

Experiencing prison

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Last year a man recently released from prison went to the home of Colorado corrections chief Tom Clements and shot him to death. The prisoner, Evan Ebel, had served five and a half years of his six-year sentence in solitary confinement. Ironically, Clements had been an advocate for prison reform and especially for reducing the use of solitary confinement.

Though one might imagine that Ebel's action would have terrified citizens and prompted calls for longer prison sentences and tougher probation laws, Clements's reform work received greater attention. In April, the Colorado legislature passed a law that prohibit prisons from placing prisoners with serious mental illness in solitary confinement and stops prisons from releasing inmates directly from solitary confinement to the outside world. Other states have passed or are considering similar legislation.

The use of solitary confinement—or “administrative segregation”—has been on the rise for several decades, as has the prison population. Under such measures, prisoners are typically held in single cells, without human contact, for 22 to 23 hours a day.

To better understand solitary confinement, Clements's successor at the Colorado Department of Corrections, Rick Raemisch, spent 20 hours in a 7-by-13-foot cell. Even during that short time, he wrote in the *New York Times*, his mind was battered.

“I felt as if I’d been there for days.” He reported that he struggled to keep his sanity. “I’m confident that it would be a battle I would lose.”

Changing the use of solitary confinement is just one of the reforms needed in the prison system, according to Robert Ferguson in his book *Inferno* (see ["American gulag"](#) for a review). The National Research Institute recently released a report detailing the nation’s high rates of incarceration. One in 100 adults is in prison or in jail—at least five times as many as in any other Western democracy. The nation spends 400 percent more on corrections now than it did in 1980. It is mostly African Americans and Hispanics who have paid the social, familial, and personal costs associated with this focus on incarceration. The number of people in prison who are mentally ill may be as high as one in two.

Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.), Dick Durbin (D., Ill.), and Rand Paul (R., Ky.) have introduced legislation with bipartisan support to begin dismantling mandatory minimum sentencing laws for drug offenses (a leading cause of incarceration) and changing the disparity between laws for crack cocaine and powder cocaine. This legislation passed the Senate Judiciary Committee in January and is now awaiting hearing by the Senate; a similar House bill has been referred to committee. While legislative action may be slow in coming, a new political consensus is emerging that recognizes massive incarceration as unsustainable morally and financially.

Rick Raemisch’s actions in Colorado demonstrate one way the movement for reform begins—by reforming our own indifference to the experience of prisoners.