

<https://www.texasobserver.org/solitary-men/>

Dave Mann is a former editor of the *Observer*.

# Solitary Men

*Does prolonged isolation drive death row prisoners insane?*



*photo by Jen Reel*

X, waits in Polunsky Unit's visiting room for guards to escort him back to his cell on death row.

**Imagine spending 23 hours a day in a cement enclosure** the size of a bathroom. Now imagine sitting in that small room nearly all day, every day without respite, for a year, five years, even 10 years. How long before you become restless and lonely? How long before you start pacing and talking to yourself? How long before you lose your mind?

For more than 300 inmates on Texas' death row, these aren't hypothetical questions. Their lives are confined to 60-square-foot cells in which they languish 23 hours a day, alone in a featureless room, behind a solid steel door, cut off not only from what they call "the free world," but from nearly everyone. Inmates endure this isolation an average of 10 years—though some have been on death row more than 30—until their appeals are exhausted and their sentences are commuted or carried out. Or until they're killed by disease, old age or another inmate. Or until they kill themselves.

Death row inmates are housed at the Allan B. Polunsky Unit near Livingston. They live in a special segregation unit—a prison within a prison. The cells have a small window at one end. The steel door has a narrow window and, at the bottom, a slit through which guards slide trays of food. Death row inmates can receive books and paper tablets for writing and drawing. Some have radios. Little penetrates these cement boxes except sound. Prison is a loud place, and sound can cause the most torment. The constant yelling and taunting and clanging doors—what one inmate describes as "prison ruckus"—never ceases. Occasionally there are dull thuds of beatings and the screams of nearby prisoners descending into madness.

They are released from their cells 10 hours each week—two hours a day for five of seven days—and shuttled into the recreation area, which is a larger cage. (Two days a week, they remain in their cells 24 hours, except for a few minutes to shower.) They exercise individually, though they can talk to an inmate in the neighboring recreation cage, one of their few opportunities for conversation. For the other 158 hours of the week and 8,216 hours of the year—94 percent of their lives—inmates waste away in their cells, isolated, trying to keep themselves from going insane.

Death row isn't designed to be pleasant. These are dangerous men. It's still a maximum-security prison. But a growing body of research suggests this kind of extreme isolation amounts to torture.

Prolonged isolation can ravage the psyche—causing or exacerbating mental illness. A 2003 study of the isolation unit at California's Pelican Bay prison by Craig Haney, a psychologist at the University of California-Santa Cruz, reports that two-thirds of inmates in solitary confinement talk to themselves and nearly half suffered from "perception disorders, hallucinations, or suicidal thoughts." Research by Stuart Grassian, a Boston psychologist who has interviewed hundreds of prisoners, found that about one-third of inmates in solitary confinement develop severe mental illness. These same effects have cropped up in military prisons. Of all the U.S. "enhanced interrogation" techniques utilized on detainees in Iraq and Afghanistan, the most devastating were psychological; prolonged isolation and blaring music eroded prisoners' sanity.

While recent studies have filled in the details, we've known for a long time that extended isolation can lead to madness. For most of the last century, American jailers considered solitary confinement inhumane. Prisons used it largely to discipline inmates; stints in solitary were short. The nation's first "supermax" facility—in which inmates are kept in long-term solitary—wasn't built until 1989, when California opened its Pelican Bay prison. The trend caught on fast. Forty states and the federal government now operate either supermax prisons or special segregation units in which prisoners remain in their cells at least 22 hours a day, according to a study by Florida State University. At any given time, between 25,000 and 100,000 U.S. prisoners are serving time in either permanent or temporary solitary confinement. That number continues to increase, according to prison reform groups.

Prison isolation is a recent development in Texas as well. Until 1999, death row inmates were housed at the Ellis Unit outside Huntsville, where they enjoyed more freedom. They could work morning and afternoon shifts at the prison garment factory and had several hours a day of group recreation. They could play board games with each other. They could watch television. They were alone in their cells only at night. They received education programs. They were occasionally permitted "contact visits," meaning they could be in the same room with visitors.

That all began to change on Thanksgiving Day 1998, when seven condemned prisoners escaped from the Ellis Unit. Six were quickly captured and the seventh committed suicide soon after leaving the

prison, but the security breach led the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to crack down. Prison officials suspected the seven planned their escape during work duty. So in 1999, when the agency moved death row about an hour east from Huntsville to the more modern Polunsky Unit in Livingston, department officials eliminated the work program and ensured that death row inmates were isolated.

Texas has perhaps the harshest death row conditions in the country. Most states keep death row prisoners in permanent solitary confinement. But Texas is one of two states—Oklahoma is the other—that doesn't allow death row inmates to watch television, according to a survey by the Northwestern University Law School. Eleven states permit contact visits with death row prisoners. In Texas, contact visits are never allowed.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice contends these strict measures ensure a secure and safe facility. But a 2006 report by a respected task force headed by a former U.S. attorney general and a former federal judge—the Commission on Safety and Abuse in American Prisons—[found that solitary confinement does more harm than good](#). It's more expensive and does little to improve prison security or reduce violence. The commissioners recommended abolishing long-term isolation. They wrote that the environment can be "so severe that people end up completely isolated ... without any meaningful human contact—torturous conditions that are proven to cause mental deterioration."

Anecdotal evidence suggests quite a few death row inmates in Texas suffer from mental illness. Two of the five longest-serving inmates—each has been on death row more than 30 years—are suffering from documented mental disorders. The number of suicides on death row has increased since Texas placed inmates in solitary confinement. Since 2004, five inmates have killed themselves on death row—more suicides than in the previous 25 years (from 1974 to 1999, four death row inmates committed suicide, according to agency figures).

While suicides are still unusual, solitary confinement wears down nearly all inmates. Rob Owen, who directs the Capital Punishment Clinic at the University of Texas Law School, has represented many inmates on death row. When he visits clients, he can see the effects of prolonged isolation. “They have to warm up,” he says. “At first, they’re withdrawn and quiet, and I think that’s because of the isolation.”

I recently spoke with three current and former death row inmates. Each reacted to the extreme isolation differently. But all of them suggested subtle reforms—more hours outside the cells, group recreation, replacing the cells’ solid steel doors with bars—that would ease the isolation. Death row will never be enjoyable. It’s not supposed to be. But it could be more humane. As one prisoner, who’s been on death row more than 15 years, put it, “It’s Hell. It really is.”

## **The Long-Timer**

Nearly 40 men have served at least 20 years on death row. I interviewed one of these longtime inmates. He was convicted of a violent murder. His guilt isn't in doubt. *The Observer* agreed to not publish his name or identifying details to protect him from reprisals and to avoid affecting his case.

He has been deprived of his freedom and many other small pleasures. He hasn't hugged his mother, or any member of his family, in two decades. He lives his life encased in concrete. His feet haven't touched grass or dirt in years.

He says that when death row moved to the Polunsky Unit, conditions went from bad to unbearable:

"We came over here in 1999. We really didn't know what to expect. We knew this was going to be more secure. But we didn't know all the privileges were going to be taken away. We came over here a little hopeful that some of the things we had, we would still have.

"It wasn't until some months that we realized we weren't going to have anything, not even television. At that point, that's when despair began to set in. After we were here for a while and saw we were going to be on permanent lockdown until such time that we either got out or were killed.

"[At Ellis Unit], we had work detail [in the prison garment factory], and then for the rest of the day, we rec'd together, go outside, go to the

day room, play table games, handball, basketball, whatever. It lasted until about 9:30 at night. But over here [in Livingston], there's no group rec at all, and you only get two hours a day, five days a week, and everything's in isolation.

"How you do time is all about being philosophically strong and keeping your mind occupied. Once recreation time is over and you in that cell, just sitting there alone, everything comes back to you. You think about your reality. Working, exercising, watching television were forms for temporary escapism, which is a healthy thing. Now, too much of it isn't healthy. You want to reflect on why you're here, the changes you need to make in your life and of course, if you're guilty, you have to think about what you've done in this world. You have to have some remorse.

"I think everybody [on death row] has had that moment [when they go off the deep end]. I'm not qualified enough to diagnose it. I can't say whether it was from some depression or what. Fear can be such that it drives you overboard. There have been times I've been deeply afraid, I have to admit. Not only for myself, but for friends—guys I've befriended, and they wind up with [execution] dates. And that's another level of isolation, when you're in that cell and the clock is ticking.

"You have to remind yourself to be strong. You have to remind yourself that the people that love you want you to survive this. There's always people rooting for you.



“Prison is a big warehouse. We’ve been thrown in this big waste bin to be disposed of. But everybody doesn’t have that attitude. The people that come here to see us, they recognize our humanity. [He says he receives visitors nearly every week.] They believe that all people have redemptive qualities. That helps. Because if they don’t come here, if no one shows you love, then the decision that judge has made, that the jury has made, you begin to believe it. You’re not worth the air you breathe. That can get into your head.

“It is not humane. Even when you tell yourself, ‘This is prison, this is my fate,’ it still is a hard pill to swallow. I think it’s wrong for the people in here to use what I did to be cruel to me every day. ...This environment molds you. It really does. You have to fight against that to stay human.

“To live on death row is to live every day in fear.”