In 2011, 16-year-old Kalief Browder was accused of stealing a backpack. Of the 1,111 days that Kalief spent in jail awaiting his trial, two thirds were spent in solitary confinement. The robbery charges against him were eventually dismissed, but he had missed the last two years of high school and even his graduation. He felt the system had “robbed him of his happiness.”

In the early 1800s, systems of confinement and labor were developed to deal with criminals, replacing hangings or public beatings. It was thought that prisoners placed in isolation could reflect on their misbehavior. Subsequently, solitary confinement became a widespread practice in the U.S. prison system.

Today, solitary confinement is often used to remove dangerous and violent criminals from the general prison population. However, it can also be imposed as a punishment for violating prison rules. While in solitary confinement, prisoners are kept in closed cells for 22–24 hours per day. Food is pushed through a small hole in the metal door. Often the cells have no windows and a light is kept on all day and night.

The 8th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits the use of “cruel and unusual punishment.” Many critics of solitary confinement point to the mental and physical suffering caused by long-term isolation. The United Nations considers more than 15 days in a row in solitary confinement to be a form of torture. Kalief spent 10 months in isolation after being a victim in a fight. After his release from jail, he explained, “...in my mind right now I feel like I’m still in jail, because I’m still feeling the side effects from what happened in there.” In June 2015, he committed suicide.

Supporters of solitary confinement argue that it keeps prisoners and prison guards safe. For example, solitary confinement can be used to protect a prisoner at risk because of race, sexual orientation, or religion. In fact, when Kalief went to prison, his brother told him to break a rule and get sent to solitary if he felt threatened. The federal supermax prison in Florence, Colorado, has 490 solitary confinement units, and was created in response to the murders of two prison guards on the same day in Ohio. Prison workers already perform a dangerous and risky job, and solitary confinement allows them to feel protected from the most dangerous inmates while performing their job duties.

When, if ever, do you think solitary confinement should be used?

Questions for Classroom Discussion:
- What does “cruel and unusual punishment” mean?
- Why did Kalief’s brother advise him to go into solitary confinement?
- What rights should prisoners have?
- Should people who commit heinous crimes still have rights?
- What about people who are awaiting trial?
USE THE FOCUS WORDS

**isolation** *(noun)* separation from others

- **Sample Sentence:** People thought that prisoners placed in *isolation* would reflect on their misbehavior.
- **Turn and Talk:** Do you prefer to work on your homework around other people or in *isolation*?

**confinement** *(noun)* restriction within limits

- **Sample Sentence:** The kitten was kept in *confinement* until her wound healed.
- **Turn and Talk:** Think of one or more situations that would lead to a person’s *confinement* to a wheelchair.

**system** *(noun)* a way of doing something that follows a plan

- **Sample Sentence:** Catalina developed a *system* to organize her music collection.
- **Turn and Talk:** Come up with suggestions for improving the education *system*.

**mental** *(adjective)* relating to the mind

- **Sample Sentence:** Meditation and exercise are some activities that can improve *mental* health.
- **Turn and Talk:** What activities do you do for your *mental* health?

**solitary** *(adjective)* without others; alone

- **Sample Sentence:** Solitary journeys in nature are a rite of passage in some cultures.
- **Turn and Talk:** Do you think it’s healthy to have some *solitary* time in your day? Explain.
**DO THE MATH**

**Solitary confinement** takes a toll on prisoner health. Most doctors agree that long-term isolation causes paranoia, anxiety, and mental illness. For example, inmates in solitary confinement are 7 times more likely to hurt themselves than inmates in the regular population. In the summer of 2013, 30,000 adult inmates in the California prison system took part in a hunger strike. By refusing to eat their meals, prisoners drew attention to the use of long-term, indefinite solitary confinement in California prisons. Some prisoners refused to eat for the full 60 days of the hunger strike. Finally California lawmakers agreed to gather information about the use of long-term isolation in the state. Forced isolation may be even more harmful to young prisoners. The Department of Justice estimates that one third of youth in prison have been isolated from other residents, and more than half of these prisoners have been confined for longer than 24 hours.

**Option 1:** The floor of a solitary cell is usually 6 feet by 10 feet. Which array shows an area equivalent to the area of a solitary confinement cell?

- [ ] = 1 square foot

A. 

B. 

C. 

D. 

**Option 2:** To get a better sense of the size of a solitary confinement cell, it is helpful to compare a cell to another space that you know well. For example, you could compare a solitary cell (about 6 feet by 10 feet) to a public bathroom stall. Most public bathroom stalls measure 3 feet by 5 feet.

What percent of a solitary confinement cell would a public bathroom stall occupy?

Bathroom stall area = 3’ x 5’ = 15’

Cell area = 6’ x 10’ = 60’

15 ÷ 60 = .25

The stall would occupy 25% of the cell.

**Discussion Question:** Prison guards have one of the highest rates of injuries and illnesses among professionals. These injuries are often caused by inmates. As the U.S. prison system becomes more crowded, prisoners become harder to control and attacks on prison guards become more frequent. Supporters of solitary confinement say that isolating the most dangerous and powerful inmates makes prisons safer for guards and other inmates. But critics say that solitary confinement is mental torture. Since the Constitution forbids “cruel and unusual punishment,” they argue that solitary confinement should be prohibited. Do you agree? Or is it more important to protect the right of the guards and other prisoners to be safe?
THINK SCIENTIFICALLY

Ms. Kahn’s class is discussing the use of **solitary confinement** in the prison **system**, and in particular its health effects. It turns out that scientists have actually studied the effects of **isolation**. The class read about a presentation on **solitary confinement** that some researchers gave at a conference. Ethan and Sumiko summarized some of the information the scientists shared:

Prisoners in **isolation** tend to become confused about who they are. They also suffer from high rates of depression, dizziness, rapid heartbeats, hallucinations, headaches, and suicidal thoughts. Additionally, prisoners in **isolation** tend to develop vision problems and lose weight.

Extreme stress from loss of personal contact can even cause parts of the brain to shrink over time. One important brain structure that can shrink this way is the hippocampus, which is involved in memory, decision-making, and control of emotion.

Activity:

Use Ethan and Sumiko’s report to list the ten effects of **solitary confinement** that you think are the most serious. Then, check the boxes to indicate whether each effect is physical, **mental**, or both.

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<thead>
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<th>Effects:</th>
<th>Physical</th>
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*Answers will vary.*

One of the goals of the prison **system** is to make inmates better members of society when they are eventually released. How might **solitary confinement** affect this goal?
DEBATE THE ISSUE
Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

A
☐ Solitary confinement should never be used.

OR

B
☐ Prisons should use solitary confinement when they think it is necessary.

OR

CREATE YOUR OWN

Jot down a few notes on how to support your position during a discussion or debate.

OR

OR

OR

OR

OR

OR

OR

OR

OR

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these:

“Can you show me evidence in the text that...”

“You make a good point, but have you considered...”

“I believe that...”

“I agree with you, but...”
TAKE A STAND

Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples. Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

isolation  |  confinement  |  system  |  mental  |  solitary

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