

The Collateral Consequences of Solitary Confinement

Solitary confinement is the practice of subjecting an individual to extreme isolation and near-total sensory deprivation in a small cell for up to 24 hours a day. In the United States, tens of thousands of incarcerated people are in solitary confinement at any given time, often as punishment for minor disruptive behavior such as possessing contraband, ignoring an order, or using profanity.¹ Some are placed in solitary for a few days; others for decades. Evidence shows that solitary confinement does not reduce violence or future misconduct in prison, and multiple studies suggest that people subjected to solitary confinement show symptoms usually found in individuals who have experienced physical torture.²

People with mental health conditions are vastly over-represented in solitary confinement. Others develop lasting mental health issues while in isolation. An analysis by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 1 in 3 people held in solitary in prisons reported symptoms of severe psychological distress, such as paranoia, anxiety, or substance abuse.³ For some, these symptoms last for years. Others never fully heal.

The negative effects of solitary confinement go far beyond immediate suffering, affect people in all areas of their lives, and can last long after individuals have returned to the general prison population or the free world.

Involvement in the criminal justice system often comes with collateral consequences, such as disenfranchisement, housing restrictions, and higher chances of homelessness and unemployment,⁴ to name just a few.

While the devastating effects of incarceration are widely known, little attention has been given to the specific collateral consequences of solitary confinement. These consequences include the destruction of family relationships, lasting financial hardship, exclusion from work and educational programming, additional time behind bars, increased recidivism, and even shortened life spans.

Destruction of Family Relationships

“When I left them, they were kids. And now they’re grown. You can never get back what you lost. You can never get that time back.”

—Esther, incarcerated in Massachusetts⁵

People held in solitary confinement are often denied all visits and phone calls with family and friends—sometimes for years. In other cases, they are limited to “non-contact” visits, meaning that the only physical contact someone might have in decades is the handcuffing and strip-searching performed by correctional officers.

Not only can this lack of social interaction damage a person’s ability to form and sustain healthy relationships upon release, it also constitutes a lasting burden on familial relationships particularly parent-child relationships.

Sometimes, mothers in solitary confinement cannot see their children for years.⁶ Studies have shown that parental incarceration not only adds stressors to the incarcerated parent, but also increases the child’s risk of suffering from developmental delays, poor physical health, PTSD, and self-harming behaviors.⁷



Booth for “non-contact” visits

Lasting Financial Hardship

“For some prisoners, the owed money hangs over them not just behind bars, but forever—as does the trauma of solitary—a combination that can make it near impossible to live.”

—Erika Eichelberger, “The Literal Cost of Solitary Confinement”⁸

Jails and prisons often fail to provide incarcerated people with sufficient food and hygiene products, meaning many must turn to the overpriced commissary for these basic essentials. As a result, many people rely on the small amount of money they are able to make through prison jobs. Although most correctional institutions exploit incarcerated workers (the average pay rate is \$0.14 to \$0.63 an hour),⁹ studies have found that being enrolled in a prison work program also increases people’s chances of employment upon release from prison, and decreases the likelihood that they will return to prison.¹⁰ However, nearly all people held in solitary confinement are barred from participating in work programming of any sort. This means that they are denied opportunities to gain work experiences and skills, and also lose their only source of income.

In addition, people who are sent to disciplinary solitary confinement are often charged fines as high as \$200.¹¹ These are added to other debts, including routine prison fees or unpaid child support that accrued during incarceration.¹² These debts exacerbate the financial strain already faced by formerly incarcerated individuals and their families.

Additional Time Behind Bars

“You get someone who is going to spend a couple of years in prison who ends up spending their whole life there, or who ends up going back and forth, because they’ve been so damaged by solitary confinement that they can’t adjust.”

—Terry Kupers, Professor Emeritus of Psychology, Wright Institute¹³

People who spend time in solitary confinement often see their prison sentences extended in a number of ways. In addition to losing parole eligibility, they can lose early-release credits—also known as “good time” or “earned time.”¹⁴ These credits are earned through a combination of “good behavior” and participation in work or educational programming, and can reduce an incarcerated person’s sentence or parole eligibility wait period. These hard-earned credits often become null when someone is sentenced to solitary confinement for a disciplinary infraction.

The almost complete isolation and sensory deprivation of solitary can cause people to incur further criminal charges, which in turn can lead to even longer prison sentences. This is especially true for individuals with

mental health issues. Anthony Gay, for example, was sent to prison for seven years at age 19. When his mental health deteriorated, he began to act out and was punished with solitary confinement. There, his condition worsened even more, until he was sentenced to an additional 90 years in prison for various infractions.¹⁵ For people like Gay, solitary confinement can trigger a cycle of punishment from which there is no escape.

Exclusion from Educational Programming

“School brought some humanity to prison. It’s like you have that voice that was taken away.”

—Jesse, incarcerated in New York¹⁶

In addition to being barred from work, people in solitary confinement are almost always excluded from educational programming. In New York, students can be suspended from college programs for six months to a year after being found guilty of a disciplinary infraction that is punishable by solitary confinement.¹⁷ Being excluded from educational programming negatively affects people’s eligibility for parole, meaning that they will end up spending more time in prison, in addition to being less prepared to succeed following their release.¹⁸

Increased Recidivism

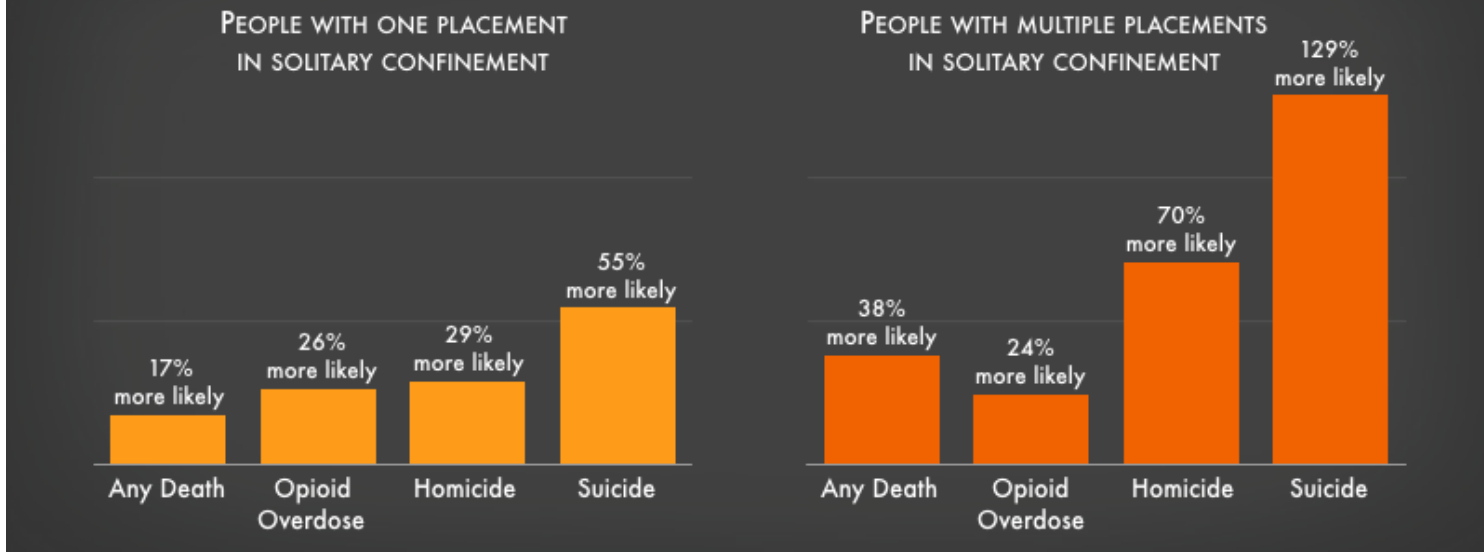
“How can we subject prisoners to unnecessary solitary confinement, knowing its effects, and then expect them to return to our communities as whole people? It doesn’t make us safer. It’s an affront to our common humanity.”

—Former President Barack Obama¹⁹

Any stay in solitary confinement can considerably increase someone’s risk of being rearrested upon their release from prison.²⁰ One key study showed that individuals released from solitary confinement units in Washington State prisons committed new felonies at a rate 35 percent higher than individuals released from the general prison population.²¹ Another showed that people who had spent time in solitary confinement in Florida state prisons were 18 percent more likely to commit new violent crimes.²²

Both educational and work programs have been shown to significantly lower recidivism rates,²³ yet people in solitary confinement are barred from participating.²⁴ Furthermore, the extreme conditions in solitary confinement can cause and exacerbate mental health issues, which again make it more likely that someone will return to prison upon their release without receiving proper treatment.²⁵ Lastly, family relationships and strong support networks have been shown to significantly reduce recidivism rates.²⁶ Yet, long isolation in solitary confinement can lead to lasting estrangement from loved ones and a diminished capacity for socialization.²⁷

Increased risk of death after release from prison for people who experienced solitary confinement compared to those who did not



Graph from the Prison Policy Initiative, created using data from “Association of Restrictive Housing During Incarceration with Mortality After Release” by Lauren Brinkley-Rubinstein, Josie Sivaraman, David Rosen, et. al. (2019)

Shortened Life Span

Self-harm and suicide rates for people in solitary confinement are extremely high: Studies have found that between 50 and 69 percent of all suicides in prisons occur in solitary confinement cells.²⁸

But the damage caused by solitary does not end when someone comes out of the cell. Several studies have found that any time spent in solitary confinement can lead to premature death. A 2007 study found that people released from solitary confinement are at a risk of death that is up to 12 times higher than that of the general population. The main causes of death were drug overdose, cardiovascular disease, homicide, and suicide.²⁹ A 2018 study similarly concluded that any exposure to solitary confinement significantly increases the risk of mortality after release. Symptoms caused by solitary confinement can “intensify interpersonal violence, increase risky behaviors, and ultimately elevate the risk of mortality.”³⁰

In solitary, even a short sentence can turn into a death sentence.

In some cases, the collateral consequences of solitary confinement can be addressed through targeted policy changes—for example, ending solitary-related fines, or bans on family visits, work, or programming. The deeper consequences, however—including the profound psychological damage that leads to additional prison time, increased recidivism, and premature death—can only be solved by abolishing the use of solitary confinement in all carceral facilities.

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Solitary Watch is a watchdog organization that investigates, reports on, and disseminates information about solitary confinement in U.S. prisons and jails to promote awareness, create accountability, and shift public narratives.

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