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Solitary Confinement and Recidivism: The Impacts of Mental Health Resources

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# **Solitary Confinement and Recidivism: The Impacts of Mental Health Resources**

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## **Background**

Solitary confinement is the imprisonment of an inmate in a single cell in which they do not have any access to social interactions and often experience sensory deprivation. Recognized by the World Health Organization, United Nations, and other international organizations, solitary confinement has been deemed as torture if individuals are placed in such conditions for more than 15 days without social interaction. Rather than providing an outlet in which inmates are able to rehabilitate and assimilate back into society once they finish their sentence, solitary confinement creates long-lasting damaging effects.

Due to the rigid conditions of solitary confinement, prisoners do not have the opportunity to engage in social interactions, which is crucial as these interactions help shape perceptions of our environment and determine what is real and what is not. The elimination of social contact leaves individuals vulnerable as they become highly sensitive and malleable to the influence of those who control their environment. This leaves individuals unable to control their behavior as they have long been withdrawn from social interaction, which is important as long-term solitary confinement is known to increase the risk of individuals developing mental illnesses. With scarce resources and inadequate medical and psychiatric care in prisons, prisoners don't receive treatment until they become flagrantly psychotic or suicidal.<sup>2</sup>

## **Impacts on Recidivism**

Although much research has yet to be done concerning the impact of solitary confinement on recidivism, it is well-known that solitary confinement has a significant impact on one's mental and psychological health. Individuals who previously had no existing mental health disorders are seen to develop such after spending time in solitary confinement. The use of sensory deprivation, as well as the elimination of social interaction, renders individuals vulnerable as they no longer can differentiate between reality and fiction. In addition to the lack of adequate treatment and resources, individuals in solitary confinement are likely to distort reality and no longer have

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<sup>1</sup> Based at UC Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies, the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends approximately 30 Cal students to the state's capital every summer for eight-week public service internships. The Golden State Fellowship supports Cal-in-Sac Fellows who secure a summer placement interning in an organization related to civic and political advocacy and who has demonstrated a commitment to diversity.

<sup>2</sup> Haney, 2020

control over themselves as they are used to being under constant surveillance without social contact. Because of this, these individuals are more likely to re-offend and struggle with re-entry into society.

A common theme that was noted when talking to experts<sup>3</sup> was that formerly incarcerated individuals struggle with assimilating back into society for many reasons including the loss of social ties, limited access to healthcare, especially mental health, and the newfound sense of independence. The prison system within California is very isolated from the rest of society, because of this, individuals who are incarcerated more often than not lose the social ties that they have as they are removed from their communities with little to no access to communication or interactions. The use of solitary confinement does not help mitigate these effects, rather, it aggravates them, as individuals are further isolated from the rest of the prison population and being to lose sense of reality. This, of course, creates long-term effects such as trauma and other mental health issues that individuals may have developed while in solitary or never knew they had. When coming out of the prison system these individuals no longer have the support system they once had as they have been isolated from the rest of the world for too long. To add to that, they now have to deal with mental health issues and ongoing trauma that they have developed from being incarcerated. With the limited accessibility to health care, these individuals are left to spiral all alone without adequate support systems. No longer being under the constant surveillance of prison guards and the strict regime of prisons, these individuals are often left not knowing how to continue with their daily lives with this newfound independence and freedom. With no systems set in place to help individuals assimilate back into society while receiving needed treatment, these individuals fall back into the trap of re-offending.

### **Challenges with Abolishing Solitary Confinement**

When discussing solitary confinement, the topic of abolishment often gets thrown into the conversation, but when analyzing our current political climate, it is brought to our attention the numerous challenges that we face when moving to completely abolish solitary confinement.

Over the years, as the Black Lives Matter Movement has grown, we have seen this narrative by police unions and some conservative groups that move to spark fear in the public by stating that defunding the police will only increase crime rates. This same type of narrative is what we see being used when it comes to discussing the abolishment of solitary confinement. Solitary confinement has long been a tool used by corrections as a way to manage their population and maintain control. The idea of abolishing solitary confinement raises questions about security and a potential increase in risks when it comes to incarcerated individuals and the lives of correctional officers. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) have

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<sup>3</sup> To inform this research, I interviewed experts in the field of solitary confinement. Interviewees included current and former CDCR employees, abolitionist, legislative analyst and advocates, as well as lawyers.

created and spun this narrative that abolishing solitary confinement will place vulnerable individuals at risk of dangerous inmates who would have been placed in solitary.

This constant backlash from prisons, as well as correctional officers who argue that abolishment would make prisons more violent, is a challenge that many advocates have faced when it comes to limiting and potentially abolishing the use of solitary confinement. This is why we see bills like AB 280<sup>4</sup> being created, as a way to address the issues of solitary confinement. Though these bills don't fully abolish solitary confinement, they are stepping stones that are needed to address the issues that continue to arise with the use of solitary confinement.

There is a clear power dynamic when it comes to CDCR and the use of solitary confinement. This is a practice that they have used for decades, which not only provides them resources but additional funding; if we were to abolish solitary confinement, not only would these resources be reduced, but so would their funding which is not something that the CDCR wants, which explains the heavy backlash on the idea of abolishment.

### **A Policy Solution: Implementing Mental Health Resources and Limitations on Solitary Confinement**

Mental health resources, as well as programs that focus on assimilating individuals back into society, are crucial when it comes to addressing and mitigating the effects of solitary confinement. By providing routine checkups with psychologists and routine evaluations, especially for individuals who have experienced solitary confinement, we can ensure that individuals are receiving the needed treatment for any mental health issues they may have developed. By redirecting funds being used for restrictive single-person housing to programs and resources to address underlying issues that cause incarcerated individuals to act out, we can start to understand how to go about addressing disciplinary actions and referring individuals to seek medical help.

The implementation of these resources and programs, of course, will be crucial, which is why it is important to ensure that there is accountability and an active paper trail that notes whether these prisons are following protocol and ensuring that individuals are getting evaluated. By addressing these issues from the root we are able to break down issues regarding security and other challenges that we face when it comes to abolishing solitary confinement.

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<sup>4</sup> AB 280, also known as the California Madela Act on Solitary Confinement, bans the use of solitary confinement for certain populations deemed vulnerable while placing limitations on the duration of which any individual can be placed in confinement. This bill also moves to mandate the documentation of the use of solitary confinement.

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