

# Solitary Confinement: Torture by Any Other Name?

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## Solitary Confinement

Torture by Any Other Name?



In 1842, Charles Dickens wrote that an inmate in solitary confinement “is a man buried alive ... dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair.”

In their Statement for the Record to the Senate Judiciary Committee on Solitary Confinement in June of 2012, the Physicians for Human Rights confirmed that 170 years later, Dickens’ observations still apply. Although the harmful effects of solitary confinement have been well documented since its first use in the early 19th century, isolation has seen a resurgence in popularity since the 1980s. Solitary Watch offers the following estimate on the number of U.S. prisoners currently detained inside cramped, concrete, windowless cells in a state of near-total solitude:

“Based on available data, there are at least 80,000 prisoners in isolated confinement on any given day in America’s prisons and jails, including some 25,000 in long-term solitary in super-max prisons.”

Utah State Prison’s Uinta 1 facility, the prison’s super-maximum solitary confinement unit, is always at or near its 96-inmate capacity. Prisoners have reported a series of violations to Solitary Watch over the years.

## What is Solitary Confinement?

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Solitary confinement is also known as isolation, control units, supermax prisons, the hole, SHUs (Special Housing Units), administrative segregation, maximum security, or permanent lockdown.

Prisoners can be placed in these units as punishment, for holding while they are under investigation, for behavior modification purposes, due to gang involvement, or as retribution for political activism. Jailhouse lawyers and jailhouse doctors are often placed in solitary confinement to curtail their advocacy work on behalf of other inmates.

A 2006 investigation found that as many as 64 percent of prisoners in isolation were mentally ill. People of color are over represented in isolation units as they are in prisons overall.

The tiny, well-lit cells have a toilet, a sink, and a steel bed. There is a small slot in the door to accommodate a food tray. Prisoners usually have their phone, mail, and visit privileges revoked. [A 2014 study](#) found that over 90 percent of New York City's inmates did not even receive their legally required one-hour of recreation outside of their 7-by-12-foot cells. A 2012 letter from a [Raleigh, N.C. prisoner](#), describes life in his 6-by-8-foot cell with one hour of daily recreation, walking around a cage.

## SHU Syndrome and Prison Psychosis

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Prolonged solitary confinement has been demonstrated to cause anxiety, depression, anger, paranoia, hallucinations, confused thought processes, and violent fantasies. Self-harm and suicide are more common in solitary than among the general prison population.

Physiological effects include headaches, lethargy, nightmares, insomnia, dizziness, heart palpitations, oversensitivity to noise and touch, digestive problems, weight loss, and eyesight deterioration. The Physicians for Human Rights add that “because they have more limited access to medical services, both pre-existing illnesses and illnesses resulting from time spent in solitary confinement often go untreated.”

Many prisoners are released directly to the streets after spending years in isolation, [American Friends Service Committee](#) states. “Because of this, long-term solitary confinement goes beyond a problem of prison conditions, to pose a formidable public safety and community health problem.” Because inmates are prohibited from educational and vocational opportunities and have limited visitation rights during their incarceration, they are “deeply traumatized and essentially socially disabled.” It is no surprise that their recidivism rates are high.

In testimony before the Senate Judiciary on Solitary Confinement in 2012, the Physicians for Human Rights concluded:

“The physiological and, especially, psychological harm caused by even a relatively short period in solitary confinement is indisputable...There is no question that the harm caused to an inmate or detainee kept in solitary confinement outweighs any benefit in all but the most extreme cases.”

## Is Solitary Confinement Torture?

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The [Physicians for Human Rights](#) believe so. “In the way in which it is used in the United States today, solitary confinement constitutes torture and/or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, in violation of both international law and America’s founding principles.”

International human rights experts have recommended that solitary confinement be abolished totally as a human rights abuse and form of torture. In August 2011, Juan Mendez, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, “concluded that even 15 days in solitary confinement constitutes torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and 15 days is the limit after which irreversible harmful psychological effects can occur.”

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Larry Nowak is the President of Bad Boys Bail Bonds in Salt Lake City, UT. He and his agents take pride in ensuring that nobody spends more time in jail than absolutely necessary.