

The Use of Solitary Confinement and Its Effect On  
Mental Health

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The United States has one of the highest prison populations in the world, with nearly 21% of the world's prisoners and an incarceration rate of 531 inmates per 100,000 people (Sawyer, 2023). With such a large prison population, disciplinary measures must be implemented to maintain order. Thus, solitary confinement quickly became a favored correction method as it has been an integral disciplinary measure in the United States since its inception in the 1700s. The nation's corrections system incorporates solitary confinement on the city, state, and federal levels. It is often used as a tool for control, behavior modification, and moral reformation, especially in supermax prisons (Shalev, 2013). The initial underlying principle of solitary confinement is that prisoners would have time to reflect on their actions, repent for their behavior, and leave isolation corrected and conditioned. Despite this intention, in practice, solitary confinement creates further conflict in prison as its effects can be highly damaging. Large amounts of time spent in isolation after an episode of misconduct does not address the root issue but acts as a quick fix that creates a deeper problem.

Additionally, solitary confinement can serve as a deterrent for the other inmates. The concept of deterrence suggests that an action will be discouraged if the consequences of said action are inevitable and instill fear or are threatening. A common belief is that if the prisoners saw a fellow inmate thrown into isolation indefinitely, they would resist those same behaviors. According to available research, it is still being determined if solitary confinement works as a practical deterrence function. The psychological component of solitary confinement is highly contested as the nation shifts between attitudes. During the '70s, solitary confinement was heavily used, and despite its harsh nature, the public supported its implantation. The U.S held a "tough on crime" perspective as crime rates rose,

which created a punitive outlook.

Recently, the country has shown a slighter shift towards rehabilitation, so the ethics of solitary are coming back into question. There is research supporting both sides of the argument regarding solitary confinement and its effect on mental health. However, a growing body of data suggests that solitary confinement can be detrimental to an inmate's physical and psychological health, especially if they are a member of a vulnerable population or protected class. Those who spend prolonged time in solitary confinement have a higher chance of developing skin irritation, weight fluctuation, and muscle problems (Henry, 2022). The harm caused could leave lasting effects and be irreparable depending on how long an inmate stayed in isolation and the condition of their stay. The U.S. correctional system needs to be reformed with current psychological research in mind so that solitary confinement can be used as a safety and disciplinary measure rather than a punitive action that leaves inmates with more scars.

Correctional officers can misuse solitary confinement for power and control rather than discipline and safety. This is especially significant among inmates who are of a racial minority, female, LGBTQ+, or have a history of mental illness (Henry, 2022). Generally, the prison population disproportionately comprises marginalized communities, specifically Black men, and this fact remains for those banished to solitary confinement the most often. A random sample in California, a state where solitary confinement is extensive, revealed that 90% of the inmates in isolation were minorities. Black and Latino men were also more likely to receive conduct infractions and write-ups than White inmates (Arrigo,

2008). The disparity between how racial minority inmates are treated versus their counterparts creates significant distrust between them and the correctional officers. Nonwhite inmates are seen as threats and untamed, while White inmates are not considered a significant threat. Consequently, this treatment can result in more incidents between correctional officers and the affected inmates, as the broken relationship causes hostility, poverty, and a more significant power imbalance. In this way, racial minority inmates can be sent to solitary confinement more often due to correctional officers' discrimination and prejudicial disciplining.

Although men are sent to solitary confinement more than women, women experience unique situations when ordered to be isolated. Women are more likely to face sexual harassment and abuse by male correctional officers. Being sent to solitary confinement makes them more vulnerable to this abuse and increases the likelihood of being triggered by violent cell extraction by men from prior trauma (Arrigo, 2008). Additionally, women have higher chances of being sent to solitary for minor infractions than men. Researchers hypothesize that this is due to the patriarchal expectations placed on women. Women must follow a feminine, submissive, and motherly code of conduct, and these expectations do not disappear for incarcerated women. Minor infractions such as a high temperament, ragged appearance, or even homosexual activity can result in women being sent to solitary confinement, especially by male officers (Arrigo, 2008). Furthermore, nonwhite women overrepresent inmates who get sent to solitary. The gender disparity is exacerbated by race and mental illness as the chances for an African American woman who has a mental illness to be sent to solitary is significantly greater (Arrigo, 2008). The gender and racial standards outside prison are also carried on into the prison

setting. The intersectional identity of being a minority and female does not go away when someone becomes an inmate. Instead, the unique experience of having this identity gets compounded by being incarcerated. Incarceration is a new high-stress setting where the social standards of the outside world do not apply anymore, yet the rules of the patriarchy and white supremacy still prevail. This setting is reflected explicitly in how Black women are treated with the use of solitary confinement.

As mentioned, the time spent in solitary confinement can affect its effectiveness as a disciplinary measure. Short stays in solitary confinement can be beneficial to the offender. Research has found that staying in solitude for ten days or less can improve behavior, and offenders can tolerate the conditions. However, when this time surpassed fourteen days, offenders were at a higher risk for mental deterioration (Medrano, 2017). Extensive time spent in solitary confinement can adversely affect mental health and behavior. Solitary confinement cells are tiny and unkempt, devoiding prisoners of sunlight or interaction with others. Prolonged time in isolation in harsh conditions can lead to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, verbal deterioration, suicidal ideation, hypersensitivity, insomnia, psychosis, paranoia, impulse control, distorted cognition, and a loss of identity (James, 2021). The attempt to maintain order and safety fails if these symptoms appear within the inmate following their release from solitary confinement and prison. Creating or exacerbating mental illness in a place where their needs are neglected cannot produce any productive outcomes.

Inmates who struggle with a pre-existing mental illness are more likely to be sent to solitary confinement and leave with more drastic psychological effects. Human beings need social contact to remain

psychologically stable. People must be social to withstand reality testing. What we define as reality is relative to the social context around us, and if we are deprived of that, it can be difficult to distinguish actual events from imagined ones. This effect is especially significant if the individual has pre-existing mental illnesses, specifically a psychotic one. Inmates can become hypersensitive to stigma, extremely combative, and experience exacerbated symptomology of their disorder. Additionally, a cross-sectional study of inmates across the United States revealed that those with mental illness were at a significantly increased risk of being sent to solitary confinement for extended periods than those without mental illness (Henry, 2022). This study linked a history of adverse childhood experiences to being sent to solitary and being identified as the main antagonist during violations. It is possible that this history aided in developing behavioral problems and issues with authority. Correctional officers are often not educated in the field of psychology or methods of de-escalation with those who have mental disorders. These factors can emphasize difficulties that occur with mentally ill inmates and result in re-traumatization. As stated, race, gender, and sexuality can affect the chances of someone being sent to solitary confinement. If an inmate belongs to one or more of those groups while being mentally ill, the chances of being sent to solitary skyrocket. Through this intersectional perspective, it is not a matter of if, but when a Black, gay, or female inmate with a psychotic disorder is sent to solitary, it is only a matter of time. The age of the inmates being sent to

solitary also has a direct impact on their mental health. Minors cannot cope as well as adults with arduous situations, especially those that test mental strength. This diminished resiliency can worsen the psychological effects of solitary confinement. For instance, a review of the correctional system in Iowa asserts that the use of solitary confinement against juvenile offenders is unconstitutional as it violates the Eighth Amendment (Castillo, n.d). The Eighth Amendment proclaims that cruel and unusual punishments are prohibited as it is inhumane to subject inmates to such treatment. Formerly, the court focused on physical maltreatment as the basis for an Eighth Amendment challenge, but psychological factors such as pain and suffering are now weighed as well. The courts created a two-pronged test to determine if solitary confinement challenges the Eighth Amendment. The conditions of confinement need to cause significant damage to the inmates' health, and these damages would violate society's standard of decency. The journal argues that juvenile solitary confinement meets these standards as minors are more susceptible to the dangers of forced isolation as their brains are not yet fully developed. This could impact their future psychological development gravely. Solitary confinement of juveniles can result in mutilation, aggressive personality, and suicide. This is especially true if the juvenile previously suffered from a mental illness.

There have been prolific testaments to the psychological dangers of solitary confinement over the past few decades. The Central Park Five case details the story of how five boys were wrongfully convicted of rape in Central Park, New York during the early 90's. This case exposes the cracks and faults embedded in the criminal justice system. One of the five boys, Korey Wise, had the least amount of circumstantial evidence against him but was in prison

for over a decade. He spent much of this time in solitary confinement in an adult prison. He suffered immense abuse from correctional officers in his time of isolation (Jackman, 2020). The officers would often invite other inmates to attack Wise when he was in confinement. This is an egregious case of systemic abuse of the criminal justice system, especially concerning the abuse of power. Solitary confinement was utilized as a tool of control rather than a brief disciplinary measure, as intended. The case of Kalief Browder is another unfortunate example of the consequences of solitary confinement. Browder was wrongly accused of stealing a backpack in New York during the 2010s. Upon this accusation, he spent the entirety of his time at Rikers Island, where he would be no stranger to solitary confinement. He would be sent there for minor or falsified violations. It was often used by the correctional officers to further abuse Browder. Browder suffered extreme issues with his mental health upon his release which resulted in recidivism and suicide. Not only did Browder suffer inexplicable abuse from fellow inmates, but he also experienced extreme forms of discipline at the hands of the people who were supposed to protect him. The criminal justice did not prepare Browder to be released back into society, especially one that was highly violent. Browder, who wrote a college paper on solitary confinement, was aware of the dangers of it. The psychological effects of his experiences were not considered and had grave consequences. In both cases, the victims of solitary confinement were young Black men who were wrongfully accused, abandoned, and abused by the correction system. The use of solitary confinement has left irreparable scars on the minds of these resilient men.

The damage that solitary confinement creates on offenders' psychological health has led citizens to call for its abolishment. The



risk for developing psychotic symptoms and suicidal ideology is alarmingly high when offenders are exposed to solitary confinement, especially if they are young, black, female, LGBTQ, or have a preexisting mental illness. These populations are vulnerable outside of prison. These factors act as susceptibilities to violence, translating to prison populations. Issues with fellow inmates and behavioral issues are the leading factors to being isolated, but these factors also confound this vulnerable population. When the correction system continues to criminalize this group, there will be an endless vicious cycle of criminality. Solitary confinement acts as a catalyst for this function. Prison and jail are challenging settings to adjust to and assimilate into. The corrections system cannot punish those who naturally have trouble in a rough environment by isolating them. Browder demonstrates that inmates can come from communities that already mimic prison culture. Being placed in prison can seem like rock bottom; however, inmates will soon find that solitary confinement is their new low. Caging inmates like animals will only result in them acting like one once they are released if no proper guidance is given. Solitary confinement does not create this damage on its own. The flaws and missteps of the criminal justice system allow solitary to incur the damage it inflicts. If the corrections system is reformed, more resources will be available to released inmates, and psychological health will be considered. Solitary confinement may be used for beneficence instead of harm.

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