

Book Review: Terry Allen Kupers, *Solitary: The Inside Story of Supermax Isolation and How we Can Abolish It*. 1st Edition. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. 2017. ISBN: 978-0520292239 (Hardcover). 172 Pages. \$26.18.

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In the book, *Solitary: The Inside of Supermax Isolation and How We Can Abolish It*, Dr. Terry Kupers a board-certified psychiatrist, a Professor at the Wright Institute, a Distinguished Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, and an expert on correctional litigations and mental health issues across America, provides an in-depth analysis of modern practice of solitary confinement and a powerful piece of advocacy advocating for its abolishment. Professor Kupers a California-based forensic psychologist is one of America's leading experts on solitary confinement. In addition to having edited, co-authored and published dozen of professional articles, book chapters and books, Kupers was the recipient of the Exemplary Psychiatrist Award presented by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) at the 2005 annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, and the William Rossiter Award at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Forensic Mental Health Association of California. Given all the expertise and experience of the author, it is not surprising that *Solitary* proves to be a fascinating exploration of solitary confinement through the lens of social psychology. *Solitary* is written in a manner that often grips like expert report yet sufficiently rigorous and theoretical.

The author begins *Solitary* by delving deeply into history of the practice of solitary confinement, highlights its controversies and

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implications, advocating for its abolishment and recommending alternative for its improvement. According to the author, the practice of placing prisoners in isolation first emerged in America in the era of the Quakers by late 18th Century. The Quakers believed that isolation of prisoners in confined cells by themselves would help in their rehabilitation. However, as time passed, this practice was viewed as ineffective and costly, and therefore it was abandoned. However, the 1980s according to Kupers saw a quick redux in the practice of solitary confinement. Kupers argues that during this period prisons and jails all over the nation became overwhelmingly overcrowded and imbued with violence. Correctional officials responded by placing prisoners in isolation units. But they quickly ran out of space and option. As they were contemplating the alternative, suddenly there was a turn of event. According to Kupers an incident at Marion a federal prison in Illinois in which two guards were killed caused the prison to permanently lock down prisoners for 23 hours a day. This experiment which came to be known as the “Marionization of prisons” (8), give birth to the rise of supermax and was highly modeled by many prison systems across the country. Supermax is a portmanteau of super and maximum and was first used by Californians when referring to the Pelican Bay prison facility. The supermax is a massive “state-of-the-art” prison, highly equipped with modern technological advances and consists entirely of isolation or segregation units. Correction officials were amused by this development and viewed it as the final solution for controlling the problems of prison violence. They reasoned that “if the worst of the worst were locked away” (25), they will be able to maintain control and order in prisons, a rationale that Kupers later on found to be ineffective.

As an expert witness on prisons litigations, Kupers is well familiar with the supermax and how they operate. In fact, Kuper is one of the few outsiders who is granted access into the innermost of prisons, including solitary confinement units. Kupers is proud to have the opportunity to tour prisons in fifteen different states to visit with, and interview over a thousand prisoners. As an eyewitness, Kupers provides his readers with a clear glimpse into the hidden agenda of supermax and its dark sides. Kuper unflinchingly refutes the claim that the supermax is used for housing the “worst-the-worst.” The supermax according to Kupers are built with a hidden agenda of containing, isolating, and punishing prisoners. The logic behind the designing of the supermax is to inflict vengeance on prisoners. Kuper sees the supermax as a place designed for disappearing of “the worst of the worst’ into its solitary confinement units and erase them from public view. Prisoners in these facilities and

particularly in the isolation units are left at the mercy of the guards who brutalize them however they will with no resource for the prisoners (67).

Not surprisingly, Kupers blames the suffering of these prisoners on the architecture of solitary confinement units. Though solitary confinement goes by many names, it can be defined as “the physical isolation of individuals who are confined to their cells for twenty-two to twenty-four hours a day (Voreh, 2019). Kupers provides a clear description of solitary confinement units base on his observations during his visits to these units to meet and interview prisoners. A typical solitary confinement unit according to him normal features a cell made of concrete and steel where prisoners spend approximately 24 hours a day alone. These cells are specifically designed to totally isolate and keep prisoners from making contact with other human beings. The cells in solitary confinement units contain only a bunk, a sink, a toilet, and prisoners belongings. The doors of these cells are made of solid steel with ports in the middle of them which serve a number of purposes. For example, through the port prisoners receive their food tray, medications, commissaries, hygiene and other basic needs. Sometimes these ports can be us to for shooting in stan grenades, or stun guns if prisoners refused to return their food tray or try to barricade themselves in their cells. What’s more, some cells have no natural light, or totally dark with no lights, and no windows. Prisoners consigned to these cells eat their meals alone. In some facilities, prisoners in solitary confinement are allowed to make phone calls, other facilities simply denied them phone privileges. When prisoners come out of their cells for recreation, they are placed alone in a “cage” or what they colloquially call a “dog run” (1). Prisoners in solitary confinement are not only “deprived of meaningful human contact” (Marcus, 2015), they are also denied meaningful activities such as jobs, religious practices, education, and vocational training, to name a few. In general solitary confinement units are filthy and smelly. These austere nature and condition of solitary confinement units makes it a “prison with a prison” (1).

According to Kupers there are two ways prisoners land in solitary confinement namely: disciplinary and non-disciplinary. A disciplinary solitary occurs when prisoners commit rule violation, found guilty and then sentence to serve time in solitary confinement. Non-disciplinary on the other hand occur for variety of reasons. For example, it could occur due to security threat by identifying or validating prisoners as gang affiliated. Or due to need for protective custody, to protect vulnerable prisoners from other prisoners. Prisoners placed in isolation according to Kupers can be held indeterminately, and often, it is the most vulnerable

prisoners who are consigned to solitary. Kupers reasons that because many mentally ill prisoners require protective custody, commit rule violations more frequently, they are disproportionately overrepresented in solitary confinement and tend to be serve longer sentences in isolation than those without such problems. In addition to the disproportionate use of solitary confinement on the mentally ill prisoners, Black prisoners Kupers notes are also disproportionately overrepresented in solitary confinement. Unsurprisingly according to the author, not only are people of color incarcerated in much larger number than whites, but they are also disproportionately overrepresented in solitary confinement units. Racial disparities Kupers argues “do not stop at the prison gate” (71). The shadow of racial disparities follows minorities throughout the criminal justice system, from racial profiling by police in the communities, to injustices and discrimination by the court systems, and to implementation of solitary confinement inside the prisons’ wall. In prisons, Kupers notes that racial disparities are blatantly practiced, and racial stereotypes govern white guards’ decision to send disproportionate number of prisoners of colors to solitary confinement. Prisoners of color, Kupers remarks are substantially more likely than their white counterpart to be punished by solitary confinement where they are subjected to idleness. Moreover, according to the author, they are less likely to receive mental health treatment than their white counterpart. On the contrary, Kupers observes that white prisoners are more likely to hold spots in desirable rehabilitation and education programs, and prisons jobs (71), and are more likely to be diagnosed with mental illness and sent to mental health treatment programs.

Solitary confinement according to Kupers can cause mental and physical damage on the prisoners. For instance, when prisoners are removed from general prison population and subjected to harsh and horrific condition of confinement in the solitary confinement units, their physical and psychological conditions automatically begin to exacerbate. From the moment they arrive to solitary confinement they immediately begin to experience symptoms of “isolation panic” (88). Kupers explains that consignment to solitary confinement can have severe and lasting psychological effects on all prisoners, and particularly those with mental illness. In this extreme environment, many prisoners suffer serious psychological and physical deterioration. Studies support the fact that whether the prisoners previously experienced mental-health problems or not, when prisoners are placed in isolation, they will all be affected by its condition of confinement and which can become dangerous to their mental health (Bennion, 2015). However, prisoners with mental illness

are often impacted the most by the condition of confinement in solitary confinement cells. More often than not, their condition of confinement in isolation exacerbates existing psychiatric conditions and can lead to suicide. Study found that suicide rates for prisoners in solitary confinement are five times higher than that of the general prison population. This partly because long-term confinement to segregation is a major factor in the high suicide rate among prisoners (204). Moreover, many successful suicides in prison occur in segregation cell, where the prisoners who have been released from observation returned (205). When prisoners with mental illness are exposed to the harsh conditions of solitary confinement their symptoms worsen, they begin to experience increased hallucinations, self-harm, and suicide attempts.

According to Kupers consignment to solitary confinement units is even harsher for prisoners with gang validation. For this group of prisoners all of their activities are basically controlled by the guards. Kupers argues the guards are often unfriendly, unfair, and in many cases racist towards these prisoners. These prisoners feel they are denied adequate contact with family members. They are not allowed to make phone calls except on rare occasions. They are denied visits due to policies or cannot have visit due to the geographical isolation of the facilities. They also feel that their mails are being tempered with or deposed off by staffs. The author describes the conditions of these prisoners as having little or no meaningful activities and essentially no programs. They are totally isolated and have no physical contacts with other humans except when being approached by the guards for pat searches, application of restraints, and escorts to and fro their cells. Solitary confinement forces prisoners to adopt living in a world without people. It denies prisoners meaningful interaction and socialization with human beings. According to Kuper most of the prisoners who are serving indeterminate sentencing to solitary confinement due to the fact that nothing can be done to improve their situation are actually experiencing what he calls the “Dead time.” (178). The hidden damage on the mental and physical conditions of prisoners caused by their condition of confinement and prolong isolation in solitary confinement units have attracted the attention of international communities such as the U.N. and human right organization. In fact, U.N. convention against torture considers the repeated use of solitary confinement such the disciplinary solitary to be torture (Fuller, 2019).

Perhaps the most engaging portion of the book occurs in Chapter two in which the author provides an in-depth analysis of the culture of punishment in the supermax isolation units. The author explains that

because rules in the supermax isolation units are well-detailed and controlling, it became easy for guards to use their discretions when making decision on which rules to enforce and which not to. The guard's discretion play important role on how the culture of punishment works. According to the author punishment in the supermax facilities starts with simple action such as denying prisoners privileges such as phone. Then escalates to harsher punishment such turning off cell lights to the prisoners' cells and leaving them in the dark. The worst punishment that can be inflicted on the prisoners in solitary confinement according to Kupers is cell extractions. The author describes the practice of extracting prisoners from their cell as being the prisoners' nightmares. Typically, cell extraction involves use of excessive force and it is conducted with or without immobilizing gas. There are usually five or six officers dressed in riot gears who are tasked with bursting into the cell and take the prisoner down. Prisoners who refused to comply with officers' directives such as returning food trays can be cell extracted. Prior to entering prisoners' cell, the guards will shoot in immobilizing gas, usually known as "O.C." or pepper spray. The culture of punishment according to the author usually gets out of control resulting in the cycle of hostility. Mentally ill prisoners are disproportionately impacted by the culture of punishment and are sent to the solitary confinement frequently. Instead of referring prisoners with serious mental illnesses to mental health treatment when they act bizarre and inappropriate due to their psychiatric conditions (Halvorsen, 2017), the guards simply round them up and sent them to solitary confinement units. According to the author, when prisoners with mental illnesses are locked in solitary confinement, their psychiatric condition deteriorate even further. And the more they continue to exhibit bizarre and inappropriate behaviors such as covering their cell windows, throwing body fluids at staffs, cutting themselves or even attempting to commit suicide, the more they are punished by the guards, and receive additional charges that prolong their stay in solitary confinement. Racial disparities according to the author plays important part in the execution of the culture of punishment in supermax facilities. Kupers notes that in prison racism is blatant and blacks' prisoners are disproportionately sent to the main prison dungeon. Kupers notices that so many of the racial disparities in prisons stem from a fundamental rural-urban culture clash that plays out daily on the cellblocks. The author suggests that because most prisons are built in the rural white communities, most of their workforce particularly guards are hired from the locals. Whereas, most of the minority prisoners, particularly Blacks and Latinos come from urbans and suburban of American cities. As of

result of this cultural barriers, white guards respond to misbehaviors by black prisoners with racial biases and write them up basic for every disciplinary infraction that sent disproportionate number of black prisoners compared to whites to solitary confinement.

Throughout the remaining portion of the book the author establishes his case for the abolishment of the practice of solitary confinement and proposes alternative solution for its improvement. The author calls for massive reduction of prison populations and suggests that mental health and rehabilitation programming in the communities and correctional facilities should be upgraded.

Solitary, takes the readers on a tour beyond the gates and secure parameters supermax isolative confinement units in fifteen states, where the author interviewed “well over a thousand prisoners” (177) in preparation for expert testimony in class actions lawsuit. It takes the readers through the empty hallways of supermax into the heart of solitary confinement units. This book is a must read for anyone wanting to learn more about the significantly underreported history of supermax prisons build up as well as the connection this history has to the struggles that these prisoners are going through. It is an asset for those who would like to learn and gain insight into the nature and conditions of solitary confinement units as well as what also happens there. The treasure of this books lies in the wealth of knowledge about supermax isolation units that it provides the readers with. One of the strengths of this book is the focus on the effects of prolonged solitary confinement on prisoners, particularly prisoners with mental illness and special needs. It also useful for conveying to the readers the realities of being segregated in a windowless cell for 23 hours a day. The reader, in turn is left to contemplated and question the legitimacy and validity of supermax prison and solitary confinement practice in general.

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