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## **CRUEL AND UNUSUAL; [FIVE STAR LIFT Edition]**

**St. Louis Post - Dispatch.** St. Louis, Mo.: Jan 6, 1999. pg. B.6

### **Abstract (Summary)**

By siphoning off suspected gang leaders and the most violent Illinois prisoners, correctional officers say, Tamms is intended to ensure the safety of guards and inmates throughout the Illinois prison system. Tamms even gets partial credit for a drastic drop in prison assaults over the past two years, though the "supermax" prison opened less than a year ago.

It costs about \$35,000 a year to house a prisoner at Tamms. But the actual cost to society is much higher. One prison official ominously said that no one from Tamms should be released directly into society. We know what sort of human beings are put into Tamms. But what sort of human beings come out? And what does this tell us about the assumptions of those invested in such a system?

If that is indeed the purpose of Tamms, then what is the effect of such punishment? Does it motivate prisoners to reform? Does it modify their behavior? Is the threat of being sent to Tamms itself a deterrent? Are criminals more apt to function well in more open prison society - and society at large - after a turn at Tamms? Should we accept Mr. (Charles) Hinsley's statement at face value?

### **Full Text (687 words)**

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### **PRISONS**

Tamms Correctional Center, a black box of isolation buried in the Shawnee National Forest of Southern Illinois, warehouses what the system has deemed the worst of the worst.

By siphoning off suspected gang leaders and the most violent Illinois prisoners, correctional officers say, Tamms is intended to ensure the safety of guards and inmates throughout the Illinois prison system. Tamms even gets partial credit for a drastic drop in prison assaults over the past two years, though the "supermax" prison opened less than a year ago.

It is hard to imagine that even for the most violent prisoners, round-the-clock isolation - including 23 hours each day in an 8-by-10 feet cell - is anything but extreme psychological cruelty. The dedication of an entire facility to such extreme isolation is deeply troubling.

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"Tamms is not about rehabilitation," said assistant warden Charles Hinsley. "It's about punishment."

If that is indeed the purpose of Tamms, then what is the effect of such punishment? Does it motivate prisoners to reform? Does it modify their behavior? Is the threat of being sent to Tamms itself a deterrent? Are criminals more apt to function well in more open prison society - and society at large - after a turn at Tamms? Should we accept Mr. Hinsley's statement at face value?

In 1995, a federal judge said isolation units at Pelican Bay, a maximum-security prison in California, put mentally ill inmates at risk of permanent psychological damage. For them, the judge ruled, isolation units amounted to cruel and unusual punishment. Prisoner- rights advocates say even stable inmates also disintegrate in isolation units, where starvation for human contact creates lunatics and monsters.

Prisoners looking for reasons to behave at Tamms can find meager rewards. But unlike inmates in segregation units of maximum security prisons, who know more freedom lies within the same prison walls, Tamms inmates must spend at least one year in utter isolation. There are no community activities or meaningful programs.

The most violent prisoners at Tamms probably would be isolated at any prison. But a second category - those in

"administrative detention" - go to Tamms if the state identifies them as gang leaders, among other reasons. The state guarantees those prisoners a hearing when they arrive at Tamms, but inmates cannot see the detailed evidence against them. Prisoner-rights advocates say that policy tempts the state to send litigious or troublesome prisoners to Tamms without cause. Correctional officers say prisoners know why they belong there.

If we accept prison isolation units as a necessary evil, we should severely limit the number of prisoners assigned to them. The review process should be meticulous and fair, giving prisoners - particularly those vulnerable to mental illness - the right to argue for a more rehabilitative setting. The efficacy of such a punitive approach also needs to be independently assessed.

For the rest of Illinois' 42,000 inmates - and, arguably, some of those at Tamms - we should push for education and treatment programs that develop prisoners into people we need not fear on our streets again someday.

Better yet, we must reassess the social policy to which our nation has committed itself and billions of our tax dollars: locking up more and more of our citizens for longer periods of time, in ever harsher circumstances.

That such a place as Tamms could exist is evidence of the appalling poverty of our moral imagination. It is evidence of the degeneration of our social conscience and a capitulation to cruelty. Imagine what sort of human beings we might create if we spent \$35,000 a year on education, social support and mental health programs for the families that will breed the Tamms inmates of tomorrow.

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