

A sourcebook on solitary confinement

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Views expressed in the Sourcebook and any errors made in it are my own.

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Preface

The wide use of solitary confinement in prisons and other places of detention has long been a source of grave concern to those involved with the international protection of human rights. Never more so than in recent years, which have seen a marked increase in the use of strict and often prolonged solitary confinement across the world: in the context of the 'war on terror'; as disciplinary punishment; with pre-trial detainees, the mentally ill and former death-row prisoners; and, in the so-called 'supermax' prisons.

As this sourcebook clearly demonstrates, solitary confinement has a well documented negative impact on mental health and wellbeing and may amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, particularly when used for a prolonged time. The use of solitary confinement should therefore be strictly limited to exceptional cases or where it is absolutely necessary for criminal investigation purposes. The severe suffering caused by solitary confinement means that in all cases it should only be used as a last resort, and then for the shortest possible period of time. When used for interrogation purposes, either in combination with other methods or on its own, solitary confinement can amount not only to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment but even to torture.

This comprehensive sourcebook brings together the accumulated knowledge and standards relating to solitary confinement and its harmful consequences. It identifies how solitary confinement may be misused and the protections that should be put in place. It is a valuable resource for prison staff and policy makers in the effort to promote the respect and protection of the rights and wellbeing of prisoners and detainees. Let us not forget that persons deprived of liberty are among the most vulnerable human beings in every society.

Solitary confinement has not received the attention it merits in international standards. There is a need to further develop protections aimed specifically at reducing its use and mitigating the harm it causes. The Sourcebook on Solitary Confinement is thus an important contribution in a shared endeavour that seeks the universal protection of human rights in all places of deprivation of liberty. I commend it to a wide readership.

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