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A look inside Illinois' only super-max prison

State's most dangerous inmates live in near complete isolation at Tamms, which critics have compared to Guantanamo Bay

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TAMMS, Ill. — Every once in a while, Joseph Dole stands in a back corner of the walled-in outdoor recreation area at Tamms Correctional Center straining to catch a ray of sunlight.

"About 4 square feet gets sun," said Dole, a rail-thin convicted murderer who is serving a life sentence. "You can stand there. ... You feel refreshed. But you can only get it if they call yard between 11 and 1."

Another murderer, Adolfo Rosario, said he hasn't shaken anyone's hand since he was transferred to Tamms 11 years ago. "There is no contact at all, none," he said.

Tyrone Dorn, serving time for carjacking, hasn't had a visitor or made a phone call in five years at Tamms. "The hardest part is the isolation," he said. "It's like being buried alive."

Situated amid rolling hills and farms in the southern tip of Illinois, the state's only "super-max" prison was built during the get-tough-on-crime wave that swept the nation in the 1990s. It was designed to house the state's most dangerous inmates.

Conditions are harsh—and meant to be. For at least 23 hours a day, prisoners sit in solitary confinement in 7-by-12-foot cells. There is no mess hall—meals are shoved through a chuckhole in cell doors. Contact with the outside world is sharply restricted. For a rare visit from relatives or friends, inmates are strip-searched, chained to a concrete stool and separated from visitors by a thick glass wall. There are no jobs and limited educational opportunities.

For the first time in years, the Illinois Department of Corrections opened up this closed world to a Tribune reporter and photographer, allowing them a glimpse at life for its 245 inmates. Among the snapshot views from the daylong visit:

- Inmates in a psychiatric unit being rewarded for good behavior by watching TV from locked cages about the size of phone booths.



- Hallways barren of foot traffic and eerily quiet except for the occasional clang of metal doors shutting.
- Desperate cries for help shouted by inmates on realizing a reporter was visiting.
- Inmates who spoke of their ingenuity at coping with the isolation by using "fishing lines" fashioned from string in blankets to pass notes to other inmates and developing a sign language to communicate.

The controversial prison, compared by some experts to the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, has been the target of persistent criticism from human-rights activists.

Opponents say Tamms and many other super-max prisons around the country warehouse mentally ill inmates and isolate others for so long that they develop psychological problems. Legislation introduced last week in Springfield would prohibit seriously mentally ill inmates from being sent to Tamms and make it more difficult to keep inmates there indefinitely.

But Illinois prison officials hail Tamms as a success, saying assaults against inmates and staff at other prisons have dropped by placing the most disruptive prisoners there. They insist they have been selective in who is housed in Tamms and note it has been at just half its capacity throughout its 11-year history. The prison is expensive, costing \$27 million a year to run, or about \$64,000 for each inmate, almost triple the state average.

"What price do you put on staff safety?" Sergio Molina, executive assistant to the state prison director, said in defending the expense at a time of economic crisis. "You earn your way here. ... It's a management tool."

The most severely mentally ill inmates are housed in a section of the prison called J-Pod, one of the first stops on the visit. While one of every 10 prisoners in Tamms is given psychotropic drugs, only a dozen inmates are incarcerated in J-Pod for treatment for schizophrenia, manic depression and other ills.

A TV blared loudly as four inmates watched the sitcom "One on One" in the phone booth-size cages behind thick glass, a scene reminiscent of the Academy Award-winning film "The Silence of the Lambs."

"They love Rachael Ray," said Rita Lehar, an activity therapist. "She has a real bubbly personality."

In one cage, John Spires, a convicted child rapist who is serving a 240-year sentence, said he hears voices telling him to hurt himself and others. He is prepared to spend the rest of his life at Tamms. "I'm OK with that," Spires said. "That way I know I won't hurt anyone. I get tired of hurting people."

Even critics praise the care at J-Pod, but they contend that mentally ill inmates shouldn't be at Tamms because the isolation is harmful. One inmate attempted suicide several months ago. Another prisoner, Marcus Chapman, hanged himself in 2004 by braiding together torn pieces of his jumpsuit. "Tell all the guys on J-Pod I'm sorry!" Chapman wrote in a suicide note, court records show. "I just couldn't take it anymore. I'm now free."

Next, Molina walked upstairs along a catwalk into the G-Pod control tower, where Correctional Officer Patrick Trokey manned an electronic board controlling 60 cell doors from his catbird seat.

While many prisons resemble small towns as inmates hustle to jobs or classes, play hoops in the yard or head to the chow hall, Tamms' corridors were desolate. For security reasons, movement is sharply

limited. When inmates are moved, they are restrained in leg chains and handcuffs and guarded by two officers.

"When I worked [at Pontiac], I was scared," Trokey said of the maximum-security prison. "Here, these guys are secure. They can't do anything."

But critics said a dearth of educational programs and jobs should be a concern to the public. More than one-fourth of the inmates at Tamms are scheduled to be freed in the next decade, prison officials confirmed.

While acknowledging that a few inmates need to be held in the strictest conditions because they are so dangerous, critics contend that most prisoners could be safely housed at one of the state's three maximum-security prisons. Yet more than a quarter of the inmates have been at Tamms since its opening in 1998.

Even George Welborn, its first warden, said Tamms has abandoned its original goal to keep most inmates for no more than a couple of years. Before he retired several years ago, Welborn said, superiors sometimes didn't follow his recommendation to transfer out inmates who had passed muster. "And that policy has been maintained since I left," he said.

Prison officials said even well-behaved inmates need to remain at Tamms if they continue to hold sway over a street gang or pose a threat. Molina contended that officials regularly review whether inmates should remain at Tamms. Since 2005, officials said, 66 inmates have been moved to less restrictive prisons.

For longtime inmates at Tamms, the biggest challenge is to stay busy and avoid "bugging out"—losing touch with reality.

Tyrone Dorn, who was transferred to Tamms after prison assaults, passes the time reading the Quran and playing chess with an inmate housed upstairs in the same wing. They shout out moves to each other.

"This place takes a toll on your entire body from a mental and physical standpoint," he said.

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