

The Impact of Long-Term Solitary Confinement on Mental Health

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Abstract

From the current literature, it continues to be documented that long-term solitary confinement causes anxiety via trickle-down effects of panic attacks, fear of impending death, irritability, and even persistent low level of stress. Specifically, the isolation causes emotional blunting or flatness in which individuals lose the ability to “feel.” Additionally, the isolation has been associated with depression in terms of lethargy, apathy, loss of initiation of ideas or activity, social withdrawal, hopelessness, and mood swings. Regarding anger as a secondary effect accruing from long-term solitary confinement, the practice accounts for outbursts of verbal and physical violence against objects, self, and others, poor impulse control, and hostility and irritability. Indeed, the study indicated that this isolation yields cognitive disturbances in terms of disorientation, confused thought processes, poor memory and concentration, and short attention span. This study highlighted further that there is a direct relationship between long-term solitary confinement and perceptual distortions. Notably, it was highlighted that the confinement accounts for the affected persons’ hypersensitivity to smells and noises, de-realization or depersonalization, disorientation in space and time, and sensation distortions. Furthermore, it was documented that long-term solitary confinement is predictive of hallucinations that impair the five senses.

1 Introduction

According to Andrews and Dowden (2005), human beings are not only social creatures in trivial senses of preference for company and dependence on each other but also in a more elemental manner. In particular, the ability to exist as a normal human being has been documented to require interactions with other members of the society. Solitary confinement refers to a process through which individuals are placed in cells for months, weeks, days, or even years. Indeed, these individuals are exposed to very little or even no contact with other persons (Bassett 2016). In the study by Cullen (2007), it was asserted that the central aim of solitary confinement is to inculcate discipline among wrongdoers in prison contexts. In another study, Kaba, Lewis, Glowa-Kollisch, Hadler, Lee and Alper et al. (2014) contended that solitary confinement seeks to protect inmates from the rest of the group and strive further to segregate individuals perceived to cause trouble. In contexts such as the U.S., Kelsall (2014) observed that solitary confinement is embraced for purposes of containing juvenile inmates in adult prisons and youth detention centers. In the majority of the past scholarly studies, it has been avowed that solitary confinement is detrimental because it causes mental illness and even worsens the conditions in situations where it (mental illness) pre-exists. Given that human beings remain social creatures but long-term solitary confinement ensures that individuals are barred from interactions that contribute to a healthy co-existence, it is worth inferring that the practice is inhumane.

2 Methodology

As mentioned earlier, several reasons prompt the placement of prisoners in isolation. These reasons range from minor issues such as possessing packs of cigarettes and talking back to the guards, to serious infractions that include fighting with other inmates (Metzner & Fellner 2010). O'Keefe, Klebe and Stucker et al. (2013) observed that since humans are social beings, an absence of other peoples' benefit could cause mental decay. In another observation, Roma, Pompili, Lester, Girardi and Ferracuti (2013) concurred that an absence of activity in long-term solitary confinement settings is predictive of brain atrophy while the inability to see off in great distances could yield visual fading. Other studies contend that a loss of control and isolation associated with long-term solitary confinement cause hopelessness, anxiety, and even anger. Thus, it could be inferred that mixed outcomes accrue in such a way that the isolation causes positive outcomes from the perspective of security institutions but, from a human rights perspective, negative outcomes outweigh the benefits.

3 Results and Discussion

In the study by Kaba, Lewis, Glowa-Kollisch, Hadler, Lee and Alper et al. (2014), it was suggested further that long-term solitary confinement causes psychosis or paranoia. Indeed, it was acknowledged that the isolation leads to persistent and recurrent thoughts of vengeful or violent character; including those that are directed against the staff in prison settings. Other conditions that were avowed to accrue from this form of isolation include schizophrenia, psychotic depression, and psychotic states or episodes. Lastly, self-harm has been associated with long-term solitary confinement. According to Kelsall (2014), the isolation poses risks such as suicide attempts, cutting, and even self-mutilation. Statistical outcomes point further to the dire consequences associated with long-term solitary confinement. For example, Metzner and Fellner (2010) observed that in the context of California, inmates stand a 13-time higher likelihood of committing suicide when compared to others who are incarcerated in related states. Irreversible and severe psychological harm has been linked to solitary confinements lasting beyond 15 days. O'Keefe, Klebe and Stucker et al. (2013) observed further that about 8-19 percent of prisoners in the U.S. are likely to experience significant functional or psychiatric disabilities. On the other hand, about 15-20 percent of the group prompts psychiatric intervention. Similar trends have also been reported in the European context. According to additional statistical reports presented by the American Psychiatric Association, close to 20 percent of prisoners under long-term solitary confinement are likely to be seriously mentally ill. At any given moment, the Association reports further that up to five percent of all prisoners under long-term solitary confinement remain actively psychotic; with about four percent of these inmates associated with schizophrenia (Roma, Pompili, Lester, Girardi & Ferracuti 2013).

Despite the existence of the adversities mentioned above, some studies contend that long-term solitary confinement poses positive effects to the society. For instance, Shames, Wilcox and Subramanian (2015) observed that long-term solitary confinement is morally and socially progressive because it forms a viable alternative that is worth implementing in the place of death

penalties. In another study, Andrews and Dowden (2005) observed that the isolation is advantages because it enables authorities to separate certain prisoners from those who threaten them, protect other prisoners, and even interrupt gang communications (while steering the long-term beneficial effect of enhanced security). Whereas the studies documenting positive effects or benefits of long-term solitary confinement are worth acknowledging, negative effects arising from the practice outweigh the benefits. Therefore, long-term solitary confinement is inhumane.

4 Conclusion

In summary, proponents of long-term solitary confinement hold that the practice is beneficial because it protects prisoners from the rest of the general public, offers an added public protection level, steers prison safety, enables correctional guards to discipline the prisoners, and reforms prisoner character. However, those who oppose the practice argue that it yields a loss of freedom, violates the prisoners' basic human rights, compromises the privacy of prisoners, and even translates into mental health and personality problems. Given that adversities outweigh the benefits, various actions need to be taken while seeking to offer conditions that are deemed appropriate for violent offenders. Indeed, the need for rehabilitation strategies cannot be overemphasized. This practice deviates from preventive programs in such a way that it targets individuals found to have participated in violent or delinquent behavior; emerging as a tertiary crime prevention program. In particular, the rehabilitation needs to target initial causes of violent crimes.

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