specious—and yet often receives little scrutiny.

PEN America has joined with prison book programs, higher education programs in prisons and other nonprofits that send literature to incarcerated people to tell state and federal elections officials that they do not support prison censorship. They are using a letter – writing campaign that allows anyone to send an email to their state and federal representatives. Their report will document the ever-accelerating banning of literature in prisons, amplifying the voices of incarcerated readers to raise awareness on the issue and offer ways to push back against it. Their latest report is: Reading Between the Bars.

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We very much regret that circumstances force us to suspend our Newsletter publication after this issue.

Some Results of Incarceration

Studies show that it can trigger and worsen symptoms of mental illness which can last long after someone has been released. As a result, many people return to their communities worse off than before they were incarcerated. This can make it even more difficult to avoid the behaviors to let to their being locked up originally.

People imprisoned with mental health conditions are often further traumatized by their being put in solitary confinement, confining them to “cages” for rec time, bullying them and not allowing them to shower. This is even though there are state laws that prohibit placing mentally ill people in solitary confinement.

We might like to think that the U.S. Constitution prohibits dangerous and categorically inhumane prison conditions and requires that incarcerated people be provided adequate medical and mental healthcare. And that such prohibitions are normally followed.

Not so.

In fact, at Western New Mexico Correctional Facility (WNMCF) there is actually a job of “companion observer,” whose job is to monitor people in crisis. At WNMCF 3 women died by suicide at the prison in 2022 alone. Several others attempted suicide. Women who are mentally ill are in solitary confinement and are mistreated and bullied. Unsurprisingly, the cameras in the suicide watch cells have been broken for months...

Unsurprisingly, studies show that incarceration can trigger and worsen symptoms of mental illness, and that those effects last long after someone has been released. Many people return to their communities worse off than before they were incarcerated.