Summarized Piece

Craig Haney: Solitary Confinement is a “Tried-and-True” Torture Device

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Dr. Craig Haney is a psychiatrist who has studied the effects of prolonged isolation on inmates. He spoke to FRONTLINE about his research, and how and why solitary confinement is used in America today. This is the edited transcript of that interview, conducted on Sept. 12, 2013.

[**http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/criminal-justice/locked-up-in-america/craig-haney-solitary-confinement-is-a-tried-and-true-torture-device/**](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/criminal-justice/locked-up-in-america/craig-haney-solitary-confinement-is-a-tried-and-true-torture-device/)

**What is solitary confinement?**

Solitary confinement is the confinement of prisoners in a cell, usually for 22 to 23, in some instances 24, hours a day, where they’re prevented from having access to any common activities which prisoners elsewhere in the prison might engage in.

So these are people who essentially are in solitary confinement, living their entire lives within the perimeter of their cells, cells which are somewhere usually between 6 and 8 square feet in dimension, the size of a small bathroom, a parking lot space. If you have a king-size bed at home, it’s a little larger than a king-size bed, but not much.

This means they basically eat and sleep and defecate all within a few feet of each other and basically get out of their cells typically once a day or once every other day and are taken to an exercise area where under most circumstances they exercise by themselves, so even there they’re prevented from having any contact with other human beings.

Essentially they’re denied the opportunity to have meaningful social contact or meaningful social interaction with anyone. …

**Can you give me a sense … [of] the magnitude of this practice and use in America? No other nation in the world, as far as I’m aware, uses it to the extent it is used here.**

I think the United States leads the world not only in the rate at which we incarcerate our citizens but the rate at which we put those incarcerated citizens in long-term solitary confinement.

The best estimates we have suggest that about 80,000 people or more are currently being held in solitary or solitary-type conditions. That’s unheard of in any other nation, and frankly, in my opinion, it was unheard of in the United States until about 30 or so years ago, when we began to increasingly put people in long-term solitary confinement.

**What’s the history here? … What was going on?**

In my opinion, the reason solitary confinement began to be used in the ’80s and ’90s has to do with the rapid expansion of the prison system in the United States. … You had terribly overcrowded conditions and prisons that looked like they were about to become out of control.

You also had a change in correctional philosophy that occurred in the United States in the 1970s. Prison systems up until that point had existed, at least in theory, to provide rehabilitative services to prisoners, the idea being that they would get out of prison, or at least have an opportunity to get out of prison in better shape than they went in.

We abandoned that commitment in the mid-1970s, and we embraced and set a prison-for-punishment rationale. Among other things, what that meant is that prison systems had fewer and fewer incentives to offer prisoners. There were fewer programs; there were fewer ways of shaping prisoner behavior by offering them positive things to do.

And so, having been denied the opportunity to use carrots, they began to use sticks. They began to punish prisoners in order to control them, and one of the tried-and-true, old-time ways of punishing prisoners is to put them in the hole. …

The third component to this is that there were increasing numbers of mentally ill prisoners coming into the prison system. Their behavior was harder to understand; it was harder to control. Prison systems didn’t have the resources to properly deal with them, and so solitary confinement increasingly became a repository for mentally ill prisoners who the prison system believed it couldn’t control any other way.

**Had there been any other occasion in America, in penological history, when solitary confinement had been tried or had been used?**

Solitary confinement was the imprisonment method of choice in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries in the United States. When prisons proliferated in the United States in the early 19th century, the model of imprisonment that was in use was basically a solitary confinement model. …

Eventually that model was abandoned, in part because there was widespread recognition that it was doing terrible damage to the people who were placed there. … It became the exception rather than the norm by the 20th century. …

**Tell me more about your studies of the psychological effects of solitary confinement. …**

Studying isolation in U.S. prisons is a challenging task because these are environments which by definition are hidden environments. They’re protected by laws; they’re protected by correctional policy. And my access to these places has oftentimes been in the context of litigation, where I have a court order, where a judge requires a prison system to allow me to have access to the environments themselves and also to the prisoners who I want to interview.

I study solitary confinement by interviewing the people who are affected by it, who live in these environments. I try always to select, when I can, a representative sample of prisoners, so oftentimes I will interview prisoners who I randomly select … so I can understand how the average prisoner in these environments is being affected by what’s happening to them. …

The patterns of effects are very similar. … Some prisoners react very negatively very quickly. They experience what has been termed “isolation panic.” The experience of being in a cell by oneself, isolated in a place where other prisoners are isolated, facing the deprivation of social contact, is overwhelming for people, and some people react with extreme anxiety reactions in the very beginning of this process.

If a prisoner gets past that initial period and begins to settle in the environment, oftentimes the next thing that envelops them is depression. They begin to feel hopeless. They’re denied the opportunity to engage in meaningful activities, not just social interaction but typically meaningful activities of any kind, and they begin to lose a sense of purpose. Some prisoners begin to lose contact with reality.

We are, in ways that we take for granted, social beings, social creatures. We depend on each other for not just stimulation but for a sense of self. A grounding in a social community just in our interactions with other people, how other people react to us, our ability to influence the world by having meaningful interaction and communicating with other people, all of these things are intrinsic to what it means to be a human being. And when you take that away from people, many people are destabilized by it. They begin to question their existence.

Other prisoners begin to deteriorate mentally. They report decreases in the ability to concentrate or focus, memory deficits.

Other prisoners become very frustrated and angry. They find themselves becoming irritated at the smallest thing, and sometimes those irritations turn into not just irritation but anger and then rage.

Other prisoners have a difficult time controlling their emotion, so they will tell you that they are sad sometimes but happy others and they’re not sure what caused the shift in their emotion. They experience these mood swings without any obvious, precipitating event in a larger environment.

The other thing that happens across the board to virtually everybody in these environments is very subtle, but it is very disabling if and when somebody is released from solitary confinement, and that is that people lose the ability to interact socially with others.

Social interaction becomes something for many prisoners that is anxiety-arousing. Because they have over time so little experience with it, they begin to lose the ability to actually communicate or engage with other human beings. Their social skills, their range of abilities that all of us have that we take for granted — our ability to communicate verbally, to communicate nonverbally, to feel appropriate emotion in social settings and so on — all of these things begin to erode.

And prisoners find themselves self-isolating. The awkwardness of being in solitary confinement sometimes leads prisoners not to seek social contact but to avoid it. Sometimes they tell their families, “Don’t visit me; don’t bother; I don’t want to see you anymore.” …

I’ve had prisoners tell me that the first time they’ve been given an opportunity to interact with other people, they can’t do it. They don’t want to do it. They don’t come out of their cell. I’ve had prisoners tell me that they’ve lost control of their bladder because they’re so anxious. They’re frightened by a simple thing like having an interaction with another person where they’re not in restraints.