

# The Torture of Isolation: The Negative Effects of Solitary Confinement

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## ABSTRACT

Solitary confinement is a popular form of punishment for misbehaving inmates in United States' prison systems. However, the question surrounding solitary confinement is the psychological effect on solitary confinement inmates. Two studies were analyzed to determine not only what the effects of isolation were, but how the findings from these studies could be applied to the field of psychology and everyday life. Even with the drastic difference in sample size and data collection methods between the two studies, the results from both studies were that solitary confinement has lasting negative psychological effects. It causes incarcerated individuals to be at increased risk for mild psychosis, self harm, anxiety, and depression. This mental decline can be explained with social and developmental psychology, namely ostracism and Erikson's developmental stages, which both demonstrate why social relationships are necessary for personal well being. The information from this research also exemplifies why people are averse to social isolation, for instance, the mandated quarantine and social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The concern is how these lasting psychological effects impact the ability of these individuals to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into general society.

## Topic Introduction

For some, the word torture may immediately conjure images of gangsters in a movie committing unspeakable acts of physical harm on some unfortunate soul who crossed their path. Yet while most are familiar with the damaging effects of physical torture, there are many forms of psychological torture which also exist and are less spoken of. One of those forms is social isolation. Among the prison population, social isolation is common, not just from the outside world, but within the walls of prisons as well. For one reason or another, some prisoners may need to be placed into solitary confinement if they pose a threat to themselves or others.

Solitary confinement is the forced isolation of inmates who are required to be in their cells for up to 23 hours a day, with minimal social interaction or environment change. Its origins can be traced back to the 19th century as a way to make prisoners remorseful for their wrongdoings. Most people would agree that any form of torture is bad, yet solitary confinement is considered socially acceptable because prisoners are seen as social deviants deserving of punishment. In addition to being used as punishment for prisoners, solitary confinement is also a common torture method. Social and sensory deprivation has lasting harmful effects because of humans' need for social interaction. The lack of social contact means that inmates are forced to adapt to confinement in harmful ways (Haney, 2018). This leads to them being socially withdrawn, which has varying negative effects on their ability to reacclimate to the general population (GP). Solitary confinement can cause mental breakdowns in most people, and inmates are often preyed upon by guards who know that they have significant power over them and use confinement as a means of controlling them (Lueders, 2015).

## Significance

Solitary confinement, according to Amnesty International, for more than 15 days can cause irreversible damage and is the equivalent of torture. In fact, the organization opposes the United States' solitary confinement practices (Lueders, 2015). This punishment technique is inhumane and degrading. One study participant reported that the way that he was treated while in solitary confinement was comparable to how one would treat an animal (Reiter et al., 2020).

With the way solitary confinement systems are currently structured, prisons are not functioning as places of rehabilitation, but instead places of harmful and degrading punishment. Likely, anyone would find it difficult to cope with the type of mental distress felt while in solitary confinement, especially an inmate who is already struggling with social, emotional, and mental challenges due to incarceration. In addition to experiencing this harmful psychological distress, it is expected that these inmates will be able to peacefully transition back into and coexist with the rest of society. However, the lack of adequate rehabilitation means that they are never truly ready for the transition, and as a result, they cause more harm to themselves and others, creating an unsafe environment for everyone. If prisons are not properly rehabilitating and caring for their inmates, then the prison system and their methods needs to be reformed.

## Study 1

### Research Methods

The first study analyzed is titled, "Psychological Distress in Solitary Confinement: Symptoms, Severity, and Prevalence in the United States, 2017–2018," and was conducted by Keramet Reiter, PhD, JD, as well as numerous other researchers. The goal of this study was to measure the psychological effects of long term solitary confinement on inmates. To do this, the researchers did a quantitative longitudinal study and utilized a psychological test called the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (BPRS). The advantage of the psychological tests is that they allow researchers to better gauge the emotional states of the inmates, which is what they need to be able to understand the psychological effects. Studying the same subjects once each year for two years, allows for better analysis of the emotional and mental states of the inmates. Researchers also interviewed the inmates, which allowed for more detailed data collection (Reiter et al., 2020).

The study took place at Washington State Department of Corrections (WADOC) in 2 different 3 week periods during the summer of 2017 and 2018. That facility was separated into 5 intensive management units (IMUs) - their solitary confinement units. All 106 incarcerated male participants were housed in these facilities. Participants were randomly selected from a population of 363 prisoners on "maximum custody" status. The research team interviewed the inmates in 2017 and did a follow up interview a year later. Of the original 106, only 80 of the participants were able to participate in follow up interviews due to lack of interest, rehousing within the prison system, discharge, or death (Reiter et al., 2020).

The BRPS is an assessment which looks at 24 self-reported or visible symptoms. This is the typical instrument used to identify the defined symptoms and determine the psychological impact of incarceration on inmates. This instrument was included in a 96 item interview that researchers conducted with each inmate. Interview time ranged from 45 minutes to 3 hours in the first round of interviews. In the second round, interview time was anywhere from 45 minutes to 2 hours and researchers used an 80 item interview (Reiter et al., 2020).

### Limitations to Research

There were some limitations to this study. First, the data collection tool, the BPRS, does not reflect all of the mental distress felt by those in solitary confinement. This can cause inaccuracy in the study's results. Also,

despite the year-long duration of the study, the researchers only interviewed the participants twice, and the interviews were a year apart. For a more accurate depiction of the inmates well being, it would have been ideal to interview them more than twice and in more closely spaced intervals. There was a 25% decrease in the number of participants from year 1 to year 2, resulting in a smaller sample size. Though other studies had similar findings, the smaller sample size made it difficult to prove the statistical significance with the collected data. Furthermore, these results can not be generalized, as the WADOC prison system is not governed in the same manner as other systems. Additionally, since the completion of this study, the WADOC prison system has undergone systematic changes that could affect the results of the study if it was done again, which could affect the study's reliability. Lastly, this study's analysis cannot determine causation between solitary confinement and psychopathology. In other words, the study cannot prove a causal relationship (Reiter et al., 2020).

## Results

The results from the collected data were indicative of long term psychological distress. During their imprisonment (not specifically while in solitary confinement), about 19% of the participants displayed and struggled with serious mental illness (SMI), approximately 22% had a recorded suicide attempt, and an additional 18% had a known instance of self-harm. The median BPRS rating was a 33, with a range of 24-168, which would indicate that most participants had mild psychiatric symptoms. Further analysis of the general BPRS results suggested that up to one half of the participants were experiencing psychiatric distress. Individual analysis showed that one fourth of the participants had symptoms of anxiety and depression. Around 80% of participants reported the negative effect that being in IMU had on their emotional health. Another 73% said that they felt isolated. In the personal interviews, one interviewee states that he felt dehumanized and was treated like "an animal." Many described sensory hypersensitivity (16% of participants) and even more talked about no longer having a sense of self (roughly 25%) (Reiter et al, 2020).

## Study 2

### Research Methods

The second study, called, "Solitary Confinement and Risk of Self-Harm Among Jail Inmates," was conducted by Fatos Kaba, MA and other researchers. This was a qualitative correlational research study that wanted to examine and establish a relationship between self harm and incarcerated individuals in solitary confinement (Kaba et al., 2014).

The researchers began by reviewing information about the inmate demographics found from the Department of Corrections database. The Bureau of Correctional Health Services (CHS) maintained a running record of self harm incidents, which is reported by clinical staff. They focused the study on the 244,699 New York City jail admissions from January 1, 2010 to October 31, 2012. All incidents of self harm from this interval were recorded, with the exception of inmates admitted on October 31, for whom researchers looked at self harm incidents from the time of admission to the jail system until January 31, 2013. In this study, the independent variables were a history of being in solitary confinement, age, duration in confinement, gender, and race/ethnicity. The analyzed dependent variables were self harm and potential fatal self harm. Self harm is defined as any act committed by an individual against themselves that results in physical injury. Potential fatal self harm is an act that has the potential to harm an individual and cause disability or death (Kaba et al., 2014).

To study the relationship between self-harm and solitary confinement, researchers compared the relationship between an inmate who self harmed and if they had ever been in solitary confinement. They then compared the types of self harm when one was in solitary confinement versus outside of confinement. With this information, the researchers were able to predict the likelihood of self harm based on gender, age, race/ethnicity,

status of mental health, duration of jail stay, and assignment to solitary confinement. Results were recorded on a graph of when the inmate first self harmed in relation to their assignment to solitary confinement (Kaba et al., 2014).

## Limitations to Research

A few limitations were observed while conducting the study. For example, researchers found that even if someone is assigned to solitary confinement, there is often a delay in placing them in that type of housing. Some people end up getting out of jail before their punishment even occurs. Others are so anxious about being sent to solitary confinement that they start to engage in self harm even if solitary confinement never ends up happening. These additional variables can skew the results of the study by causing the relationship between solitary confinement and self harm to be misinterpreted. Additionally, there is not enough documentation related to why the inmates ended up in solitary confinement. As a result, researchers are left with little clues or background that would allow them to eliminate alternative reasons as to why the inmates are self harming in solitary confinement. This, in turn, can harm the study results. Also, the researchers could not gather enough data about inmates having been jailed in the past to determine if there is a pattern of poor behavior and self harm. This lack of information makes it difficult for researchers to accurately make predictions about the inmates behaviors and motivations for those behaviors (Kaba et al., 2014).

## Results

The research from the study showed that solitary confinement significantly increased the risk of self harm and potentially fatal self harm. Researchers wanted to determine how mental illness, age, and being in solitary confinement, affect self harm when examined all together instead of separately. It was found that being in solitary confinement affected the outcomes the most, as opposed to age or mental illness. However, they did also note that having a severe mental illness will increase the likelihood for self harm, regardless of whether one is in solitary confinement or not (Kaba et al., 2014).

Inmates in solitary confinement also tend to have longer imprisonments. The potential for self harm increased the longer an inmate was imprisoned, especially if the inmates had a serious mental illness. Inmates who have been in solitary confinement are 3.2 times more likely to commit an act of self harm in 1,000 days than those who are not in solitary confinement. Inmates in solitary confinement were 2.1 times more likely to engage in self harm while in isolation. They were 6.6 times more likely to engage in self harm during the time that they were not in solitary confinement compared to inmates who have never been to solitary confinement. Furthermore, when the inmate was 18 or younger, the risk of self harm was also increased. Ultimately, the research showed that solitary confinement did significantly increase the risk of self harm and potentially fatal self harm (Kaba et al., 2014).

## Comparison

Study 1 was a smaller study, with only 106 participants. By collecting their data from personal interviews, the researchers were able to get in depth and personal accounts of the prisoners' experience in solitary confinement. However, the study only had male participants and the self reporting aspect of the interviews introduced the possibility of bias affecting the inmates' answers. Study 2 was conducted on a larger scale. The researchers did not get to experience personal interactions with their participants, but they had a much larger sample size with the 244,699 medical records which were analyzed as part of their data collection. The records contained information on participants of different genders and ages, allowing researchers to explore the effects of solitary

confinement on more diverse groups. However, the issue with only examining medical records is that they are prone to human error if someone forgets to or purposefully does not record a particular incident of self harm. This could ultimately affect the results of the study. Both studies found that solitary confinement has harmful psychological effects on inmates and leads to a decline in their mental health. Still, it is difficult to generalize the results of the studies because not all prison systems are run the same way. There were instances of self harm found in both studies among solitary confinement inmates.

## Application

The results of the studies are significant to general life in many ways. For example, they reveal that social interaction is important for a person's mental wellbeing. It is not healthy to experience social deprivation, as it can lead to symptoms of guilt, depression, or anxiety. The findings of these studies can also help people understand why they may have experienced a decline in mental health and wellness during quarantine for the COVID 19 pandemic. Many people were unable to visit loved ones while in quarantine. Family gatherings were canceled, and face to face visits were restricted to video calls. If people did see each other in person, they had to remain several feet apart while wearing masks which partially hid their faces, obscuring their facial expressions and dampening the sound of their voices, which often made it difficult to communicate. The masks, which were a necessary physical barrier to infection, additionally and inadvertently served as a barrier to social interaction, leading to physical, social, and emotional isolation of a large number of the population. The sudden onset and totality of quarantine made many people feel as though they were no longer in control of their surroundings, their bodies, or their lives. There were numerous reports of people who felt increasingly anxious, isolated, alone, and hopeless, which resulted in poor mental health for many.

These studies can also help people to understand the negative effects associated with social media. With social media, there is no physical interaction. Any interaction is limited to one's online presence. Much like the reported symptoms of those in solitary confinement, people start to confuse what is real and what is not, and it may cause them to focus more on the negative aspects of their lives, altering the way they see themselves. It can change the way they think and what they believe. As a result, their mental health deteriorates.

The psychological effects of solitary confinement can also help people understand the plight of marginalized groups, like those who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Many in this group express feelings of social isolation. They often report feeling misrepresented, misunderstood, and ostracized by those in general society. Solitary confinement inmates have reported similar feelings in interviews with researchers. This lack of a connection with the rest of society often leads them to feel isolated and hopeless. Ultimately, this has negative effects on their mental health which can lead to many of the same things solitary confinement inmates have been known to experience, like self-harm or suicide.

## Relevance

These studies highlighted the effects of confinement. Inmates in solitary confinement are cut off from the rest of the prison population. With the exception of the limited time they are allowed out of their cell, they have no companions. Even when they are briefly let out of their cells, most inmates are still left in an area by themselves. There is usually only a guard present who does not typically try to interact with them. Ostracism like this, leads to a person becoming less agreeable and more aggressive and reserved, making others stay away from them. This reinforces the cycle of social deprivation.

Erikson's stage of intimacy vs. isolation is based on the concept that people need to seek out other people to be around and love once they have developed their sense of self. Without finding and fostering these meaningful connections and relationships, people become isolated and have trouble making and maintaining

relationships. People in solitary confinement often report feeling as though they have lost their identity and a sense of who they are. These feelings make them socially withdrawn, and because they do not get the opportunity to interact with others, they are further isolated. Even after they are released back into the general population, these solitary confinement inmates often have a hard time connecting with others.

Reciprocal determinism is also seen in the solitary confinement environment. Inmates are portrayed as incorrigible social deviants unfit for rehabilitation, which reinforces their bad behavior. Social withdrawal and aggressive behavior often lands them in solitary confinement where they are kept away from everyone else. They perceive others as not liking them. They can become angered by this and become increasingly aggressive. The persistence of that behavior keeps them in solitary confinement longer and hurts their mental health.

The Just-World Phenomenon further explains why solitary confinement inmates have such a hard time reconnecting with others, leading to their further isolation and mental decline. Most people subscribe to the notion that those in solitary confinement deserve it and so they do not try to sympathize or understand what these inmates might be going through. People avoid them, exclude them, and treat these incarcerated individuals badly because they believe that such treatment of bad people is justified. The solitary confinement inmates then experience further social isolation and the psychological effects of solitary confinement worsen.

## Conclusions

The social isolation that results from solitary has damaging effects. People need social interaction, as it is vital to their mental well being. Staying locked in a barren room with extremely limited contact with others and just enough supplies and furnishings to meet your basic needs, serves no purpose other than to punish the inmate. Instead of rehabilitating solitary confinement inmates, prison systems are leaving them with a lifetime of psychological struggles that a great deal of inmates never manage to overcome.

## Personal Discussion

I chose this topic because of personal interest. When one thinks of torture, they often refer to what they have seen in movies, TV shows, or Medieval times. These are often examples of physical torture, like water boarding or the Spanish Donkey. However, I wanted to focus on a type of torture that might be more relatable and is less commonly known and talked about. Additionally, I wanted to focus on psychological torture methods instead of physical torture. I settled on solitary confinement after finding numerous sources that claimed it was a type of torture. I was surprised, since solitary confinement just seemed like a standard punishment for misbehaving inmates, but not necessarily torture. It is a practice that is widely socially acceptable. I learned that solitary confinement was often used in standard torture methods because of the drastic negative psychological effects of social isolation. I was interested to learn more about how being stuck in a room by yourself could be so harmful, and so I decided to choose the psychological effects of solitary confinement as my research topic. Not only have I learned a great deal about the negative effects of solitary confinement, but it has reinforced to me the importance of social interaction, healthy relationships, and overall mental health and wellness.

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