



Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement.
an Issues Chapter of the Social Welfare Action Alliance

What is Solitary Confinement?

In jails and prisons across the United States, an estimated 80,000 – 100,000 people are being held in Solitary Confinement. For 23 hours a day, they are alone inside a cell the size of a parking space, experiencing no meaningful human contact. Food trays are passed through a flap in the cell door. The length of time they stay in these cells varies from a few days to decades. People are usually placed into “Solitary” for punitive purposes -- for infractions ranging from disobeying orders to assault on staff. Although the public is led to believe that Solitary houses the “worst of the worst,” in most cases, the infractions are non-violent. In 2018, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor joined a growing chorus of world leaders in condemning this practice, likening it to a “penal tomb.”

[8-minute film clip- Johnny Perez, solitary survivor, describes his experience in confinement.](#)

Helping Professionals in Solitary Confinement Units -- Providing Treatment or Abetting Torture?

In 2011, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture stated that Solitary Confinement beyond 15 days constitutes torture. Despite this official decree, the practice remains legally sanctioned and deeply entrenched in the United States, posing an ethical dilemma for the healthcare workers who staff these units. In particular, mental health workers must monitor the people held in these cells, assessing them for the mental deterioration and heightened suicide risk that is induced by such extreme isolation. Torn between their professional Codes of Ethics that call for upholding the dignity of all human life, and the demands of their workplace, they are routinely faced with a “dual loyalty” that is not easily remedied.

[8-minute film clip, Mary Buser, social worker in mental health department at Rikers Island Solitary Confinement Unit, discusses her responsibilities and the dilemmas she faced in carrying them out.](#)

Alternatives to Solitary Confinement

Despite growing calls for its abolition, Solitary Confinement has been long considered a necessary tool for institutional safety – that is, until the State of Colorado figured out how to keep their prisons safe without it. In 2011, for humanitarian reasons, Colorado began emptying out its Solitary cells, replacing them with “stepdown units” which allowed ever increasing time out of the cell for therapy and socialization. Using this method, over a period of six years, the solitary population decreased from 1,500 to less than five people. Contrary to expectations, the rate of violence in the prisons also decreased, with the biggest drop being assaults on staff. The Colorado template demonstrates that alternatives are effective, and actually create safer institutions. For mental health workers, the Colorado model offers hope of meaningful work in a correctional setting, as opposed to being cogs in an inhumane wheel.

[5-minute film clip -- Rick Raemisch, former Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Corrections, testifies before Congress about reforms to solitary confinement in the Colorado State Prisons.](#)



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Contemplation Points:

1. Are there any ethical principals in the NASW's Code of Ethics that solitary confinement violates?
2. How might social work institutions support social workers who are in a dual-loyalty situation?
3. What challenges might a social worker face if they are working in a punitive setting?
4. Do social workers have an ethical responsibility to act when they know of human rights violations? What should they do?

Resources

Lockdown on Rikers: Shocking Stories of Abuse and Injustice at New York's Notorious Jail, by Mary Buser
St. Martin's Press (September 29, 2015)

Hell is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement by Jean Casella, James Ridgeway and Sarah Shourd
The New Press; First Trade Paper edition (September 5, 2017)

Solitary, by Albert Woodfox
Grove Press (March 5, 2019)

Stop Solitary: Advocacy Resources, by the American Civil Liberties Union (online PDF)

Survivors Manual: How to Survive in Solitary Confinement, by the American Friends Service Committee (online PDF, book by mail order)

Solitary Confinement's Mockery of Human Rights, by Mary Buser, Washington Post, April 6th, 2014

Call to Action!

1. Go to the [Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement \(SWASC\) website](#), join the taskforce, and participate in the monthly call to see how you can help!
2. Click on [Unlock the Box](#) (National Campaign to End Solitary Confinement). Find "What You Can Do" tab, pick an action, and then do it!
3. Click on [Solitary Watch](#) – National Solitary Confinement Watchdog Group. Review the information about legislative campaigns in all 50 states, find your state, and work on that policy change.