

A call for an end to solitary confinement



© 2017 Daniel Soekov for Human Rights Watch. A prisoner lies in his solitary confinement cell in the safety unit at Lotus Glen Correctional Centre, northern Queensland.

18 May 2020

New research from The University of Queensland has called for an end to solitary confinement in Queensland prisons because of the impact on the mental and physical health of prisoners.

The multidisciplinary **report** (<https://bel.uq.edu.au/research/human-rights/solitary-confinement>) was co-authored by **Law School** (<https://law.uq.edu.au/>) researcher **Professor Tamara Walsh** (<http://researchers.uq.edu.au/researcher/1463>) , Director and Principal Solicitor of **Prisoners' Legal Service** (<http://pls.qld.com/>) (PLS) Helen Blaber and a team of UQ students and PLS volunteers.

The report found many Queensland prisoners are held in solitary confinement for extended periods, some for years, while prisoners with mental health conditions receive inadequate treatment.

Professor Walsh said this was concerning as solitary confinement causes severe, sometimes-permanent psychological harm and worsens pre-existing mental health conditions.

"In solitary confinement, prisoners are isolated in their cells for at least 22 hours per day with little to no contact with others and limited mental stimulation and access to fresh air and natural light," Professor Walsh said.

"It's not uncommon for these prisoners to show signs of psychosis, engage in self-harm and obsessive-compulsive behaviours, become hypersensitive to noise or develop a fear of open spaces.

"As a result, United Nations bodies have determined solitary confinement should only be used as a last resort for periods of 15 days or less, and courts worldwide have conceded these conditions may breach fundamental human rights.

"However, in Queensland, 'separate confinement' is the default option for managing prisoners' behavioural and mental health issues, and there are no hard legal limits on its duration."

Ms Blaber said she had partnered with UQ out of concern for her clients in solitary confinement across the state.

"During this time of COVID-19 shutdowns and restrictions, it can feel as though we are all in solitary confinement of sorts," Ms Blaber said.

"But for many of our clients in Queensland prisons, this is their daily reality – the difference is they have no smart phone or internet and sometimes they don't even have a pen and paper.

"All of the things we can do to keep ourselves well during isolation are just not possible for people in prison.

"Additionally, although Queensland legislation outlines minimum requirements for prisoners in solitary, these requirements don't comply with international best practice, and there is a disconnect between the law, policy and practice.

"For example, prisoners can be placed in cells without access to running water or power and some aren't given the chance to exercise outside for at least two daylight hours per day as required by law."

09:40

Legal perspectives on solitary confinement in Queensland (<https://vimeo.com/417823405>) from **UQ BEL Faculty** (<https://vimeo.com/uqbelfaculty>) on **Vimeo** (<https://vimeo.com>) .

The research team interviewed Queensland prisoners' lawyers and advocates and analysed client files to learn about prisoners' lived experiences in solitary.

Based on their findings, Professor Walsh said their key recommendation was to abolish solitary confinement.

"We understand solitary confinement can't be eliminated overnight," Professor Walsh said.

"However, there are interim best practice measures that can be taken immediately to improve wellbeing and behavioural outcomes for prisoners in solitary, as well as legitimate, safe and workable alternatives to solitary confinement that focus on prisoner rehabilitation."

Ms Blaber said the report would provide PLS with a single resource to support its client advocacy and legal arguments.

"We hope this may create a pathway to developing alternative measures in Queensland, which we believe will improve the wellbeing of vulnerable people in prison and promote community safety," she said.

Professor Walsh, Ms Blaber and a group of Australian and international solitary confinement experts will answer questions about this report during an upcoming panel discussion video. Find out more and submit your questions **here** (<https://bel.uq.edu.au/human-rights/solitary-confinement-panel>) .

Media: Professor Tamara Walsh, t.walsh@law.uq.edu.au; Helen Blaber, helenb@plsqld.com; BEL Communications, media@bel.uq.edu.au, 0409 612 798.

Share link:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb8t6l8d>

Subscribe to the UQ News weekly newsletter



Environment + Sustainability, Research, Science



Hunting threatens one of the world's most amazing wildlife migrations 21 May 2020



Belt and Road's financiers fall short on biodiversity 12 May 2020

(<https://twitter.com/uqnews>)

text=A u=<http://tinyurl.com/yb8t6l8d>

call for call for

an end an end

to to

solitary solitary

confinement confinement



[Recent Australian wildfires made worse by logging](#) 6 May 2020



[Stopping deforestation: lessons from Colombia](#) 1 May 2020

Research, Science



[Why cats have more lives than dogs when it comes to snakebite](#) 19 May 2020



[A mathematical framework could help safely ease social distancing](#) 6 May 2020

Careers, Law, Students



[Legal clinics get a boost from UQ law students](#) 13 May 2020

Health + Medicine, Research



[Lessons from the past to help the present pandemic response](#) 1 May 2020



[Answering the question 'Will I get better?'](#) 1 May 2020

Recent Headlines



[Hunting threatens one of the world's most amazing wildlife migrations](#) 21 May 2020

-



[COVID-19: could saliva tests replace nasal swabs?](#) 20 May 2020



[UQ's Tesla battery saving big energy bucks](#) 20 May 2020



[Why cats have more lives than dogs when it comes to snakebite](#) 19 May 2020

[More headlines](#)