

# Human Rights Group Faults Super Security Prisons

By Michael Isikoff  
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An international human rights group yesterday charged that U.S. prison authorities are engaging in "numerous human rights abuses" through the increasing use of "super maximum security" prisons modeled after the federal prison in Marion, Ill.

Condemning what it called the "Marionization" of the nation's prison system, Human Rights Watch said in a new report that 36 states have created such prisons—rigidly regimented institutions in which inmates are usually confined in solitary cells with few opportunities for exercise or contact with other inmates.

After visiting more than 20 such prisons around the country, Joanna Wechsler, director of the group's prisoners' rights project and chief author of the report, said she was "outraged at some of the incredibly harsh conditions. . . . It's practical-

ly impossible to forget some of the things we found."

Marion was converted by the Bureau of Prisons into the country's first "super-maximum security" facility in 1983 following a near riot in which two guards and an inmate were murdered. As the U.S. prison population has soared in recent years to more than 1 million, such prisons have become increasingly popular among state corrections authorities as a means of disciplining inmates deemed violent or disruptive.

In some cases, Human Rights Watch charges, these state institutions violate international standards for the treatment of prisoners adopted by the United Nations.

Among the alleged abuses the group cites are conditions in the Q-wing of the Florida State Prison at Starke, where, the report charges, inmates are confined in windowless, badly ventilated cells for extended periods, in some cases as long as seven years. At the disciplinary unit in the Oregon State Penitentiary, the

report states, authorities have imposed a "strip status" on inmates in which they are deprived of clothing, bedding and personal possessions and must "earn" the items back with good behavior.

The report also condemns the

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denial of educational programs to inmates in such prisons, as happened earlier this year at a prison in Southport, N.Y.

The report says that in some cases inmates are being confined to such institutions without administrative hearings on the question of

their placement in the restrictive facilities. "It's being done completely outside of any due process," said Wechsler. "It's left entirely in the hands of prison administrators."

But federal and state prison authorities have vigorously defended the trend, saying "segregated units" are the most effective means of coping with the violence in many prison systems. In addition, a Florida state corrections official disputed the group's description of the conditions at Starke. The Q-wing, which houses death row inmates and disciplinary cases, is located in an aging facility that lacks air conditioning, said Kerry Flack, assistant to the state secretary of corrections.

"Obviously, it is not as unbearable as they are describing because otherwise the staff would complain," said Flack. "I will acknowledge that it gets very hot, but we don't believe it is appropriate for the taxpayers of Florida to pay for air conditioning . . . for people who violate the law."