

Solitary Confinement in The United States of America

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Overview

Solitary confinement is a form of punishment that is used for violent and disorderly inmates in The United States Corrections system. This practice has been deemed illegal and has been outlawed in many countries and even within some states within the United States. The long term psychological and physical effects caused by extended periods of isolation is not only dangerous for the prisoners, but also for the rest of society. After an inmate enters solitary confinement they are forever changed for the worse and recovery is near-impossible. The United States needs to find a better solution for unruly prisoners than locking them up in a six by nine concrete cell for twenty-three hours a day.

The use of solitary confinement has been a major topic of discussion around the world, not only in the United States. It has been clearly defined as a form of torture by the United Nations and is shunned upon if a country uses it on a foreigner. A question to ask is: Why would a country like the United States want to subject its own citizens to this type of “cruel and unusual punishment”? The most discussed aspect of this form of torture is the fact that the inmate has little to no contact with other people. The psychological effects this has on a person creates lifelong problems that they will rarely escape.

Solitary confinement became a matter of global discussion after its overuse on prisoners of war throughout the 1900's. Many countries were so disgusted that they wanted it to be banned as a form of torture on POW's. As of October 21, 1950, through the Geneva Convention, it is now outlawed to use solitary confinement for captured soldiers. If one of the largest human rights meetings decided it should be outlawed in wars, then it should clearly be banned in the United States for its own prisoners. Senator John McCain, who was subjected to this the type of torture, was a huge advocate against the use of solitary confinement. He believed it was inhumane and he said that no person should be subjected to that type of torture. (The Dangerous

Overuse Of Solitary Confinement In The United States). As strong as he was, he still stated this was one of the worst things that could happen to a human being. He fought strongly against its use on American prisoners while he was alive.

Reasons why some people are put into Solitary Confinement

There are a few reasons as to why a prisoner is condemned to a sentence of solitary confinement. It is either to keep him/her safe from others or used as a punishment for an offense committed whilst inside prison. Whether there be a simple misunderstanding or an inmate proved himself to be a danger to himself or others, solitary confinement is commonly used to stop further similar behaviors from occurring in the future. While this in essence should work, it actually provides the opposite effect. Prisoners have shown to act out more after long term stays in solitary housing units (SHU).

Some states have already begun to ban or at least reform the policies in relation to solitary confinement. Not only does the effect it has on prisoners cause more harm than good, it is also not a cost effective solution. The solitary housing units are very expensive to maintain and take up a lot of space that could be repurposed to house more programs for inmates or even give prisoners more living space.

According to a 2011 study covering multiple states including California, Illinois, and Colorado, it was found that prisoners in solitary confinement can be up to five times more expensive than an ordinary prisoner (Fact Sheet: The High Cost of Solitary Confinement). This is not including the millions of dollars it takes to even build the facility to house these inmates in the first place. It is clearly a financial drain on the system that provides minimal benefits for such an absurd amount of money.

Psychological issues associated with solitary confinement

Not only is solitary confinement fiscally irresponsible, it also causes a plethora of psychological issues. The psychological effects of solitary confinement set in at around fourteen days. Considering the fact that many solitary confinement sentences last well over the two week minimum, the psychological effects of this punishment can last the rest of that prisoner's life. Some of these issues include: increased aggression, depression, suicidal thoughts and actions, severe mood swings and anxiety. These are just a few of the dozens of mental health issues associated with solitary confinement.

Anxiety caused by isolation is one of the more severe and untreatable medical conditions created by solitary confinement. According to the dictionary, anxiety is defined as “a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.” Almost every single prisoner who has undergone some type of solitary confinement has reported having feelings of major anxiety (Haney,C 2018). The main reason why anxiety is so commonly spoken about is because of all the other issues it leads to. Another aspect of this is the severity of the anxiety created by isolation. Humans are social creatures and a large part of that is human to human interaction. Being deprived of that basic necessity is proven to do irreparable damage to inmates.

The suicide attempt and self-harm rates of inmates in solitary confinement is significantly higher than inmates who have not been in the SHU. A study done in the New York Prison System in 2013 found that inmates that have been in solitary confinement are around 6.9 times more likely to harm themselves than regular inmates (Solitary Confinement and Risk of Self-Harm Among Jail Inmates). This number was also shown to be growing over the past few years

with no signs of slowing down. This study was a real shock to many and provided some reason for the reform that has taken place over the past decade. Prisons should not be the place where someone attempts suicide. It should be geared to rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Slips from reality have been proven to be very dangerous for those in isolation and who they come in contact with. Being in a windowless room for twenty-three hours a day creates a false sense of time and reality for some prisoners. Night and day become indiscernible as well as reality and fantasy. This becomes not only an issue for the prisoner, but for the guards that are in charge of them as well. Too much time in isolation can cause some inmates to have emotional breaks which can lead to bouts of violent rage against correctional officers. These outbursts also can lead to more time in solitary, continuing the brutal cycle.

Depression is also a repercussion of solitary confinement. Depression among those inmates who enter the SHU are significantly higher than those who avoid it altogether. Even after release from solitary confinement, back into the general population of the prison, the depression can still follow the inmate. For some this is for the remainder of his/her prison sentence or even after their sentence is complete. There are a plethora of cases where inmates who were in solitary commit suicide even after their release from prison.

Physical disorders associated with solitary confinement

Not only does solitary confinement affect the mental health of a person, but it also creates several health issues as well. Some of them include chronic headaches, heart murmurs, light sensitivity, severe weight loss, joint issues, and depth perception issues. Just having one of these issues can shorten the lifespan of a prisoner, but having all of them is practically lethal.

The main cause of these issues stem from the lack of movement and outdoor time the prisoners get. One hour “outside” three times a week is certainly not enough to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The “outside” they are granted is also partially covered and is still more of a “cage” than the real outdoors. The size of their “cage”, as some refer to it, is also counterproductive to their health. There is practically no room for movement which is required to keep a person healthy. During this time, they also cannot talk to other inmates or even guards, which only makes them feel more alone and isolated.

Exercise is one of the most beneficial things for any person and that is what these inmates are denied the right to do. Most of the day these inmates are in a six by nine foot concrete box and barely have room to move around. This is a major cause of circulation issues, especially in older inmates (Older Prisoners and the Physical Health Effects of Solitary Confinement). The circulation issues can lead to damaged limbs and even in some cases cause brain damage. Blood flow is one of the most important body functions and by not being allowed to move about, inmates are being severely harmed by this lack of movement.

One of the more interesting physical side effects of solitary confinement is sensory deprivation. This occurs due to the lack of natural light a prisoner receives while in solitary confinement as well as the plain colored walls and lack of overall exposure they have to the world. Many prisoners report losing track of time and having no sense of day or night. This ruins a person's sleep schedule which can lead to exhaustion and more health problems. It happens to be a very common issue within the blind communities, but it extends to prisoners with long sentences of isolation as well.

Some prisoners feel as if they had no visual depth perception and could fall at any moment. They did not know if they had a floor below or a ceiling above them. As a result, they

became paranoid as to where they physically were and unsure of their every moment (Older Prisoners and the Physical Health Effects of Solitary Confinement). This is the cause of many unnecessary falls and injuries to inmates while they are in solitary. One fall for an older inmate could create so many unnecessary medical costs that must be paid by the prison system which comes out of people's tax dollars. Inmates could also fall and hit their head on a hard or sharp surface leading to brain trauma or even worse, death.

Not only is the lack of Vitamin D from the real sun harmful to an inmate's health, the fake lighting they endure all day has proven to have negative health effects. The lack of care taken for the lights, including the fact that many are dusted or broken, has been shown to give inmates epilepsy and seizures that can give the brain irreversible damage. A lack of vitamin D can also cause bones to deteriorate, cause hair to fall out, and can even allow for cancer to grow more quickly. These are just more expenses that prisons face when they overuse solitary confinement.

The most common reason for someone entering solitary confinement is violence against guards or inmates. The goal of isolation is to “take a lesson” and deter prisoners from committing similar actions. Despite the desired effect of the punishment, studies have shown it does not reduce violence of the prisoners subjected to the torture. All the time alone, with just their own thoughts, allows for anger and rage to fester and that will not stop when they are released back to the rest of the prison. The delusions caused by this isolation can also give the prisoners more reasons to hate corrections officers making for more future conflict.

Issues within the prison system

The United States prison system is known for having a subpar reputation. The overpopulation and poor treatment of prisoners is something that has haunted the United States for generations. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, at the end of 2016, there were an estimated 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States. Although this number is on a decline, that number is still higher than every other country, with Russia and England being the closest. That means that approximately 0.71% of the United States population is behind bars in either federal or state prisons.

Another major issue associated with the United States prison system is the undertrained and underpaid staff. This lack of training is also a cause of the overuse of solitary confinement. An untrained corrections officer is more likely to use solitary confinement because it is the easiest solution to handle or discipline an unruly prisoner. Instead of trying to solve the problems, these officers are simply ignoring the problems and throwing people into the SHU as a “quick fix” to the issue at hand. The officers are clearly thinking short term and not thinking about the long term damage they are doing to the prisoners. By simply throwing inmates in solitary they are actually only escalating the situation instead of fixing the problem. Between the psychological and physical damage done while isolation, many prisoners tend to get worse upon release.

The “quick fix” ideology is detrimental to the American Prison System. Every prison certainly has a laundry list of problems to attend to on basically an hourly basis so issues must be resolved quickly. The issue arises when corrections officers take these matters into their own hand and “fix” the problem by using solitary confinement. This overly simplified solution creates

dozens of future problems that will need to be attended to at a later date. Instead of rehabilitation occurring in prison, it only causes more harm to the inmate.

The Kalief Browder Story

A horrifying example of why solitary confinement should be outlawed is the story of Kalief Browder. He was a 16 year old boy who was placed in Rikers Island for over a thousand days with no trial. While he was there, Kalief spent over two years in solitary confinement. He came out a completely different person than when he went in. His time there did not help him become a better person. It eventually led to suicide upon his release from prison. It is for people like Kalief Browder that the vicious use of solitary confinement must be severely restricted in the United States.

Kalief was accused of stealing a backpack and was never even given a fair trial. His trial date kept getting pushed back due to the prosecution not being able to supply their own witness to testify. It was later discovered the accuser fled the country. Kalief should not have served any time behind bars, let alone in solitary confinement.

This case shows an overall failure of the United States prison system. It simply goes to show that change needs to occur in order to stop atrocities like this from happening in the future. While in solitary confinement for a crime he did not commit, he practiced and contemplated suicide many times. With regard to Kalief's failed attempt at suicide inside Riker's Island, a prisoner said, "I didn't see him when he did it, but I did see him when they took him out of his cell, and he had the sheet around his neck."(Kalief Browder Documentary, Facts). This a key

example showing that the inmates in isolation will go to extreme measures to flee the inescapable grips of the prison system.

The effects of being in isolation clearly got to Browder due to his committing suicide upon release from jail. Before his untimely death he said, “in my mind right now I feel like I’m still in jail, because I’m still feeling the side effects from what happened in there.” (Kalief Browder Documentary, Facts). The mental toll of depression, anxiety, along with the numerous health issues Browder faced while on Rikers Island, were just too much for the young man to handle. Sadly, two years after his release from prison, the effects of solitary confinement caught up to Kalief and caused him to commit suicide. It should also be noted that in New York State there has been a law named “Kalief’s Law” in order to prevent people from experiencing the same type of unnecessary trauma that Kalief faced. It is known as Bill Number: A3055A and addresses issues of speedy trials that may have saved Kalief’s life.

It is stories like this that convinced President Barack Obama into fighting against solitary confinement, especially for minors. One of the last things President Obama did while in office was ban solitary confinement for juveniles. Throughout most of President Obama’s second term he fought against the use of solitary confinement in prisons and in the end he prevailed. He hoped it would send a message to future legislation that an outright ban should be implemented for all prisoners with regard to isolation. Obama also stated that solitary confinement “too often undercuts that second chance. Those who do make it out often have trouble holding down jobs, reuniting with family and becoming productive members of society.” Along with this statement President Obama banned solitary confinement for juveniles and limited the amount of time spent in solitary confinement for first time offenders to 60 days rather than 365 days. (*President Obama: "Why We Must Rethink Solitary Confinement"* 2016). The inhumane nature and

scientific facts behind solitary confinement, he believed, will be enough for an outright ban in the near future.

Conclusion

Since the end of President Obama's two terms, very little has been done with regard to solitary confinement. Other issues seemed to take precedence over this matter since the beginning of President Trump's first term. Although it is not necessarily a political issue, it may become one soon if nothing is done in the near future.

The use of solitary confinement goes against human nature. Humans desire contact and connections. These connections enable people to grow emotionally and become better citizens in society. That is how progress is made and human civilization advances. By that measure, solitary confinement is anti-progress and does not help in the rehabilitation of prisoners, which is the new prison system goal. Since the main issue with prisoners is how they enter back into society upon release, the way they are treated while incarcerated should be carefully dissected and tweaked to help and not harm prisoners.

Solitary confinement has been a part of the American Prison System since its inception. For its entire existence, it has had the same purpose, but that has to change. The United States is not what it was well over a hundred years ago, and the prison system has to catch up. An outright ban on solitary confinement could also lead to massive consequences. There are some criminals that need to be isolated for the safety of others, but there should be a process to decide on who deserves this treatment. A system needs to be created to discern between who needs to be in isolation and who just needs more resources to help them throughout their prison sentence.

Something to note is that reintegration into society is a major part of the prison system. Solitary confinement must be across the United States in order to keep this progress alive. If the trend of simply throwing problem prisoners into isolation continues like it is, the public will pay the price when they are eventually let out of prison. This ill-adjusted and mentally tampered group of people will not know how to interact within a community in the outside world. Almost all studies show that solitary confinement causes more harm than good. Change must happen soon in order to minimize the damage it has already done to people and society as a whole.

The American Prison System has been shifting over to a “reform based” model and the issue of solitary confinement must be the next issue addressed. Options such as probation and parole have been increasingly used over the last few decades which is a great start, but it is still just the beginning. If The United States wants prisoners to be able to return to society and be functioning members of that society, solitary confinement must be used more scarcely. Not every instance should be answered with the punishment of isolation.

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