Prisoners of Solitude: Bringing History to Bear on Prison Health Policy

Margaret Charleroy* and Hilary Marland

Centre for the History of Medicine, Department of History, University of Warwick, Humanities Building, Room 449, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom

Season two of the popular prison drama *Orange is the New Black* opens in a small concrete cell, no larger than a parking space. The cell is windowless and sparsely furnished; it holds a toilet, a sink and a limp bed. The only distinguishing feature we see is a mural of smeared egg, made by the cell's resident, the show's protagonist Piper Chapman. When a correctional officer arrives at this solitary confinement cell, he wakes her, and mocks her egg fresco. "This is art," she insists. "This is a yellow warbler drinking out of a daffodil." Her rambling suggests the confusion and disorientation associated with inmates in solitary confinement, who often become dazed after only a few days in isolation. As the scene continues, we see Piper exhibit further symptoms associated with both short- and long-term solitary confinement—memory loss, inability to reason, mood swings, anxiety—all indicating mental deterioration and impaired mental health. In this and other episodes, we begin to see solitary confinement as the greatest villain in the show, more villainous than any character a writer could create. The new and growing trend of television prison dramas like *Orange is the New Black* brings the issue of solitary confinement, along with other issues related to incarceration, to a more general audience, exposing very real problems in the failing contemporary prison system, not just in America, but worldwide. The show's success leads us to ask how history, alongside fictional dramas and contemporary case reports, can draw attention to the issue of solitary confinement.

Solitary confinement harms prisoners who were not mentally ill upon entry to the prison and worsens the mental health of those who were. Both historical and contemporary evidence has demonstrated how both short- and long-term solitary confinement threatens the physical and mental health of those who endure it. So how and why has it become one of the most widely used means to control and punish inmates in the Western prison system, one involving around 80,000 people in prison currently in the US? And, how can historical perspectives inform contemporary discussions concerning the effects of solitary confinement on the mental health of inmates?

The health effects of solitary confinement are currently being debated by policymakers, governments, academics,

prison staff, criminologists, psychiatrists and historians on both sides of the Atlantic. The potency of historical evidence—on this and other themes related to mental health and the criminal justice system—was on display at a recent workshop in London on "The Prison and Mental Health," co-convened by Professor Hilary Marland at the University of Warwick, England and Dr. Catherine Cox, based at University College Dublin, Ireland. The event involved historians, criminologists, psychiatrists working in prison settings, representatives of prison reform organizations and policymakers, who came together to explore the potential of history to inform, enhance, and shape current debates on the prison and mental health. The event, showed, above all, how a historical perspective allows us to link contemporary debates around solitary confinement with the prison regimes and their associated philosophies of rehabilitation, treatment and punishment that inspired this lingering practice. It also underlined the close and enduring relationship between solitary confinement and high rates of mental illness. Until now, a historical perspective has remained largely absent from academic and legal writing on a topic that strives to produce policy changes in prisons. Yet history can make a powerful contribution to these discussions, documenting shifts in prison policy and discipline and acting as the wellspring of narratives that highlight the devastating impact of solitary confinement over the longue durée. Viewing contemporary policy through a historical narrative exposes sources of enduring problems, as well as giving them faces, names and stories.

In the past decade, prison administrators in both the United States and England have significantly increased the use of solitary confinement as a means of "managing" difficult prisoners. But solitary confinement, as illuminated at the workshop, is far from new. Its roots can be traced to the rise of the modern penitentiary in the early nineteenth century, when isolating all inmates was used as a means of rehabilitation, or so prison reformers and administrators thought. What began as a program to rehabilitate inmates in America during the early nineteenth century, and was brought to England just over a decade later, in practice led to increased rates of mental illness among prisoners, which the prison physicians and chaplains recorded. A nineteenth-century inmate at Eastern State Penitentiary echoed the experience of Piper: "In the gloomy solitude of a sullen cell there is not one redeeming

Corresponding author: Charleroy, M. (m.charleroy@warwick.ac.uk).
*Corresponding author.

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principle. There is but one step between the prisoner and insanity."[1]

Despite these effects, solitary confinement sprang from high-minded motives. At the start of the nineteenth century, prison reformers reconsidered the relationship between punishment and reformation, and experimented with prison regimes and architecture. In 1787, a coalition of Philadelphia social reformers, mostly Quakers, and led by Benjamin Rush, formed the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons. In direct contrast to the corporal and capital punishment employed in existing prisons, the Pennsylvania reformers believed that, once isolated, prisoners would be reformed through silent, spiritual reflection. To achieve these reformative goals, they designed a prison where inmates would have little or no contact with either other prisoners or staff. This strict isolation, it was hoped, would allow inmates to reflect upon their actions, inducing penitence and promoting deep-seated moral and spiritual reform.

These reforms were the foundation of what became known as the Pennsylvania system—also known as the separate system—of prison policy and inmate reform. The system was first implemented at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1829. With the construction of a new prison, advocates of the Pennsylvania system were able to build the assumption of solitary confinement into the very architecture of the prison in a way that had never before been attempted. Prisoners ate all meals in their cells. Cell walls were thick and prevented inmates from communicating with one another. Attached to each cell was a small yard for private exercise by inmates. The need for these solitary cells guided the physical design of the prison and led to the famed radial design, pioneered by John Haviland (Fig. 1).

Jeremy Bentham's panopticon—though never actually built—was the inspiration for Haviland's radial plan. At the center of Haviland's structure stood an eighty-foot tower, which served as a viewing platform for prison guards who would thus be able to observe all of the prison corridors from a single vantage point and monitor inmate behavior at all times. Seven single story wings radiated from the central tower. The tower guards could see the prisoners in their individual exercise yards, though the prisoners themselves would have had no contact with one another because inmates were given time in their individual exercise yards at staggered times throughout the day to diminish the possibility that they would communicate with one other. Indeed, communication between prisoners was punished harshly. Eastern State was a penitentiary in a literal sense. The physical structure, which reinforced strict solitude, was designed to encourage introspection and, ultimately, penitence. Haviland's radial design for Eastern State Penitentiary became the most widely copied prison format in the nineteenth-century United States.

Less than a decade after Eastern State Penitentiary opened its doors, it became apparent that isolation was causing mental breakdown amongst the prisoners. Reports describing the effects of the Pennsylvania system on the minds of inmates appeared in annual reports of the Prison Discipline Society, *The Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy*, and numerous other publications popular among social reformers and scholars. In the 1838 report of the Prison Discipline Society, the "Effects of the System of Solitary Confinement, Day and Night, on the Mind" was included as subcategory of discussion, one that was retained through the following decade.[2] Their argument was simple: isolation produced higher rates of mortality and insanity among prison inmates.

English prison reformers visited American prisons at the height of debates about the merits and drawbacks of solitary confinement. In 1833 William Crawford, founder member of the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline, was commissioned by the British government to report on American prisons and penal ideas. He returned to England entranced by the system in operation at Eastern State Penitentiary, eager to apply the same model of prison discipline in the new prison being planned in London, Pentonville Model Prison.

Crawford and Reverend Whitworth Russell, who were appointed prison inspectors for London in 1835, were vigorous advocates of the separate system and brushed off warnings of the dangers inherent in the regime to the mental state of the prisoners that American reformers put forth. They argued that what distinguished their model at Pentonville from the Philadelphia system was the access prisoners would have at all times to the prison officers, notably the chaplains. Pentonville's critics were not convinced. During his travels in America, author Charles Dickens most wanted to see two sights: the falls at Niagara and Eastern State Penitentiary. His visit to Eastern State prompted a critical response. In particular, he condemned the system of solitary confinement imposed there in his *American Notes*, published in 1842, the year Pentonville took in its first prisoners. Encountering several of Eastern State's prisoners, he referred to how one was "a dejected heart-broken wretched creature," another "a helpless, crushed, and broken man."[3] Dickens concluded, "I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body."[4] An editorial in the London *Times*, which campaigned against the separate system, predicated that insanity would be a "probable," even "inevitable," outcome of the Pentonville regime.[5]

Pentonville Model Prison heralded the launch of a new prison system and approach to punishment in Britain when it opened in 1842. Like Eastern State Penitentiary, Pentonville was intended, through religious exhortation, rigorous discipline, moral training and the imposition of separation in its most extreme form, to produce true and deep repentance and rehabilitation in its convict population. The approach was exacting and rigorous. Pentonville, with its 500 inmates housed in tiered lines of cells radiating from a

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[1] State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Records, Series 4, Prisoners' Correspondence, Prisoners' Letters, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

[2] *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Prison Discipline Society* (Boston: The Society's Room, 1838), 236.

[3] Cited in David Wilson, "Testing a Civilisation: Charles Dickens on the American Penitentiary System," *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 48 (2009): 280–96, on 290–91.

[4] Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation: Vol 1* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1842), 239.

[5] Editorial, *The Times*, May 1, 1841.