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Solitary Confinement
Loaf

Our Towns; What's Worse Than Solitary Confinement? Just Taste This

By MATTHEW PURDY
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PRISON wardens everywhere have a menu of sanctions for inmates who break rules -- loss of recreation, loss of phone privileges, solitary confinement. In New York, the final item on the menu is the Loaf.

The ultimate discipline for incorrigible prisoners is three one-pound loaves a day made of flour, milk, yeast, sugar and lesser amounts of margarine, salt and shredded carrots and potatoes. Plus, there's a side order of cabbage. One cup, raw. And water.

The restricted diet is used as a last resort for inmates already locked in disciplinary housing for 23 hours a day, who commit serious offenses like attacking correction officers or milder infractions like disobeying their orders. The diet is often imposed for just a few days, but sometimes for weeks, with inmates served the loaf for seven consecutive days and regular food for two.

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Prisons are tough places for tough people. But bread and water in the 21st century?

"It has a connotation of the Middle Ages." That's from a state prison system doctor, John Alves, who said in a recent deposition that while the diet posed no medical risk, it conjured up long-ago images: "Medieval, dungeons, shackles, bread and water."

However antiquated the loaf may sound, the number of New York State inmates on it is growing, to 478 last year from 363 in 1999. Last week, 36 inmates were on the loaf.

The restricted diet, which has been around since the mid-1980's despite legal challenges, is now the subject of two lawsuits. One is by Wilfredo Rodriguez, who has been convicted of attempted robbery and selling drugs and has racked up dozens of infractions in prison. In the 1990's, while in disciplinary housing at the Southport Correctional Facility, he was given about 100 days on the diet, court papers show.

"It's hard, partially frozen, served in a bag," he said, describing the loaf in a deposition this year. And he added, "The cabbage is really smelly."

Officials who run the prisons, hardly five-star joints to begin with, say the loaf meets nutritional standards. But you have to eat three pounds daily to get the full benefit.

In February, a judge in Elmira temporarily stopped the diet for Jessie Barnes, a chronic problem inmate. He had been on it nearly five days a week for five months, was refusing to eat and had lost 20 pounds, court papers show. "His weight loss and deteriorating health is directly attributable to the lengthy imposition of the restricted diet," wrote Justice Samuel J. Castellino of State Supreme Court.

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