

Overview:

Over the past two decades, solitary confinement has moved out of the prison basement and into whole facilities built just for isolation. These places have many names -- Supermax, intensive-management units, secure housing -- but the meaning is the same: years alone, out of the public view and away from public oversight.

Isolation today means 23 hours a day in a concrete cell no bigger than a bathroom. One hour a day is spent alone in a concrete exercise pen, about the length and width of two cars.

Most inmates held in solitary have no contact with the outside world other than the U.S. mail. Depending on the state, inmates have limited access to visitors. Most can't watch television, call anyone on the phone or even touch another person while in the units.

Some inmates have been incarcerated in these conditions in U.S. prisons for more than 20 years. Most have been there for more than five years.

Conservative estimates say that there are more than 25,000 inmates serving their sentences this way in 40 states. The inmates aren't in these facilities because of what they did on the outside. No one is sentenced by a court or a judge to serve their time in isolation, except in the rare occurrence of terrorists who could pose a threat to national security.

Inmates are put in isolation because of something they did on the *inside*. Prison officials say inmates are placed in isolation because they are the most violent, dangerous prisoners. Officials say most inmates in the units are members of gangs that are making their prisons too risky for the officers and the other inmates. But over the years, the violence rates in U.S. prisons have not decreased, nor has the strength of the gangs.

In many states, inmates held in solitary confinement have almost no way out. Many stay in isolation until their sentences run out. And that's pretty common. Almost 95 percent of the inmates in isolation in this country will be released back to the public one day. Many of them will receive little, if any, help with the transition. Texas, for example, took 1,458 inmates out of isolation in 2005, walked them to the prison's gates and took the handcuffs off.

A few states are trying to implement programs to help inmates work their way out of isolation. Several states, including Oregon and Colorado, have started a system that allows inmates to earn back privileges with good behavior and eventually work their way out of isolation. Oregon also offers inmates therapy sessions with a visiting psychologist to work on anger management. And a dozen states now rely on a panel of prison officials

outside the prison to decide who goes into isolation and who gets out, so it's no longer solely at the discretion of the warden.

Prisoner advocates such as the American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights Watch are calling for an end to long-term isolation, arguing that it may make inmates more violent and render them unable to rejoin society. But many prison officials and correctional officers say isolation units are necessary, allowing them to control prison gangs and keep prisons safe for the rest of the inmates.

Part I: July 26, 2006

NPR.org, July 26, 2006 · Associate Warden Larry Williams is standing inside a small, cement prison cell. Everything is gray concrete: the bed, the walls, the unmovable stool. Everything except the combination stainless-steel sink and toilet.

You can't move more than eight feet in one direction.

"Prison is a deterrent," Williams says. "We don't want them to like being in prison."

The cell is one of eight in a long hallway. From inside, you can't see anyone or any of the other cells. This is where the inmate eats, sleeps and exists for 22 1/2 hours a day. He spends the other 1 1/2 hours alone in a small concrete yard.

This is the Security Housing Unit -- or the SHU (pronounced "SHOE") -- at Pelican Bay State Prison in northern California. With more than 1,200 inmates, it's one of the largest and oldest isolation units in the country, and it's the model that dozens of other states have followed.

Although all the inmates are in isolation, there's lots of noise: Keys rattle. Toilets flush. Inmates shout to each other from one cell to the next. Twice a day, officers push plastic food trays through the small portals in the metal doors.

No Contact but the 'Pinky Shake'

Those doors are solid metal, with little nickel-sized holes punched throughout. One inmate known as Wino is standing on just behind the door of his cell. It's difficult to make eye contact, because you can only see one eye at a time.

"I've got my paperwork, my books to read, my little odds and ends," he says, pointing to the small items carefully organized throughout his cell.

Wino fears he'll get in trouble for talking; he asks that NPR not use his real name. Wino is a 40-something man from San Fernando, Calif. He was sent to prison for robbery. He

was sent to the SHU for being involved in prison gangs. He's been in this cell for six years.

"The only contact that you have with individuals is what they call a pinky shake," he says, sticking his pinky through one of the little holes in the door.

That's the only personal contact Wino has had in six years.

'Pods' of Isolation Cells

There are five other hallways like this one, in what prison officials here call a "pod" of cells. The hallways shoot out like spokes on a wheel. In the center, high off the floor, an officer sits at a panel of blue and red buttons controlling the doors. The officer in the booth can go an entire shift without actually seeing an inmate face to face.

Far below, an inmate walks a few feet from his cell, through a metal door at the end of the hallway, and out into the yard.

The exercise yards at Pelican Bay are about the length of two small cars. The cement walls are 20 feet high. On top is a metal grate -- and through the grate is a patch of sky. Associate Warden Williams says they don't allow inmates to have any kind of exercise equipment.

"Most of the time, they do push-ups. Some of them just walk back and forth for exercise," he says. "We don't allow them to have any type of balls or -- I don't know what you call it -- any kind of activity out here. It's just basically to come out, stretch their legs and get some fresh air."

Monitor. Control. Isolate.

Inside the SHU, there's a skylight two stories up. But on an overcast day, it's dark, and so are the cells. There are no windows here. Inmates will not see the moon, stars, trees or grass. They will rarely, if ever, see the giant, gray building they live in. Their world -- 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year -- is this hallway. There are 132 hallways at Pelican Bay just like this one. They are all full.

More than 40 states operate facilities like Pelican Bay. Inmates aren't sent here by judges or juries. No prisoner is sentenced to isolation. It makes absolutely no difference what crime you committed on the outside. It's how you behave on the inside that counts, and every state has different rules for how you get here. In some parts of the country, the decision belongs to a small group of state officials; in other states, it's up to the warden.

Prison officials at Pelican Bay say the 1,200 inmates here are in segregation because, since arriving in prison, they have been the most violent, dangerous inmates in California.

"The intent is to monitor, to control, to isolate," says Lt. Steve Perez, who has worked at Pelican Bay for 17 years. "This is in response to their behavior. That's why you have facilities like this."

Each month, officers squeeze soap, shampoo and toothpaste into paper cups for the inmates. They are issued a jumpsuit, but in two days at the facility, there doesn't seem to be a single prisoner wearing one. All of them are wearing their underwear, white boxer shorts, t-shirts and flip-flops.

'It Breaks You Psychologically'

"You find yourself being by yourself, and sometimes you don't like what you see," said one inmate named Jason, a young-looking 39-year-old from Sacramento.

Four years ago, Jason violated his parole on a robbery charge and was sent to prison. A few months after he arrived, prison officials suspected he was involved in a prison gang and sent him to isolation. He's been in the SHU ever since.

"A lot of guys go [crazy], really, and sometimes I ask myself, 'Am I losing it, right?'" Jason says behind his small cell-door holes. "It breaks you psychologically, right? People do develop phobias. You start thinking people are talking about you when they're not."

When inmates do go crazy, there is another part of the prison for them -- the psychiatric SHU.

Treating Mental Illness in Solitary

In the psychiatric SHU at Pelican Bay, one inmate stands in the middle of his cell, hollering at no one in particular. Another bangs his head against the cell door. Many of the inmates are naked, some exposing themselves.

The psychiatric SHU is full -- all 128 beds. One in 10 inmates in segregation is housed here. There's even a waiting list.

Lt. Steve Perez points to the board outside the unit, where little markers describe some of the psychiatric problems of inmates held there.

"Here we are with Vic -- indecent exposure. He's got to be in a jumpsuit," Perez says. "Nichols -- he's on a razor restriction. This guy Flores -- staff assault through the food port."

The board says one inmate had his shoes taken because he kept kicking the cell door over and over.

'Group Therapy' in a Cage

Lt. Troy Woods works in the psychiatric SHU. He says they treat mental illness by monitoring the inmates and sending them to what he and others call "group therapy." It consists of a small room with six phone-booth-sized cages.

"Depending on what the group is, they'll either listen to music, watch movies, play games, have art, current events -- a lot of different types of groups," Woods says.

There are no therapists in group therapy. Woods says the idea is to help inmates socialize with each other and behavior normally again.

"Normal" for these prisoners means they don't smear feces on themselves or throw urine at the officers. They shower when able, eat when told and keep their cells tidy. For the most part, when prisoners do achieve this, the reward is a return to the regular SHU.

Experts say it can cost \$50,000 more a year to house these inmates in isolation -- regular or psychiatric. But if you ask prison officials in this state why they need facilities like this one, they have one answer: to control the prison gangs.

Part II

Controlling the Grip of Gangs

Outside in the yard, hundreds of prisoners from general population are playing basketball games, exercising and crowding around cement tables. On this day, without exception, every inmate is divided by race -- and gang membership.

"You've got your white group there on that one dip bar. You've got your southern (Mexicans) -- they're always on that one table. You have your blacks," Lt. Steve Perez says, looking out onto the yard.

Prison officials like Perez say a lot of crimes happen on the yard right in front of them.

"Right now, business is being conducted," Perez says, pointing to the group of prisoners gathered on the yard. "There's gambling that's going on, drugs that are being passed and sold."

Assaults, stabbings and attacks on staff are weekly occurrences here. Two former gang members sit at a table in the yard, long after most other prisons have been sent back

inside. They're kept separate because they recently left the gang. Because they fear for their life, they asked that NPR not to use their names.

They say the gangs run the prisons.

"If they keep killing people, you are going to do what they tell you to do -- out of fear, out of self-preservation," one of the inmates says. "If you're 90 days at the house, and a gang member tells you, 'You go stab that dude right there,' or 'Go back in and stab your cellie,' out of self-preservation, you are going to do what you are told. Because if you don't, you are going to be killed."

Associate Warden Larry Williams acknowledges that prison gangs are an enormous problem that prison officials do not have control over.

"Every time we pluck one out, a new one pops up," he said.

'There Are Times When You Lose Control'

Officials say 70 percent of the inmates in California's prisons are in some way affiliated with prison gangs.

When asked whether the gangs control Pelican Bay, Williams says: "The biggest part of me wants to say no. But you know, prisons only run with the consent of the inmates -- and that's all the inmates. The administration and the officers do have control of the prisons. But there are times when you lose control."

Associate Warden Larry Williams says it has been this way since the 1980s, when the number of inmates exploded, and rehabilitative programs disappeared. The gangs filled the void left from increasingly tense conditions and utter boredom. California's answer to the gangs was, and is, the SHU.

Even locked in isolation, some inmates have managed to find ways to kill each other and assault staff. On a recent afternoon, a half-dozen officers spent an entire day tearing apart the cells in one hallway, searching desperately for a metal binder clip they believed one of the inmates was hiding. Officer Buchanan discovered the paper fastener hidden inside a crack in the concrete wall. It had been sharpened into a deadly razor.

In the cell next door, Sgt. France held up a couple of staples she found.

"They use the staples. They sharpen them to a point, wrap paper around them real tight, and make a spear out of it," France says. "It will go through the perforations on the cell. They can spear someone with it."

Isolation Breeds Deadly Ingenuity

Lt. Steve Perez explains that inmates pull out the elastic from their underwear and braid it into a kind of super-powered bow to fire their weapons.

"They can project a spear coming out of there at 800-square-pounds per foot," Perez said. "And 800 pounds per foot, into your neck, it'll drive that right in there. And now we've got to go in there, and what does he have on it? Does he have feces? HIV? Does he have herpes? TB? Hepatitis? And that's not unusual."

Prison officials say that removing the most dangerous gang members and putting them in segregation makes regular prisons safer for the rest of the inmates -- and it weakens the gangs.

But Jim, a 38-year-old SHU inmate from Long Beach, says that's wishful thinking. He says that to gang members, being sent to the secure-housing unit is an honor.

"Coming up here was the big thing," Jim says from inside his cell. "Put in work. Come up here, be with the big homeys. Because this is the only place you're going to be around the fellas, you know."

'You're a Target Because of the Color of Your Skin'

Jim says gang leaders still control the gangs from within the SHU, mostly by mailing each other letters. And he says if you show up to prison and don't join the gang of your race, you'll be a target for the other gangs within days.

"When there's a war, there's a war," Jim says. "You're a target just because of the color of your skin, so you might as well. You're going to have to defend yourself. The lines get divided. You've gotta take sides."

Jim was sent to prison 10 years ago for armed robbery. Several years later, he was put in segregation for assaulting other prisoners when he joined a prison gang called the Nazi Low Riders.

"It's definitely racist," Jim says. But he says he wasn't racist before he came to prison. "Prison made me that way. My mom and dad taught me to respect everybody, no matter who it was. It's funny because I still remember, to this day, my dad telling me, 'You respect every man until he proves differently.'"

'It's Designed to Break You'

There are really only two ways out of Pelican Bay's SHU. Either you have to prove to prison officials that you have not been involved in gang activity for six years -- which is rare -- or you have to tell everything you know about your gang. It's called debriefing. It can sometimes take two years. That's what Jim is trying to do now.

But it has a cost. Jim says he's already been warned through the grapevine that if he gets out of the SHU, he's a dead man. But after seven years in isolation, Jim says he doesn't care anymore.

"A place like this is designed to drive you crazy," he says. "It's not just designed to isolate you from the general population. It's designed to break you. It sucks. It's hard. It's made me different. It's made me spiteful."

Is Solitary Working?

Associate Warden Williams says that without the SHU, the gang problem would be even worse.

But after almost 20 years, California is now holding more inmates in solitary confinement than it ever has -- and its gang problem is worse than it has ever been. And over the years, the violence rates at Pelican Bay have actually gone up.

Williams says he worries a little that segregation could be making the inmates worse.

"I can't totally disagree that it may affect the inmates in some kind of way," Williams says. "It may make them mad for a while. But the benefit of these security housing units is that we take the people who go out there and cause the trouble, and we lock them up here, to get them off the mainline so that it can function the way it's designed to -- and the way we would like it to, and the way the inmates would like it to."

Almost 95 percent of the inmates in Pelican Bay's SHU are scheduled to be released back into the public at some point. They'll spend a few weeks in a local prison before rejoining society, with little, if any, preparation for how to live around people on the outside. And for every inmate that leaves, there is another one waiting to take his place.

Part II

A growing number of prisoners are spending years in solitary confinement in prisons across the country. These prisoners eat, sleep and exist in their cells alone, with little, if any, physical contact with others.

Experts say there are more than 25,000 inmates serving their sentences this way. A handful of them have been in isolation for more than 20 years.

Almost every inmate in isolation will be released back into the public one day. But there are a few prison officials who are rethinking the idea of isolation -- and wondering if there might be a better way.

One of them is Don Cabana. He began his career in corrections the way most people did 30 years ago in the South: On the back of a horse, a shotgun in one hand and 100 prisoners below him, picking cotton.

The inmates were prisoners at a place called Parchman, a prison deep in the farmlands of Mississippi.

"Parchman was like any other prison: Nobody ever cared about it or cared what went on there," Cabana says. "And there's no question inmates were beaten and abused. I would go so far as to say some were probably even murdered."

Locking Down a Lawless Prison Environment

For almost a century, Parchman was notoriously violent. It was known as a place where inmates did hard time. By the time Don Cabana became warden in 1981, things had changed at Parchman. Much of the prisoner abuse had subsided, but there were new problems.

It was overcrowded, underfunded and full of bored, violent inmates -- the result of an explosion in gangs and drug crime. Assaults on staff were increasing. Instead of worrying about the guards killing the inmates, Cabana says he worried about the inmates killing his guards.

"I had three officers stabbed one morning by one inmate," he says, "and the only reason he stabbed them is because he was trying to elevate his status in the Aryan brotherhood. Damn near kills all three of them. You know, you take your staff being injured by these people very personally, because you feel like you have failed somehow. And a warden's worst nightmare is losing a staff person."

For Cabana, that was the last straw. He pulled the inmate into his office and shut the door.

"I sat there and I said, 'Well, Bubba. I tell you, you've made it to the big time,'" Cabana says, describing his conversation with the inmate. "'Are you prepared for all the benefits?' And he said, 'Well, like what?' And I said, 'I'm going to lock this place down so tight and so long that you'll never see the sunshine. And you see, I'm going to do it to a thousand inmates in here, not just you.'"

That's just what Cabana did.

He looked at states including California, Arizona and Illinois and saw they were creating a new place to put bad inmates: 1,000-bed, high-tech isolation units known as Supermax prisons. That meant 23 hours a day in a cell, one hour alone in an exercise pen. No television, no contact with the outside world, nothing but a concrete cell.

Making Meaner Inmates

Cabana says he didn't have any trouble getting money to build the Supermax prison, or getting state lawmakers to support the idea.

And for a while after it was completed, the facility seemed to work well. Cabana says the threat of going to long-term isolation was making the rest of the inmates in general population behave.

But then, Cabana says some things started to trouble him. Inmate behavior got worse, in ways that seemed almost unbelievable. Inmates were smearing themselves with urine and feces and throwing it at the officers.

"Some inmates were crazy, and wouldn't know they were throwing urine at somebody, others were just mean and doing it out of pure spite," Cabana said. "But many of them did it out of utter frustration."

And there was another problem: the staff.

"A lot of the staff would just be flat-out abusive to the inmates. They would taunt them, ignore them," Cabana says.

Cabana says he would lie awake at night under the pressure of having to decide whom to send to isolation and whom to release. Then one day, as he walked the tier of his Supermax facility, Cabana says something occurred to him.

"Inmate hauls off and spits at you -- yeah, you want to slap the total crap out of them into the next cell," Cabana says. "Problem is, that takes you down to his level, and we're supposed to be better than that. And as a society, one of the best measures of how far a society has come is what their prisons are like. I think what we're doing in Supermax is, we're taking some bad folks, and we're making them even worse. We're making them even meaner."

Second Thoughts About Supermax

Don Cabana is no longer the warden of Parchman. He retired last year. But his feelings about Supermax haven't changed.

"The biggest single regret I had in my career was having built that unit," he says.

Cabana is not the only one with second thoughts. Brian Belleque, the warden of the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem, has them, too.

"We realize that 95 to 98 percent of these inmates here are going to be your neighbor in the community," Belleque says. "They are going to get out."

In 1991, Oregon built something it calls the Intensive Management Unit, or the IMU. Inmates are locked in their cells all day long, for years. It's dark. There are no windows inside.

On a recent visit, many inmates were pacing back and forth in their cells, talking to themselves or hollering at inmates down the hall.

Rethinking Isolation

The IMU looks like a standard isolation unit. But these days, there are some big differences, including therapy for many of the prisoners.

One prisoner named Gregory says that therapy has really helped him.

"Some changes took," Gregory said recently while having a session with the psychiatrist. "I was just a mess. I was a straight mess. I was an animal, and I acted that way."

Oregon has also adopted a system that allows inmates like Gregory to earn their way out of isolation. The longest an inmate can stay in isolation is three years.

And the decision of who is and isn't sent to isolation is no longer in the warden's hands. A three-person panel outside the prison system decides.

Mitch Morrow, the deputy director of the Oregon Department of Corrections, instituted many of the changes.

"This department, for as long as I have been here, has always believed that inmates are people," Morrow says.

'You Need to Change the Inmate'

But changing the system wasn't an easy sell. It took years. Morrow says even now, there are state officials who cling to the idea of long-term isolation.

"It feels good today to lock them up, and for that given moment, you feel safer," Morrow says. "But if that's where you stop the conversation, then you are doing your state a serious injustice. Because you need to change the inmate. You need to provide the inmate the opportunity to change. And if you don't, if you just feel good about locking somebody up, it's a failed model."

Oregon no longer releases inmates directly from segregation to the streets. Now they send them first to classes, and then to prison jobs in the general population, so they can get used to being around people again.

That's not the case in other states. Last year in Texas, prison officials took 1,458 inmates out of their segregation cells, walked them to the prison gates and took the handcuffs off. There's almost no research about the effects of isolation on how well inmates cope on the outside.

That troubles Walter Dickey. Dickey used to run Wisconsin's prisons. Now he's been appointed by a court there to oversee the conditions at the state's Supermax facility.

Dickey says many officials in his state don't see a downside to having a Supermax. He says the state built it because legislators thought they needed it, and most prison officials went along.

"If you are running a corrections system, and you are offered a greater level of control than you otherwise could have, you are going to take it," Dickey says. "Because there's a part of them that says, 'We don't need this,' but there's a part of them that says, 'If you are going to build it, I'll take it, because I can find some use for it.'"

It's the numbers that bother Dickey. When he ran the state's prisons, he says there were, at most, a dozen inmates so dangerous that he took them out of general population. Today, the 500 beds at Wisconsin's Supermax are full -- and most inmates have been there since it opened seven years ago.

Keeping Inmates Out of Long-Term Segregation

At a small California prison on the Nevada border called High Desert, a group of prison officials gather around a metal desk each week. An inmate in a jumpsuit is also there, eagerly waiting for the results.

One prison official recommends that the inmate be released from a new, experimental program because his progress has been so good.

These weekly meetings are part of a new program meant to keep inmates out of long-term segregation. High Desert Warden Tom Felker started the program six months ago. He said he was tired of sending hundreds of inmates to years of isolation.

"I, like a lot of people, looked at it as, 'There's probably a better way,'" Felker says.

Felker took his 40 worst inmates and housed them together. He's taken all their possessions: radios, books, televisions. He banned them from the yard. He told them that if they want these privileges back, they would have to earn them by following a specific, itemized list: attend therapy, school and weekly anger-management classes with a local college professor. The staff keeps detailed notes about their progress.

A Model for a Balanced Approach?

"Just straight rehabilitation in its own right -- that's not realistic. But just warehousing inmates? That's not going to work, either," Felker says. "You have to have a balanced approach."

In the past six months, the results so far have stunned even Felker. Almost every inmate has graduated from the program, and they've stayed out of trouble back in general population. Recently, Felker has been visited by staff from several other prisons in California asking how they can start a program like his.

Before Don Cabana retired from Mississippi's Parchman prison, he tried to reform much about the segregation unit. He wanted to send most of the inmates back to general population. But there are still 1,000 inmates in the unit today.

"Prisons have always had prisons within prisons," Cabana says. "I mean, every prison has its jailhouse for the guys you have to lock up. But the numbers of people we're incarcerating under Supermax conditions in this country -- it's just run away from us. That's not how it's supposed to be."

Like prison officials in Oregon, Wisconsin and California, Cabana says he found that building an isolation unit is a lot easier than taking one apart.

Part III -- Making it on the outside:

July 28, 2006 · Daud Tulam likes to sit on the porch of his mother's house in Salem, N.J., and watch traffic whiz by.

"I spent most of the whole summer out here, daytime and night," he says. "After being confined for that long period of time, you really do have an appreciation for the outside."

That "long period" was the past 25 years, which Tulam spent inside the New Jersey State Prison. For most of that time, Tulam was held in isolation. He spent 23 hours a day alone in a cell no bigger than a bathroom and one hour in a concrete exercise yard.

Tulam is one of more than 25,000 inmates who serve their sentences this way in the United States. It's not what these prisoners did on the outside that sends them to isolation: It's how they behave on the inside. And once in isolation, there is often no way out.

Two Decades in Solitude

In Tulam's case, he was sent to prison for trying to rob a gun store. He was sent to isolation after prison officials say they caught him planning to assault officers. He stayed in isolation for 18 years.

New Jersey prison officials say he never participated in any programs that could have gotten him out. Tulam says he tried to participate, but they never let him out, so he gave up.

Now, on the outside, Tulam has trouble making small talk. Even after all those years alone, when faced with people looking for a conversation, Tulam doesn't engage.

Tulam is taking a class on welding at a local community college. During one recent session, he hid in the back of the classroom.

When the teacher comes over to check his work, Tulam only looks at the floor. At one point, the instructor asks Tulam if he understands a welding technique. Tulam does not look up -- or answer. Eventually, the instructor gives up and moves on.

'I Lost My Social Skills'

In many ways, Tulam's days are still filled with this kind of silence. But there is one place where Tulam suddenly has a lot to say: behind the wheel of his car, when his eyes -- and yours -- are on the road.

"I'm certain that I lost my social skills to a certain extent," Tulam says as he drives through the rundown streets of Salem. "Not that I'm unable to socialize. Just that trivial conversation for conversation's sake, I don't have no tolerance for."

Tulam's 6-foot-frame seems too big for the 15-year-old Taurus he's driving. He's wearing what he wears everyday: old jeans and a sweatshirt. He passes boarded-up buildings and liquor stores. Much has changed about this town, but he says even more has changed about him.

Tulam's luckier than most ex-convicts. He has a family, a place to stay and even some occasional construction work. But he finds much about society difficult. He doesn't like grocery stores, busy sidewalks or going to the movies. And he doesn't like parties.

That came as a shock to his family. Tulam's mother, Charlotte Fletcher, says Tulam used to love to socialize.

"He always had a few friends. But as far as I was concerned, it wasn't the right kind," Fletcher says.

Early on, she says, it was hard to keep her son away from kids who wanted to party.

"He was a young kid when he first got in trouble -- last year of high school," Fletcher says. "He was around with these guys. They been doing a lot of drinking and other things, so I guess he did some wild things."

Looking for 'Some Kind of Relief'

On the day Tulam was released from prison, his family threw him a party in the backyard. He spent the whole time sitting alone in a folding chair in the corner, while his nieces and nephews played. That's the other thing Tulam doesn't like anymore.

"You know, in prison there are no children," Tulam says. "The trivial kind of things kids do, the nonsensical things kids do, you don't have a tolerance for that. I'm still trying to really adapt."

Tulam says he struggled to make the days he spent in solitary pass. He began dividing his time into little increments: Make the bed. Write a letter. Do push ups.

"Even if I would have to go to sleep early, just to look for the next day to bring some kind of relief," Tulam says.

He still does that now. He schedules his day into activities: Take a shower. Eat breakfast. Sit outside. Go for a drive.

"I never use alarm clocks," Tulam says. "I've done it for so long, it's almost like second nature."

'You Become Your Best Company'

New Jersey has one of the least restrictive isolation units in the country. Prisoners in solitary are allowed visits with relatives, though Tulam's family could rarely afford the

trip. They are also allowed televisions. Tulam says he kept his TV set on every day, morning until night, for 18 years.

"Up until that time, I never owned a TV, never had much interest in TV," he says. "But when I got into solitary, it was so quiet in there, I genuinely had to get me a TV, just to hear some noise."

Now he can't stand television. But he doesn't want to hang out with people, either. He doesn't talk much with his family. He hasn't joined any groups. He doesn't talk about having any friends.

"Having been in isolation, with hardly anybody to talk to, anyway, you just acquire a knack of just being able to -- like with me, you become your best company," Tulam says.

The Odds Against Making It

There are few statistics about how inmates who spend time in isolation adjust on the outside. Only two studies have been conducted; one looked at former inmates in Washington state, the other at those in Texas. The results weren't good.

In both studies, the rate of recidivism for inmates released from isolation was higher than for those released from the general prison population. And in Washington, researchers found these ex-inmates were more likely to commit violent crimes than their general population counterparts.

In that sense, Tulam is doing better than expected. Having a place to live and a mother to make him food has made a big difference. But at 51 years old, he's spent almost half his life in prison, most of it alone.

"I do have some regrets," he says, pausing for a moment before getting out of the car. "But ask me if I would ever want anybody else's life? Nah. I'm comfortable with the life that I've been given. You know, like saying that I'm a realist. I genuinely believe that every individual struggles in this life, anyway."

So after 18 years of isolation, Daud Tulam's greatest struggle may be finding a way not to live an isolated life.

Life in Solitary Confinement

Working the Isolation Unit: A Prison Officer's Tale

by Laura Sullivan

- [**Hear Harkins Tell His Story**](#)



Corbis

For 25 years, Sgt. Gary Harkins was a correctional officer at the Oregon State Penitentiary. He retired in February. For part of that time, Harkins worked in the prison's isolation unit.

"It's only when you leave it that you really truly understand how much stress you were under," he says of his time in the solitary ward.

Isolation in Oregon and most other states in the country means 23 hours a day locked in a cell the size of a bathroom. One hour alone in a small exercise yard. No contact with anyone. No television. No windows.

These conditions can be difficult for inmates who spend years -- and in some cases, decades -- in them. But, as Harkins found, they are also difficult on the officers.

"I kept thinking about it. I couldn't get away from the job," he says. "I'd be dreaming about what happened the day before at night. Or I'd be sitting at home, watching [a TV] show, and something would trigger something that happened at work. You know, the times when people would act out. So you would relive some sort of cell extraction or some sort of altercation -- you would relive it."

Dark Days

While working in the giant, windowless, gray prison building, Harkins says months went by where he'd never see the sun: "You're down there for 12 hours a day. You walk in at six in the morning just as the sun is coming up. In the wintertime, you're going in when it's dark and coming out when it's dark. Sometimes, you can never see the sun."

Every day, the routine was the same. Deliver food on plastic trays. Take inmates to the shower. Walk the tiers for hours, in front of hundreds of inmates who are often angry, frustrated and abusive.

"When people are driving on you, telling you you're bad, you suck -- all day, eight hours a day -- you gotta have 16 hours a day where you get all the positive."

But, he says, a lot of officers he knows don't have that.

"Some of them go to the bar. Some of them go home and kick the cat," he says. "I mean, various people would have different ways of trying to get rid of the tension. And some people didn't do a very good job at doing that."

In general population, Harkins says, he could spend half his day talking with inmates about sports or the news. But in isolation, the inmates don't talk to the officers, and the officers don't talk to the inmates: "An us-versus-them attitude quickly takes over."

Cold Interactions

Harkins says there were inmates in the general population with whom he was on great terms. But when they got sent to segregation, they would no longer even look at him.

"When he gets down to segregation, to IMU, to Intensive Management, something changes," he says. "They become hostile. They become withdrawn a bit. They won't talk to you."

Any interaction is short and businesslike: "Instead of saying, 'Please pick the papers up off the floor,' you walk in and say, 'Pick the papers up.'"

And he says the relationship would get even more tense, because in isolation, the inmates can't do or get anything for themselves.

"It's kind of a weird situation in that you're their servant," Harkin says. "Whatever need they want, you're supposed to take care of their needs."

'We're Not Doing Society Any Good'

As each day passed on the dim and noisy tiers, Harkins says he began to feel trapped like his prisoners; he asked for a transfer back to general population, where he worked until he retired. That wasn't uncommon. Even now, Oregon, like most states, is having a hard time getting officers to work in segregation units.

Harkins doesn't have any sympathy for the inmates there -- especially those who aren't trying to work their way out. But when he thinks about solitary now, from

outside the prison's walls, he says he finds himself worried as much about the unit's effect on prisoners as he is about its effect on officers.

"Those people are going to be your neighbors some day," Harkins says. "And if our system is maintaining people in a negative, antisocial way, we're not doing ourselves any good. We're not doing society any good."

Many officials in Oregon seem to agree. The state has put a number of changes in place in recent years. Prison officials have limited the amount of time inmates can stay in isolation, and they've also started providing therapy. The results so far have been good. Prison officials say they've seen the violence rates in their isolation unit, and in the overall prison population, decrease.

IV. Arguments favoring use of isolation

Q&A: Solitary Confinement & the Law

by Maria Godoy



Roger Pilon is the founder and director of the Cato Institute's Center for Constitutional Studies.

Q&A: HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS

Estimates suggest that at least 25,000 U.S. prisoners are held in solitary confinement. They live in isolation, in small, often windowless cells, for years or even decades, with virtually no human contact.

Jamie Fellner, director of the U.S. program for Human Rights Watch, discusses the civil liberties concerns raised by the long-term segregation of inmates. [Read the Q&A with Fellner.](#)

NPR.org, July 27, 2006 · Long-term segregation -- also known as solitary confinement -- has been used in U.S. prisons since the late 1820s. But the practice only became

widespread during the past two decades. That rise has coincided with a burgeoning prison population, and with the growing power and influence of gangs within the U.S. correctional system.

Prison officials cite gang violence when explaining the need for long-term segregation. Inmates are housed in separate facilities away from other prisoners, and they have virtually no contact with other inmates -- or other humans, except for corrections officers.

And yet, for more than a century, legal questions have surrounded the use of long-term segregation. In 1890, one U.S. Supreme Court Justice noted that "experience demonstrated that there were serious objections" to the practice. NPR discusses some of the legal concerns surrounding solitary confinement with Roger Pilon, founder and director of the Cato Institute's Center for Constitutional Studies.

Q: Why do prisons house offenders in long-term segregation?

Unfortunately, too many inmates today fear for their lives and their safety. That, in a nutshell, is the main reason why prison officials segregate and isolate prisoners. Sometimes the victims are segregated; more often the predators.

Do officials sometimes err in doing so, or do so for the wrong reasons? Of course. Because their judgment is not and cannot be perfect, they will be criticized from both sides. Given the prison population they have to deal with, they would be derelict if they did not practice some segregation, and derelict if they practiced too much.

Q: Many attribute the rise in long-term segregation to the rise in gang activity in prisons -- gangs that often form along racial lines. Does the use of isolation raise questions about racial discrimination within the prison system?

There is a strong, but not irrebuttable, presumption against government discrimination, including presumably segregating prisoners by race or ethnicity or isolating prisoners and thus, treating them differently than other prisoners.

But a prison sentence is not a death sentence. In 1968, Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black suggested that protecting prisoners from violence might justify narrowly tailored racial discrimination.

The burden is on the government to justify those practices. Justice Black suggested a standard of "strict scrutiny," which would require the government to show that its practice served a "compelling state interest" and its means were "narrowly tailored" to serve that interest.

The answers come down, in the end, to judgment calls, and different people will judge differently.

Q: Who oversees long-term isolation -- the individual states (who run their own correctional system) or the feds?

As long as inmate suits can be brought in federal courts, there will be federal oversight by courts employing general constitutional standards. Depending on the evidence, federal oversight might be called for. But one of the virtues of our federalism is that 50 states can serve as laboratories in which different approaches may be tested. That enables states to learn from each other in a way that would be unavailable were we to go to one federal system. Remember, no one has a corner on the answers to this difficult problem.

Q: Some human-rights experts say prisons should focus on education, therapy and other rehabilitative programs that could also help curb violence.

That's all well and good, but who's going to pay for all of that? Taxpayers tend to put prisons rather low on their list of public priorities. And that means the potential for mission failure is heightened at prisons, which are among our most isolated institutions.

Moreover, as I read the evidence (see the work of [James Q. Wilson](#)), "rehabilitation" has a fairly low success rate. Age is a better rehabilitator.

Q: Critics also say long-term segregation damages inmates psychologically and makes it difficult for them to cope with life on the outside if they are released.

Yes, it is a concern, but it must be balanced with a concern for the safety of other inmates. As with spousal abuse and child abuse cases, officials have to walk a delicate line between too little and too much intervention. That is why oversight by outside organizations is so important.

Q: Besides the federal courts, where can prisoners in solitary turn for recourse?

They'd turn to the ACLU.

V. Arguments against use of solitary confinement.

Q&A: Solitary Confinement & Human Rights

by Maria Godoy



Jamie Fellner is director of the U.S. program for Human Rights Watch.

Q&A: SOLITARY & THE LAW

Long-term segregation -- also known as solitary confinement -- has been used in U.S. prisons since the late 1820s. But the practice only became widespread during the past two decades. That rise has coincided with a burgeoning prison population, and with the growing power and influence of gangs within the U.S. correctional system.

And yet, for more than a century, legal questions have surrounded the use of long-term segregation.

Roger Pilon, a legal scholar with the Cato Institute, discusses some of the legal concerns involved. [Read the Q&A with Pilon.](#)

NPR.org, July 27, 2006 · Prisoners confined to long-term segregation live in isolation, in small, often windowless cells, for years or even decades. They are passed food trays through slots in the doors. A few times a week, they are let out, in handcuffs and shackles, for a shower or to exercise in a small, enclosed space. As a general rule, they have almost no human interaction except with guards, no access to newspapers or television, and are allowed few personal items -- a few photographs, perhaps a book.

Estimates suggest at least 25,000 U.S. prisoners are held in such "Supermaximum security" conditions, which were designed to hold the most violent of inmates. The rising use of long-term segregation has drawn sharp criticism from human-rights experts.

NPR discussed these concerns with Jamie Fellner, director of the U.S. program for Human Rights Watch. She has been researching and writing about prison conditions in the United States, with a focus on Supermax confinement, for more than a decade.

Q: Is there good reason to keep prisoners in long-term segregation in U.S. prisons?

The massive use of long-term segregation reflects a failure of correctional policies. Segregation has become routine because of exploding prison populations, which strain meager prison budgets. That has made it difficult for officials to provide humane prisons with educational, counseling and rehabilitative activities. And we know that prisoners who have access to education while incarcerated, for example, are more likely to remain law-abiding once they're released.

That said, there may always be a few inmates who simply prove too dangerous to be in the general population. For them, some form of segregation may be the only option. But even then, the nature of segregation should be rethought. No one should be confined in small, empty cells with nothing to do -- and no one to talk to -- day in and day out, year in and year out.

Q: What worries you most about long-term segregation?

Our research shows that segregation is used far more frequently, for far longer periods of time, and under far harsher conditions than is legitimately needed to manage inmate security.

Supermax facilities have been built in excess of the number of truly "worst of the worst" prisoners they were ostensibly intended to house. They're often used for any troublesome inmate -- including those who break minor rules, are in a single fight or are mentally ill and act out.

The conditions of isolation are harsh and degrading. For many, the absence of normal social interaction, of mental stimulation, of exposure to the natural world -- of almost everything that makes life human and bearable -- is emotionally, physically and psychologically destructive. The experience is hardly conducive to successful re-entry to the community. No other Western democracy imposes such conditions of confinement for prolonged periods on so many people.

And segregation can last for decades. Officials have complete discretion when to release an inmate; there's no guarantee good behavior will secure a release. Corrections officials must be able to exercise their professional judgment -- but such discretion must be tempered to minimize the risk that an inmate is unnecessarily sent to or kept in segregation. Principled leadership, careful staff training and effective internal-review processes can help. But external, independent scrutiny is also needed to prevent abuse and give inmates recourse against arbitrary and unfair treatment.

Q: What do human-rights experts believe to be most problematic about the day-to-day conditions of long-term segregation?

More than a decade ago, a federal judge noted that prolonged segregation pushes the bounds of what human beings can tolerate. Whether or not it produces clinical psychiatric symptoms, living in such conditions for years is likely to produce unfathomable misery and suffering.

Some inmates with no prior history of mental illness develop clinical symptoms of psychosis or severe affective disorders. For prisoners with a history of mental illness, the isolation, lack of social interaction and lack of structured activities can aggravate their symptoms. Even worse, mental health service for prisoners in segregation is usually far worse than for the general population. The result is mental agony, sometimes to the point of suicide. Inmates whose illness becomes acute may be transferred to mental hospitals -- but once their condition is stabilized, they are returned to segregation, where the cycle of illness begins again.

In several states, lawsuits have resulted in bans against placing mentally ill prisoners in segregation. But elsewhere, in state after state, a disproportionately large number of prisoners in long-term segregation are mentally ill.

Q: Prison officials say a burgeoning gang problem is one reason for long-term segregation. How can they deal with gangs without housing offenders in isolation?

The problem of violent gangs in prison is serious -- and growing. But there's no evidence that long-term segregation is the solution. California, for example, has a horrific problem with gangs -- despite the fact that it has been locking gang members in segregation for years, refusing to let them out unless they renounce the gang and identify members.

Gangs in prison serve many purposes: They provide status and respect, a sense of purpose, protection and an opportunity to acquire goods and services. Punishing gang members does little to change this function or to reduce the allure and power of gangs.

Many corrections experts believe a solely punitive response to gangs is doomed to fail in prisons, as it has in communities. What's needed is an approach that combines "law enforcement" with better prison conditions: reduced crowding, increased educational and productive activities, more mental health counseling, and more staff to increase safety.

Q: Some prison officials say some inmates are too violent to remain in the general population. If they aren't sent to isolation, what should be done with them?

There would be much less violence in prison -- and much higher prospects of successful reintegration into the community upon release -- if public policies and correctional practices yielded something other than today's barren, overcrowded warehouses for people.

But prison officials can't do it alone. The single biggest problem they face is the staggering and ever-growing size of the prison population. Too many people are sent to prison for crimes for which alternatives to incarceration would be appropriate, and their sentences are far too long. Public officials have been willing to give the United States the largest prison population in the world, but they haven't been willing to allocate the funds to ensure humane confinement.

Elected officials should put prison reform on their agenda. They should give prison officials a clear mandate to provide productive confinement, they should give them the necessary resources, and they should hold them accountable when they fail. If prison were dramatically improved, long-term segregation would be needed for very few.