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For many decades, the civilized world has recognized prolonged isolation of prisoners in cruel conditions to be inhumane, even torture. The Geneva Conventions forbid it. Even at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, where prisoners were sexually humiliated and physically abused systematically and with official sanction, the jailers had to get permission of their commanding general to keep someone in isolation for more than 30 days.

So Americans should be disgusted and outraged that prolonged solitary confinement, sometimes for months or even years, has become a routine form of prison management. It is inflicting unnecessary, indecent and inhumane suffering on tens of thousands of prisoners.

The issue came to the fore [most recently](#) because of a three-week hunger strike by inmates at Pelican Bay State Prison in California near the Oregon border that began on July 1 in the Orwellian Security Housing Unit, where inmates are held in wretched isolation in small windowless cells for more than 22 hours a day, some for many years.

Possessions, reading material, exercise and exposure to natural light and the outside are severely restricted. Meals are served through slots in steel cell doors. There is little in the way of human interaction. Returning to the general prison population is often conditioned on inmates divulging information on other gang members, putting themselves in jeopardy.

How inmates in these circumstances communicated to organize the protest is unclear, but it quickly spread to other California prisons. About 6,600 inmates participated at its peak. California's huge prison system is dysfunctional in so many ways. In May, [the Supreme Court found](#) conditions at the overcrowded prisons so egregious that they violated the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment and ordered the state to cut its prison population by more than 30,000 inmates. The case did not address the issue of long-term solitary confinement.

With their health deteriorating, those inmates continuing to fast resumed eating after state prison officials met a few modest demands. Inmates in Pelican Bay's isolation unit will get wool caps for cold weather, wall calendars to mark the passing time and some educational programming. Prison officials said current isolation and gang management policies are under review. But the protest has raised awareness about the national shame of extended solitary confinement at Pelican Bay and at high-security, "supermax" prisons all around the country.

Once used occasionally as a short-term punishment for violating prison rules, solitary confinement's prevalent use as a long-term prison management strategy is a fairly recent development, Colin Dayan, a professor at Vanderbilt University, [said in a recent Op-Ed article in The Times](#). Nationally, more than 20,000 inmates are confined in "supermax" facilities in horrid conditions.

Prison officials claim the treatment is necessary for combating gang activity and other threats to prison order. It is possible to maintain physical separation of prisoners without ultraharsh levels of deprivation and isolation. Mississippi, which once set the low bar for terrible prison practices, saw a steep reduction of prison violence and ample monetary savings when it dramatically cut back on long-term solitary several years ago.

Holding prisoners in solitary also is very expensive, and several other states have begun to make reductions. In any case, decency requires limits. Resorting to a dehumanizing form of punishment well known to induce suffering and drive people into mental illness is beyond them.