

Surviving Solitary Confinement

Professor Ian O'Donnell MRIA

UCD Sutherland School of Law



SUMMARY

Professor O'Donnell's work reframes scholarly debates about prolonged solitary confinement, the abolition of which is an imperative for prison systems around the world. It provides prisoners in isolation with a set of tools to help them cope with an intrinsically destructive experience.

It was relied upon in the High Court to block the extradition of a terror suspect to the United States on the grounds that if it went ahead he would be held in isolation and this would constitute inhuman and degrading treatment. It contributed to a change in the law relating to solitary confinement, aligning Ireland more closely with United Nations standards.

"I have no doubt in my mind that there was a direct relationship between Ian's research, the challenge he issued, and the creation of the new statutory instrument. To me, this is tangible proof of how criminological research can directly affect policy and practice, leading to better outcomes for society."

(Michael Donnellan, Director General of the Irish Prison Service, April 2018).

RESEARCH

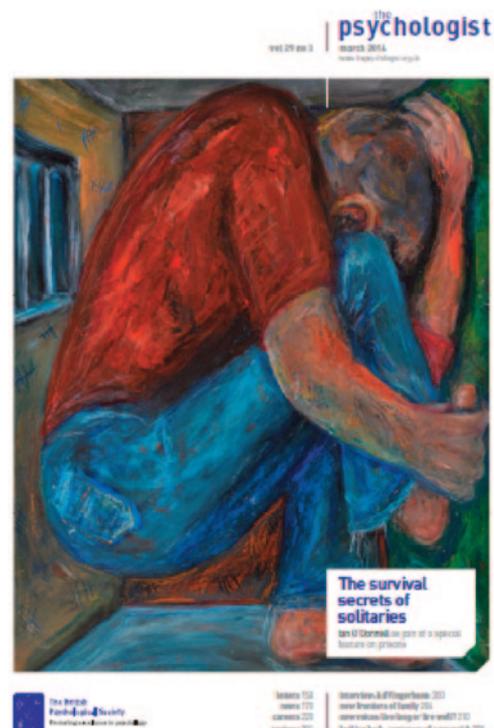
The research culminating in the book *Prisoners, Solitude, and Time* (Oxford University Press, 2014) was carried out over ten years. It was followed by an article in *The Psychologist* (March 2016) and an invitation to contribute a chapter to an award-winning collection published by the American Psychological Association (*Living on Death Row: The Psychology of Waiting to Die*, April 2018).

O'Donnell's work incorporates a revisionist history of how isolation was used as a penal strategy as well as an attempt to make sense of how prisoners deal with the passage of time in a place not of their choosing, to a timetable not of their design.

The harmful consequences of prolonged solitary confinement are well known. They include impaired concentration, memory loss, hallucinations, paranoia, depression, anxiety and lethargy.

The denial of engagement with others leads to human relations that are hostile in affect and effect. The abolition of this abhorrent practice is an international priority (e.g., over 80,000 prisoners in the United States are in solitary).

A key insight of the work is that the burdens of solitary confinement can be alleviated. Some prisoners have learned to turn the situation to their advantage and experience post-traumatic growth. Their survival strategies offer vital lessons about how to soften the impact of an inherently damaging practice, pending its eradication.



O'Donnell's research was featured as the cover story of *The Psychologist* (circulation 57,000) in March 2016. The accompanying article was picked up by, and reprinted in, a newsletter sent to prisoners on death row in the United States (of whom there are 2,600).

RESEARCH IMPACT

In addition to its academic impact, the research was relied upon by the High Court in the case of Ali Charaf Damache whose extradition to the United States was denied on the grounds that the segregation he faced would constitute inhuman and degrading treatment (judgment delivered by Ms Justice Aileen Donnelly, May 2015). Professor O'Donnell's involvement in this litigation followed an article he wrote for The Sunday Times.

The work has impacted on policy and legislation. Michael Donnellan, Director General of the Irish Prison Service, invited O'Donnell to meet with his Elimination of Solitary Confinement Working Group in January 2016 and afterwards to address the IPS Strategy and Policy Group. O'Donnell challenged the IPS to achieve full compliance with the UN Rules on solitary confinement. The necessary Statutory Instrument was introduced in July 2017.

The Director General acknowledged his role was pivotal, stating: "I have no doubt in my mind that there was a direct relationship between Ian's research, the challenge he issued, and the creation of the new statutory instrument. To me, this is tangible proof of how criminological research can directly affect policy and practice, leading to better outcomes for society."

His policy and outreach contribution continues, most recently with an invitation to join the former UN Rapporteur on Torture to address an Irish Penal Reform Trust conference on solitary confinement in February 2018.

His research has been brought to the attention of those whose concerns it addresses and has had wide social impact. The article in The Psychologist was reprinted in The Wing of Friendship, a newsletter sent to prisoners on death row in the United States.

A copy of Prisoners, Solitude, and Time has been placed in every prison library in Ireland. A man who served time in solitary confinement in South Africa during the apartheid era sent Professor O'Donnell his prison diary when he read it.

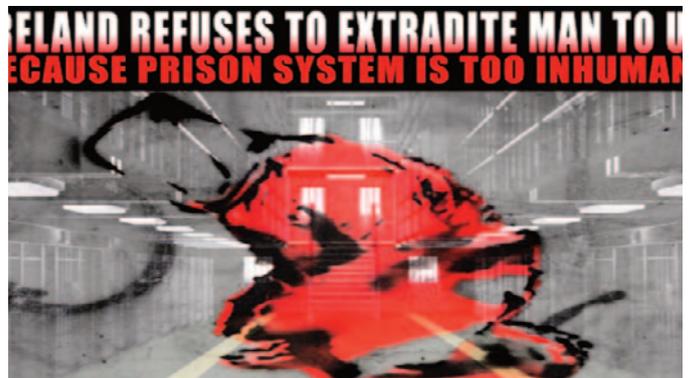
President Michael D Higgins also wrote to Professor O'Donnell after reading the book, describing it as: "A particularly valuable contribution to penal literature... profound and important...I want to congratulate you on a beautifully written and excellently researched work which I hope reaches the audience it deserves."

A video about the book is one of the most popular uploads on the UCD YouTube channel with more than 183,000 views.



Prisoners, Solitude, and Time was launched in Mountjoy Prison in December 2015. This event was marked by a feature in *The Irish Times* and an accompanying video (<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/tales-from-the-block-surviving-in-solitary-1.2471253>). Another video was produced by UCD University Relations; this was broadcast in March 2016 and posted on the UCD and Irish Prison Service websites (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZnMxaezVd0>).

The release of Ali Charaf Damache, in whose case Professor



O'Donnell was an expert witness, made headlines internationally (e.g. <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-extradite-supermax-20150809-story.html>).

RESEARCH REFERENCES

Publications

O'Donnell, I. (2018) 'Psychological survival in isolation: Tussling with time on death row', In: H. Toch, J. Acker and V. Bonventre (eds.) *Living on Death Row: The Psychology of Waiting to Die*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <http://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4316185.aspx>

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<https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-29/march-2016/survival-secrets-successful-solitaries>

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<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396607/obo-9780195396607-0110.xml>

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<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199684489.do>

O'Donnell, I. (2014) 'Time and isolation as performance art: A note', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 10: 81-86.
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1741659014528345>

Videos

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/tales-from-the-block-surviving-in-solitary-1.2471253>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZnMxaezVd0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZgEDKDgKkA>

Reviews and citations of *Prisoners, Solitude and Time*

"A wonderful, thorough and nuanced piece of scholarship... balanced and dispassionate ...a lesson in scholarly pluralism... an extraordinary wealth of insight" (Ben Crewe, Cambridge)

"Poignant and surprisingly inspiring" (Keramet Reiter, University of California, Irvine)

"An engaging, beautifully written book that merits careful reading...bold in its scope and full of ideas" (Sharon Shalev, Oxford).

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/prisoners-solitude-and-time-9780199684489?cc=ie&lang=en&#>

As well as being widely and enthusiastically reviewed, the book has been cited by researchers from the US, Canada, the UK, Ireland and Africa.

High Court judgment citing the work

<http://www.courts.ie/Judgments.nsf/09859e7a3f34669680256ef3004a27de/3e2641854ba1ddc380257e580045ea0d?OpenDocument>

Statutory Instrument inspired by the work

<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/si/276/made/en/print>