

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/solitary-confinement-leads-to-social-death/>

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Recent interviews of people in prolonged solitary confinement reveal that these men are so severely isolated that experts describe their experience as a social death.

Dr. Craig Haney, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, interviewed 56 men who had spent between 10 and 28 years in solitary confinement at Pelican Bay State Prison in California, one of the most severe prisons in the country.

Pelican Bays isolation unit is comprised of windowless, 7.6-foot-by-11.6-foot cells. Doors open and close electronically and face a concrete wall. Officers speak to inmates through intercoms. The design minimizes human interaction, leaving some prisoners so disoriented that they begin to question their own existence.

Men in the isolation unit at Pelican Bay are not allowed personal phone calls and are barred from any physical contact during visits. Some of those interviewed by Dr. Haney had not had a single visitor during the decade or more spent in solitary. I got a 15-minute phone call when my father died, said one man in solitary for 24 years. I realized I have family I don't really know anymore, or even their voices.

The interviewees in long-term solitary confinement suffered from anxiety, paranoia, perceptual disturbances, and deep depression. Nationwide, suicides among people held in isolation, who make up 3 to 8 percent of the nation's prison population, account for about 50 percent of prison suicides.

The use of long-term isolation escalated after tough on crime policies led states to build super-maximum-security prisons in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, about 75,000 people are held in solitary confinement in state and federal prisons in the United States. Some states have begun to reduce the number of people in isolation.

Dr. Haney's findings support the view shared by a growing number of corrections officials and policymakers that isolating people for years is unnecessary and ineffective. President Obama last month questioned whether we really think it makes sense to lock so many people alone in tiny cells for 23 hours a day, sometimes for months or even years at a time.

United States Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy recently [condemned solitary confinement](#), writing in his concurring opinion in *Davis v. Ayala* that [y]ears on end of near-total isolation exacts a terrible price. [T]he human toll wrought by extended terms of isolation, including madness and suicide, anxiety, panic, withdrawal, hallucinations, and self-mutilation, is an added punishment, the justice reasoned, and consideration of whether this added punishment falls short of contemporary standards of decency, and therefore violates the Eighth Amendment's prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment, is needed.

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