**Solitary Confinement Is Torture—and Morally Wrong**

*"It is due time that all states ... recognize that prolonged*[*solitary confinement*](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108444&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=)*is a moral and fiscal price we cannot afford to pay."*

In the following viewpoint, Heather Rice argues that solitary confinement is an inhumane, torturous practice that should be outlawed. Citing historical criticism and scientific evidence, Rice contends that solitary confinement causes inmates such extreme physical and mental distress that it effectively qualifies as a form of [torture](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108444&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=). This leads her to conclude that the practice is both morally wrong and unfit for use in modern American [prisons](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108444&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=). Rice was the director of the US prisons policy program for the National Religious Campaign Against Torture prior to becoming the senior policy advisor for Justice Fellowship.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to the viewpoint, what did Justice Samuel Freeman Miller say about solitary confinement in his 1890 opinion?
2. What are the effects of solitary confinement, according to Dr. Craig Haney?
3. According to Rice, why is solitary confinement wrong from a spiritual point of view?

Dozens of prison inmates at Virginia's Red Onion super-max prison resorted to hunger striking in order to call attention to inhumane confinement conditions. As reported in your May 24 article the prisoners are protesting the use of prolonged solitary confinement, which the strikers describe as 'torture.' Prisoners at Red Onion spend 23 hours a day in a cell alone. Some, including those with mental illness, have been kept in isolation for years. These starving Virginia prisoners are not the first to identify that solitary confinement can rise to the level of torture.

In 1842, the novelist Charles Dickens visited the Eastern Pennsylvania Penitentiary and said: The system here is rigid, strict and hopeless solitary confinement. I believe it ... to be cruel and wrong. I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain, to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body.

In an 1890 opinion, U.S. Supreme Court justice Samuel Freeman Miller made the following observation about prisoners held in solitary confinement: A considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi-fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others became violently insane; others still, committed [suicide](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108444&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=); while those who stood the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community.

Sadly, we have not learned our history lesson when it comes to the damaging and ineffective results of solitary confinement. In fact, from 1995 to 2000, the growth rate of segregation units significantly surpassed the prison growth rate overall: 40 percent compared to 28 percent.

In a 2009 *New Yorker* article that brought solitary confinement to national attention, Atul Gawande described the personal stories of several people who were subject to long-term solitary confinement, including Terry Anderson (the American diplomat held for years in Lebanon), Senator John McCain, and [prisoners of war](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108444&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) in Yugoslavia. Gawande tellingly observed that none saw solitary confinement as anything less than torture. He also noted electroencephalogram, or EEG, studies going back to the 1960s have shown diffuse slowing of brain waves in prisoners after just a week of solitary confinement.

The Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons, a national bipartisan task force established in 2006, reported that among the dozens of studies on the use of solitary confinement conducted since the 1970s, there was not a single study of nonvoluntary solitary confinement lasting more than 10 days that did not document negative psychiatric results in its subjects.

Nationally recognized expert Dr. Craig Haney, social psychologist and psychology professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, found extraordinarily high rates of symptoms of psychological trauma among prisoners held in long-term solitary confinement in his systematic analysis of prisoners held in super-max prisons. More than four out of five of those evaluated suffered from feelings of anxiety and nervousness, headaches, troubled sleep, and lethargy or chronic tiredness, and over half complained of nightmares, heart palpitations, and fear of impending nervous breakdowns. Nearly half suffered from hallucinations and perceptual distortions, and a quarter experienced suicidal ideation.

Citing scientific studies demonstrating the lasting mental harm caused by isolation in a presentation before the United Nations General Assembly in October 2011, the UN special rapporteur on torture Juan Mendez declared that solitary confinement can amount to torture and called for an absolute prohibition of prolonged solitary confinement in excess of 15 days.

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture, or NRCAT, a coalition of 315 religious organizations that have united to abolish torture, has launched a nationwide campaign to end prolonged solitary confinement. The question of whether someone should be punished is separate from whether we should, as a nation, permit [punishment](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108444&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) that is so severe it amounts to torture. When we analyze the latter question through the lens of faith, our answer is an unequivocal no.

Our faith traditions teach us that every human being possesses inherent dignity, a quality that does not disappear behind prison gates. Prolonged isolation violates individuals' God-given dignity by destroying prisoners' minds. More often than not, prisoners held in solitary confinement return to society as less functional human beings that are more likely to recommit crimes.

NRCAT has been vocal in its opposition to Virginia's overuse of prolonged solitary confinement, including urging Governor [Bob] McDonnell to provide for independent experts to assist in the Virginia Department of [Corrections](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108444&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=)' review into long-term solitary confinement. Independent review using expert data analysis methodology has been essential to successfully implementing alternatives to solitary confinement in other states like Mississippi, Illinois, and Colorado. These states and others have seen far less violence in prison and far less cost to taxpayers as a result of reforming their solitary confinement policies.

It is due time that all states, including Virginia, recognize that prolonged solitary confinement is a moral and fiscal price we cannot afford to pay.

## Violent Offenders Should Be Placed in Supermax Prisons

The [California](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016204&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) Department of Corrections operates all state [prisons](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016204&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=), oversees several community correctional facilities, and supervises all parolees during their re-entry into society. Pelican Bay State Prison houses California's most secure prison facility—the Security Housing Unit (SHU), a "supermax" prison. This is where the most violent and dangerous [prisoners](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016204&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) are housed. In order to ensure the safety of inmates and staff, prisoners in the SHU experience [solitary confinement](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016204&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=), limited movement, little or no contact with others, and strictly controlled leisure time. This results in a successful program that punishes offenders and keeps violence to a minimum. California's most secure prison facility—the high-tech Security Housing Unit (SHU)—is located within the maximum custody Pelican Bay State Prison. Its purpose: to protect staff and male inmates throughout the system from the few most violent, predatory offenders.

The prison is geographically isolated, lying just south of the Oregon border near the coastal community of Crescent City, California. One side of the prison houses maximum custody inmates in general population— those who can hold jobs, go to school and mingle with other inmates. Those assigned to Pelican Bay's SHU (pronounced shoo) have none of these privileges. They have proven by their behavior in prison that they cannot be housed safely with general population inmates. The 1,056-bed facility at Pelican Bay is one of two Security Housing Units the department currently operates. The other, a 512-bed facility at Corcoran State Prison, houses both SHU and protective custody inmates.

**Earning a trip to SHU**

Not every inmate is "eligible" for SHU. Most are sent there for committing violent acts while in prison such as [murder](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016204&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=), assault, initiating a riot, threatening staff or other inmates, or being caught with a weapon. An administrative review committee considers the evidence and listens to the inmate and witnesses. If the charges are verified, inmates can be given a SHU term ranging from a few months to five years.

Known gang members and affiliates—especially those responsible for violence or intimidation within the prison—also can be assigned to SHU. Because there is no set term for gang members assigned to SHU, the department conducts a thorough investigation to document the inmate's gang activities and reviews his status every 120 days.

**Designed for maximum protection**

Pelican Bay's SHU often is referred to as a "super-max" prison. It was designed to ensure the maximum protection for inmates and staff.

Most inmates are in single cells. Heavy, perforated cell doors limit an inmate's ability to assault others, without obstructing visibility into or out of a cell. Bunks are molded into the wall and toilets have no removable parts that could be used to make weapons. All clothing, bedding and personal effects are x-rayed before being placed in a cell. There are eight individual cells in each pod. A shower is located on each floor. Several overhead skylights flood each pod with natural light. Each pod has its own 26' by 10' exercise yard.

The pods are arranged in a semi-circle, like spokes of a wheel, with a centralized control room as the hub. The control room officer has a clear view of all six pods, also called cell blocks. The officer operates each door, controls the entrances and exits to each pod, and monitors movement in the exercise yards via closed circuit television.

The SHU complex encompasses both housing and support functions within a single building envelope. A secure system of corridors is monitored by control rooms. To aid in the secure operation of the complex, the upper level corridors are restricted to staff only. Heavy mesh grating on the floor of the upper corridor allows close scrutiny of activity below.

**Controlling inmate movement**

Most SHU inmates are allowed a limited amount of unescorted movement within the pod. For example, an inmate can walk alone from his cell to the shower or to the exercise yard. This reduces the frequency of physical contact between staff and inmates and greatly diminishes the risk of assault. Only one inmate at a time is allowed to move within the pod.

Before an inmate moves outside his pod, he is placed in restraints. He is escorted to secure areas within the SHU complex by two correctional officers. He may:

* Receive health services
* Meet with counseling or administrative staff
* Conduct legal research
* Attend classification, parole or disciplinary hearings
* Visit with family or friends (non-contact visits only)

**Minimizing inmate-to-inmate contact**

One way of controlling violence within a prison is to minimize the physical contact inmates have with one another. Unlike other institutions where lower custody inmates provide support services, at Pelican Bay's SHU only staff have physical contact with inmates.

Staff in the housing unit deliver food trays, mail, canteen supplies, or medications. In the law library they process requests for information, transmit approved material between inmates, and deliver reference books. Those few SHU inmates who share a cell can exercise together. Otherwise, the inmates are kept separate from one another throughout the prison.

Inmates from the Level IV side of the institution do come into the building to prepare meals, operate the canteen, or assist with routine maintenance. These general population inmates are searched when they come and go, are closely supervised while inside, and are kept separate from those housed there. They also wear special jumpsuits to distinguish them from SHU inmates.

By enforcing this kind of separation, the prison eliminates the possibility that inmates can be used as go-betweens for information or contraband. Further, it ensures that no inmate has a position of greater status or access within the SHU.

**Providing inmate health care**

Each SHU facility offers a full range of health care services including emergency care, routine medical diagnosis and treatment, [mental health](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016204&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) consultation, and dental care.

In many instances, [physicians](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016204&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) can diagnose and treat inmates during their "rounds" to the housing units. Most medications are dispensed on site by medical technicians.

Any inmate needing complex medical treatment, dental care or in-depth psychological counseling is escorted in restraints to the infirmary. If the problem is beyond the scope of the prison infirmary, the inmate will be transported to a community hospital for treatment. The prison provides round-the-clock security for any inmates removed from the institution.

**Accommodating legal research**

SHU inmates are allowed reasonable access to the prison law library for research. Run by an accredited librarian, Pelican Bay's library maintains up-to-date legal texts and research materials.

Inmates schedule library time in advance. Small groups are escorted to the library then locked into individual cells for study. The court has ruled that inmates may share legal materials with each other. Security staff search the material for contra-band or unauthorized messages before they make the transfer.

The law library is designed to allow inmates time for quiet study. However, a court decision also allows conversation between inmates in library cells.

**Making use of leisure time**

Because of the high security level of the SHU, all leisure time activities are strictly controlled.

*Visiting*—Family members and friends can visit SHU inmates on regularly scheduled visiting days. All visits are non-contact visits. The inmate is escorted into a small, secure cell. The visitor sits on the opposite side of a Plexiglas divider and communicates with the inmate via telephone.

*Exercise*—Inmates have access to the exercise yard at least 10 hours per week. For security reasons, no exercise equipment is allowed. The concrete exercise area measures 10' wide by 26'long by 18' high. One half of the top is covered with Plexiglas for protection during inclement weather. The other half is open to the air but covered with a heavy mesh screen. Video cameras mounted at either end of the yard allow constant surveillance of the inmate's movements by the control room officer inside.

*Religion*—Religious services and programs are offered to SHU inmates on an individual basis. Chaplains meet with inmates in the housing unit or at the cell door.

*Entertainment*—Inmates may have radios and television sets inside their cells. They must use earphones to listen to the programs.

## Yes, Some Inmates Still Deserve Solitary Confinement

*"Not every felon deserves to burn in hell, but some do. If*[*solitary confinement*](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108445&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=)*is hell on earth, then we should still use it for the worst."*

In the following viewpoint, Greg Dobbs argues in favor of retaining solitary confinement as a means of [punishment](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108445&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) within [prisons](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108445&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=). While he acknowledges the harsh nature of the practice and the potential risks to those who are forced to endure it, Dobbs contends that it is still a justified and necessary measure, at least in certain circumstances. A former ABC News correspondent, Dobbs is a journalist and professional public speaker.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Dobbs, what is the big reason for incarceration that opponents of solitary confinement typically don't mention?
2. According to Dobbs, under what circumstances should solitary confinement not be used?
3. According to Dobbs, why is it necessary to retain the use of solitary confinement?

When Colorado's new prisons chief voluntarily checked in last month [February 2014] for a 20-hour stay in solitary confinement, it was commendable. If he didn't know before his ordeal just how gutsy it was, then by the time he got out—feeling "as if I'd been there for days"—he knew it cold.

"I sat with my mind," Department of [Corrections](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108445&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) boss Rick Raemisch wrote in an op-ed for the *New York Times*, wondering "how long would it take before Ad Seg (the prison term for solitary) chipped that away. I don't know, but I'm confident that it would be a battle I would lose."

The good news is, he has drawn a lot of attention to the sinister side of solitary confinement. NPR broadcast almost an hour about the issue last week, and the *Times'* David Brooks followed up with a compassionate column called "The Archipelago of Pain."

But the bad news is this new national focus on reform risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

**Why We Use Solitary Confinement**

We have to remember that convicted [criminals](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108445&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) typically aren't sentenced to solitary; they are sentenced to prison. I've been in plenty of prison cells while covering stories, including death rows, and it's scary to feel the confinement of a 9-by-6 cage even for a few minutes, let alone a few years. But if convicts mind their manners, at least it shouldn't get worse than that. It's only when they don't—when they do something egregiously bad—that they end up in solitary.

The trouble is, in his op-ed, Raemisch never once used any form of the word "punish." Not about solitary, not even about the general idea of [imprisonment](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108445&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=). Rather, he wrote, "Our job in corrections is to protect the community." Sure it is, and we're awfully glad you do it, but that's not the whole story. Neither is the necessary goal of correcting criminals' bad behavior through rehabilitation, necessary because most felons someday will live again among us. That's why we call it the "Department of Corrections."

Yet one of the big reasons we lock up bad guys wasn't even mentioned—not by Raemisch, not by the *Times*, hardly by NPR—partly because many people believe it's not civilized to admit it: Punishment, or as some define it, society's retribution for violating society's laws.

Which brings us back to solitary: How else do you punish someone who's already being punished? One prisoner was quoted in the NPR program griping that his mattress in solitary was uncomfortable. Sorry, pal, but the man you murdered while already serving time doesn't get to complain anymore about bad mattresses—or anything else. If the punishment were to fit the [crime](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108445&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=), you'd have more to worry about than a bad mattress.

**A Necessary Evil**

The prisons chief is absolutely right to advocate that we shouldn't throw the mentally ill into solitary confinement; that we probably shouldn't throw anyone in, ill or not, for emotionally unbearable stretches; and that we need a buffer to allow cons recently released from solitary to decompress.

When Raemisch's predecessor, Tom Clements, was shot and killed last year, the problem wasn't just that his murderer had suffered in solitary confinement; it was that thanks to bad paperwork and premature parole, he'd gone almost straight from solitary to the street.

Which is where the baby and the bathwater come in. The bathwater we need to throw out is the occasionally arbitrary and arguably excessive spells in solitary to which some [prisoners](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010108445&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) are condemned. When a punishment is counterproductive all around, it should stop. But the baby we need to keep is the penultimate punishment of solitary confinement. It's all we've got when no other form of behavior modification has worked.

Not every felon deserves to burn in hell, but some do. If solitary confinement is hell on earth, then we should still use it for the worst. They've earned it.

## Super Maximum Security Prisons Are Cruel and Inhumane

## *How Should Prisons Treat Inmates?*, 2005

Super maximum security [prisons](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) house the worst of the worst. But the stark isolation, lack of activities, and few opportunities for rehabilitation in these institutions are making these inmates even more violent and antisocial. Despite some reforms, many [prisoners](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) leave super max prisons poorly equipped to integrate into society. Until voters become concerned about the condition in which these inmates are living, we will be endangered by the release of angry, unbalanced prisoners back into society.

It's quiet in pod C5, deep inside Pelican Bay State Prison's Security Housing Unit, home to about 1,200 of California's most violent offenders. There are no sounds from outside, because there are no windows—only a skylight high overhead, through which gray daylight seeps into the bare quadrangle facing the pod's eight cells, stacked four on four. All that can be heard are a few subdued voices, and the occasional thunderous sound of a flushing toilet reverberating off the blank concrete walls.

This is not the crowded, clamorous kind of prison you see in the movies. The SHU, as it's known, is a starkly efficient place of electronically controlled doors and featureless concrete and steel. Occasionally, the monotony is punctured by bursts of noise and violence. Sometimes inmates scream at guards, other inmates, or themselves. Sometimes there is the clangorous racket of a recalcitrant prisoner being forcibly extracted from his cell. But most of the time, nothing happens. Almost nothing is permitted to happen. That's the idea of the SHU.

If you're an inmate in a regular prison—even a maximum-security prison, which the other two wings of Pelican Bay are—most days you can play basketball in the yard or cards in the day room, work in the laundry room or dining hall and take meals with the other men on your tier.

In the SHU, there are no jobs, no activities, hardly any [educational programs](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) and barely any human contact. You are locked in your 8-by-10-foot cell almost around the clock. You can't see the other prisoners in the cells adjoining yours, nor the guards watching from a central observation booth. Most of the time, all you can see through the fingertip-sized perforations in your cell's solid steel door is the wall of the eight-cell pod, the larger cage containing your cage. Guards deliver your meals. Once a day, the remote-controlled cell door grinds open, and you get 90 minutes to spend alone in a walled-in courtyard—a place more like the bottom of a mine shaft than an exercise yard. It's an environment about as restrictive and monotonous as human minds can design—and, perhaps, as human minds can tolerate.

Pelican Bay, which sprawls over 275 acres just south of the Oregon border, in a ... region of misty mountains and ancient redwood forests, was among the first of a wave of new prisons equipped with ultra-restrictive "supermax" lockups that have proliferated nationwide in recent years. There are as many as 20,000 inmates housed in such facilities in at least 30 states.

California has three SHUs for men in its Pelican Bay, Corcoran and Tehachapi lockups, plus one for women in Valley State Prison in Chowchilla. They house about 3,000 convicts in all. But Pelican Bay is the one with the hardest cons and the harshest conditions, the end of the line for the inmates whom correctional officials call "the worst of the worst."

Like their counterparts in other states, California corrections officials say they need SHUs to control incorrigibly violent cons in the state's vast archipelago of prisons, teeming with nearly 160,000 inmates. While no one could argue with that goal, there are significant concerns about the tactic. For starters, it's not clear to what extent SHUs are indeed reducing [prison violence](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=).

## Supermax prisons may breed danger

More disturbingly, there's a growing worry that supermaxes—long decried by prisoner advocates as dangerous to the [mental health](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) of inmates—may be breeding danger for the general public.

Psychiatrists, activists and some correctional officials say the intense isolation of supermaxes is producing prisoners who are uncontrollably furious and sometimes violently deranged. Most of those prisoners will one day be set free. In the past three years, in fact, nearly 1,000 California SHU inmates at the end of their sentences were moved to less-restrictive prisons for just a few weeks, and then released.

And at least 403 inmates were paroled without even that intermediate step: They were taken straight from the solitary cells where they spent years marinating in their rage, handed $200 in gate money and put on a bus to rejoin the rest of us.

"T.C.," a Pelican Bay SHU inmate who, like most of the nearly two dozen current and former SHU prisoners interviewed for this article did not want his name published, wrote: "How does society expect a person to act once he has been released from the SHU, in most cases after spending years back here? There are things that happen here which people out there are never aware of; these things tend to build anger and hate in some persons, and if these persons don't have anyone to talk to, or complain to, that anger and hate continues to grow. If that person paroles, he's now a human time bomb waiting to release all that anger and hate, waiting to explode."

You can hardly blame prison authorities for liking the idea of supermaxes. Prison guards are spit on, screamed at and assaulted daily. Reducing the chances of being stabbed in the neck with a sharpened toothbrush is understandably a higher priority for them than fretting over how [solitary confinement](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) might change an inmate's mood.

But America's supermaxes have been denounced as inhumane by organizations from the ACLU to the United Nations. Fistfuls of lawsuits have been filed in recent years challenging conditions in supermaxes from California to Massachusetts. Some have succeeded in forcing changes.... So far, the courts have upheld the constitutionality of supermax-style [imprisonment](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=). But just because they're legal doesn't necessarily mean they're good policy. In fact, Democratic state Sen. Gloria Romero of Los Angeles, head of the Senate's Select Committee on the California Correctional System, has launched a campaign to investigate how supermaxes are affecting prisoners—and the public.

No question the Pelican Bay SHU holds a great many extraordinarily malicious men. Most of California's top prison gang leaders are there, including such luminaries as Aryan Brotherhood shot-callers Paul "Cornfed" Schneider and Dale Bretches, the original owners of the dogs that mauled a San Francisco woman to [death](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) in 2001. The day before my visit there this year, a SHU inmate who was appearing in court stabbed his own lawyer with an ice pick-like shank he apparently had hidden in what a Pelican Bay spokesman referred to as his "keister."

## How inmates wind up in the SHU

There is considerable debate, however, about whether everyone in the SHU deserves to be there. No one is in the SHU for crimes they committed on the streets; you get sent there for doing something while you're in prison.

This works in two ways. The first is straightforward: If you violate prison rules—say, being caught with drugs or for attacking another inmate—you can be sent to the SHU for a set period of time as punishment.

The second is more ambiguous: Simply being declared a member or associate of a prison gang lands you in the SHU—indefinitely. About half the state's SHU inmates are in for this reason. Aside from getting paroled or going certifiably insane, the only way a "gang-validated" inmate can be released from the SHU is by "debriefing"—confessing everything he knows about other gang members, which entails obvious risks—or by convincing prison officials that he has been free from gang activity for six years.

"Prison gang members and associates are responsible for the largest percentage of violence in our institutions," says Steve Moore, the head of gang-related issues for the California Department of Corrections. "The idea is to extract those people from the general population."

Corrections officials and prisoners agree that California's half-dozen major prison gangs—Nazi Low Riders, Aryan Brotherhood, Black Guerrilla Family and several Latino factions—are behind a hefty chunk, though certainly not all, of the trouble in prisons statewide, from stabbings to drug dealing. And as the number of people cycling through the prison system has swelled in recent years, some of those gangs are believed to have begun forging increasingly close links with street gangs on the outside.

Activists and inmates, however, charge that the department's criteria for determining gang membership are overly broad, sending many undeserving inmates to supermax solitary. SHU inmates in Corcoran and Pelican Bay have staged two hunger strikes in the past two years over the issue, and Romero convened a hearing in September [2003] to investigate the corrections department's policy of identifying gang members. "I have very serious concerns about the validation process," Romero said at the hearing, held in Los Angeles. "In this time of constrained budgets, it's a good time to look at who is going into SHUs and whether they should really be there."

In response to these criticisms, Moore ordered a review of all gang validations. As of September, his office had looked at several hundred cases and found 17 that didn't pass muster.

Regardless of why prisoners are put in the SHU, perhaps the most pressing concern for the public is the inmates' mental states upon release. Dr. Stuart Grassian, a Boston psychiatrist who lectured at Harvard Medical School, has been studying the effects of solitary confinement for more than two decades, during which time he has examined more than 100 supermax prisoners, including 50 at Pelican Bay. His conclusion: [Supermax prisons](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=" \o "More on 'Supermax prisons') can literally drive inmates crazy.

"There are many scores of cases of people who never suffered psychiatric illnesses and developed them while incarcerated in supermaxes," he says. Other mental [health](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) professionals agree. "I've seen many prisoners with no history of mental illness who after some time in the SHU started cutting themselves," says Dr. Terry Kupers, an Oakland-based psychiatrist with decades of experience in prison work. "I've almost never seen self-mutilation among adult males anywhere else, but it's very common in SHUs." At the landmark *Madrid v. Gomez* federal trial in 1995 over conditions at Pelican Bay, even the prison's senior staff psychologist acknowledged seeing psychiatric deterioration among some SHU prisoners.

Supermax prisoners often develop similar symptoms, Grassian says. These include hallucinations; hypersensitivity to external stimuli; paranoia; panic attacks; hostile fantasies involving revenge, torture and mutilation; and violent or self-destructive outbursts, to the extent of gouging out one's eyes, smearing oneself with feces or biting chunks of flesh from one's own body.

Take Matthew Lowe, convicted of armed robbery, assault on a peace officer and grand theft auto. During his three years in the Pelican Bay SHU, Lowe never got to the point of biting off pieces of his sizable biceps, but in other ways he fits Grassian's diagnosis of a mentally ill inmate. Lowe is a big guy in baggy jeans and a motorcycle-shop sweatshirt, with a tiny soul patch on his chin and tattoos on his neck and fingers. At 38, he has spent most of his life behind bars, but he says his time in the SHU changed him in a way prison never had before.

"Them years of sitting in that little cell—it did something to me, I don't even know what," says Lowe, sitting on a couch in his girlfriend's tidy bungalow in a blue-collar suburb of San Francisco. "I only had conversations with about five or six people in three years. I'd sit in there and just think about doing crazy [stuff] all the time.... Your average prison doesn't do that to you." After years of obsessively ruminating about blowing up buildings and shooting cops, Lowe was finally paroled last year [2002]. He was taken from his SHU cell, shifted to San Quentin for a few days and then let out onto the streets of Marin County.

So far, he's doing all right, working as a roof-gutter installer and going to AA meetings. But he scares himself with how jumpy and paranoid he has become. "So many times I've come so close to snapping since I got out," he says. "One time in a store, someone cut in front of me in line—a 50-year-old guy, I don't think he even realized it. I had to catch myself, because my first thought was just to smash him."

## The roots of solitary confinement

Penal solitary confinement was essentially invented in the [United States](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=). In the late 1700s, whips and stocks were the preferred tools of public punishment. But reformers argued that by isolating criminals, their consciences would naturally lead to repenting their evil ways.

In 1790, Pennsylvania opened the first prison designed for this purpose, dubbed a "penitentiary." Several American states and European nations soon followed suit. But the penitentiaries gradually fell out of favor as evidence began to mount that they were often driving inmates mad. As the Supreme Court observed in an 1890 ruling condemning the penitentiary system: "A considerable number of prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi-fatuous condition ... and others became violently insane; others still, committed [suicide](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=); while those who stood the ordeal better were not generally reformed."

Still, solitary confinement continued to be used as a short-term punishment for inmates. But the idea of keeping large numbers of convicts permanently in such severe conditions didn't return until the 1980s, as America's prison population began mushrooming. Driven largely by tough anti-drug and "three-strikes"-type mandatory minimum sentencing laws, the number of Americans behind bars has quadrupled since 1980 to an all-time high of about 2 million today. In the same get-tough-on-criminals spirit, many states have also cut back educational programs, exercise facilities and other "perks" for prisoners. Violence grew apace. Desperate to restore order to the federal maximum-security lockup at Marion, Ill., authorities in 1983 put the entire facility on indefinite lockdown. Under the administrations of then-Gov. George Deukmejian and then-Corrections Department head James Rowland, California was among the first states to copy the concept, opening SHUs at Corcoran in 1988, and Pelican Bay in 1989.

## Mental health needs of inmates are ignored

Pelican Bay came under fire almost right away, both over alleged abuses by guards and conditions in the SHU. In the *Madrid v. Gomez* decision, U.S. District Court Judge Thelton Henderson ruled that there was a "pattern of brutality" by the guards. On whether the SHU itself was damaging to inmates' mental health, he ruled that while the SHU "may press the outer bounds of what most humans can psychologically tolerate" and could seriously exacerbate previously existing mental illnesses, there was not enough proof to show that it could drive a sane man mad.

Pelican Bay instituted several reforms as a result of the case, including creating a 127-bed psychiatric unit and beefing up its mental-health staff to a total of 79. As far as the prison was concerned, that took care of the problem. "We moved all of those with mental illnesses into the [psychiatric unit] after the Madrid decision," declares Rawland Swift, who, until recently, was the Pelican Bay spokesman. Certainly, the SHU's conditions aren't as extreme as those that so appalled the 1890 Supreme Court. Pelican Bay SHU inmates can talk to others in neighboring cells, receive letters and see visitors (through security glass) on weekends. Those who can afford them have TVs (though they can only watch during the day and must listen through earphones). Most occasionally leave their cells for brief excursions to court or for medical treatment.

A select number of SHU inmates even have cellmates, but most are housed alone, and the overwhelming bulk of their time is spent in a small concrete and steel box. It seems entirely possible that a good many SHU inmates are losing their grip on reality—whether their keepers acknowledge it or not.

Prisoners are given mental-health attention if their guards—hardly experts in such matters—deem their behavior strange enough to warrant an examination. Swift told me that while seemingly troubled prisoners are often taken to the psychiatric unit for evaluation, the psychiatrists almost always send them back, saying, "He's got a behavioral problem, not a mental health problem." This echoes disturbingly a finding of the judge in the *Madrid* decision: "It is clear ... that an overburdened, and sometimes indifferent, mental health staff is far too quick to dismiss an inmate as a 'malingerer' and thus deny him needed treatment."

Almost all of the inmates I interviewed (and at least one correctional officer who did not want to be named) said they had seen other prisoners suffer serious mental deterioration in the SHU—screaming, banging on doors, cutting themselves. "I have seen plenty of people lose their sanity while in the SHU. I used to think that they were faking it ... but once being around them for a while you could see that it was no act," writes Pelican Bay SHU inmate Otis Booker. "When you hear a guy holding a conversation with himself, or calling out cadences to exercises that he's not even doing or growling out animal sounds all day, you know something's not right."

Grassian estimates that as many as one-third of all supermax inmates are suffering some kind of psychiatric trouble—most of which goes undiagnosed. "A guard may see a prisoner hiding under a blanket, obviously delusional, but as long as he's not screaming or throwing feces, he's OK as far as they're concerned," Grassian says.

All of which could help explain the case of Erik Scott January, convicted of armed robbery. His mother, Long Beach resident Laura Daniher, says that before he was sent to the Corcoran SHU in 1997, January had no history of mental health problems. After a couple of years in the SHU, though, he started raving about the evil spirits he saw dancing on the walls.

In a letter to her from mid-2001, January writes relatively lucidly for most of two pages, asking about her house and other chitchat—and then mentions that he has been seeing things and experiencing other "strange occurrences." A few months later, another letter makes it apparent he has left reality far behind: "I am Tutankamen mother.... Take a time to pray to your hi Hitler power of white skin because I need some hand in time I need hand time handtime ... god is the sun I am the sun I am Satan I am Lucifer."

Vanessa Filley, a member of California Prison Focus, a San Francisco-based advocacy group, visited January early last year [2002] and found him "in a delusional state," suffering "visual hallucinations." In a letter to the warden asking that January be taken out of the SHU, Filley states that she was told by a Corcoran psychiatrist that January "is not dysfunctional to the point of forced intervention, therefore barring any specific behavior we can't do anything." At the time of this writing, January was still in the SHU.

Certainly, SHUs don't drive everyone over the threshold of clinical insanity. But they may have dangerous effects short of that. What happens when you take a man who had antisocial and violent impulses to begin with, lock him in a cell by himself for five or 10 years, and then let him out?

"It's like keeping a dog that has bitten someone in a cage, kicking it and beating it all the time until it gets as crazy and vicious as it can be, and then one day you open the cage and run away," Grassian says. "Taking someone straight from the Pelican Bay SHU and sending them back to San Francisco or Los Angeles is about as dangerous a thing as you can do."

Even some corrections officials agree. "From my experience as a prison administrator, the prolonged confinement of inmates with little or no contact with others will only make people worse," Jerry Enomoto, a former California director of corrections, said when the *Madrid* lawsuit first hit the courts. (Current Department of Corrections director Ed Alameida did not respond to several requests for an interview.)

Some people, of course, are less affected by the SHU than others. But at best, it seems, coming out of the SHU often leaves prisoners dangerously ill-equipped to cope with the [stress](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) of being around other people.

"Tony" is a 30-year-old Latino and former gangbanger with a generous mustache and hair cropped so short you can see the scars on his head. He has done time in both the Corcoran and Pelican Bay SHUs. Since his parole [in 2002], he has been living with his mom in a quiet Bay Area town and working as a diesel mechanic. On the spring afternoon I met him, an ancient little dog was asleep on a pillow in the front yard next to Tony's massive weight set.

Like Matthew Lowe, Tony was sent straight home from the SHU after a few days in San Quentin. "On my first day out, my mom took me to the grocery store," he says. "I blew up on a couple of people. There was some woman who came up about five feet behind me, and I turned and said, 'Don't stand so close to me!'" Months later, he still breaks out in hot sweats when he's out in crowds. The day before, he says he found himself moving warily away from an [elderly](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?disableHighlighting=false&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&currPage=&scanId=&query=&docIndex=&source=&prodId=OVIC&search_within_results=&p=OVIC%3AGIC&mode=view&catId=&u=mari24586&limiter=&display-query=&displayGroups=&contentModules=&action=e&sortBy=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010016219&windowstate=normal&activityType=BasicSearch&failOverType=&commentary=) woman standing behind him in line at the post office. "I'm not the same," he says. "Look at me, I'm paranoid of a 90-year-old lady in the post office. It's from being so isolated. No wonder people who've been in five or six years come out and kill people."

## Released inmates pose a danger

There have been at least a few hair-raisingly brutal crimes committed by convicts fresh out of supermaxes. In 1992, one day after getting out of the Pelican Bay SHU, Robert Lee Davenport, 24, kidnapped, beat and raped a woman in El Cerrito. In 1995, within a week of his release from the same facility, Robert Walter Scully, 36, killed a Sonoma County sheriff's deputy, took hostages and barricaded himself inside a house in a standoff with police before finally surrendering.

Judging from the media coverage and conversations with people who remember these cases, it doesn't seem that anyone made the connection, or pointed to the SHUs as possibly having contributed to crimes committed by former SHU inmates. Grassian says he has served as consultant on more than a dozen similar cases nationwide. There may be more crimes to add to this list, but no one keeps track of what happens to SHU inmates as a group after they are freed to their parole officers. They are just another former con.

According to Department of Corrections statistics, killings in California prisons dropped dramatically in the years immediately after the Corcoran and Pelican Bay SHUs opened. But the total rate of assaults in the state prisons has been rising since. As of 2000, the inmate-on-inmate assault rate was just as high as in the years before the SHUs opened, and the rate of armed assaults on staff was even higher. Despite its oppressive security, there were 221 assaults in the Pelican Bay SHU [in 2002]—inmates assaulting guards when they are taken to court, for example, or by ingenious methods such as firing homemade blowguns through the perforations in their cell doors. More ominously, in the past [few] years federal prosecutors have charged more than a dozen members of two prison gangs with directing—via letters and visitors—scores of murders and attempted murders in prisons around the country from their cells in the Pelican Bay SHU.

Moore is aware of all this. But, he says, the SHUs are better than nothing. "We have much better investigative tools with the gang leaders in the SHUs," he says. "We know where they are. We can monitor them more closely. Will we ever totally stop them? No. But are we hindering them? Yes. And the best way we've found so far to do that is the SHU."

This is a common view among supermax supporters. Still, as a 1999 National Institute of Corrections report on these facilities points out, "There exists little or no hard data comparing such perceived impacts on entire systems versus the fiscal cost to gain such results." That's no small matter, considering how prodigiously expensive supermaxes are. Taxpayers forked over $218 million to build Pelican Bay, and spend $115 million every year to keep it running. It costs California about $28,000 per year to hold an average prisoner, but SHU inmates, with their elaborate security measures, cost substantially more. The Department of Corrections won't provide an exact figure, but most experts estimate the cost is as much as two or three times greater.

**Opposing viewpoints: Is Solitary Confinement an Effective Punishment?**

Directions: read the 4 articles on solitary confinement and identify multiple facts that support either side of the argument. When you are done reading all the articles you will form a Thesis statement and pick 3 facts, from the articles, you would use to support your personal claim.

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| **Points that support Solitary Confinement** |  **Points that oppose Solitary Confinement** |
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**Thesis statement**: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\*highlight the 3 facts you would use as evidence to support you thesis statement.