



SCHOOL OF LAW
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Human Rights Clinic • 727 East Dean Keeton Street • Austin, Texas 78705
Phone: (512) 232-6477 • Fax: (512) 232-9171 • hrc@law.utexas.edu

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Human Rights Violations on Texas' Death Row

New Report Concludes that harsh conditions in Texas prisons are equivalent to torture

AUSTIN, Texas — A new report detailing the chronic overuse of solitary confinement in Texas prisons was released today by the Human Rights Clinic of the University of Texas School of Law. In it, the authors present their case of how the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's (TDCJ) practice of holding prisoners in mandatory solitary confinement for 22 to 24 hours a day, often for decades on end, violates the U.S. Constitutional rights of those prisoners and contravenes well-established international standards of human rights.

“Designed to Break You: Human Rights Violations on Texas' Death Rows,” is a 48-page report representing the culmination of a yearlong study by Clinic students and faculty during which they compiled extensive personal testimony from former death row inmates.

Among the key findings are:

- TDCJ holds all death row prisoners in mandatory solitary confinement, an unnecessary practice described by multiple human rights bodies as “torture.”
- Death row prisoners spend an average of 14 years and 6 months totally cut off from human contact and rarely seeing sunlight or fresh air.
- Prolonged solitary confinement is well documented to have severely negative and often permanent psychological effects on inmates, and is particularly dangerous for inmates with a history of mental illness or intellectual disability.

The effects of solitary confinement on individuals with intellectual disability are especially relevant in light of a recent Supreme Court ruling criticizing Texas for creating “an unacceptable risk that persons with intellectual disability will be executed.”

Other concerns outlined include the TDCJ's failure to provide inmates with adequate medical treatment and mental health care, the lack of access to religious or educational material, and the total ban on physical contact.

According to Ariel Dulitzky, the Human Rights Clinic's director, “This display of cruelty extends to execution day, when inmates must say goodbye to family and friends through a glass window, forbidden to exchange a final embrace.”

The report also offers several recommendations for easing the plight of death row prisoners and moving Texas' practices into compliance with Federal and international law. They include:

- Texas should immediately end the use of solitary confinement except as a measure of last

resort, to be used for as brief a time as possible.

- Because of its adverse psychological effects, Texas should entirely ban the use of solitary confinement for inmates with mental illness or intellectual disability.
- Prisoners should be allowed physical contact during visits.
- Access to health care, religious services and outdoor recreation must be improved to meet international human rights standards.

“Texas’ failure to provide humane living conditions for death row inmates reflects poorly on the nation as a whole. Due to Texas’s harsh treatment of death row prisoners, the United States continues to face criticism by international human rights bodies such as the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the United Nations Committee Against Torture,” Dulitzky said.

In the words of former death row inmate Anthony Graves, who spent 12 years on Texas’ death row after being wrongfully convicted, “Solitary confinement does one thing; it breaks a man’s will to live.”

The Human Rights Clinic is part of the University of Texas School of Law. In the Clinic, an interdisciplinary group of law students and graduate students work under the supervision of Clinic Director Ariel Dulitzky on human rights projects through fact finding, reporting, and other public advocacy. The Clinic is involved in a multitude of activities including supporting advocacy in domestic and international fora, investigating and documenting human rights violations, and engaging with global and local human rights campaigns.

For more information, contact:

Ariel Dulitzky

Human Rights Clinic

The University of Texas at Austin, School of Law

727 E. Dean Keeton Street, Austin, TX 78705

adulitzky@law.utexas.edu Office: (512) 232-1256 Cell: (512)-529-6520

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