**Frequently Asked Questions about Prolonged Solitary Confinement**

*What is the history of solitary confinement in the United States?*

Dr. Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin and several Quaker leaders first instituted solitary confinement at Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia in the late 18th century, believing that total isolation and silence would lead to penitence (hence, the term ‘penitentiary’ was coined). That led to the building of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Penitentiary in 1829, which only had solitary confinement cells.

However, instead of becoming penitent, the prisoners developed serious mental health problems and many went insane. In 1842, Charles Dickens, the novelist, visited the Southeastern Pennsylvania Penitentiary and said, “The system here is rigid, strict, and hopeless solitary confinement. I believe it…to be cruel and wrong. … I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body.”

The Quakers also recognized that solitary confinement caused severe psychological harm and apologized for their use of prolonged solitary confinement.

Unfortunately, the U.S. has let history repeat itself. In the 20th century, some U.S. prisons had a limited number of solitary confinement control units within their facilities; however, in 1983 a prison in Illinois instituted a permanent ‘lock down’ of their entire facility, in which all inmates were confined alone in their cells for 23 hours per day. The use of solitary confinement has increased dramatically since then. In 1989, California built Pelican Bay Prison to house prisoners exclusively in isolation (the first “supermax” prison). Today, there are 44 state-run supermax prisons and one federal supermax prison. The United States has become a world leader in holding prisoners in prolonged solitary confinement.

*What does ‘prolonged’ solitary confinement mean?*

It depends who says it. For the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), the term ‘prolonged solitary confinement’ is equated to torture — the point when the use of solitary confinement results in severe mental or physical pain or suffering. Torture is defined by the United Nations Convention Against Torture, which has the weight of U.S. law (see below).

In a 2011 report, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan Mendez, cited 15 days as ‘prolonged solitary confinement,’ noting that some of the psychological effects caused by isolation become irreversible at that point.

The American Bar Association Standards for Criminal Justice defines ‘long-term isolation’ as 30 days or more, for the purpose of setting a deadline by which prisoners in solitary confinement are given increased due process protections.

*What about prisoners who voluntarily request to be placed in solitary confinement for their own protection, for example?*

NRCAT recognizes prolonged solitary confinement as torture, which by definition “is intentionally inflicted . . . at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.” Therefore, prisoners who voluntarily request to be placed in...
What are the psychological effects of prolonged solitary confinement on prisoners?

Many studies have documented the severe detrimental effects of solitary confinement on prisoners’ mental health. Symptoms include: hyperresponsivity to external stimuli, hallucinations, panic attacks, difficulty with thinking and memory, paranoia, etc. One study showed that prisoners held in solitary developed psychopathologies at a rate nearly twice as great as those held in general prison population. Dr. Stuart Grassian, a psychiatrist, notes that many prisoners held in long-term solitary confinement experience perceptual disturbances (e.g. objects appearing to ‘melt’ or get smaller or bigger). These symptoms are commonly associated with neurological illnesses, such as brain tumors and seizure disorders, rather than mental illnesses.

How much does housing prisoners in solitary confinement cost compared to other forms of confinement?

Experts have found housing a prisoner in solitary confinement can cost as much as $50,000 more annually compared to general prison population housing. The Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons 2006 report states that solitary confinement can double the cost of housing prisoners.

Does solitary confinement ‘work?’

No, solitary confinement is an ineffective tool to rehabilitate prisoners, and its consequences affect us all. One study found that prisoners who were released directly from segregation into their community had a much higher recidivism rate than individuals who spent some time in a general population prison setting before returning to the community: 64% compared to 41%.

What is the definition for torture?

NRCAT uses the definition of torture included in Article I of the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Convention came into force on June 26, 1987, following ratification by the 20th nation. The Convention was signed by the U.S. in 1988 and ratified by the U.S. Congress in 1994.

Here is the definition of torture from Article I of the United Nations Convention Against Torture, which has the weight of U.S. law:

“For the purposes of this Convention, the term ‘torture’ means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.”