

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

PsySR Statement on Torture, Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment and Racial Injustice in the United States

Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR), an organization that has long worked against torture at offshore detention sites like Guantanamo Bay, calls on psychologists and other mental health professionals to look more closely at torture and related human rights violations committed within the U.S. criminal justice system.

Echoing the voices of the Black Lives Matter movement, PsySR is concerned with the staggering array of violent acts committed by public officials against individuals and communities of color within the United States. Acts constitute torture when they cause severe mental or physical pain or suffering and are intentionally inflicted by or under public authority for the purpose of obtaining a confession, punishing, intimidating or coercing, or for any other reason based on discrimination of any kind. Cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment (CIDT) encompasses a broader range of exposure to substantial pain or suffering undertaken with the consent or acquiescence of public officials.

Torture, in its most immediately recognizable form, is manifest in actions such as those of Chicago police officers who, under the direction of Jon Burge, attached electric shock cables to African American suspects to gain false confessions. Far more frequent is the use of prolonged solitary confinement, a psychologically destructive practice that the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture has called on all nations to abolish.

Other significant human rights violations that could rise to the level of torture or CIDT, or may otherwise be linked to them, include police beatings and racially discriminatory killings, sexual assault, medical neglect, and abuses within prisons, jails, and detention centers. These traumatizing acts are often disproportionately waged on individuals and communities of color.

Under international law, the United States is obligated to stop and prevent torture and CIDT. Social scientists and health professionals, bound by their professional ethics and values, also bear a serious responsibility to face and stop these abuses. Many of us work within institutions where CIDT and torture occur, and thus we have a choice whether to oppose these human rights violations or, as bystanders, to perpetuate them. Too often, our participation in these settings supports existing structures of racial injustice, already so widespread they can appear commonplace and “normal.”

Given the long history and current confluence of forced segregation, mass incarceration, private for-profit prisons, solitary confinement, the school-to-prison pipeline, and other correlates of inhuman and degrading treatment, professionals need to look seriously at our ethical obligation to beneficence and nonmaleficence. We need to recognize when we are rightly and actively resisting abuse and when we are instead complicit in maintaining abusive systems. It is our responsibility to align our ethical obligations to embrace and advocate for policies and practices that actively work to dismantle racial injustices in all settings in which we work.

PsySR calls upon psychologists and other health professionals within the criminal justice system, in all areas of research, practice, and consultation, to:

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

- Acknowledge the impact that roles, settings, norms, and the cultural climate within the criminal justice system has on you and those around you.
- Identify areas of your own work and your colleagues that, even if merely characterized by silence, perpetuate racial injustices rather than help to eliminate them.
- Advocate for systemic change, reinforcing the right and responsibility of professionals and other staff to refuse participation in any abusive practices, and to report every form of abuse to agencies independent of the abusive structure.
- Lobby for external accountability of abusive institutions and the protection of whistleblowers.
- Advocate for reparations, including rehabilitation for survivors and victims of torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and other forms of systemic abuse.
- Press for alternatives to incarceration, including restorative justice practices and specialized courts for drug-related offenses, and for other community-based programs that recognize the traumatic effects of abusive systems without pathologizing people or communities.
- Tell and write your stories about injustices you witness or experience, and send those pieces to blogs, the media, policy makers, and local, state, and national organizations.
- Transform professional training programs to: go beyond traditional conceptions of “cultural competence”, be mindful of racial oppression, and work strenuously for the health, well-being, and protection of those caught up in the criminal justice system.
- Collaborate actively in the national movements to end abuses such as solitary confinement and mass incarceration and all other manifestations of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

PsySR recognizes and is inspired by grassroots organizations such as *We Charge Genocide* of Chicago and *Anti Police-Terror Project* of Oakland that are working to address this human rights crisis. In recognition that the crisis has taken an especially profound toll on men, women and children from African American, Latino/a, indigenous, migrant, and other diverse groups and communities, we strongly advocate for continued and increasing alliances and coalition building within and between groups to work toward change.

We, as PsySR, commit to the growing campaign against torture and CIDT. We believe that mental health professionals and psychologists have an important role to play in working to dismantle systems of racial injustice.

For more information about our ongoing work and the Racial Justice in Praxis Conference 2016, please visit this link to our website: www.psyr.org/racialjustice.

April 3, 2016