

## What is a Control Unit?

II. Control Units, otherwise known as "Supermax" prisons or "maxi-maxis", unequivocally violate the major provisions of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

Control Units are defined by three primary features: 1) **permanent lockdown**-- prisoners are locked in cells approx. 23 hours a day, alone, without any access to work or educational programs, group dining or group religious worship in violation of Articles 71 and 72, 77 and 78, 41 and 42 respectively of the Standard Minimum Rules; 2) **isolation/ sensory deprivation**-- prisoners are stripped of most sensory and social stimulus, at times even sunlight, in violation of Articles 29, 30, and 31. As Harvard psychiatrist Dr. Grassian has testified, this constitutes "psychological torture"; 3) **administrative classification**-- prisoners are transferred to Control Units on the basis of administrative, not disciplinary criteria, thus enabling prison authorities to persecute outspoken and non-conformist prisoners. Thus, one finds in Control Units across the country a disproportionate number of **politically active prisoners, political prisoners, prisoners of war, and jailhouse lawyers** in violation of Article 6 (1). Black prisoners in particular are targeted by predominantly white authorities in violation of Article 6 (1).

In Control Units, a pattern of **physical torture** has been documented, including the use of mechanical restraints as punishment in violation of Article 33, strapping prisoners spread-eagle to concrete or steel bed-frames in violation of Article 34, routinely gassing, beating, and firehosing prisoners in violation of Article 31, refrigerating prisoners via air-conditioning in violation of Article 10, stripping prisoners of clothing and confining them to "strip cells" on inadequate diets in violation of Article 32, the list goes on....

In Control Units, **denial of medical and psychological care combined with the systematic abuse of mentally unstable prisoners** is a documented pattern in violation of Articles 22, 23, 25, and 26.

## Control Unit Prisons

A **control unit** (or "supermax") is a prison or a part of a prison that is in a state of permanent lockdown. ("Lockdown" is a temporary condition used to control and suppress disruptions within a prison by severely restricting prisoners' rights.) This once temporary condition has been increasingly adopted as the new model for U.S. prisons.

**In theory**, control units are protective. They are supposedly used to warehouse the most violent prisoners, who threaten the security of the guards and other prisoners.

**In practice**, control units are prisons within the prison system that are used to isolate and punish those people who present a threat to the established power; for example, those who have filed lawsuits against prison officials, participated in work stoppages, or actively pursued their religious and/or political beliefs. In certain cases, political prisoners, such as American Indian Movement organizer Leonard Peltier and Black Liberation Army member Sekou Odinga, are sent to control units **directly from trial**, thereby disproving the claim that prisoners in control units have earned their punishment by their own violence or disruption once in prison.

### Control unit conditions include:

**Longterm isolation and sensory deprivation:** Prisoners are kept in solitary confinement for 22-23 hours a day, in cells that are commonly about 6 feet by 8 feet. The cells in the new control unit prison at Florence, Colorado don't even have windows to let in outside light, and all cells are soundproof. Prisoners will only hear the sounds they make themselves, and only see the glare of fluorescent light panels (which are often left on 24 hours a day).

**Forced Idleness:** Prisoners are denied standard vocational, educational, and recreational activities, including access to law libraries.

**Excessive Restraint:** Prisoners are often put in iron shackles or chained spread-eagle and naked to reinforced rings in their beds. This is usually billed as punishment for those who "misbehave"; yet misbehavior is arbitrarily decided by the guard on duty (and has been known to include refusing to make beds, or complaining about clogged and overflowing toilets). This form of restraint is, according to US and international law, a form of corporal punishment (which is illegal) not to be administered without the approval of a psychologist who testifies that the prisoner poses a threat to himself or prison officials. Instead, it is used as a punitive measure to suppress legal activities.

**Toxic Environment:** Prisons are often built near environmental hazards. Until 1992, Marion prison in Illinois got its water from a lake that had been known since 1984 to be poisoned with levels of chloroform over 1000 times what is deemed "safe". Several prisoners got cancer from the water supply during those eight years. Similarly, the new prison at Florence is in an area whose water, soil, and air is known to be contaminated with dangerously high radiation levels from a nearby uranium milling plant. In Westville MCC in Indiana, dangerously unsafe levels of lead have been detected in the water by an independent examiner.

**Limited Human Contact:** Physical contact is prohibited during visits. Phone calls for prisoners in Marion cannot exceed ten minutes a month. No congregating dining, exercise, or religious services are permitted. In Florence, prisoners will be shuffled through remote-controlled electronic doors to their destination, without ever seeing another human being.

There are many accounts of human rights violations and abuses in control units, including denial of medical care to injured and/or sick prisoners (including diabetics and epileptics), refrigerated cells during winter months, arbitrary beatings, psychological abuse of mentally unstable prisoners, illegal censorship of mail, extended isolation and indoor confinement, denial of access to educational programs, and administrative (rather than judicial) decisions about punishment for "misbehaved" prisoners. There is no evidence that such abuse decreases violence within the overall prison system. This torture must end.

*Sources: Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, Coalition Against Indiana Control Units, American Friends Service Committee, Pelican Bay Information Project, Z Magazine, Prisoner Advocacy Network, Los Angeles Times, Rocky Mountain Peace Center.*