

**The Effectiveness of Solitary Confinement:  
An Interdisciplinary Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

Scholars are yet to come up with solutions that would properly solve the problems that are associated with solitary confinement. This is because opinions within the scholar community are divided where many scholars believe solitary confinement is a form of reasonable punishment while others argue that it is adding to existing problems. Solitary confinement is a worldwide problem that affects millions of prisoners every year, so therefore this is a problem that needs to be addressed. To properly address this problem, one must approach this problem from an interdisciplinary sense. This means that this problem will need to be addressed by multiple disciplines where each discipline can share their insight in order to create or form a comprehensive understanding. This paper will approach the complex problem of solitary confinement by using the ten steps of the interdisciplinary research process. This paper will further use both qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to bring clarity to the topic of solitary confinement. Finally, this paper will examine and determine if solitary confinement is an effective way of punishing criminals within the prison system.

### **Drawing on disciplinary insights**

Solitary confinement continues to be a controversial topic within the criminal justice system today where it often finds its way on the tip of many people's tongues. Solitary confinement can be defined as a form of punishment where a prisoner is sent to a single prison or jail cell where they do not have much contact with the rest of the prison population. Even though this might sound extreme, there are thousands of prisoners in the United States alone who are sent to solitary each year which causes uproars. (Cloud, David, Drucker, Browne, & Parsons, 2015). There are many problems that surround solitary confinement which makes this problem very vast or broad. It is near impossible to address every single problem within solitary confinement, so therefore the scope of this paper will focus on the effectiveness of solitary confinement. This paper will investigate to find the answer to the research question- is solitary confinement an effective way of punishing criminals?

Solving the complexity of solitary confinement is beyond the knowledge of a single discipline. This means that in order to find the effectiveness of solitary confinement, one needs to approach the problem in an interdisciplinary sense. When approaching the problem from an interdisciplinary standpoint, multiple disciplines will be needed. This is due to the fact that not one single discipline would be knowledgeable enough to address all different aspects of such a complex problem. In other words, there would not be a conclusive or comprehensive answer when determining if solitary confinement is effective when using a single discipline. There are many different aspects that need to be looked at when determining if solitary confinement is effective. These aspects include cost, behavioral, and mental health impact. A single discipline such as psychology can only address the mental health impact of solitary confinement. This means that psychology would not be able to determine the cost and impact solitary confinement

has on social behavior. This is because these aspects are out of the field of psychology main point of study, so therefore Psychology alone would not be able to provide a comprehensive understanding of the problem.

There are three aspects of solitary confinement that this paper will take into consideration when determining if it is effective. As mentioned earlier, these aspects are mental health, social behavior, and cost. The three disciplines that will come together and form a comprehensive understanding on the effectiveness of solitary confinement are psychology, sociology, and economics.

Psychology is known to be the study of how the human mind works. This discipline would take on a scientific approach to see how solitary confinement affects a person mentally. Solitary confinement was created to punish criminals who committed outrageous acts and those who posed a threat to the rest of the prison population. So therefore, does sending prisoners to solitary makes them worse? The second discipline that will be used is sociology. Sociology is known to focus on the social behavior of humans. In this case, Sociology may focus on how inmates behave towards the rest of the prison population after they have been released from solitary. This means that an inmate could become more aggressive or violent after they have been released. An inmate could also behave in a more respectable manner towards other inmates and prison personnel after they have been released because of their fear of going back into solitary. The role of economics is to focus on the cost of solitary confinement. Economics will determine if solitary confinement is a cheap and easy way of punishing criminals. Economics will also determine if the government spent too much money on solitary each year in order to maintain discipline within prisons across the United States.

To further gather knowledge and support all three disciplines of psychology, sociology, and economics, one must conduct literature research. Literature research should be conducted to see what existing knowledge has been published on solitary confinement by each of those disciplines listed above. This way one can see where each discipline stands on the topic. An initial search has been conducted on solitary confinement where one can conclude that this topic needs to be researched from an interdisciplinary standpoint because of its complexity. After the initial search, the full-scale search was conducted. This is where one would form their sources that support their disciplines.

In order to see where each discipline stands on solitary confinement, adequacy needs to be developed. Each discipline has their own perspective on the issue at large where they developed their own theories and methods. Based on the analysis of the full-scale search, psychology tends to focus on the experimental and evaluation method to understand people within solitary. For example, a psychologist must conduct experiments and evaluations on an inmate that has been in solitary to find out the psychological impact. Sociology uses interviews and observations to address problems within solitary. To understand a person's social behavior, one must observe how that person socializes with other people. In this case, one must observe how a particular inmate from solitary socializes with other people within the prison facility. Finally, the full-scale search showed that economics approaches the problem of solitary confinement in a data analysis manner. This means that researchers provided mathematical modeling facts on whether the economic cost of solitary confinement makes it effective.

Many scholars believe that the condition of solitary confinement is what leads to the psychological damages of inmates within prisons. According to Craig Haney of the University of California, inmates that are placed in supermax prison or solitary confinement often find

themselves in total isolation. Haney went further to state that when these inmates are isolated for a significant amount of time, they start to develop some psychological feelings. Feelings that are associated with solitary confinement and supermax prisons are said to be anxiety, depression, and hallucinations along with many other types of negative feelings. (Haney, 2003). It is also said that people with existing psychiatric problems are more likely to become a victim of solitary confinement. This is because these inmates are incapable of following prison rules because of their mental state. (Cloud, David, Drucker, Browne, & Parsons, 2015). Their mental state would further be negatively impacted because they are later sent to be isolated in solitary as a discipline procedure. (Cloud, David, Drucker, Browne, & Parsons, 2015). Scholars also believe that solitary confinement can be effective where it does not have to cause psychological damage. This means that psychological damages can be avoided where solitary can produce positive results if inmates are placed in isolation for just a short period of time. (Medrano, Ozkan, Morris, 2017). It is also common for an inmate to volunteer themselves where they asked to be placed in solitary confinement. (Laws, 2021). These inmates who asked to be placed in solitary confinement experience little to no symptoms of psychological distress. This is because these inmates are mentally prepared to be in isolation where they want no part in being with the rest of the prison population. According to Ben Laws, University of Cambridge, inmates feel protected when they are placed in solitary confinement. These inmates feel protected because they are in a zone where they can not be a victim of violence or any type of sexual assaults. When inmates are subjected to violence and assaults in prisons, they often ask to be transferred. When inmates are denied transfer to another prison facility, they further ask to be placed in solitary confinement. If a transfer to another prison or solitary confinement is not granted, these inmates will go on to experience psychological effects. (Laws, 2021). Solitary confinement therefore proves to be

beneficial to inmates where they can be more relaxed without the worry of them being attacked or assaulted.

From conducting interviews and observations from a sociological standpoint, researchers found that inmate's social behavior have changed after they are released from solitary confinement and supermax prisons. Craig Haney stated that "these come about because in order to survive the rigors of supermax, many prisoners gradually change their patterns of thinking, acting, and feeling." (Haney, 2003). By changing their social regiments to adapt to the conditions of solitary confinement, inmates may also participate in new problematic behavior such as violence. These inmates who are affected by isolation in solitary may cause bodily injury such as stabbing on other inmates and prison personnel or staff. (Haney, 2003). Isolation from solitary also seems to be a factor in violence. According to Cloud, David, Drucker, Browne, & Parsons, isolation causes inmates to harm themselves where they can go as far as committing suicide. Suicide is said to be much higher when inmates are isolated compared to when inmates are amongst the general prison population. Researchers also believe that sending inmates to solitary confinement does not always have an impact on their behavior. According to Aranda-Hughes, Mears, Pesta, & Brown, inmates' behavior has changed for the better where they have the time in isolation to think about their future goals and to reflect on their behavior. This can be beneficial where inmates can become a better version of themselves and bring a positive energy back into the general population after they have been released from solitary. The safety of inmates and prison guards is another reason why solitary confinement is useful and needed according to some scholars. Solitary confinement is needed to punish inmates who partake in gang activities. (Kurki and Morris, 2001). When inmates are affiliated with gangs within prisons, this can become a safety issue where other inmates and prison guards could get hurt. According to Kurki and

Morris, solitary can be used as a form of punishment in order to get inmates to debrief. This means that inmates are threatened with long term solitary confinement if they do not reveal the identity of other gang members and their own history of being part of a specific gang. Prison personnel can use this information provided by an inmate to identify other gang members in order to maintain control and safety within the prison. Lastly, it is said that solitary confinement is needed to separate the most dangerous inmates from each other along with prison staff who are corrupted. (Kurki and Morris, 2001). When inmates who are proven to be dangerous are separated from each other through solitary, the general prison population enjoys greater freedom according to Kurki and Morris.

Economically, some researchers believe the practice of solitary confinement is financially high. According to Medrano, Ozkan, and Morris, solitary confinement is very costly compared to a regular populated prison. Medrano, Ozkan, and Morris asserted that “SC is one of the most expensive forms of incarceration; nationally it costs \$75,000 annually to house an inmate in SC in comparison to an inmate in general population who costs \$25,000 per year.” (Medrano, Ozkan, and Morris, 2017). Normally, people are sent to solitary for misbehaving, or they have become a danger to the rest of the prison population. With this being said, these inmates in solitary are regularly being watched, and there are more advanced security features in this area of the prison. (Medrano, Ozkan, and Morris, 2017). So therefore, there will be more equipment and staff required to supervise inmates which will eventually become costly.



### **Integrating disciplinary insights**

After the problem of solitary confinement has been analyzed from each discipline's perspectives, conflicts between insights and their sources need to be addressed. Conflicting insights need to be addressed because this prevents integration where one would have trouble creating common ground. The conflicting insight of solitary confinement happens within and across a discipline. Within the discipline of psychology, some scholars and researchers believe that the housing of solitary confinement is the main reason why inmates experience some form of mental illness. This proves to be conflicting because other scholars believe the design and the structure of prison solitary confinement cells are important and crucial. (Kurki and Morris, 2001). This is because the design of the housing limits the interaction between dangerous inmate who are sent to solitary and prison personnel. This can be seen as a safety concern from a prison perspective where safety within the prison would be maintained. Other scholars also dismissed the theory of housing being the main factor of mental illness where they believe once an inmate has been adjusted to the housing of solitary confinement, then mental illness is no longer a problem. (Aranda, Pesta, & Brown, 2021). Furthermore, there are scholars who believe the lack of social contact with other humans are the main reason why inmates experience symptoms of mental illnesses. (Haney, 2003). These scholars further believe that once an inmate starts to experience one form of mental illness then they will start to receive other symptoms if not treated. Within the discipline of sociology, there are numerous amounts of conflicts that have been identified. It is already said that solitary confinement results in inmates being more violent and aggressive. These violent and aggressive conduct can be directed to both prison personnel and a member of the general prison population. Furthermore, studies show that after inmates are released from solitary, they often find it difficult to control and organize their own life. (Haney,

2003). This becomes conflicting because studies have shown that solitary confinement can change criminal behavior for the better. As stated earlier, inmates may use solitary confinement to reflect on their own action and how they can become a better version of themselves going forward. According to Aranda-Hughes, Mears, Pesta, & Brown, solitary confinement can be a safe haven for inmates where they are protected from other inmates who may sexually and physically assault them. It is also said that inmates may also find prison troublesome where they are finding it difficult to adapt and fit in with the general prison population. Scholars believe solitary confinement would therefore be beneficial where inmates can become more comfortable in which they have more control over their own life.

Since conflicting insight within a discipline has been identified, common ground between insight needs to be created in order to bring clarity to the issue. In a psychological sense, it has been agreed upon that solitary confinement causes some form of mental illness within prisons across the United States. Scholars from the discipline of psychology believe placing inmates in solitary for a significant amount of time will result in extreme psychological damages. According to Medrano, Ozkan, & Morris, inmates who are sent to solitary for no more than ten days showed very little to no sign of mental illness. The ones that are sent to solitary over a period of 14 or more days showed great signs of mental illnesses. It is also agreed upon that it is easy for inmates to develop some psychological problems without the inmate themselves or staff being aware. This is because these problems are sometimes not obvious enough to get the attention of prison personnel. Scholars within the field of sociology may disagree on the impact solitary confinement has on social behavior, but they all agree that people are sent to solitary for the wrong reasons. Inmates are sent to solitary confinement for minor rule breaks such as having an attitude toward a prison guard or staff and smoking. (Cloud, David, Drucker, Browne, &

Parsons, 2015). When these inmates are sent to solitary for these minor infractions, they tend to develop a negative behavior towards staff because they felt they have been wronged. Lastly, it also agreed upon within sociology that dangerous inmates need to be separated from other inmates. If dangerous inmates are not separated, then disruption within the prison will become a norm where the safety of inmates and guards will be at risk.

After analyzing and integrating empirical sources on the complex problem of solitary confinement, one can conclude that the harmful effect has proved to outweigh the positive effects. Different analytical perspectives were used to evaluate the psychological effect of solitary in which mental illnesses are caused by multiple factors. Factors that have shown to affect inmates psychologically within solitary confinement are housing conditions and lack of social contact. The housing condition of solitary confinement includes a single prison cell that has limited space to move around. These inmates are placed into these cells for up to 22 hours a day until they are released back into the general population. (Aranda, Pesta, & Brown, 2021). Inmates in solitary are isolated from other people in which they do not have the opportunity to socialize with other humans. This can create psychological damages where they start to experience many different forms of health issues. (Haney, 2003). Sociology stance on solitary is divided in which scholars strongly disagree on whether it impacts behavior. This means that future studies need to be conducted to see if solitary confinement more often or not changes inmates' behavior in a negative way. In an economic sense, all scholars have agreed that solitary confinement is a costly way of punishing criminals. This stems from the construction cost, security features installed within this part of the prison, and the number of personnel who are needed to watch over these inmates within solitary.

This paper was organized based on the ten steps of the interdisciplinary research process. Each step of the interdisciplinary research process was used individually or separately in which they have not been compressed or omitted. By using different disciplines to analyze the problem of solitary confinement, I have learned where each discipline stands on the subject. All insight from all three disciplines of psychology, sociology, and economics has helped to successfully integrate each perspective into a meaningful understanding. Each source that has been used in this paper is based on relevancy and not whether or not I have agreed with a particular scholar's view. Lastly, I have used the Szostak test to test a more comprehensive understanding. The test showed that this paper gave a better insight and understanding of solitary confinement. The paper showed ways that solitary confinement can be effective and how it can be ineffective. But in the end, research has shown that there is more harm associated with solitary confinement than good. The Szostak test has also shown that this paper shows some form of casual relationship. It shows how the three disciplines of psychology, sociology, and economics came together to determine if solitary confinement is an effective way of punishing criminals.

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