
The Inhumane Reality of Contemporary Solitary Confinement

Sanvindam Sidhu

Abstract

This paper argues that modern prison systems degrade incarcerated individuals through their use of solitary confinement, and this dehumanization only gets exacerbated through the significant inaction shown by legislative bodies. Drawing on the works of Sykes, Smith, Guenther, Hattery, Casella, Reiter and Aranda-Hughes, this research examines how systems of solitary confinement strip prisoners of identity, autonomy and fundamental humanity. It explores the psychological and physical consequences of extreme isolation, supported by harrowing inmate testimonies, and critiques the structures that continue to perpetuate these inhumane practices. In particular, it questions the failure of Canadian policies such as Bill C-83 to offer a meaningful sense of solitary reform. This essay concludes that solitary confinement not only fails to accomplish its goal of prisoner rehabilitation, but serves as a vessel of institutional dehumanization that demands urgent ethical and policy reconsiderations.

The inhumane reality that prisoners face with the severe enforcement of solitary confinement raises questions regarding the ethical shortcomings of modern prison systems with the physical and psychological detriments they impose on their inmates. The extreme segregation that is evident in these structures subjects the inmates they are supposedly rehabilitating to extreme isolation for lengthy periods, sensory deprivation and significant psychological and physiological damages that remain prevalent in both the short and long term. In their application of administrative segregation, prisons enlist an approach of stripping their prisoners of all aspects of basic humanity, and force deprivations upon them that even wild animals do not endure. This assassination of humanity consequently results in severe problems for inmates as they carry out their sentences and for their future reintegration into society. Renowned sociological authors Sykes (2007), Smith (2006), Guenther (2013) and Hattery (2023) discuss the significant limitations solitary confinement pushes upon prisoners, such as deprivations of liberty, identity and autonomy. Prisoners are forced into a form of social and civil death, which renders them invisible to the prison system, both literally and figuratively. These systems operate on their own accord with minimal judicial oversight, leaving isolated inmates voiceless and helpless. Adamjee (2022) and Reiter (2016; 2020) delve into the inabilities of legislative bodies to hold prisons accountable for their poor treatment of segregated prisoners, while the Aranda-Hughes et al. (2021) study implicates that, to a certain extent, even correctional officers recognize the dehumanization that is fostered in systems of solitary confinement. This paper will explore the work of these leading prison researchers and argue that modern prison systems, through their use of solitary confinement and the failure of legislative bodies to address its flaws, contribute to the dehumanization of incarcerated individuals. It will examine how these practices subject prisoners to severe, inhumane treatment that profoundly affects their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Ultimately, this paper will contend that these systems must be fundamentally reconstructed with a more humane perspective to ensure the just treatment of their inmates.

The Intensified Pains of Imprisonment in Solitary Confinement

Maximum security prison systems in the modern world no longer rely on ancient notions of physical torture; they instead strip inmates of their humanity through a subjection to severe deprivations, deprivations that become even further exacerbated in systems of solitary confinement. Sykes (2007) looks into some of the deprivations that inmates are prone to experiencing in modern prison systems, such as the loss of liberty, in which the inmates have their movements totally restricted and are kept from their loved ones. One of the most significant deprivations incarceration enforces is the deprivation of autonomy, in which the inmate is “subjected to a vast body of rules and commands which are designed to control his behaviour in minute detail” (Sykes, 2007, p. 73). Prisoners are exposed to a total and imposed power, and they surrender their ability to make decisions for themselves. These deprivations get extremely amplified for the prisoners who get placed in solitary confinement for extended periods of time, as these inmates suffer an even deeper, complete loss of identity and autonomy. They are restricted to a minuscule living area with severe limitations for meaningful human interaction. This isolation can be seen as “painfully depriving or frustrating in terms of lost emotional relationships” (Sykes, 2007, p. 65). Sykes also acknowledges the deprivation of heterosexual relationships in which prisoners experience a reduction of sexual drive and overall sexual frustration, as male prisoners have extremely reduced meaningful contact with partners of the opposing sex. These frustrations can often intensify into psychological issues due to the sense of lost masculinity these inmates experience (Sykes, 2007). Through this needless elimination of human contact, confined inmates surrender the opportunity for intimate relationships of any fashion, and they are housed in caged animal-like living conditions under total isolation for majority of the day, resulting in serious physiological and psychological damages.

From Headaches to Hallucinations: Solitary’s Assault on the Body and Mind

Residence in solitary confinement has a wide range of negative effects on inmates, including physical, mental and emotional detriments. Smith (2006) delves into these pains of solitary confinement that severely impact a prisoner's quality of life. He enlists several studies regarding the impacts of solitary confinement, which highlight the damaging effects of prolonged isolation. Smith reports that 88% of isolated inmates in a particular study complained of headaches, 50% of long-term isolated remand prisoners reported severe headaches in another study, while a third study conducted with Norwegian prisoners reported that 40% of isolated prisoners suffered from long-term, continued headaches (Smith, 2006, pp. 488-489). Smith also examines complaints made by solitary inmates regarding muscle and abdominal pain, along with reports of chest pain and pressure. Inmates also suffer from digestive and weight loss issues. Smith references a 19th-century prison study which revealed that prisoners lost noticeable weight within the first three months of prolonged segregation. Prisoners in solitary confinement also suffer severe impairments to their mental well-being during elongated periods of segregation. Smith divulges that these inmates develop a hypersensitivity to stimuli, often having severe reactions to even the most ordinary noises one hears on a daily basis. Smith enlists a study conducted by Hans Christian Anderson during his visit to a Swedish prison in 1851, which truly showcases the frightening hypersensitivity these prisoners acquire during periods of extreme isolation. It is stated that during his visit to the solitary confinement cells, Anderson gently lifted

the cover of the eye-shaped peephole on a cell door and looked inside. What he saw was that the isolated prisoner's "glance immediately met [his]" due to the borderline insignificant sound the peephole cover made (Smith, 2006, p. 489). This incredibly disturbing testimony makes it evident that prisoners who are subjected to prolonged isolation or harsh confinement often begin to respond to even the slightest external stimuli in a heightened and instinctual manner, reactions that seemingly mirror the behavior of caged animals. Prolonged isolation also leads to severe cognitive, perceptual and emotional disturbances, which further deteriorate the inmates' mental well-being and their ability to function socially. Many isolated inmates struggle with concentration, making it difficult to even read or watch television. They experience confusion, paranoia and even violent fantasies along with an increased loss of memory. Inmates also showcase a "difficulty in communicating with individuals from the outside," and there is a "decreasing ability by prisoners to direct the flow of their own ideation" (Smith, 2006, p. 490). Confined inmates also reveal that they experience hallucinations and perceptual distortions during isolation. Prisoners report seeing moving walls, imagining visits and often hearing voices. A study concluded that over 40% of the inmates in the study experienced such distortions of reality, while 63% of prisoners revealed that they often talk to themselves (Haney, 2003, as cited in Smith, 2006). Lastly, Smith discusses the emotional reactions and impulsive actions which segregated prisoners often elicit. Depression and anxiety are widespread issues in solitary confinement, causing prisoners to also suffer with impulse control, violent outbursts, and suicide attempts. Smith (2006) contends that attempts of "self-mutilation are reported with alarming frequency" (p. 492). In sum, it is evident that solitary confinement systems inflict serious physiological, psychological and psychiatric pain on their inmates, and there is a deep-rooted requirement to address these issues. Smith even refers to U.S. supermax prisons as "one of the most harmful isolation practices currently in operation" (p. 502).

Social Death and the Erasure of Personhood

Lisa Guenther looks into the social impairments of solitary confinement, in which the inmates suffer a civil and social death due to the isolation they are subjected to. Rather than rehabilitating its prisoners, solitary confinement systems psychologically and emotionally dismantle them, leaving them more broken rather than reformed. Guenther (2013) claims that "to be imprisoned in such a machine was to be buried alive, removed from the world to an enclosure with no vantage points from which to gain a perspective on one's spatial situation" (p. 16). Guenther mentions a study conducted by Tocqueville, which revealed that prolonged isolation merely "destroys the criminal without intermission and without pity; it does not reform, it kills" (p. 16). Through these severe systems of segregation, prisoners become essentially dead to the outside world. In discussing the architectural design of the cells within solitary confinement, Guenther highlights that these units create a social and political situation for the prisoner that produces a "concrete sign of civil death" (p. 16). Guenther closes her remarks on extreme segregation by claiming that the system of solitary confinement, which was implemented with the intention to redeem the souls of prisoners through self-reflection, instead "threatens to destroy the very matrix of personhood" (p. 22).

Inhumane Conditions and Institutional Neglect

Angela Hattery and Earl Smith's (2022) research delves into dehumanization that occurs in systems of solitary confinement. Hattery and Smith claim that human beings in solitary confinement often react similarly to trapped animals, engaging in self-harm or violent behaviours. Many prisoners resort to cutting themselves, banging their heads and even attempting suicide in an effort to escape their extreme captivity (Hattery & Smith, 2022). These systems showcase an incredible fostering of inhumanity, with inmates being locked away in cages for twenty-three hours a day with no human interaction at all. The environment is loud, cluttered and unsettling, the floors are littered with trash, and these realities directly contradict solitary's supposed goal of introspection (Hattery & Smith, 2022). In essence, solitary confinement is not just a profound violation of human dignity but a damaging system that fosters and intensifies human harm, further reinforcing the need for reform to prevent such erasures of humanity from taking place.

Looking further into the living conditions and architecture of solitary confinement cells, Jean Casella and colleagues' work looks into testimonials from inmates themselves to paint the full picture of the solitary experience. Prisoner Herman Wallace spent forty one years in solitary confinement and describes the cell he lived in as so small that he could "only make four steps forward until [he touched] the door" claiming that the cell "is really smaller than anybody's bathroom", he goes onto disturbingly reveal that he is surrounded by men who often "constantly throw feces at one another" on a daily basis (Casella et al., 2016, p. 103). Another inmate stated that he has seen minds "slipping down the slope of sanity, descending into insanity" due to the undignified conditions of solitary residence (Casella et al., 2016, p. 41). Inmates describe solitary living as "a place like no other on planet Earth. It's a place where men full of rage can stand at their cell gates fulminating on their neighbor or neighbors" and speak the filthiest words to one another sometimes for hours on end (Casella et al., 2016, p. 42). A 2020 study conducted by Reiter et al. also consisted of testimonials from isolated inmates. One participant stated, "I bet you couldn't walk in my shoes because of all the stuff you endure behind these walls of pain" (Reiter et al., 2020, p. 559). A deeper issue behind these poor inmate living conditions that Casella et al. (2016) brings to light is the fact that it is difficult to legislate solitary confinement and that governments are "heavily in favor of prison administrators" and "when confronted with legal challenges to long term isolation, the federal courts have been loath to interfere with the judgement of correctional officers" (p. 194). Ultimately, Casella et al.'s (2016) work highlights the upsetting reality that despite the widespread and severe ailments of solitary confinement, governments and federal courts remain unwilling to interfere, allowing prison administrators to maintain these inhumane practices without the prospect of accountability.

Reiter's research also examined the lengths prisoners of solitary confinement have gone to try and influence government intervention for the harsh conditions of solitary confinement, but to no avail. Reiter (2016) discusses the hunger strikes and federal lawsuits orchestrated by Pelican Bay inmate Todd Ashker, alleging the unconstitutional conditions of the long-term confinement taking place at Pelican Bay. Months into Ashker's hunger strike, several prisoners had even been hospitalized for nutritional reasons, but rather than implement policies of change, the courts simply signed an order permitting the prison to "re-feed" the prisoners

through feeding tubes, completely disregarding the shockingly inhumane mistreatment Ashker's strike brought to light (Reiter, 2016). This strike eventually gained significant traction and public attention as the world learned that some inmates had been in solitary confinement for decades, and legislators were forced to actually take a look into the isolation policies in California prisons (Reiter, 2016). Despite the growing public attention and pressure on legislative bodies, the lack of meaningful reform throughout history highlights the prevailing reluctance from policymakers to address the issues that are most prominent in solitary confinement systems.

Acknowledging the Harm: Correctional Officers on Solitary Confinement

Even those tasked with enforcing solitary confinement, correctional officers themselves acknowledge its harmful effects on inmates. Aranda-Hughes et al.'s (2021) study involved interviews with 144 correctional officers to gather their perspective on solitary confinement. One of the profound revelations of the study was the fact that several officers conceded that long-term solitary confinement produces an extent of harm or pain for the inmates (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Correctional officers also divulged that the physical isolation limits the inmates' liberty, relationships and autonomy while also recognizing that solitary confinement is a far more painful experience than what general population inmates are afforded (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Given that even correctional officers recognize the detriments the toll extreme solitary confinement can have on inmates, its continued reinforcement is not only cold-heartedly inhumane, but seemingly unjustifiable.

From Segregation to SIUs: A Shift Without Accountability in Canada

Shifting to a Canadian perspective, one of the most significant policy changes to address the pains of solitary confinement in Canada was the enforcement of Bill C-83, which eliminated the use of administrative segregation in federal prisons and replaced it with structured intervention units (SIU). This bill definitely has significant benefits in comparison to the systems of the past, such as its attention to the health of the inmates through daily visits from registered health professionals, as well as the application of regular reviews from each inmate housed in such units. However, there are still significant downsides to the policy as well, which evidently render it insufficient in its goal of solitary reform. The bill assigns responsibility for properly enforcing its regulations to prison officials. However, these representatives often struggle to carry out the rules effectively due to insufficient staff and resources. Additionally, there is little oversight to ensure accountability when enforcement fails (Adamjee, 2022).

These structured intervention units showcase some deeper-rooted issues as well, particularly the overrepresentation of Indigenous people. Indigenous people only make up 4.2% of the adult Canadian population, but 32% of the incarcerated population and an astonishing 48.9% of the population of structured intervention units, an issue which has gone largely unnoticed (Public Safety Canada, 2022). According to amendments made in 2019 to the 1992 Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA) there are some basic requirements for these units, such as the least amount of total time spent in the unit as possible and a specified time of four hours per day outside of the cell with two hours dedicated to meaningful human interaction with other inmates or loved ones (s. 36(1)(a)–(b)). However, data reveals that inmates are staying in SIU for much longer than they should be, and many of them are not getting their

promised two hours per day of meaningful interaction. According to Public Safety Canada (2022) 28% of inmates missed their allotted two hours of meaningful human contact in over 75% of the days they were housed in these units, which is a direct violation of the CCRA's guidelines, but there is a significant lack of resources and oversight which continually allow these violations to occur and go unchecked (Table 9). The promises that were supposedly implemented to differentiate the SIU systems from typical solitary confinement systems are evidently being broken, and legislative bodies simply seem unwilling to address the encroachments taking place.

In conclusion, the use of solitary confinement within modern prison systems raises concerns that simply cannot be ignored. The practice of prolonged isolation does not accomplish its goal of prisoner rehabilitation, but instead it creates and then exacerbates physiological, psychological and emotional distress, while stripping inmates of their fundamental humanity and hindering a meaningful reintegration into society. The lack of legislative involvement from governments in their inability to hold prison systems accountable deepens the crisis, allowing these systems to go unchecked for the long-lasting harm they inflict on the inmates housed in extreme isolation. Without meaningful reform, the continued use of solitary confinement reflects a failure of the justice system to uphold basic human rights, reinforcing systems of torment rather than ones of meaningful rehabilitation. Given the overwhelming evidence that has been provided by sociologists like Sykes, Smith, Hattery and Reiter, it is imperative that we continue to challenge systems of solitary confinement and advocate for reforms that emphasize true rehabilitation, dignity and the humane treatment of inmates.

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