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Cruel and Unusual

By SHARDEL RAGIN

Does psychological trauma fit under the requirements of the 8th amendment protections against cruel and unusual punishment? Is psychological trauma meant to be part of imprisonment? Having to eat food that staff wouldn't dare feed their dogs, being forced to labor, being under constant surveillance, having no privacy, and living in a state of fear are all part of the living conditions that contribute to our trauma. Being housed in such conditions heightens stress levels and decreases mental health while increasing self-harm and suicide.

The food that is served is a constant throb of the pains of prison, the desire for a decent, palatable, nourishing meal is a reminder of our punishment. It reflects a culture that treats us as subhuman. We call the mystery meat/soy mixture "slop" to undermine the menu they serve to us. Because of our limited options, the purchase of commissary is a vital necessity. The list of items includes an assortment of sugary and salty foods—candy bars, chips, ramen soup, cookies, and processed meats like sausage and pepperoni—which can cause diabetes and high blood pressure. While there is a limited selection of healthy items of nutritional value available, we are overcharged and exploited with no remedy in sight. For example, a pouch of 4.5 oz of chicken breast costs \$4, a 2.5 oz bottle of Ms. Dash seasoning costs \$4.53, a 16oz jar of peanut butter costs \$4. (Side note: We pay taxes on these and other commissary items without the right to vote—taxation without representation.)

The exploitation of incarcerated people to perform low-cost work to keep the prison operating saves the system millions annually. We are paid pennies on the dollar to contribute to much of the facilities day to day operation. We do all the janitorial work, which often exposes us to hazardous material. We are kitchen workers, plumbers, electricians, barbers, garbagemen, landscapers, and we work industrial jobs including woodwork, welding, and upholstery. In order to get into a less volatile unit, where the workers are housed, we are required to have a job. Employment becomes mandated on our Offender Accountability Plan (OAP), and it increases the chances of making parole. If we refuse to work, we can be subjected to disciplinary actions and the loss of privileges such as commissary, visits, the use of our phones and tablets, as well as being kicked out of rehabilitating and educational programs—all of which decrease our chances of being released on parole. Exploiting us through low-cost work is demoralizing at its best and slavery at its worst.

The constant scrutiny of guards and lack of privacy are psychologically debilitating. Many guards go out of their way to make their presence known to us. The correction officers tour the unit every half an hour. During night tours, officers shine their flashlights in our faces. They often rip our letters in the process of opening them. When our family and loved ones visit, they watch us with a closely attentive eye. Our phone calls are being monitored. We are not

afforded the luxuries of the 4th amendment requiring a warrant for probable cause for searches and seizures. Our possessions, our bodies, our urine, and DNA can be searched at any time. All of it takes a cumulative toll.

The treatment by undertrained and antagonistic staff members disrupts our well-being and renders our environment a perpetual cycle of violent behavior. There is a repressive and dehumanizing culture among the staff, if new staff happens to treat us with decency and respect, they are mocked and chided by their coworkers who "correct" them by calling them "inmate lovers." By our next encounter with them, the staff member has been fully indoctrinated into this culture of abuse. The abuse is a ritual of disrespect and barking orders, forcing us to lock up early from our recreation, keeping us locked in our cell for recreation, provoking us, terrorizing us, shaking our cells down and leaving them in disarray, attempting to get a rise out of us at every turn. We know what happens when we attack an officer, it lands us in long-term segregation with outside criminal charges and disciplinary sanctions.

The dehumanization from the staff rubs off on us and we often turn on each other. Our tolerance somehow becomes diminished, filling the atmosphere thick with tension. Instead of seeing each other as people, we depersonalize our interactions so we see one another as "inmates" and not brothers, fathers and sons. The compassion that we should share with each other is replaced with aggression, and we display our frustrations and our mental anguish in combative ways. Having to always be on guard in a defensive mental state blurs the lines of fight or flight. A reaction to the smallest issue can cause someone to snap. Some people refuse to conform to the setting and resort to violent outbursts to display their rebellion. I've seen people smear feces and urine all over their cell and bodies, refusing to conform to the conditions of incarceration. This drastic action is not normal or natural, but being imprisoned and living in these conditions is not normal or natural either.

As a result of our circumstances, people in prison may experience personality changes and suffer psychiatric disorders such as paranoia, panic attacks, and depression. Type 2 trauma is the injury, pain, or shock that results from anticipated, ongoing or multiple incidents over time. When a person is left helpless or is overtaken by an event, the results may be classified as traumatic. Loneliness, boredom, stress and depression mixed with psychological trauma is a cocktail for a disaster. Left with no options of silencing the screams of one's conscious, many result to self-harm and even suicide. But is it really suicide if the person is being driven to death by the prison? It is very sad when someone is forced into such extreme measures, what could I have done to protect them? What could I have said to stop them? Will I break down one day and seek relief from the effects of prison's psychological trauma and murder myself?

The accumulation of psychological trauma inflicted on us is a form of torture, and it is inflicted by design. In this prison and in prisons across the United States, the conditions of incarceration directly violate our 8th amendment right of protection from cruel and unusual punishment. Even though the psychological trauma that is inflicted on us is not the stated purpose of incarceration, it is systematically enforced and distributed by a cruel culture of oppression.

Our society needs to look at new ways to implement effective methods toward rehabilitation replacing the flaws of the current system in place. Instead of warehousing us like dogs in the pound in facilities designed to keep us isolated, we need treatment in a conducive setting. Most of us need to heal from trauma we endured pre-incarceration, and now we need to heal from the trauma of being incarcerated. The rehabilitative process should be one of stabilized positive

reinforcement to the point of society welcoming our reintegration instead of the opposite.

Legislators, judges, and prison officials need to rethink their confinement policies, which allow tens of thousands of confined people to suffer from the debilitating effects of psychological trauma of incarceration. What I've been through in here, what I see, and how I am treated will have lasting effects on my mental health. Watching how the stress eats and breaks down my body, leaves me looking in the mirror unable to recognize myself, asking what's wrong with me. I choose to break the slave mentality of "a silent tongue makes a wise head," speaking my truth against a heartless culture of unyielding-obdurate overseers. The unnecessary and wanton mental trauma inflicted by the treatment and conditions of confinement warrants me relief due to the cruel and unusual treatment violating my right under the protection of the 8th amendment.

by Shardel