



ETHICAL ISSUES

Prison Isolation and Mental Health

Some prisoners are considered so dangerous that they are kept in isolation 23 to 24 hours a day. An example of this is inmate John Jay Powers, who was convicted of robbing a bank in 1990 and was sentenced to prison. While incarcerated, Powers witnessed three inmates repeatedly stab and murder another inmate, which resulted in Powers being diagnosed with severe and complex posttraumatic stress disorder. Powers then attempted to escape prison, which landed him in the federal government's administrative maximum (ADX) facility in Florence, Colorado, in 2001. In ADX all approximately 450 inmates are deprived of almost any human interaction. Shortly after being sent to ADX, Powers became so deranged that he tried multiple times to kill himself. After some time at ADX, he also started engaging in mutilating behavior and successfully bit off several of his own fingers, severed his earlobes, and severed his own testicle and his scrotum. Prior to being in ADX, Powers showed no signs of this degree of mental illness.

Advantages of isolating dangerous inmates include that it protects other inmates and correctional officers from danger and it minimizes the risk of escape. A disadvantage of this approach is the severe deterioration of the mental health of inmates who find

themselves in isolation for years. Evidence suggests that extended time in isolation exacerbates mental illness and decreases the chance that these inmates will ever be able to reenter society. Yet thousands of inmates are kept in isolation in the United States each year, and some are released back into the population.

Think About It

1. **Given evidence that such prolonged isolation is damaging, is it ethical to house humans in such extreme conditions?**
2. **Is this damage worth the protection of other inmates and staff?**
3. **Is it ethical that an inmate leave a prison in worse mental shape than when he or she entered as a result of the isolation?**
4. **What is the answer to housing dangerous inmates if not in isolation?**
5. **If you agree that such treatment of inmates is ethical, is it equally ethical that the United States end its condemnation of the treatment of prisoners in other countries doing similar things?**