



Doug Wilson says ending solitary confinement is worth the risk.



THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

How a prison
manager changed
his mind about
solitary
confinement

By Jeri Zeder

D

Doug Wilson remembers how it was back when he was a prison guard. Inevitably, the day would come when an inmate who had spent 10 or 15 years in solitary confinement — a person deemed unfit for human contact — would go free. The day of release would often go like this: Wilson and his colleagues would strap the prisoner in leg irons, wrist restraints and belly chains and take him to the local public bus station. When the bus showed up, in sight of other passengers, they would remove his restraints, hand him his bag, put him on the bus and send him away.

“It was always kind of weird. This guy is being unchained and now he’s going to get on the bus,” recalls Wilson, who often wondered about what was going on in the minds of the bus passengers. “I’m sure it was weird for the offender, too.”

Proponents of solitary confinement — typically correctional administrators and officers’ unions — say that the practice is needed to run a safe prison. Critics counter that it is inhumane, insensibly costly and antithetical to public safety, and that replacing solitary with less draconian methods of control actually makes prisons safer. Doug Wilson has been with the Colorado Department of Corrections (DOC) for 23 years and is now a DOC administrative services manager responsible for staff training, facility accreditation, policy development and coordinating grievances and litigation. His state has been in the vanguard of solitary confinement reform, and while Wilson does believe that the dangers of ending solitary confinement are greater than the critics contend, he now believes that reform is worth the risk.

Buy-in from corrections leaders and staff is key to reforming prisons. So it’s worth asking: What made Doug Wilson change his mind?

Growing Momentum

Solitary confinement is a method of managing and controlling prisoners for behaviors, ranging from merely uncooperative to truly violent. Typically, a prisoner is locked in a 60- to 80- square-foot cell for 23 hours a day without human contact. Days can turn into months and years as prisoners commit further infractions and get themselves deeper into the hole. While many people think solitary is reserved for “the worst of the worst,” that’s not the case. “I’ve had clients who could be anyone’s child, who end up in prison for stupid things like opiate

abuse and selling drugs to support their habit and then get into a fight [while incarcerated] or get into the crosshairs of a corrections officer and end up in solitary confinement,” says Leslie Walker ’85, executive director of Prisoners’ Legal Services of Massachusetts (PLSMA). She argues that their punishment is the loss of liberty — going to prison — not “torturing them in a box the size of a parking space for months and years on end.”

“It just kind of builds up, builds up and builds up,” says Christine Sunnerberg ’17, who spent her first co-op with Walker’s agency last fall, and now works there part time. During her co-op, Sunnerberg wrote several advocacy letters for individual inmates whose health needs were not being met in prison, and she attended legislative hearings where PLSMA and others testified in support of bills to reform Massachusetts’ policies on solitary confinement.

Since the mid-1980s, the growth in solitary confinement has outpaced the growth of the prison population in general, according to Jean Casella, co-director of Solitary Watch, which monitors and disseminates information about solitary confinement. Today, there are “80,000 to 100,000 people in solitary, and an unknown additional number in jails and criminal detention and juvenile detention,” she says.

Momentum against solitary confinement is slowly building. The Obama administration is looking to reforms in federal prisons. In the states, the trends are uneven — and surprisingly distributed. Massachusetts, for example, lags behind Mississippi. “We are not as progressive in these areas as a lot of people think we are,” says Professor Daniel Medwed, author of *Prosecution Complex: America’s Race to Convict and Its Impact on the Innocent*. “The real reason why it still exists

Continued on page 39

... their punishment is the loss of liberty — going to prison — not
**“torturing them in a box the size of
a parking space for months and
years on end.”**

Leslie Walker '85



Solitary

Continued from page 22

is that corrections officers believe, or make it seem as though they believe, it is a tool that they need to basically punish the worst of the worst, or somehow restrict the worst of the worst to protect prison guards and other inmates," he says.

According to PLSMA, Massachusetts does limit the use of solitary confinement for prisoners with mental illness, but deprives prisoners of meaningful due process toward release from solitary confinement; frees prisoners directly from solitary confinement to the community; and is one of only three states that permit solitary sentences of up to 10 years for disciplinary infractions. Meanwhile, Arizona, California, Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Texas and Wisconsin are all working to reduce their solitary populations.

In a recent report for the US Department of Justice, Natasha Frost and Carlos Monteiro of Northeastern University's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice found that solitary confinement is little understood. The research, they explain, shows that it can have devastating psychological effects on those with mental illness and on those who are subjected to it long term or indefinitely, including difficulty concentrating and thinking, distorted perceptions and responses, and problems with impulse control. But more research is needed on whether solitary is detrimental to people subjected to it short term: whether those placed in solitary for their own protection do better than those who are held there to protect others, how long in solitary is too long or the effects of solitary on levels of prison violence.

Taking a Toll

Doug Wilson's ultimate boss, Rick Raemisch, executive director of Colorado's Department of Corrections, famously spent a night in solitary and wrote about it for *The New York Times*. Raemisch tells *Northeastern Law* magazine that he went in figuring he'd catch up on some sleep. "What I didn't realize," he says, "is that it is not sensory deprivation; it is sensory overload." Banging and screaming by those in solitary confinement went on day and night. The lights were dimmed but never off. Every 30 minutes, metallic clanging disrupted Raemisch's sleep as corrections officers yanked on cell doors to ensure they were locked 24 hours a day.



Over time, Wilson says, this environment takes its toll. He points to a prisoner in long-term solitary confinement who ate bizarre things, such as shampoo bottles and handcuffs. "He had numerous surgeries where he had to have these things removed out of his intestines," Wilson says. "And then he would act out in the hospital, so you would have to have extra security staff. That type of behavior was just the kind of stuff you saw every day with these offenders. The things they would do, you'd think you'd have to be crazy to do." Wilson believes these types of extreme behaviors are often developed during lengthy stretches in solitary confinement. They are considered by prison authorities as signs of behavioral problems but not mental illness.

Under Colorado's new policies, rather than resort first to solitary, corrections officers are expected to engage with prisoners, perhaps withdrawing privileges, even negotiating, as in "you can spend 10 days in segregation, or you can get up an hour earlier all next week and wipe down the tables in the day room," explains Wilson. This approach, coupled with the removal of identified mentally ill prisoners from solitary, has helped Colorado reduce its solitary population from 1,500 in 2011 to around 160 today.

At first, Wilson wasn't exactly on board with the new policies. "I thought we are putting our staff at risk," he says. "I guess what helped sell it for me is that I started seeing some success stories." The prisoner who ate dangerous objects stopped doing so once he got out of solitary confinement. Now, he has a prison job and is able to buy himself soap and extra food from the canteen. Inmates who at one time might have lashed out violently now ask to use time-out rooms where they can go to calm themselves down.

Reformers insist that changes like these make prisons safer. Emerging data from states where reforms are happening indicate

that prisons experience fewer attacks, fewer workers' compensation claims and fewer trips to the emergency room. "Public safety officials in Massachusetts should follow evidence-based best practices and reduce the current reliance on long-term solitary confinement," says Walker. They should "consider the successful models employed by other states, including Mississippi, Maine and Colorado, that have reduced solitary time and saved millions of dollars doing so without a negative impact on crime in prison and in the community when prisoners are inevitably released."

But the data are still very preliminary. Wilson, for one, believes that the new regime potentially makes prisons less safe and secure. "We are taking a chance by letting these guys meld into the general population and interact with each other and with staff without them being restrained. There are going to be assaults where there wouldn't be if they were locked up. There is going to be violence that didn't happen before," he says. But, he suggests, the risks may be worth it if the outcomes are better. "What we get in the end is, I think, a higher percentage of offenders who are going to be released successfully in the society and not end up recommitting crimes." Ninety-seven percent of all prisoners will eventually be released, he notes. The risks of using alternatives to solitary confinement, he hopes, "are a small price you pay in the institution for more success in the community."

A few years ago, Wilson went to meet his daughter for lunch at the college she was attending. When he arrived, his daughter introduced him to a classmate. The classmate recognized Wilson immediately — he had been an inmate in Wilson's prison. "He said something positive about his experience in prison. I thought about that and was like, wow, what if he had had a really bad experience, and then he meets my daughter," says Wilson, who can't help but think of the danger his daughter might have been in had the former prisoner held Wilson to blame for a negative incarceration experience. "That was going through my mind," Wilson says. "I made a decision right there that any chance I get, I'm going to try to help repair somebody. Model behavior. Take a minute to listen or whatever it takes, hopefully, to help them be a better person when they get out."

And that's how Doug Wilson changed his mind about solitary.

Jeri Zeder is a Boston-area freelance writer.