A Cage within a Cage:  
A Report on Indeterminate Security Housing Unit (SHU) Confinement and Conditions  
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composed with the permission of Pelican Bay and Corcoran SHU prisoners:

Lauren Liu, Legal Intern  
University of California Berkeley  
under the supervision of  
Robin Rederford, Intern Coordinator/Community Liaison
Dedication

This report is dedicated to all of the men and women who are currently undergoing and have undergone the torturous conditions that come with being forced to live in solitary confinement. We would like to thank all those who participated in the survey and those who received it but were not able to complete it. It is through the voices and testimonies of those living in the circumstances that we begin to understand the actual state of your situation. It is with hope that you all continue to have the strength to survive as society becomes further aware of this inhumanity.

Note: Drawing by Pelican Bay SHU prisoner
“The years (11) represent the time I’ve been in SHU. It’s actually (12) years. The skeletal hand and key = life, what you get in SHU if you don’t debrief or parole, which will lead to death, the guy looking at a broken clock = time stays still in SHU/my section/pod. I’m the guy trying to break free, not just from prison but from the psychological torture. The PBSP (gang) officer with the cuffs trying to make more money – only in America! The eyes and tears and the lettering...I’ll leave it to everyone’s interpretation.”
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Note: Drawing by Pelican Bay SHU prisoner
I. INTRODUCTION

Imagine being in a prison within a prison in a six by ten foot concrete room the size of a bathroom for 22 ½ - 23 ½ hours a day with no windows by yourself for twenty to thirty years. To not be able to see the sun or experience fresh air. When you are released for that half hour of one hour, you walk down a narrow hallway into another small room with a partial view of the sky. To not have physical contact with an individual unless it is with a guard who is not being very friendly with their intentions on contact. To never be able to make a phone call or send a photograph of yourself to your loved ones. To only have non-contact visits behind glass. Imagine the depression and psychological torture to only be in your own head with no exercise equipment or rehabilitation programs to occupy your time. Welcome to solitary confinement, otherwise known as the SHU (security housing unit).

Many SHU prisoners are kept indefinitely in solitary confinement based upon a classification made by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). Those deemed to be a security risk to other prisoners or to the institution, such as politicized prisoners who speak out and alleged validated gang members, are some of the individuals who are also placed in the SHU. As one prisoner states, “I have good days and bad but that’s life over here. SHU placement is torture and the secondary effects upon my family are profound.” These conditions create the premise of why this report is written.

On August 14, 2009, a Pelican Bay State SHU prisoner contacted Legal Services for Prisoners with Children in regards to a potential survey that could be sent out to other prisoners who are currently living in the SHU or have spent time there. The survey would serve to document and record the inhumanity and effects of long-term isolation and to raise awareness of the conditions specific to prisoners placed indefinitely in the SHU. Formally titled, “Indeterminate SHU Confinement Questionaire,” the survey was sent out on March 16, 2011 to both SHU prisoners at
Pelican Bay State Prison and California State Prison Corcoran and included questions about the prisoner, their family and the conditions in which they reside.

Those who are serving an indeterminate SHU term are housed in what is known as the short corridor which is the ultra-super max isolation unit in which all the conditions that were previously described occur. This is where the most “dangerous” individuals who pose the most threat to the institution or the prisoner population reside. The title, “A Cage within a Cage,” refers to the isolated prisoners who have an indeterminate SHU sentence living inside a smaller prison within the much larger prison.¹

The findings of this report present an urgent matter because of the dire situation that this segregated population of prisoners is currently in. On July 1, 2011, prisoners in the Short Corridor at Pelican Bay State Prison began to protest the appalling conditions they live in by going on an indefinite hunger strike in an attempt to change the existing policies in place. Despite the difficulty in acquiring accurate statistics, at its peak, the hunger strike had participants in eleven of the thirty-three California prisons including Corcoran as well as internationally and far reaching as Perth, Australia.

In order to evaluate the concerns of the prisoners, it is essential that our organization collects accurate information; hence, we have turned to the voices of the men who are confined.

¹ When an individual violates an infraction, he is moved from the General Population (GP) to Administrative Segregation (Ad Seg), where the infraction is reviewed by the Institution Classification Committee (ICC). If ICC finds that the violation is substantiated, he is then moved to the Security Housing Unit (SHU) where he can spend anywhere from 30 days to 36 months. If ICC finds that further isolation is needed, he will be placed in the Short Corridor of the super max unit of the SHU for an indeterminate amount of time with a designation of an Indeterminate SHU until he debriefs, paroles, or dies.
II. METHODOLOGY

The Pelican Bay SHU prisoner who initially contacted Legal Services for Prisoners with Children with the idea for the survey provided sample questions. Incorporating both his questions as well as our own, surveys were sent out to names on a list that he provided. The partial list of designated names represented an individual in each unit in Pelican Bay and Corcoran who would pass along copies of the surveys to the others in their pods. Individuals who did not receive a copy of the survey wrote their answers on a separate piece of lined paper and sent that in.

63 responses in total were received over the course of three months: 47 from Pelican Bay State Prison and 16 from California State Prison Corcoran. Included in the 47 responses from Pelican Bay is an individual who is currently in Salinas Valley State Prison but has experienced living in the Pelican Bay SHU for fifteen years and one year in Corcoran SHU. 61 out of the 63 (96.8%) people are currently in solitary confinement and 62 out of 63 (98.4%) are housed in the short corridor.

Individuals who have been in the SHU for an indeterminate time were targeted. The ages of the men ranged from thirty to over sixty years old. 22.2% of the prisoners are between the ages of 30-40 years old, 31.7% are between the ages of 41-50 years old, 38.1% are between the ages of 51-60 years old, and 6.3% are over 60 years old. The length of time spent incarcerated ranged from 6-25+ years. Less than half of those surveyed (46%) have been incarcerated between 16-25 years and less than 10% have spent over 35 years inside prison. However, the range of the length of time spent in the SHU is between 1-40 years. Astonishingly, 44.4% of individuals have spent between 16-40 years in solitary confinement.
III. FINDINGS: COMPILATION OF PELICAN BAY STATE PRISON AND CALIFORNIA STATE PRISON CORCORAN

I. FAMILY

*Family:*

- **63** out of **63** individuals have family (100%).

*Children:*

- **48** have children (76.2%).
  - **7** children are under 10 years old (14.6%).
  - **27** children are between the ages of 10-20 years old (56.3%).
  - **29** children are between the ages of 21-30 years old (60.4%).
  - **18** children are over 30 years old (37.5%).
  - **11** children are grandchildren (22.3%).
- 1 omitted to answer.

*Visits:*

*Last visit from a family member:*

- **1** individual has never had a visit (1.6%).
- **27** individuals had their last visit between 0-5 years ago (42.9%).
- **13** individuals had their last visit between 6-10 years ago (20.6%).
- **4** individual had their last visit between 11-15 years ago (6.3%).
- **8** individual had their last visit between 16-25 years ago (12.7%).
- **2** individual had their last visit between 26-35 years ago (3.2%).
- **2** individuals had their last visit “a long time ago” (3.2%).
- 5 omitted to answer.

*Last time they’ve seen their children:*

- **2** have never seen their children (4.2%).
- **9** had their last visit between 0-5 years ago (18.8%).
- **10** individuals had their last visit between 6-10 years ago (20.8%).
- **7** individual had their last visit between 11-15 years ago (14.6%).
- **11** individuals had their last visit between 16-25 years ago (22.9%).
- **4** individuals had their last visit between 26-35 years ago (8.3%).
- **1** individual had his last visit “a long time ago” (2.1%).
- 6 omitted to answer and the question was not applicable to **13** people.

*Frequency of loved ones visiting:*

- **18** have never had a visit (28.6%).
- **13** stated that they rarely receive a visit (twice ever, 5 years ago, 19 years, etc) (20.6%).
- **21** stated that they sometimes receive a visit (at least once or twice a year; once every two years, etc) (33.3%).
- **6** stated that they receive a visit often (every week to once a month) (9.5%).
- 5 omitted to answer.
Impact of SHU placement on family member’s visiting plans:
- 60 stated that being in the SHU has affected their family’s visiting plans (88.2%).
  - Out of this group, 41 said it is due to the location of the prison from their residency (68.3%).
  - 7 said it is due to the short length of visit (1 hour) (11.7%).
  - 6 said it is due to it being a no-contact visit (10%).
- 3 omitted to answer.

Have ever had a contact visit with family members:
- 36 have had a visit with contact (57.1%).
- 25 have never had a visit with contact (39.7%).
- 2 omitted to answer.

Last contact visit:
- 4 have had a contact visit between 0-5 years ago (6.3%).
- 8 individuals had their last visit between 6-10 years ago (12.7%).
- 7 individual had their last visit between 11-15 years ago (11.1%).
- 16 individuals had their last visit between 16-25 years ago (25.4%).
- 8 individuals had their last visit between 26-41 years ago (12.7%).
  - Out of the 42 who have had a contact visit, 40 were before SHU and 2 were during SHU (95.2%).
    - The 2 during SHU was because the individuals had to attend a court hearing and the judge granted them 20 minutes with their child (4.8%).
- 15 individuals have never had a contact visit (23.8%).
- 5 omitted to answer.

Photos:
Last time they could take photos and send them home:
- 5 were able to take photos and send them home between 0-5 years ago (7.9%).
- 5 were able to take photos and send them home between 6-10 years ago (7.9%).
- 9 were able to take photos and send them home between 11-15 years ago (14.3%).
- 28 were able to take photos and send them home between 16-25 years ago (44.4%).
- 4 were able to take photos and send them home between 26-41 years ago (6.3%).
  - Out of the 51 who were able to take photos, all 51 were done before being placed in the SHU (100%).
- 7 have never had the opportunity (11.1%) and 5 omitted to answer.

Ever taken photos:
- 31 have taken photos during visits before (49.2%).
  - Out of these 31, 26 stated that it was before they were placed in the SHU (83.3%).
- 26 have not taken any photos during visits (41.3%).
  - Out of these 26, 14 said it is because it is not allowed in the SHU (53.8%).
- 6 omitted to answer.
II. PRISONER

Age of prisoner:
- 14 out of 63 individuals are between 30-40 years old (22.2%).
- 20 out of 63 individuals are between 41-50 years old (31.7%).
- 24 out of 63 individuals are between 51-60 years old (38.1%).
- 4 out of 63 individuals are over 60 years old (6.3%).
- 1 omitted to answer.

Length of sentence:
- 17 out of 63 individuals have a sentence between 5-20 years (27%).
- 17 out of 63 individuals have a sentence between 21-30 years to life with possibility of parole (27%).
- 7 out of 63 individuals have a sentence between 31-40 years to life with possibility of parole (11.1%).
- 1 out of 63 individuals has a sentence between 41-50 years to life with possibility of parole (1.6%)
- 2 out of 63 individuals have a sentence of 50+ years to life with possibility of parole (3.2%).
- 11 out of 63 individuals have a life sentence (17.5%) and 6 out of 60 have life with no parole (10%).
- 2 omitted to answer.

Length of time spent incarcerated so far:
- 2 out of 63 individuals have spent 6-10 years in prison (3.2%).
- 4 out of 63 individuals have spent 11-15 years in prison (6.3%).
- 29 out of 63 individuals have spent 16-25 years in prison (46%).
- 17 out of 63 individuals have spent 26-35 years in prison (27%).
- 6 out of 63 individuals have spent over 35 years in prison (9.5%).
- 5 omitted to answer.

Housing:
- 1 out of 63 is housed in Administrative Segregation (1.6%).
- 62 out of 63 are housed in the Short Corridor/ultra-super max isolation unit (98.4%).
- 61 are currently housed in solitary confinement (96.8%).

Length of time spent in solitary confinement:
- 5 out of 63 individuals have spent between 1-5 years inside the SHU (7.9%).
- 11 out of 63 individuals have spent between 6-10 years inside the SHU (17.5%).
- 11 out of 63 individuals have spent between 11-15 years inside the SHU (17.5%).
- 21 out of 63 individuals have spent between 16-25 years inside the SHU (33.3%).
- 7 out of 63 individuals have spent between 26-40 years inside the SHU (11.1%).
- 8 omitted to answer.

SHU placement due to disciplinary or administrative reasons:
- 55 out of 63 individuals are housed in SHU for administrative reasons (indeterminate time) rather than for disciplinary reasons (determinate time) (87.3%).
- 7 omitted to answer.

Initial SHU sentence:
-20 out of 63 were given a determinate SHU sentence of between 0-7 years (31.7%).
  - However, they have exceeded that amount between 5-33 years.
-26 out of 63 were given an indeterminate SHU sentence (43.3%).
-17 omitted to answer.

Reasons why CDCR has not released individuals from SHU based on their “six-year inactive gang policy:”
-1 out of 63 has been released by the policy (1.6%).
-5 out of 63 believed they have not been released from SHU because they are politicized individuals who may have influential power (7.9%).
-8 out of 63 believed they have not been released from SHU because the policy is a “sham process” and they are in there because of non-gang related reasons (12.7%).
-4 out of 63 did not know why they have not been released (6.3%).
-30 out of 63 believed they have not been released from SHU because their six year review is not up and they still have alleged active gang affiliation (47.6%).
-3 out of 63 believed they have not been released from SHU because they are not eligible (4.8%).
-12 omitted to answer.

Debrief, parole, or die:
-45 out of 63 individuals reported that when they go to classification, officials tell them that they must debrief, parole, or die to leave SHU (71.4%).
-3 out of 63 reported that they do not hear that statement. Two said it is because they go in absentia (4.8%).
-15 omitted to answer.

III. PAROLE
Eligibility for parole:
-42 out of 63 individuals reported that they are eligible for parole (66.7%).
  - The reason for 6 people not eligible for parole is because of their life without parole sentence.
-8 omitted to answer.

Impact on parole suitability:
-47 out of 63 individuals believed that their SHU placement has had an impact on their parole suitability (74.6%). 7 omitted to answer.
  - Out of this group, 17 out of the 47 stated that the reason is because the activities that are suitable to increase the chances of parole are unavailable (36.2%).
  - 21 out of 47 stated that the reason is because they do not get a parole date if they are in the SHU (44.7%).
  - 6 out of the 47 stated that being in the SHU has had an impact but it could change as they have a new classification status or have debriefed (12.8%).
  - 6 out of the 47 who responded with a No stated that the reason is because they are not eligible for parole yet (12.8%).

Impact on health:
-50 out of 63 individuals stated that being in SHU has had a negative effect on their health (79.4%).
10 omitted to answer.
  - Out of the 50, 4 stated that it has affected their health psychologically (8%).
  - Out of the 50, 29 stated that it has affected their physical health (58%).
  - Out of the 50, 18 stated that it has affected both their physical and psychological health (36%).

Impact on family relationships:
-53 out of 63 individuals stated that being in SHU has had a negative effect on their family relationships (84.1%). 9 omitted to answer.
  - Out of the 53, 14 stated that the reason is because of the type of contact (no contact through glass) (26.4%).
  - Out of the 53, 24 stated that the reason is because of the distance of the institution (26.4%).
  - Out of the 53, 4 stated that the reason is gang-related and their family has been scared off by the Institutional Gang Investigation (7.5%).
  - Out of the 53, 10 stated that the reason is because they do not have access to a phone (18.9%).

Impact on ability to access vocational, self-help, rehabilitation or employment resources:
-62 out of 63 individuals stated that being in SHU has impacted their ability (98.4%).
  - Out of the 59, 52 stated that it is because those programs do not exist in SHU (83.9%).
  - Out of the 59, 9 stated that this negative impact can change as they have debriefed or had their classification status modified (14.5%).

*[It is important to note the subjectivity of the interpretation of questions that were left blank. The person answering the survey may have left a question blank because it did not apply or he did not understand it, or just did not want to answer.]

IV. SURVEY ANALYSIS

A. Length of confinement and reasons for SHU placement: Placement in the SHU can fall into two categories – disciplinary or administrative. If a prisoner is placed because of disciplinary reasons, he receives a determinate SHU sentence and will most likely be able to leave if he completes his time without accruing any violations. If a prisoner is placed because of administrative reasons, he can receive either a determinate SHU sentence or an indeterminate SHU sentence in which the latter means he will be isolated for an unfixed and uncertain amount of time. 87.3% of the individuals reported that they are housed in the SHU for administrative reasons which includes being validated as an active gang member or being a risk/threat to other prisoners and the institution.
The survey results illuminate how there is a discrepancy between the initial SHU sentence given and the amount of time that is being served in the SHU. Compared to the 43.3% who were given an indeterminate SHU sentence, 31.7% of the respondents were given a determinate sentence between 0-7 years. However, they have exceeded that amount of time by over serving an additional 5-33 years and continue to be in solitary confinement.

The survey results also show how these individuals serving an indeterminate SHU sentence have spent several decades inside solitary confinement under the grave conditions. 7.9% of the respondents reported that they have spent between 1-5 years inside the SHU, 17.5% have spent at least a decade inside, 33.3% have spent between 16-25 years, and 11.1% have spent between three to four decades inside concrete walls.

B. How to get released: For those who are housed indeterminately for administrative reasons, there are four ways to get released. The first method is by CDCR’s six year inactive gang policy in which an alleged gang member has to wait six years before he can go in front of a board to determine if he is still allegedly active. However, the procedure to determine this active gang affiliation is quite arbitrary. Although 1.6% of the respondents was released by the policy, the following prisoner’s statement can be representative of many people’s experiences who are purportedly associated with a gang: “I was up for inactive review last year, but I’m being kept for 6 more years because the Institutional Gang Investigation (IGI) found a list with a bunch of inmates’ names on it in some other inmate’s cell and they are using that as gang activity against me. I don’t know who this other inmate is and I never gave anyone permission to write my name on any list. So I have to stay in the SHU for another 6 years for someone else’s action. My record is clean.” In sum, having someone’s name in another’s cell in which the latter is thought to be associated with a gang incriminates the former. Another prisoner reported that he was validated as a gang member because he had given a birthday
card to someone who was an alleged member. In addition, other statements have included having a drawing or tattoo being seen as incriminating evidence as well. Hence, 12.7% of the respondents reported that they have not been released by the policy yet because it is a “sham policy” and they are in there because of non-gang related reasons (i.e. birthday card, drawing, etc). However, 47.6% of the individuals reported that they had not been released yet because they still have alleged gang affiliation and/or their six year review is not up. 7.9% stated that they believed they had not been released from the SHU because they are or have become politicized and deemed to have influential power. These individuals own books in their cells by radical revolutionaries such as former Black Panther, George Jackson, and are thrown in the SHU. As one prisoner maintains, he was placed in the SHU because he was “using innocuous free speech, i.e., referencing publication by George Jackson (purchased via CDCR Authorization) upon [his] art criticizing this beastly prison industrial complex as “Frankenstein Demented Creature.”

The other three ways to get released is mentioned in a statement that 71.4% of respondents reported they heard from prison officials when they first go to classification to determine placement in the SHU: they must debrief, parole or die to leave the SHU. Having those three ways explicitly said to an individual is so abysmal because it is a bleak way to look at how they will carry out the rest of their life. One individual declared that when he heard that statement, the prison officials “smiled about it as though antagonizing or making fun!” of him.

Debriefing means becoming an informant or “snitch” and telling officials anything they know about a particular gang. This poses problems for the informant who needs to exchange information about the actions of others in order to leave because he may not know anything but because he has found himself in a desperate situation, he may lie and point the finger on someone. If he does snitch, there may be retaliation once he is released back to general population. In addition, in regards to the
difficulty of deciding to debrief or not, one respondent stated the following: “After sitting in PBSP-SHU for 21 plus years, meeting the so called “inactive” requirements, and still not getting released from indeterminate SHU, I debriefed for my family/fiancée. I’m 50 years old and they were never going to let me out. I do not believe in or like “debriefing,” but my family is going through too much hardship with me in SHU so I have to sacrifice.”

Paroling out is needed to leave to SHU; however, being in the SHU itself affects one’s parole suitability. 66.7% of the respondents reported that they are eligible for parole (versus the 9.5% who are not) and 74.6% believed that their SHU placement has had an impact on their suitability, regardless of whether it is a positive or negative effect. Less than 45% (44.7%) of the respondents from this latter group explicitly reported that they do not get a parole date if they are in the SHU. One prisoner stated that “The board will not parole anyone from SHU. It’s an unwritten policy. At my last hearing in February 2009, I was denied parole for ten years based solely on my continued housing in the SHU” while another stated, “In the SHU, no prisoner is ever granted a parole release date despite a clean record, graduation from school, a job offer, a place to live – there is a 100% denial fate of parole for SHU prisoners.”

12.8% of the respondents stated that being in the SHU has had an impact but this could change as they have debriefed and therefore, have a new classification status. This is illustrated by one prisoner’s statement that “the board has consistently alluded to debriefing as a prerequisite for parole consideration.”

In addition, 36.2% of the individuals followed the same sentiment as this individual who declared “To parole, the board tells you that you must first “program.” But there is no programming environment in the SHU, so it is a catch-22.” By consistently expressing that they need to complete programs and seek skills that are not available to them in the SHU in order to parole out, the parole
board is setting them the prisoners up for failure. These statements illuminate the unreasonable and unjust policy on parole suitability.

C. Impacts/effects - access to vocational, self-help, rehabilitation or employment services:

As mentioned by the prisoner and 83.9% of the respondents, being in the security housing unit has impacted their ability to access programs because they do not exist in the SHU. In a straightforward manner, one prisoner testified, “There are no vocational training, self-help, rehabilitation or employment resources available here. Nothing! The response is clear at committee. If you want programs, get out to the mainline/general population which details debriefing. Otherwise, you don’t have nothing coming.” However, 14.5% stated that the negative impact could change for them and they may have access to the programs as they have had their classification status modified through the debriefing process.

Prisoners are also prevented from working with outside organizations and talking to medical doctors with whom they feel comfortable with. One such individual said, “I am unable to publish manuscripts. SHU also prevents me from networking with social/cultural organizations that work with delinquent youth, dysfunctional individuals and incorrigible criminals. I am unable to consult with a black clinical psychologist regarding the institutional racism. The prison clinical psychologists don’t acknowledge the existence of institutionalized racism.” In sum, nothing comes in and nothing goes out.

D. Impacts/effects - health: Solitary confinement has damaging effects on the health of prisoners as reported by 79.4% of individuals. 36% of individuals stated that their health has been affected both physically and mentally. One respondent put it bluntly by stating that “being caged 22 and 1/2 hours a day isn’t healthy period for anyone.” 58% of individuals stated that their physical health has been impacted. One prisoner states, “Before being transferred to P.B.S.P., I was a very
active person. I averaged two hours of exercise six days a week. More often than not I eat one meal a day, and very little junk food. Now I’m on chronic care for high blood pressure and worrisome good and bad cholesterol numbers from the lack of proper quality foods.” Another reported that SHU prisoners do not receive adequate medical care with his statement, “Since I’ve been in solitary confinement, I’ve been diagnosed with an enlarged heart, trigeminal neuralgia. I’ve been denied a specialist in both cases (ie: neurologist/cardiologist). They knew I had an enlarged heart since 2005, but didn’t tell me until 2007. I suffer pain daily.” Other effects include fatigue, becoming legally blind, high blood pressure, stomach problems, back pain, arthritis, and asthma. The lack of sun and artificial lights has also caused many to have eye problems such as diagnoses of glaucoma. One unfortunate prisoner stated, “My hearing deteriorated after being in the same pod with mentally impaired prisoners who bang with noise everyday. I’m now hearing impaired and my sight deteriorated so I’m now wearing bifocals.”

The result findings state that 8% said that being in the SHU has affected their health psychologically. SHU placement induces psychological torture due to the social isolation and sensory/environmental, cultural, and social deprivations of stimuli. Many reported having symptoms of SHU syndrome, anxiety, panic attacks, clinical depression, insomnia, and bipolar disorder. One prisoner stated, “Being in solitary confinement for well over 20 something odd years has caused me to feel closed off from the rest of the world. I seem to be losing my ability to socialize with people even on the most basic of levels (ie: I constantly feel guarded and suspicious). This is especially true here in PBSP where they’ve buried us back here in the short corridor and strictly enforce rules of little or no contact/communication with any other prisoner outside our immediate pods - almost like we’re being “conditioned” to become anti-social human beings.” Another reported, “I almost died in there. I was pulling my hair out. I was in a deep depression. The stress was so great. I would grind
my teeth in my sleep. I went six years without a cellie. I could not be around anyone. I still feel the
effects of that extreme isolation.”

These findings demonstrate that being confined to the SHU can have a more significant
impact on one’s health than if they were just confined within the main prison structure.

E. Impacts/effects - family relationships: The results of the report illustrate how SHU
placement creates a debilitating effect on the maintenance and sustenance of family relationships.
100% of individuals reported they have family (63 out of 63) and 76.2% stated that they have
children ranging from the ages of under ten to over thirty. 22.3% have grandchildren. In total, 84.1%
of respondents stated that being in the SHU has had a negative effect on those relationships.

Because of various reasons, there is a high number of individuals who have never had a visit
(28.6%) or rarely receive one (20.6%). There are a lucky few who receive a visit often such as every
week to once a month (9.5%) and others who sometimes receive a visit (33.3%). 42.9% of
respondents had their last visit from a family member less than 5 years ago whereas 12.7% had theirs
16-25 years ago and 3.2% lost track of time and just reported that it was “a long time ago.” One
prisoner poignantly avowed, “I haven’t hugged my daughter in 6 years and now that I got transferred
to PBSP-SHU, the regular “behind the glass” visits are becoming less and less. I’m too far away and
the relationship is strained. I’m afraid she won’t know me in a couple of years.” This statement is
reflected in many of the respondents who last saw their children 16-35 years ago (31.2%)

More than half of the respondents stated that they have had a contact visit with family
members before while 39.7% have never had one. Specifically, 11.1% of individuals had their last
contact visit between 11-15 years ago, 25.4% between 16-25 years ago, and 12.7% had theirs
between 26-41 years ago. Out of the 42 prisoners who reported that they have had one, 40 were
before they were placed in the SHU while 2 were while they were inside the SHU. The latter two

2 This prisoner was released by the six year inactive gang policy and is currently housed in Salinas Valley State Prison.
was only because the individuals had to attend a court hearing and the judge granted them twenty minutes with their child. One individual stated that he has never touched his fiancée and has not touched his mom since 1986.

Prisoners in the SHU are prevented from having contact as shown through several barriers such as the lack of photo opportunities, the type of visit, no phone calls, and the distance. 100% of the respondents (51 out of 51) who were able to take photos and send them home did it before they were placed in the SHU. Specifically, 14.3% had the opportunity between 11-15 years ago, less than half (44.4%) between 16-25 years ago, and 6.3% between 26-41 years ago. To never be able to send a photo home to their loved ones further creates a distance in family relationships particularly for families who rarely visit and as one prisoner puts it, “after twenty years, they don’t know how I look now.”

Another barrier that is created that impacts family relationships is the type of visits that are allowed, which are non-contact visits behind glass on Saturdays and Sundays. In Corcoran, it is a one hour visit while in Pelican Bay, it is one and a half to two hours. 26.4% stated that the reason for the negative impact is because of this reason. Equally as significant is the barrier caused by the distance from the institution to their loved one’s location of residence (26.4%). Although the distance may be a variable beyond their control, indeterminate prisoners in the SHU are unable to get hardship transfers. On the other hand, 18.9% stated that the reason that their relationships are falling apart is because they do not have access to a phone and cannot make phone calls, thus preventing their loved ones from hearing their voices and vice versa. As one prisoner put it, the only time he was able to make a ten-minute phone call was when there was a death in the family.

Mail has also been reported as routinely withheld if a prisoner is validated as an alleged gang member as stated by 7.5% of the respondents. One individual contended that “PBSP-SHU practices
mail restrictions on those they allege are active gang members without notice. We can’t explain the contents in our letters when they misinterpret them so basically they control who, what, when, and where you will communicate with. Obviously this creates distance with your family and loved ones…there’s times that I can’t answer a letter until 3-4 months later.” Another stated, “The Institutional Gang Investigation (IGI) has scared my family away with indirect threats and direct threats by saying their association with me will open [them up to] a gang investigation.” By restricting mail months at a time, it makes maintaining family relationships frustrating and burdensome.

Having contact with their families helps prisoners survive and be able to pass the time knowing that they are missed and loved back home. These results demonstrate the importance of prisoners being able to visit and stay connected with their families as well as the importance of families being able to visit and stay connected with their incarcerated loved ones. Through the denial of phone calls and longer visits, CDCR is disrupting family and community ties.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings illuminate the inhumanity and torturous conditions that human beings in cages within a larger cage are enduring. As one prisoner states, “To knowingly seek to break a person’s spirit and take his dignity is to play with fire especially if you intend to release this person back out into society. This is counter-productive because a person like this no longer honors or values anything.” However, despite the negative circumstances, the survey responses allow us to bear witness to their strength, resilience, and determination to survive the oppressive environment as they share their experiences with the rest of society.
We hope that this information will be added to the bank of knowledge that already exists about confinement in the SHU and that the collected data will be a catalyst to effect change in the corrections system. As declared by an individual, “We have to rely upon outside humanity for support of those who desire to self-educate/rehabilitate & progressively reach outside this place and give back to our oppressed-struggling communities/families – the people! A calling that is long overdue for the hundreds of thousands people locked up in America’s massive prison nation!”

*Note: Drawing by Pelican Bay SHU prisoner*