

Craig Haney, PhD — Social Psychologist

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF INCARCERATION

Psychologist Craig Haney, PhD, studies the use and impact of solitary confinement on inmates in super-maximum security, or “supermax,” prisons.

“There’s very little doubt in psychology that enforced isolation is psychologically harmful and for some people will be very damaging,” says Haney, a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Despite the shared perspective many psychologists have about the dangers of isolation and social exclusion, less research has been done into the psychological impact of enforced solitary confinement. Haney’s goal is to get the data in order to evaluate whether such confinement is harmful, how much damage it can inflict and who is most susceptible.

STUDYING THE SUPERMAX

Haney has inspected many supermax prisons across the U.S., conducting systematic psychological assessments of nearly 1,000 inmates in solitary confinement. In addition to conducting observations and face-to-face interviews with inmates, mental health staff and correctional staff, he has performed an extensive literature review of personal accounts and prison documents relating to the operation of confinement units.

Through his research, Haney has found little evidence to support claims that prisoners or prison systems benefit from solitary confinement. Even those prisoners deemed to be the worst offenders don’t require such extreme isolation and deprivation. Many, he argues, are placed in supermax conditions not for what they have done but on the basis of a prison official’s judgment that they are dangerous, disruptive or a threat. Often, he says, they can and should be handled differently.

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT AND SOCIAL DEPRIVATION

“There are few, if any, forms of imprisonment that appear to produce so much psychological trauma as isolation,” Haney says. “For many prisoners, the absence of regular, normal interpersonal contact creates a pervasive feeling of unreality.”

Haney’s research found that among the population of inmates in supermax prisons, there is a higher rate of mental illness than the general prisoner population. Some inmates entered the prison system with existing mental health problems, while others show signs of mental illness that emerged after confinement. He assessed 400 randomly selected inmates to determine if they were experiencing symptoms of psychological distress or demonstrating isolation-related psychopathological symptoms. More than half of the assessed inmates experienced 11 of the 12 recognized signs of psychological distress. Approximately two out of three of those interviewed reported having anxiety attacks and feeling on the verge of an emotional breakdown. Some inmates also reported more extreme symptoms, such as depression and suicidal thoughts.

His research showed that even in the correctional system, people need human interaction to be healthy psychologically.

“It borders on being common sense, but it is common sense with empirical research to support it,” Haney says. “So much of what we do and who we are is rooted in a social context. When people experience extreme isolation and social exclusion, they suffer.”



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SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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