

**Solitary Confinement: Disproportionality and Mental Impacts on Prison
Inmates**

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Solitary confinement, also known as segregation, is the isolation and separation of inmates within the correctional setting. The three main types are disciplinary, confining as a punishment for rule breaking, protective, confining for the inmate's safety, and administrative, long-term confinement for security purposes (Bartol 2021). Roughly 5% of prison inmates are in solitary confinement at any given moment, while 20% of inmates have experienced it during their incarceration. Every day, inmates in solitary confinement remain in their cells for 23 hours with one hour of recreation time in a small caged space. They take meals in their cell and are permitted showers three times a week (Bartol 2021). These conditions can be unbearable to any prisoner when no visitors, books, or television are allowed, but especially to mentally ill populations. The 1995 court case *Madrid v. Gomez* acknowledges the intolerable nature of solitary confinement when experienced for long periods, but does not consider it a violation of the 8th amendment for inmates not suffering from mental illness (Bartol 2021). Many psychological researchers condemn long-term solitary confinement for the negative effects it has on inmates. Though it decreases institutional misbehavior, it increases the odds of recidivism post-release and increases self-harming behaviors in inmates (Bartol 2021).

The topic of solitary confinement (SC) has been controversial due to recent research on the negative effects it has on inmate mental health. Supporters of SC argue that the extended solitary management (ESM) of inmates deemed destructive and

violent is the only effective way to ensure the safety of other prisoners and the institution itself (Mears et al. 2021). Large solitary facilities like supermax prisons exist for this reason and use prolonged isolation, a form of administrative segregation, to manage the facility. Mears and colleagues (2021) analyzed a sample of admission and release population data from Florida state corrections administrative records to determine demographics and characteristics associated with ESM populations. The sample only included inmates who were entered and released between 2007 and 2015. Results showed prevalent disparities in mental health, gender, race, and education characteristics, as ESM populations tend to be mostly males who are less educated compared to the general prison population by roughly 1.6 grades. 36% of ESM inmates had mental health issues compared to 18% in the general prison population, and Black people made up 60% of all ESM inmates despite only accounting for 43% of the nation's prison population. This is a disproportionate statistic compared to White and Hispanic populations (Mears et al. 2021).

Silverthorn and Zgoba (2024) analyzed two data sets to study the interconnectedness of SC and mental health as well as SC and recidivism rates for mentally ill populations. Their first sample consisted of 1,099 inmates with or without mental illness who spent at least one week in SC during their incarceration. Their second sample included 399 previous inmates released between 2007 and 2015 who were followed for three years post-incarceration to measure recidivism rates. By analyzing mental health services (MHS) data, prison infraction data, criminal history,

and demographic variables, Silverthorn and Zgoba (2024) found that inmates with mental illness (IWMI) had a higher need for MHS post-SC than inmates without mental illness. This increased need subsequently increased SC inmate prison infractions, further growing the need for MHS. Though IWMI had a greater need for MHS overall, their needs didn't increase during or post-SC as much as inmates without mental illness, whose needs for MHS increased 8% per week spent in SC. This proves that longer periods spent in SC are detrimental to the mental health of "stable" prisoners just as much as IWMI (Silverthorn and Zgoba 2024).

Attachment theory suggests that human beings need social connection, something stripped from them when placed in SC, which has been shown to worsen mental health and increase rates of self-harm, the need for MHS, and recidivism rates post-incarceration. These negative effects increase over prolonged periods, where inmates have nothing to consult but their thoughts. Black men with lower education levels are more likely to be placed into ESM facilities than any other population, showing a disproportionate use of this punishment depending on race, gender, and education level. Though it's common in the correction system to view SC as a necessary management strategy that keeps violent and dangerous inmates in check, the studies above show that its utilization is causing more harm than good within the system.

References

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