

Is Solitary Confinement Useful?

Beyoncé Carty

Imagine being placed in a small, narrow cell for long periods of time without any human interaction, just you and your thoughts. Segregated from prisoners, your mind starts to think of ways to escape this sufferable empty atmosphere. Is this form of punishment morally right? Are prisons promoting recidivism and death rather than rehabilitation by segregating individuals? More importantly, do they expect inmates to be able to reintegrate into society easily knowing their mental state is fragile?

“In Europe and North America between the 18th and 19th centuries, the approach to criminal punishment shifted significantly” (Smith, 2009, p. 3). From Beccaria's philosophy that individuals express free and rational will to positivist views, new practices of imprisonment were coming about. Utilizing these practices of imprisonment came from the principle that criminals should be rehabilitated through the use of isolation and moral reform (Smith, 2009). The formal term for this kind of rehabilitation was named solitary confinement, a form of imprisonment where individuals live in a single cell isolated from the rest of the general population. Inmates are usually segregated from the general population because they have either been posed as a risk to other inmates and/or for protective reasons. “The principle of rehabilitating prisoners through a system of isolation and moral reform was associated with some of these experiments in, for example, England and Pennsylvania in the U.S” (Smith, 2009, p. 3).

In Pennsylvania, the Eastern State Penitentiary was the first to implement this ideology of solitary confinement to benefit the prisoners. This was utilized as a tool to help inmates find their self-identity so they can reintegrate into society as a fresh and purified individual. The more it was

used, the more prevalent the system became in more prisons in the U.S. One might think that since the institutions were under strict rules, the inmates would look forward to seeking to find their inner self in the cells. But as solitary confinement became more common, it was no longer a beneficial experience for inmates. What started out as a way for individuals to find inner peace within themselves has turned into a harmful and overused form of imprisonment. Furthermore, data collected from several prisons in the U.S indicate that solitary confinement brings negative psychological and physiological effects on individuals with and without mental illnesses. Researchers have made many efforts to figure out how often solitary is used, how it affects prisoners' behaviors, and how it affects their life after their sentence is served.

Studies

One study of prisoners in solitary confinement came about from mental health and psychiatric facilities when the form of imprisonment was first introduced. The Vridsløselille Penitentiary in Denmark acted as a strict model for the Eastern State Penitentiary in the 1800s. By observing several inmates' prison medical records, researchers argued that concerning symptoms of mental illness and disruption of self-identity were arising amongst them due to solitary confinement. Some of the mental illness symptoms included lethargy, apathy, headaches, anxiety, paranoia, hallucinations, and mental illness in general (Smith, 2008, p. 1050). Since it was the 1800s, new health problems were being discovered by the psychiatric wards as more prisoners suffered in isolation. Wards treating individuals with these symptoms were deeming them as "mad" and very troubling. Prisoners that first arrived at the prison were allegedly behaving normally with officers until they were placed in isolation.

Researchers in Denmark also discussed how people were losing their inner self and turning against themselves. The main point of isolation was for inmates to find peace with themselves, but the opposite tends to occur. “Stripping away the possibility of primary intersubjectivity leading to the experience of depersonalization goes to the very basic level of the minimal embodied self” (Gallagher, 2018). Since that first study, more research and empirical studies have been conducted to determine more, if any, underlying causes of troubled individuals in isolation.

Another study indicated that social exclusion from the general population could be a main cause for some prisoners to suffer from psychological consequences. This study focused on how social withdrawal affected inmates in California’s Pelican Bay State Supermax prison. A basic function of humans is social interaction, but segregation prevents this and results in individuals turning to themselves for a sense of interaction. According to social psychologist Haney (2018, p. 291), social withdrawal is connected to another set of social pathologies that prisoners face when attempting to adjust to the long periods of time without social contact. Researchers took a sample of inmates from the prison and documented how many suffered from psychological stress and/or trauma from being isolated from others. Without the basic function of socially interacting with other humans, prisoners may resort to destructive options such as self-injury, recidivism, and sadly suicide.

Two studies at Washington State and Maine State Prison found that those held in super-maximum units are more likely to reoffend and resort to inflicting pain on themselves. A sample of participants from Washington State prison proved the hypothesis that offenders who have spent a portion of their sentence in supermax were likely to commit new felonies (Lovell, Johnson, & Cain, 2007). A three-year documentation of Maine State prisoners in solitary was taken

to display live footage of the hardships inmates face when locked down in a cell for over 23 hours a day.

Methods

Participants for the first study done at The Vridsløselille Penitentiary in Denmark included prisoners in solitary confinement and prisoners in general population. Specifically, about 1,904 prisoners that were cleared as healthy were observed. Over a 5-year period, both variables were observed and documented to see if isolation actually caused health problems. In the second study at Pelican Bay State Supermax prison, a random sample of 100 isolated and general population inmates were utilized to test their hypothesis. Lastly, for the recidivism study in Washington State a control sample of about 6,453 men, both in supermax and non-supermax, participated.

Data

“In the official reports of the Danish prison service it was acknowledged that from 1878 to 1883 more than 13% of inmates who had arrived in the prison in a healthy condition suffered from health problems directly related to the regime of solitary confinement “(Smith, 2008, p. 1052). 13% may not seem like a large number to many, but back then this was very significant. From 1883 to 1891, the more inmates placed in isolation, the higher the percentages got. Between individuals in solitary confinement and those in the general population there was a 14.15% difference in those that experienced health problems (Smith, 2008, p. 1053). This percentage sparked a red flag for scientists because health problems could potentially turn into mental health problems. Mental health and psychiatric scientists found that symptoms like lethargy, insanity, and issues related to the brain were

prevalent amongst members in solitary. The most common cases in Vridsløselille were hysteria and lethargy, which rose up to 27 and 40 cases (Smith, 2008, 1055). Being that this was a new form of imprisonment, new disorders were being discovered and researched in-depth by psychiatrists. As a result of these unusual findings, more cases and studies have been conducted on these new diseases. In the same way, these surprising statistics motivated others to do research of their own on other prisoners in solitary confinement.

Another reason why solitary may not be useful is due to the lack of environmental stimulation and its damage to human psychological functioning (Hany, 2018, p. 289). Over a span of time, Haney found that between the general population and isolated prisoners, more isolated prisoners experienced emotional withdrawal symptoms due to no social interaction. A mean number of 6.88 stress-related symptoms among solitary inmates versus 3.58 among general population was reported (Haney, 2018, p. 292). In addition, a mean of 8.44 isolation-related symptoms was experienced by those in isolation versus 4.24 for those in the general population (Haney, 2018, p. 292). “Haney found that the extremely long-term isolated SHU prisoners reported nearly twice the mean number of symptoms of both stress-related trauma” (Haney, 2018, p. 292). When humans are deprived of interpersonal contact, due to trauma and stress symptoms, their awareness of certain things diminishes. For example, in solitary a prisoner’s sensory awareness, capacities to see and hear clearly, and to make sense of their own perceptions plummets (Gallagher, 2014).

These specific long-term issues, more than likely, can lead inmates to resort to reoffending once they’re released. Individuals released directly from supermax were reported to commit felonies at a quicker rate than those who were not in supermax. At Washington State Prison, there were 53% of felony recidivism cases of directly released supermax

participants versus 46% for non-supermax mates (Lovell et al., 2007, p. 644). Additionally, even on a later release there was still 46% of cases for supermax mates and 44% for non-supermax mates (Lovell et al., 2007, p. 644). This small 2% difference may make many believe there's no relationship between recidivism and supermax mates, but that's due to lack of significance of later released mates. Not to mention, researchers took past misdemeanors and age of first offense into account and still found that 69% of direct-release supermax participants committed new felonies versus 53% of later-release mates (Lovell et al., 2007, p. 644). Even though there is a sufficient amount of data, other studies have tried to counter-argue these hypotheses.

Outsiders may view solitary confinement as beneficial because they're being kept far away from producing any more trouble in a society. On the other hand, they also don't realize the hidden damage it projects on a person's mental state because it's not affecting them personally. The mean number of inmates that experienced symptoms of psychological damage at Pelican Bay State Prison due to isolation made me wonder if prisons are working towards reform. I would assume if they see that segregating individuals is only causing them more harm, then they would do something about it. However, that may not be the case for every prison, but why not? A study at the Colorado Prison system tested the psychological effects of solitary confinement and it indicated that mental health of inmates did not decline (Bulman, Garcia, Hernon, 2012). Researchers for this study took participants that were older than 17, younger than 59, and were of different ethnicities. "Overall, the researchers found that 20 percent of the study sample improved and 7 percent worsened during the study period" (Bulman et al., 2012). Statistics like these may "prove" a prison's point that adjusting the solitary system will be unnecessary. Contrarily, this study doesn't justify anything because numbers like this

may not apply to other prison systems and negative effects that prisoners actually endured were left out the study (Bulman et al., 2012). Despite there being different studies that determine solitary has no inimical impact on individuals, current events show that it's still a common issue.

Several unsettling stories regarding individuals facing hardships from previously and currently being in solitary have always been discussed, but never on the news. The most repeated story regarding isolation was the tragic incident of Kalief Browder from New York City. Browder had never been convicted of a crime before, but once he was accused of robbing someone, he was sentenced to three years at Rikers Island in New York (Berman, 2016). He served two out three years of his sentence in solitary confinement without being convicted of a crime. What makes this story so heart wrenching to me is that he was only 16-years-old and was isolated from the general population over a misdemeanor he didn't even commit. "In 2015, at age 22, he hanged himself at his parents' home in the Bronx" (Weiser, 2019). Six years after he was released, the psychological damage and trauma from solitary had stuck with him. How is segregating youth and adults helpful to prisoners' overall well-being if the outcome is this? In light of his tragic death, former President Obama moved to ban the use of solitary confinement in the United States.

While Obama's effort may help reform multiple criminal justice systems, prisons should look into offering mental health services and other boosting opportunities such as encouraging inmates to get their GED. In a documentary on inmates in solitary at Maine State Prison, officials record and document how the unit deteriorates them and ways they can make it useful or reduce the use of isolation. The warden of Maine State Prison even stated that "my belief is the use of segregation has its place when you have real dangerous prisoners, but from my perspective it is overused in the

United States” (Edge & Mucciolo, 17:17, 2017). To reduce segregation, the prison tested out incorporating boosting opportunities as mentioned before. This then flowed into displaying how the inmates behaved in the isolated units, which they noted was like wild animals. The main point of isolation is to keep them away from the general population due to certain circumstances, but this only irritates them more to act out of character. In the film, an inmate named Todd Michael Fickett was seen as always at risk because he resorted to self-injury a lot. Fickett stated that being in solitary only made his mental state go downhill and drove him to wanting to cut himself (Edge & Mucciolo, 7:45, 2017). Obviously, if inmates are constantly hurting themselves because they’re mentally hurting, there’s an issue. Furthermore, if custodians are stating that they clean self-injury incidents about 20 times a month, then something needs to change (Edge & Mucciolo, 15:20, 2017). Dr. Stuart Grassian, a psychiatrist, viewed solitary confinement as a neuro-psychiatric, almost a medical or neurological disease (Edge & Mucciolo, 2017). Current incidents regarding solitary confinement are still prevalent, but not discussed as much.

In conclusion, solitary confinement is not a useful form of imprisonment. The destructive psychological effects and trauma it brings upon inmates destroys their overall state. Mentally their brain doesn’t function properly anymore, they experience symptoms of mental diseases, they often reoffend, and/or commit suicide. If long-term issues like these are frequent amongst prisoners, isolation should be a last resort. Researchers will try to counter argue that solitary has no effect on prisoners, but current events indicate it still does. Several studies still can’t accurately prove anything, but prisons can still move towards revising the use of this form of imprisonment.

References

- Berman, M. (2016, January 26). Kalief Browder and what we do and don't know about solitary confinement in the U.S. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/postnation/wp/2016/01/25/kalief-browder-and-what-we-do-and-dont-know-about-solitary-confinement-in-the-u-s-2/?utm_term=.e780eeb47bba
- Bulman, P., Garcia, M., & Hernon, J. (2012, March 26). Study Raises Questions About Psychological Effects of Solitary Confinement. Retrieved from <https://www.nij.gov/journals/269/pages/solitary-confinement.aspx>
- Edge, D., & Mucciolo, L. (2017, April 18). Last Days of Solitary. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/last-days-of-solitary/>
- Gallagher, S. (2014). The cruel and unusual phenomenology of solitary confinement. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00585
- Haney, C. (2018). Restricting the Use of Solitary Confinement. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 1(1), 285-310. doi:10.1146/annurev-criminol-032317-092326
- Lovell, D., Johnson, L. C., & Cain, K. C. (2007). Recidivism of Supermax Prisoners in Washington State. *Crime & Delinquency*, 53(4), 633-656. doi:10.1177/0011128706296466
- Smith, P. S. (2008). "Degenerate Criminals". *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 35(8), 1048-1064. doi:10.1177/0093854808318782
- Smith, P. S. (2009). Solitary Confinement – History, Practice, and Human Rights Standards. *Human Rights Documents Online*, 3-11. doi:10.1163/2210-7975_hrd-9962-3006
- Weiser, Benjamin. "Kalief Browder's Suicide Brought Changes to Rikers. Now It Has Led to a \$3 Million Settlement." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 24 Jan. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/01/24/nyregion/kalief-browder-settlement-lawsuit.html