

THE MYTH THAT THE PELICAN BAY CONTROL UNIT HAS REDUCED VIOLENCE

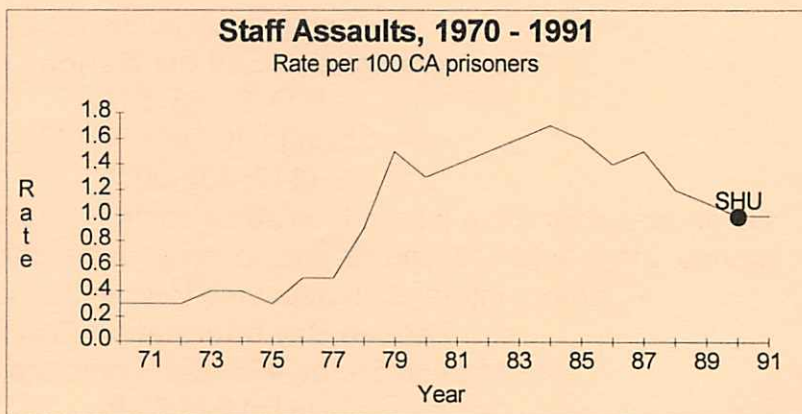
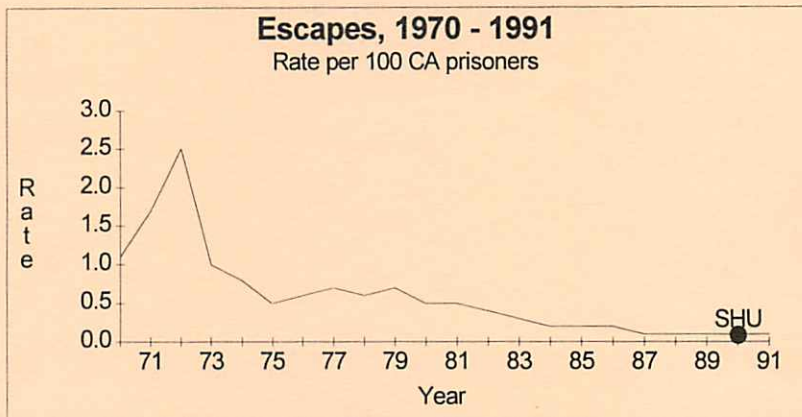
In the Fall of 1993 Pelican Bay prison, located in northern California, went on trial for violating the human rights of the prisoners caged there. Much of the testimony has come against the control unit prison, the Special Housing Unit (SHU), which is part of the Pelican Bay complex and which holds 1500 prisoners. As we write this, at the end of 1993, the trial, *Madrid v. Gomez* (one of the prisoners filing the lawsuit versus the director of the California Department of Corrections), has just come to an end but a decision is not expected for several months.

During the course of the trial members of CEML were often asked to comment on what was happening there. Whenever we would speak about the human rights violations of USP Marion and all other control unit prisons, including Pelican Bay, people would say to us "But it works in reducing prison violence, doesn't it?" We would respond by saying that even if it did reduce violence it still wouldn't be ok, and that we were certain that structurally it couldn't reduce violence, just as prisons structurally cannot reduce violence or crime in general. (See the first-page article of the

Fall, 1993 issue of CEML's newsletter, "Walkin' Steel," for a detailed explanation of why this is the case.) In response to this formulation our questioners would show us some numbers distributed by the California Department of Corrections, and published in major newspapers across the country and used on tv stations throughout Chicago. What these figures showed was a reduction in violence in the California prison system since the SHU in Pelican Bay opened in December of 1989.

Many people used such data to "prove" to us that the SHU was acceptable. One of the main proponents of this mode of argument were leaders of the Illinois chapter of AFSCME, the allegedly progressive union, which was the major force in the pursuit of a control unit prison for Illinois. This prison, they maintain, will serve as a device to protect the guards in the state prison system, one of the many groups represented by AFSCME. Others, of course, use this argument as well. California Corrections director James Gomez was quoted by the media as crediting the SHU with greatly decreasing violence in the system. Similarly, California Deputy Attorney General, Peter Siggins, has informed the media: "The simple truth about Pelican Bay is that it is working. Assaults by prisoners and lock downs have declined throughout the prison system." Let us examine this "simple truth."

CEML has just obtained the most recent annual report of the California Department of Corrections,



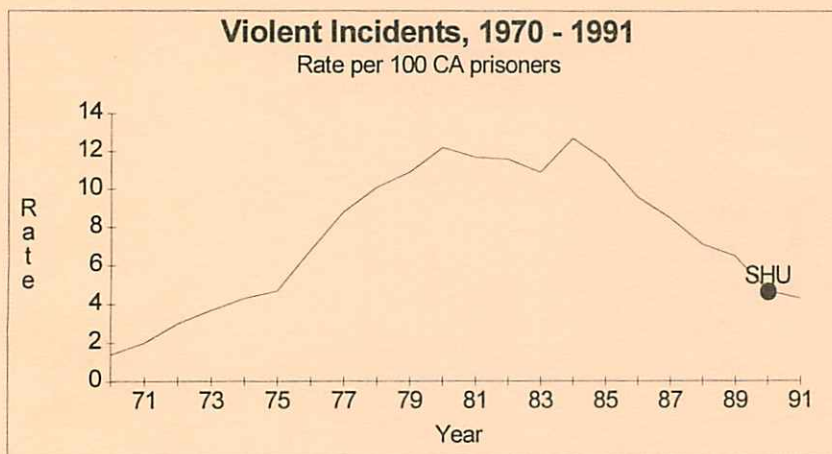
"California Prisoners and Parolees." This 95-page report contains thousands of numbers. Three of these sets of numbers are related to the stated purpose of the SHU. These are prison escapes, violent prison incidents, and assaults on staff. We have converted these numbers to rates per 100 prisoners (a common analytic tool) and plotted each set of rates over time, since 1970, the first year given in the report.

The results are astounding. Although the California Department of Corrections has informed everyone that violence decreased from 1989 to 1990 (the first full year of the SHU) and then again from 1990 to 1991, these correctional experts forgot to mention that all three measures have been declining, although in different ways, for as much as a decade.

**** Prison Escapes** -- These rates were about 2.5 20 years ago and have declined steadily since then until 1991 when the rate was about 0.1. In fact this rate has been 0.1 since 1987.

**** Assaults on Staff** -- These rates were 0.3 20 years ago, rose to 1.7 in 1984 and have been falling ever since. In fact, the rate did not even decline between 1990 and 1991.

**** Violent Incidents** -- These rates were about 2.0 20 years ago, rose to 13.0 in 1984 and have been falling ever since.



Thus, according to California's own data, there is no evidence at all that the SHU has reduced violence. All three of these measures have been declining for some time now, and none of these declines have been speeded up by the SHU. In fact, two of the three measures did not even continue their declines in the most recent year.

The issue here is not so much that the SHU did not decrease the violence. The issues rather are twofold. First, the California Department of Corrections has lied to the public and deliberately deceived us. Second, the SHU was not "needed" even if you believe their motivation for building it, since all indicators of prison violence were steadily improving.

Thus, still another multi-million dollar fraud designed to destroy thousands upon thousands of people of color has been perpetrated upon us. Now, what will we do about it?

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Contact us for more information about control units, the racist nature of U.S. imprisonment, and how you can get involved in the efforts to combat these evils.

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