

## New project sheds light on the worldwide use of solitary confinement

Andrea Mølgaard<sup>1</sup>

The ‘Mapping Solitary Confinement’ project, launched in early 2024 by Dr Sharon Shalev and collaborators, aims to shed light on the global use of solitary confinement - also known as ‘isolation’ or ‘segregation’.

The project, a collaborative effort involving contributors from all over the world, is structured around relevant human rights standards, in particular the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture’s recommendations and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners also known as the ‘Mandela Rules’ (UN, 2011; UN General Assembly, 2015). These standards state that solitary confinement should only be used as a last resort, for a short a time as possible and for no longer than 15 days in total. Despite being a ‘soft law’ instrument which is not legally binding, the Mandela Rules provide a strong ethical and normative framework for evaluating the use of solitary confinement and a standard against which practices can be measured (Shalev, 2024).

The project includes comprehensive reports on national practices from 57 jurisdictions within 42 countries across six continents, compiled by a wide network of volunteers all over the world. The project, available online on a dedicated website, is still in progress, encompassing only a representation of the countries in the world. It is therefore crucial for the project to receive extensive support, including submissions of new country reports, as well as maintaining and updating data.

The project also includes an overview and key findings report, completed with support from the Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT). The report highlights a widespread and persistent use of solitary confinement, as none of the countries covered by the project appears to manage its prison system without resorting to the use of solitary confinement in some form. The report also demonstrates that solitary confinement is widely used as disciplinary punishment for offences committed in prison. These offences could range from minor disciplinary issues, such as speaking disrespectfully to staff to physical violence against another person. Other grounds for imposing

solitary confinement included, in the majority of countries surveyed, allegedly protecting individuals from self-harm or harm by others, and managing prisoners labelled as ‘high risk’ (Shalev, 2024). Other areas covered by the project include conditions in solitary confinement units, its duration, safeguards, and the role of health staff in solitary confinement units.

This project holds special relevance for the Torture Journal, given its longstanding focus on solitary confinement. Accordingly, we will highlight notable quotes from papers featured in previous issues of the journal:

“although there is a long way to go before the use of solitary confinement will end, the recommendations contained in the International Guiding Statement are a valuable, fundamental, and pragmatic tool to centralise the issue of prison isolation in the debate on the rights of incarcerated individuals, and to achieve its end” (Stroppa & Moss, 2023).

“Solitary confinement deprives your senses, but most than anything banns colors. Because of blindfolds and because of the monotonous tones of what surrounds you. Colors are at the heart of emotions and feelings. Quoting Koestler: “When this morning, for the first time I looked out of the window and saw a green field landscape filled with flowers and trees, it was all a dream. The main issue is that the trees and flowers have color. Only after that, you notice the monotony of black and white and its impact” (Koestler, 2006 pp 238-9). When asked about their mental state, most prisoners (11/16) said that they suffered some kind of severe emotional breakdown, labelled in their own words as depression, anxiety or permanent irritability.” (Khodaei, 2017).

The project advocates for increased scrutiny and awareness of the harms of this prison practice, reserving it as last resort in emergency situations, and a complete ban on its use with people who are mentally unwell and other people in a position of vulnerability. The initiative serves as a call to action, urging all stakeholders to advocate for alternatives that do not compromise the health and wellbeing of people deprived of their liberty. We therefore encourage Torture Journal readers to provide support to this important initiative.

For more information on the ‘Mapping Solitary Confinement’ project please visit its website using the following link: <https://www.solitaryconfinement.org/mapping-solitary-confinement>. We strongly encourage readers to contact the editor of the web-site to support this important initiative by contributing country data or reports ([Sharon.Shalev@solitaryconfinement.org](mailto:Sharon.Shalev@solitaryconfinement.org)).

<sup>1</sup> Editorial Assistant, International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims. Correspondence to [akm@irct.org](mailto:akm@irct.org)

*References*

- Khodaei, S. M. (2017). Solitary confinement, Section 350, Evin prison in Tehran. *Torture Journal*, 27(2). Online: <https://doi.org/10.7146/torture.v27i2.97221>
- Shalev, S. (2024). *Mapping Solitary Confinement: A Key Findings Report*. Online: <https://www.solitaryconfinement.org/mapping-solitary-confinement-findings-report>
- Stroppa, R., & Moss, D. (2023). Introducing the International Guiding Statement on alternatives to solitary confinement. *Torture Journal*, 33(3), 113–119. Online: <https://doi.org/10.7146/torture.v33i3.141379>
- UN. (2011). UN Special Rapporteur on torture calls for the prohibition of solitary confinement. Online: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2011/10/un-special-rapporteur-torture-calls-prohibition-solitary-confinement#:~:text=The%20Special%20Rapporteur%20also%20called,and%20persons%20with%20mental%20disabilities.>
- UN General Assembly. (2015). United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules). A/RES/70/175. Online: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/NelsonMandelaRules.pdf>