

Scientific arguments against solitary confinement

This report summarizes psychological and neuroscientific evidence from over 20 peer-reviewed studies.

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Scientific review of the psychological, physical, and neural effects of long-term solitary confinement demonstrates the vital importance of reforming how prison systems utilize this controversial method. The Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement (HALT) Act provides necessary steps forward both in restricting the use of isolation and in providing alternative options for more effective rehabilitation.

Social isolation causes severe and lasting neurological and psychiatric problems. The environment in solitary confinement is characterized by a near-complete isolation from social interaction, an extreme deprivation of sensory and intellectual stimulation, and a severe lack of physical activity. Individuals who are subject to these conditions for extended periods of time develop serious cognitive, psychological, and physiological symptoms, including memory loss, hallucinations, stupor, anxiety, paranoia, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal ideations.¹⁻⁶ These symptoms emerge in individuals who have no history of mental illness, and worsen in individuals with a history of mental illness.^{5,7} The mental and social impairments resulting from solitary confinement can occur within only a few days of isolation.^{5,8} Furthermore, the risk of developing mental health symptoms and rates of hospitalization for mental health reasons increase with time spent in isolation.^{5,9} Symptoms can persist for years, even after individuals have been released from solitary and from prison.^{5,6}

Social isolation is used to induce neurological and behavioral problems in lab animals. Laboratory animals who are socially isolated display pronounced behavioral changes, such as increased aggression,¹⁰ anxiety- and depression-like behaviors,^{11,12} and cognitive impairments in learning^{13,14} and memory.¹⁵ Correspondingly, drastic neural abnormalities are observed in the brains of animals who have been socially isolated.^{14,16-20} Even less than two weeks of isolation can result in structural changes in the brain, such as decreased myelination in the prefrontal cortex,²⁰ a region of the brain crucial for many cognitive functions including decision making. Just two days of social isolation produces a significant disruption in neurogenesis, the development of new neurons, which plays a role in learning and memory and mood disorders, and this perturbation can persist for weeks.¹⁸ The behavioral and neural changes are so closely correlated to those observed in human patients that housing animals in social isolation is commonly used to create laboratory versions of neuropsychiatric disorders such as anxiety,^{17,21} depression^{12,16} and schizophrenia.¹⁵

Housing of animals in laboratories is more strictly regulated than the housing of humans in prison. Because the impact of housing conditions on behavior and biology is so well established, formal regulations were created. It is federally mandated that most animals be housed with other animals of the same species. Only in extenuating circumstances is an animal to be housed in isolation, and for as little time as possible.²² Veterinarians and the facility's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee oversee and approve the housing of animals to ensure these regulations are followed. In contrast, most states—including New York—allow people to be held in solitary confinement indefinitely, with few or no provisions to mitigate their social and sensory deprivation.

Solitary confinement reduces prison and public safety. The distressing symptoms suffered from time in isolation are accompanied by behavioral changes that directly counteract the purported intention of solitary confinement to reduce violence and behavioral problems. Instead, housing in solitary confinement increases the risk of both self- and other-directed violence.^{4,23} States that reformed the use of solitary confinement have reported decreases in serious incidents and use of force in their prisons.^{24,25} Because of the sustained medical and psychological impacts of this environment, individuals who spend time in solitary confinement are likely to have difficulty reintegrating into society and are more likely to reoffend, indicated by higher rates of recidivism for those who spent significant time in solitary, and even more so for those released directly out of solitary into society.²⁶⁻²⁸

Summary. Scientific research shows that solitary confinement fundamentally alters an individual's brain, causing serious and sustained mental health issues, and increasing abnormal and aggressive behaviors. Solitary confinement is damaging not only to the individual in isolation, but also to the surrounding community, and it increases the probability of recidivism. Indeed, there is a growing consensus about the harmful and counterproductive impact of solitary confinement.²⁹ The United Nations classifies solitary confinement as a form of torture, and revised the Mandela Rules to include a 15 consecutive day maximum, in recognition of the permanent harm associated with prolonged periods of solitary confinement. The HALT Act would establish similar limits and introduce more effective alternatives to solitary confinement, representing a necessary, positive step toward a criminal justice system that seeks to make society more healthy, just, and safe.

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