



LENS

The Implications of Solitary Confinement

REUTERS/Robert Galbraith



Demonstrators rally in Oakland, California, to reform the practice of solitary confinement.

Solitary confinement is when a prisoner is kept in his or her cell alone for 22–23 hours a day without access to the activities that other prisoners engage in. These people eat in their cell, sleep in their cell, and perform normal bathroom functions in their cell. It is estimated that some 80,000 people in the United States are currently being held in solitary confinement. That is more than any other country in the world.

Solitary confinement is used in American prisons for a number of reasons. Sometimes, the person is violent and a danger to other prisoners and prison workers. Other times, the person is seen to be a member of a prison gang. Sometimes, it is to protect the person from other prisoners, as seen with gay, lesbian, or transsexual individuals or those who committed certain types of crimes. Other times, it is part of an administrative procedure that precedes the introduction of a new prisoner into a larger prison unit. Others who are often put in solitary are those who find it difficult to follow the rules of the prison, and those who respond to guards in a confrontational manner. This may include those with mental illness. Most prisons do not have the resources to respond to mental illness, and therefore solitary confinement became one way to handle those with mental disorders. However, these individuals may not have the skills to endure the environment experienced in solitary confinement.

Although the person's basic physical needs are taken care of in solitary confinement, there is little or no social contact or interaction. What is the result of this lack of true human interaction? Psychologists have begun to ask this question. One psychologist who has studied solitary confinement over a number of years is Craig Haney. In 1993, Professor Haney interviewed a group of inmates in solitary confinement at Pelican Bay State Prison in

California. During this period, new super-maximum security prisons were being built. It was also a time when the nation viewed prisons as punishment and not rehabilitation for those incarcerated.

Craig Haney returned to Pelican Bay some 20 years later and talked to some of the same individuals he had seen previously. He was shocked by what he experienced. He reported that not only did solitary confinement make those with mental illness worse, but even those prisoners without any disorders showed negative consequences. He found a similar pattern: One group of prisoners responds with panic to the isolation. Once this has passed, the person may become depressed and feel hopeless. Without human contact and other important activities, some lose contact with reality. Others do outrageous things just to know that they still exist or to get a reaction from the guards. After a time, they no longer want to see others, even their family.

Recently, a number of media outlets have begun to pay attention to the consequences of solitary confinement. What little research there is suggests that solitary confinement does not make a prison safer and is negative for the individuals involved. In 2012, the Center for Constitutional Rights filed suit in federal court against state officials on behalf of Pelican Bay inmates who had spent more than 10 years in solitary confinement, claiming that their prolonged isolation violated their Eighth Amendment protection against cruel and unusual punishment. In 2015, a settlement by the state of California reformed the way in which solitary confinement is used (see <https://ccrjustice.org/key-reforms-california-s-use-solitary-confinement>). Further, in June 2015, Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote that in relation to solitary confinement, “near-total isolation exacts a terrible price.” In 2015, President Barack Obama became the first president to visit a federal prison and asked whether “we really think it makes sense to lock so many people alone in tiny cells for 23 hours a day, sometimes for months or even years at a time.” In 2016, President Obama banned solitary confinement for juvenile offenders in federal prisons.

Thought Question: How would you research the effects of solitary confinement? What would be your control group?

Based on information presented on PBS's *Frontline* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/craig-haney-solitary-confinement-is-a-tried-and-true-torture-device/>) and the *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/04/health/solitary-confinement-mental-illness.html>).