

Solitary Confinement

"We're sending people back to our neighborhoods worse than when they came."

—Gregg Marcantel
Secretary of Corrections, New Mexico



Pre-Reading

A. Warm-Up Questions

1. When do you feel most alone?
2. What is solitary confinement?
3. Why is isolation a form of punishment?

B. Vocabulary Preview

Match the words on the left with the correct meanings on the right.

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| _____ 1. isolated | a) to provide an excuse or reasoning for one's actions or decisions |
| _____ 2. inmate | b) related to the enforcement of rules |
| _____ 3. restricted | c) kept within strict limits |
| _____ 4. death penalty | d) a prisoner in the same jail |
| _____ 5. humane | e) severe pain (mental or physical) inflicted on someone |
| _____ 6. torture | f) a (usually unpleasant) result or outcome from an action or occurrence |
| _____ 7. necessary evil | g) something that has to be done because there is no other alternative |
| _____ 8. justify | h) left alone |
| _____ 9. disciplinary | i) the process of helping someone get ready for regular life again |
| _____ 10. consequence | j) separation or division |
| _____ 11. rehabilitation | k) compassionate, more gentle on humans (or animals) |
| _____ 12. segregation | l) a punishment of death for someone who has committed murder or another very serious crime |

Reading

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

Is it torture or a necessary evil?

1. Solitary confinement is often described as a prison inside a prison. While in solitary, a prisoner spends up to 23 hours per day in an **isolated** cell. Social interaction with **inmates**, staff, and family is **restricted**. Recreational activity is limited too.
2. Not long ago, solitary confinement was viewed as a **humane** alternative to other punishments such as public beatings or the **death penalty**. Today, however, restricted housing is a costly form of punishment that many view as **torture**.*
3. Prisoners who spend too much time in isolation often develop personality disorders. When they are released back into the general prison population, many are worse than they were before. The easiest way to deal with mentally ill people is to isolate them.
4. Is solitary confinement **a necessary evil**? Prisons in the US **justify** restricted housing policies in a few different ways. First, they say that some prisoners pose a risk to the general prison population and staff. Second, they claim that some prisoners need protection from other prisoners or themselves. Solitary confinement is also used as a **disciplinary** measure. How can prison guards maintain order without **consequences**?
5. Solitary confinement is rarely used as a short-term solution. In the US, about 80,000 prisoners are currently in solitary, and many will spend months or years this way. Not only does this prevent **rehabilitation**, it costs about three times as much to keep a prisoner in **segregation**. As soon as a cell in a Special Housing Unit, or SHU, becomes available, it is necessary to fill it.

Other Names

FOR PRISON:

- jail
- penitentiary
- correctional facility
- detention center
- the slammer

FOR SOLITARY CONFINEMENT:

- permanent lockdown
- the block
- restricted housing
- the hole
- SHU (Special Housing Unit, Security Housing Unit, Special Handling Unit, Segregated Housing Unit, etc.)
- suicide watch

*Note:

According to the UN, *torture* refers to “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person”.

Comprehension

Discuss these questions in pairs, and write the answers in your notebook.

1. What is solitary confinement?
2. What often happens to prisoners who are put in solitary confinement for a long period of time?
3. How do prison guards justify this form of punishment?
4. What did you learn about the financial costs of solitary confinement?
5. What is inferred at the end of the reading?

Vocabulary Review

A. Complete the Sentences

Complete each sentence with the correct word from the vocabulary list on page 1. Some of the word forms may need changing.

1. Our _____ program prepares prisoners for life on the outside.
2. We consider isolation _____ because humans are social animals.
3. Prisoners who are _____ for 23 hours a day often resort to self-harming.
4. She poses a danger to herself, to prison staff, and to the other _____ .
5. Attacking a prison guard has to have _____ .
At our jail, it results in 30 days of solitary confinement.
6. A more _____ way of punishing prisoners is to have them complete physical labor.

B. Word Placement

Where does the word *in italics* belong in the sentence?
Circle the correct letter.

1. *inmate*
The a who b moved into c solitary confinement last night d hanged himself.
2. *restricted*
The prisoners in a our SHU are b to one phone c call per d month.
3. *disciplinary*
Prisoners who a participate in the labor b strike will c face d action.
4. *necessary evil*
Placing a dangerous b offenders in chains is a c in this d super-max penitentiary.
5. *justify*
How a can you b leaving a prisoner c alone for d 23 hours a day? It's inhumane!

Discussion

1. In your opinion, is solitary confinement a form of torture or a humane form of punishment?
2. How should prisoners be punished for breaking prison rules?
3. Should prisoners in solitary be allowed to communicate with family members?
4. Is giving a child a *time-out* in his/her room similar to solitary confinement? Does it work?
5. Why might some prisoners prefer solitary confinement to living in the general population of a prison?

Pair Work

IS IT JUSTIFIED? WHY OR WHY NOT?

A. Justified, Not Justified, or Torture?

Here are a few examples of why prisoners are placed in solitary confinement around the world. In your opinion, which examples are justified (J)? Which are not justified (NJ)? Place a (T) beside any that you consider *torture*. Compare your answers with your partner's answers.

- _____ 1. to fill a bed in an expensive SHU
- _____ 2. to force a person to confess to a crime
- _____ 3. to calm a prisoner down after a fight with another inmate
- _____ 4. to put a prisoner on suicide watch
- _____ 5. to break up a prison gang
- _____ 6. to protect a child-killer from being killed by other inmates
- _____ 7. to prevent a high-risk prisoner from harming another prisoner
- _____ 8. to house a mentally disturbed person who is annoying to the general prison population
- _____ 9. to punish a prisoner for participating in a labor strike

B. SHUs

In US prisons, there are three types of SHUs. Which category does each example in Part A fall under? Which examples do not fall into any category? (N/A*)

- **Administrative Segregation:** to protect other prisoners and staff from a harmful prisoner
- **Disciplinary Segregation:** to show prisoners that there are consequences for bad behavior
- **Protective Custody:** to protect prisoners from harming themselves or from being harmed by other prisoners

***N/A:**

In English, you will often see N/A on a form or questionnaire. N/A may mean "not applicable," "no answer," or "not announced." It may also mean "none of the above."

Listening – Gap Fill

 <http://blog.esllibrary.com/2015/07/08/podcast-solitary-confinement/>

Fill in the blanks as you listen to the recording.

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3. Prisoners who spend too much time in isolation often develop personality disorders. When they are released back into the general prison population, many are worse than they were before. The easiest way to deal with _____ ill people is to isolate them.
4. Is solitary confinement a necessary _____? Prisons in the US justify restricted housing policies in a few different ways. First, they say that some prisoners pose a risk to the general prison population and staff. Second, they claim that some prisoners need protection from other prisoners or themselves. Solitary confinement is also used as a _____ measure. How can prison guards maintain order without _____?
5. Solitary confinement is rarely used as a short-term solution. In the US, about 80,000 prisoners are currently in solitary, and many will spend months or years this way. Not only does this prevent _____, it costs about three times as much to keep a prisoner in _____. As soon as a cell in a Special Housing Unit, or SHU, becomes available, it is necessary to fill it.

5. rehabilitation, segregation
4. evil, disciplinary, consequences
3. mentally
2. humane, torture
1. isolated, restricted

ANSWERS: