
Solitary confinement of prisoners

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Introduction

53. Solitary confinement of prisoners is found, in some shape or form, in every prison system. The CPT has always paid particular attention to prisoners undergoing solitary confinement, because it can have an extremely damaging effect on the mental, somatic and social health of those concerned.¹

This damaging effect can be immediate and increases the longer the measure lasts and the more indeterminate it is. The most significant indicator of the damage which solitary confinement can inflict is the considerably higher rate of suicide among prisoners subjected to it than that among the general prison population. Clearly, therefore, solitary confinement on its own potentially raises issues in relation to the prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In addition, it can create an opportunity for deliberate ill-treatment of prisoners, away from the attention of other prisoners and staff. Accordingly, it is central to the concerns of the CPT and, on each visit, delegations make a point of interviewing prisoners in solitary confinement in order to examine their conditions of detention and treatment and to check the procedures for deciding on such placements and reviewing them. In this section of its General Report, the CPT sets out the criteria it uses when assessing solitary confinement. The Committee believes that if these criteria are followed, it should be possible to reduce resort to solitary confinement to an absolute minimum, to ensure that when it is used it is for the shortest necessary period of time, to make each of the solitary confinement regimes as positive as possible, and to guarantee that procedures are in place to render the use of this measure fully accountable.

54. The CPT understands the term “solitary confinement” as meaning whenever a prisoner is ordered to be held separately from other prisoners, for example, as a result of a court decision, as a disciplinary sanction imposed within the prison system, as a preventative administrative measure or for the protection of the prisoner concerned. A prisoner subject to such a measure will usually be held on his/her own; however, in some States he/she may be accommodated together with one or two other prisoners, and this section applies equally to such situations.

As regards more specifically the solitary confinement of juveniles, a practice concerning which the CPT has particularly strong reservations, reference should also be made to the comments made by the Committee in its 18th General Report.²

This section does not apply to the isolation of prisoners for medical reasons, as the grounds for such a measure are of a fundamentally different nature.

¹ The research evidence for this is well summarised in Sharon Shalev’s “A Sourcebook on Solitary Confinement” (Mannheim Centre for Criminology, London, 2008), available electronically at www.solitaryconfinement.org

² See CPT/Inf (2008) 25, paragraph 26.

The principles involved

55. Solitary confinement further restricts the already highly limited rights of people deprived of their liberty. The extra restrictions involved are not inherent in the fact of imprisonment and thus have to be separately justified. In order to test whether any particular imposition of the measure is justified, it is appropriate to apply the traditional tests enshrined in the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights and developed by the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights. The simple mnemonic **PLANN** summarises these tests.

(a) Proportionate: any further restriction of a prisoner's rights must be linked to the actual or potential harm the prisoner has caused or will cause by his or her actions (or the potential harm to which he/she is exposed) in the prison setting. Given that solitary confinement is a serious restriction of a prisoner's rights which involves inherent risks to the prisoner, the level of actual or potential harm must be at least equally serious and uniquely capable of being addressed by this means. This is reflected, for example, in most countries having solitary confinement as a sanction only for the most serious disciplinary offences, but the principle must be respected in all uses of the measure. The longer the measure is continued, the stronger must be the reason for it and the more must be done to ensure that it achieves its purpose.

(b) Lawful: provision must be made in domestic law for each kind of solitary confinement which is permitted in a country, and this provision must be reasonable. It must be communicated in a comprehensible form to everyone who may be subject to it. The law should specify the precise circumstances in which each form of solitary confinement can be imposed, the persons who may impose it, the procedures to be followed by those persons, the right of the prisoner affected to make representations as part of the procedure, the requirement to give the prisoner the fullest possible reasons for the decision (it being understood that there might in certain cases be reasonable justification for withholding specific details on security-related grounds or in order to protect the interests of third parties), the frequency and procedure of reviews of the decision and the procedures for appealing against the decision. The regime for each type of solitary confinement should be established by law, with each of the regimes clearly differentiated from each other.

(c) Accountable: full records should be maintained of all decisions to impose solitary confinement and of all reviews of the decisions. These records should evidence all the factors which have been taken into account and the information on which they were based. There should also be a record of the prisoner's input or refusal to contribute to the decision-making process. Further, full records should be kept of all interactions with staff while the prisoner is in solitary confinement, including attempts by staff to engage with the prisoner and the prisoner's response.

(d) Necessary: the rule that only restrictions necessary for the safe and orderly confinement of the prisoner and the requirements of justice are permitted applies equally to prisoners undergoing solitary confinement. Accordingly, during solitary confinement there should, for example, be no automatic withdrawal of rights to visits, telephone calls and correspondence or of access to resources normally available to prisoners (such as reading materials). Equally, the regime should be flexible enough to permit relaxation of any restriction which is not necessary in individual cases.

(e) Non-discriminatory: not only must all relevant matters be taken into account in deciding to impose solitary confinement, but care must also be taken to ensure that irrelevant matters are not taken into account. Authorities should monitor the use of all forms of solitary confinement to ensure that they are not used disproportionately, without an objective and reasonable justification, against a particular prisoner or particular groups of prisoners.

Types of solitary confinement and their legitimacy

56. There are four main situations in which solitary confinement is used. Each has its own rationale and each should be viewed differently:

(a) *Solitary confinement as the result of a court decision*

In most countries, courts have the power to order that a person remanded in custody (i.e. placed in pre-trial detention) be held for a certain period in solitary confinement, in the interests of the criminal investigation. Further, in a few countries, a period of solitary confinement is an automatic part of some sentences established by legislation or can be ordered by a court as part of a sentence.

In relation to solitary confinement ordered by a court as part of remand conditions, it is axiomatic that there may be justification, in an individual case and based on sufficient evidence, for keeping a given remand prisoner apart from other particular prisoners or, in even more exceptional circumstances, prisoners in general, and in restricting his/her contact with the outside world. This should only be done to guard against a real risk to the administration of justice and must be subject to the safeguards outlined in paragraph 57 below.

The CPT considers that solitary confinement should never be imposed – or be imposed at the discretion of the court concerned – as part of a sentence. The generally accepted principle that offenders are sent to prison as a punishment, not to receive punishment, should be recalled in this context. Imprisonment is a punishment in its own right and potentially dangerous aggravations of a prison sentence as part of the punishment are not acceptable. It may be necessary for a sentenced prisoner to be subject, for a certain period of time, to a solitary confinement regime; however, the imposition of such a regime should lie with the prison authorities and not be made part of the catalogue of criminal sanctions.

(b) *Solitary confinement as a disciplinary sanction*

Withdrawal of a prisoner from contact with other prisoners may be imposed under the normal disciplinary procedures specified by the law, as the most severe disciplinary punishment. Recognising the inherent dangers of this sanction, countries specify a maximum period for which it may be imposed. This can vary from as little as a few days to as much as a month or more. Some countries allow prison directors to impose a given maximum period, with the possibility for a judicial body to impose a longer period. Most countries – but not all – prohibit sequential sentences of solitary confinement.

Given the potentially very damaging effects of solitary confinement, the CPT considers that the principle of proportionality requires that it be used as a disciplinary punishment only in exceptional cases and as a last resort, and for the shortest possible period of time. The trend in many member States of the Council of Europe is towards lowering the maximum possible period of solitary confinement as a punishment. The CPT considers that the maximum period should be no higher than 14 days for a given offence, and preferably lower.¹ Further, there should be a prohibition of sequential disciplinary sentences resulting in an uninterrupted period of solitary confinement in excess of the maximum period. Any offences committed by a prisoner which it is felt call for more severe sanctions should be dealt with through the criminal justice system.

(c) *Administrative solitary confinement for preventative purposes*

The law in most European countries allows for an administrative decision to place into solitary confinement prisoners who have caused, or are judged likely to cause, serious harm to others or who present a very serious risk to the safety or security of the prison. This may be for as short as a few hours, in the case of an isolated incident, or for as long as a period of years in cases involving prisoners who are considered as particularly dangerous and to continue to pose an imminent threat.

This is potentially the longest lasting type of solitary confinement and often the one with the fewest procedural safeguards. It is therefore crucial that there be rules to ensure that it is not used too readily (e.g. as an immediate response to every disciplinary infraction pending adjudication), too extensively or for too lengthy periods. Accordingly, the safeguards described in paragraph 57 below must be rigorously followed.

¹ The maximum period should certainly be lower in respect of juveniles.

(d) *Solitary confinement for protection purposes*

Every prison system has prisoners who may require protection from other prisoners. This may be because of the nature of their offence, their co-operation with the criminal justice authorities, inter-gang rivalry, debts outside or inside the prison or the general vulnerability of the person. While many prisoners can be managed in the general prison population in these circumstances, the risk to some is such that the prison can only discharge its duty of care to the individuals by keeping them apart from all other prisoners. This may be done at the prisoner's own request or at the instigation of management when it is deemed necessary. Whatever the process, the fact is that it can be very difficult for a prisoner to come off protection for the rest of the sentence – and maybe even for subsequent sentences.

States have an obligation to provide a safe environment for those confined to prison and should attempt to fulfil this obligation by allowing as much social interaction as possible among prisoners, consistent with the maintenance of good order. Resort should be had to solitary confinement for protection purposes only when there is absolutely no other way of ensuring the safety of the prisoner concerned.

The decision of placement in solitary confinement: procedures and safeguards

57. In order to ensure that solitary confinement is only imposed in exceptional circumstances and for the shortest time necessary, each type of solitary confinement should have its own distinct process for applying and reviewing it. The CPT outlines here what it considers to be the appropriate processes:

(a) *Solitary confinement as part of remand conditions*

As already indicated, solitary confinement of persons remanded in custody should only be used sparingly and where there is direct evidence in an individual case that there is a serious risk to the administration of justice if the prisoner concerned associates with particular inmates or others in general. Such decisions should be made in open court, with as fully reasoned a judgment as possible, and be separately appealable. They should also be reviewed by the competent court on a frequent basis to ensure that there is a continuing need for solitary confinement.

(b) *Solitary confinement as a disciplinary sanction*

The reason for the imposition of solitary confinement as a punishment, and the length of time for which it is imposed, should be fully documented in the record of the disciplinary hearing. Such records should be available to senior managers and oversight bodies. There should also be an effective appeal process which can reexamine the finding of guilt and/or the sentence in time to make a difference to them in practice. A necessary concomitant of this is the ready availability of legal advice for prisoners in this situation.

Prisoners undergoing this punishment should be visited on a daily basis by the prison director or another member of senior management, and the order given to terminate solitary confinement when this step is called for on account of the prisoner's condition or behaviour. Records should be kept of such visits and of related decisions.

(c) *Administrative solitary confinement for preventative purposes*

This can result in very long-term placements under solitary confinement and the administrative decisions involved are often indeterminate; both these elements aggravate the negative effects of the measure. Consequently, there is a need for stringent controls. The CPT considers that placement in administrative solitary confinement should only be authorised by the most senior member of staff in the prison; any imposition of this measure as an emergency should be reported to the most senior member of staff on duty immediately and brought to the attention of the prison director as soon as possible. A full written report should be drawn up before the member of staff who makes the decision goes off-duty. This should record the reasons for the decision and the precise time the measure was adopted as well as the views of the prisoner as far as these can be ascertained. There should be constant, logged, monitoring of all cases for the first few hours and the person should be released from solitary confinement as soon as the reason for the imposition of the measure has been resolved. In all cases where the measure continues for longer than 24 hours, there should be a full review of all aspects of the case with a view to withdrawing the measure at the earliest possible time.

If it becomes clear that solitary confinement is likely to be required for a longer period of time, a body external to the prison holding the prisoner, for example, a senior member of headquarters staff, should become involved. A right of appeal to an independent authority should also be in place. When an order is confirmed, a full interdisciplinary case conference should be convened and the prisoner invited to make representations to this body. A major task for the review team is to establish a plan for the prisoner with a view to addressing the issues which require the prisoner to be kept in solitary confinement. Among other things, the review should also look at whether some of the restrictions imposed on the prisoner are strictly necessary – thus it may be possible to allow some limited association with selected other prisoners. The prisoner should receive a written, reasoned decision from the review body and an indication of how the decision may be appealed. After an initial decision, there should be a further review at least after the first month and thereafter at least every three months, at which progress against the agreed plan can be assessed and if appropriate a new plan developed. The longer a person remains in this situation, the more thorough the review should be and the more resources, including resources external to the prison, made available to attempt to (re)integrate the prisoner into the main prison community. The prisoner should be entitled to require a review at any time and to obtain independent reports for such a review. The prison director or senior members of staff should make a point of visiting such prisoners daily and familiarise themselves with the individual plans. Medical staff should also pay particular attention to prisoners held under these conditions.

(d) *Solitary confinement for protection purposes*

“Own request” protection cases raise fewer questions than those ordered to go on protection by staff, but they still need some consideration. The CPT considers that all the alternatives, including transferring to another prison either the individual prisoner in need of protection or the prisoners causing the problem, mediation and assertiveness training, should be tried first and the full consequences of a decision to go on protection explained to the prisoner. Of course, a request from any prisoner on voluntary protection to return to the mainstream should be considered and granted if this can be safely done.

Those who are placed on protection against their will should have the right to play a full part in the discussion of the decision and to proffer alternative solutions. They should be given a full explanation of the decision and the opportunity to challenge it at a higher level. The decision should be reviewed on a regular basis so that solitary confinement can be ended as soon as it is no longer necessary.

Material conditions in solitary confinement

58. The cells used for solitary confinement should meet the same minimum standards as those applicable to other prisoner accommodation. Thus, they should be of an adequate size, enjoy access to natural light and be equipped with artificial lighting (in both cases sufficient to read by), and have adequate heating and ventilation. They should also be equipped with a means of communication with prison staff. Proper arrangements should be made for the prisoners to meet the needs of nature in a decent fashion at all times and to shower at least as often as prisoners in normal regime. Prisoners held in solitary confinement should be allowed to wear normal prison clothing and the food provided to them should be the normal prison diet, including special diets when required. As for the exercise area used by such prisoners, it should be sufficiently large to enable them genuinely to exert themselves and should have some means of protection from the elements.

59. All too often, CPT delegations find that one or more of these basic requirements are not met, in particular in respect of prisoners undergoing solitary confinement as a disciplinary sanction. For example, the cells designed for this type of solitary confinement are sometimes located in basement areas, with inadequate access to natural light and ventilation and prone to dampness. And it is not unusual for the cells to be too small, sometimes measuring as little as 3 to 4m²; in this connection, the CPT wishes to stress that any cell measuring less than 6m² should be withdrawn from service as prisoner accommodation. The exercise areas used by the prisoners concerned are also frequently inadequate.

60. It is common practice for cells accommodating prisoners undergoing solitary confinement as a punishment to have a limited amount of furniture, which is often secured to the floor. Nevertheless, such cells should be equipped, as a minimum, with a table, adequate seating for the daytime (i.e. a chair or bench), and a proper bed and bedding at night.

As regards the cells used to accommodate prisoners undergoing other types of solitary confinement, the CPT considers that they should be furnished in the same manner as cells used by prisoners on normal location.

Regimes in solitary confinement

61. As with all other regimes applied to prisoners, the principle that prisoners placed in solitary confinement should be subject to no more restrictions than are necessary for their safe and orderly confinement must be followed. Further, special efforts should be made to enhance the regime of those kept in long-term solitary confinement, who need particular attention to minimise the damage that this measure can do to them. It is not necessary to have an “all or nothing” approach to the question. Each particular restriction should only be applied as appropriate to the assessed risk of the individual prisoner. Equally, as already indicated, there should be a clear differentiation between the regimes applied to persons subject to solitary confinement, having regard to the type of solitary confinement involved.

(a) *Prisoners placed in solitary confinement as part of remand conditions ordered by a court* should be treated as far as possible like other remand prisoners, with extra restrictions applied only as strictly required for the administration of justice.

(b) *Prisoners undergoing solitary confinement as a disciplinary sanction* should never be totally deprived of contacts with their families and any restrictions on such contacts should be imposed only where the offence relates to such contacts. And there should be no restriction on their right of access to a lawyer. They should be entitled to at least one hour’s outdoor exercise per day, from the very first day of placement in solitary confinement, and be encouraged to take outdoor exercise. They should also be permitted access to a reasonable range of reading material (which, for example, should not be restricted to religious texts). It is crucially important that they have some stimulation to assist in maintaining their mental wellbeing.

(c) *Prisoners placed in administrative solitary confinement for preventative purposes* should have an individual regime plan, geared to addressing the reasons for the measure. This plan should attempt to maximise contact with others – staff initially, but as soon as practicable with appropriate other prisoners – and provide as full a range of activities as is possible to fill the days. There should be strong encouragement from staff to partake in activities and contact with the outside world should be facilitated. Throughout the period of administrative solitary confinement, the overall objective should be to persuade the prisoner to re-engage with the normal regime.

(d) *As regards prisoners placed in solitary confinement for protection purposes*, there is a balance to be struck between on the one hand the need to avoid making this kind of solitary confinement too attractive to prisoners and on the other hand minimising the restrictions put on persons to whom the measure is applied. Certainly, at the outset of such a period of solitary confinement, steps should be taken to reintegrate the person as soon as possible; if it becomes clear that there is a need for long-term protection, and no other response is possible, regime enhancement should be pursued. Special efforts should be made to identify other prisoners with whom the prisoner concerned could safely associate and situations where it would be possible to bring the person out of cell.

The role of health-care staff in solitary confinement

62. Medical practitioners in prisons act as the personal doctors of prisoners and ensuring that there is a positive doctor-patient relationship between them is a major factor in safeguarding the health and well-being of prisoners. The practice of prison doctors certifying whether a prisoner is fit to undergo solitary confinement as a punishment (or any other type of solitary confinement imposed against the prisoner's wishes) is scarcely likely to promote that relationship. This point was recognised in the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation Rec (2006) 2 on the Revised Prison Rules; indeed, the rule in the previous version of the Rules obliging prison doctors to certify that prisoners are fit to undergo punishment has now been removed. The CPT considers that medical personnel should never participate in any part of the decision-making process resulting in any type of solitary confinement, except where the measure is applied for medical reasons.

63. On the other hand, health-care staff should be very attentive to the situation of all prisoners placed under solitary confinement. The health-care staff should be informed of every such placement and should visit the prisoner immediately after placement and thereafter, on a regular basis, at least once per day, and provide them with prompt medical assistance and treatment as required. They should report to the prison director whenever a prisoner's health is being put seriously at risk by being held in solitary confinement.

Conclusion

64. The aim of the CPT in setting out these standards is to minimise the use of solitary confinement in prisons, not only because of the mental, somatic and social damage it can do to prisoners but also given the opportunity it can provide for the deliberate infliction of ill-treatment. The CPT considers that solitary confinement should only be imposed in exceptional circumstances, as a last resort and for the shortest possible time.

Prisoners undergoing solitary confinement should be accommodated in decent conditions. Further, the measure should involve the minimum restrictions on prisoners consistent with its objective and the prisoner's behaviour, and should always be accompanied by strenuous efforts on the part of staff to resolve the underlying issues. More specifically, regimes in solitary confinement should be as positive as possible and directed at addressing the factors which have made the measure necessary. In addition, legal and practical safeguards need to be built into decision-making processes in relation to the imposition and review of solitary confinement.

Ensuring that solitary confinement is always a proportionate response to difficult situations in prisons will promote positive staff-prisoner interaction and limit the damage done to the very persons who are often already among the most disturbed members of the inmate population.
