



Lexington High Security Unit

On October 29, 1986, the Federal Bureau of Prisons opened the first female High Security Unit (HSU) at the Federal Correctional Institution, Lexington, Kentucky. The mission of the Lexington HSU was to control and isolate **women** prisoners who posed a political threat to the United States or who were considered to be highly disruptive or an escape threat within the federal prison system. Lexington HSU was a 16-bed self-contained unit located in the subterranean level of the institution. It soon became a focus for national and international concern over human rights and was closed just two years after opening.

HISTORY OF THE LEXINGTON FEDERAL CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION

Congress originally established the Lexington facility in 1929 as the first U.S. narcotics rehabilitation "farm" for the treatment of male addicts. In 1936, it became the U.S. Public Health Service Clinical Research Center and continued to treat drug addicts including those who were federal prisoners. At this time, the facility held 280 patients. In 1941, the **Women's** Building was constructed within the larger institution and the first female residents were admitted. In 1974, the U.S. Public Health Service's Clinical Research Center was finally transferred to the Federal Bureau of Prisons becoming a low-security coed correctional prison for inmates with drug or alcohol abuse problems.

THE WOMEN OF LEXINGTON

During its short period of existence, the Lexington HSU **housed** several **women** with long-standing political histories. The first two inmates placed in it were Alejandrina Torres and Susan Rosenberg. Torres had been sentenced to 35 years for seditious conspiracy in response to plotting bombings at U.S. military bases. Rosenberg, who was eventually granted clemency by President Bill Clinton in January 2001, received a maximum term of 58 years for possession of weapons, explosives, and false identification papers. The other **women housed** in the unit were Silvia Baraldini, Carol Manning, Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme, Sylvia Jean Brown, and Debra Denise Brown. These **women's** convictions varied from racketeering, armed robbery, kidnapping, and murder.

REVIEW AND CLOSURE OF THE CONTROL UNIT

In 1987, the National Prison Project, a wing of the American Civil Liberties Union, conducted a formal assessment of the Lexington HSU. Two National Prison Project staff attorneys, a correctional psychologist, and criminologists toured the facility and conducted interviews with five female prisoners confined to the unit, along with the warden, associate warden, and program staff. In their report, on the institution's medical and ethical correctional conditions, the panel determined that the **women's** rights had been violated in a number of ways. First, they had not been given proper administrative hearings prior to being transferred to the unit. Once incarcerated at Lexington, their visits were either curtailed completely or severely reduced. Their behavior was monitored at all times, even when they were showering, and they were strip searched after each outdoor exercise period. The panel also found that the prison did not provide adequate medical treatment or supervision.

The report concluded that the inmates in the Lexington HSU were dehumanized by their incarceration. Not only were they not allowed to personalize their living space, or allowed more than five books in their cell at one time,

some were sexually abused and humiliated during their confinement. In response, the **women** were exhibiting numerous psychological disorders, including claustrophobia, chronic rage reactions, depression, hallucinatory symptoms, and defensive psychological withdrawal. Their physical and mental conditions were deteriorating as a result of loss of weight, loss of appetite, dehydration, insomnia, and acute anxiety syndrome.

Based on the findings of the report, it was recommended that the Lexington HSU be closed and the female inmates transferred to the general population of the Lexington facility. The HSU was permanently shut down in 1988.

CONCLUSION

Following the closing of the HSU in 1988, the prison briefly became a co-correctional facility again although by 1990 it was designated an administrative security-level facility for **women** only. Administrative security **houses** protective custody cases, inmates awaiting disciplinary hearings, inmates awaiting transfer to other institutions, and offenders who are separated from the general population because of security and/or safety reasons. In November 1991, it was designated as the Federal Medical Center (FMC), Lexington, and currently **houses** male inmates at the administrative level and **houses** females at an adjacent minimum-security camp.

—Barbara Hanbury

Further Reading

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