

Speaking to the **SOLITARY**

Dostoyevsky wrote that the degree of a society's civilisation could be judged by its prisons. So what do the growing number of Supermax prisons say about the world we live in? Jessica Winterstein talks to **Sharon Shalev** about her research into solitary confinement.

Jessica Winterstein: What prompted you to focus your research on Supermax prisons?

Sharon Shalev: My initial interest in solitary confinement started when I was working for a human rights organisation dealing with detainees who had been tortured. Often the initial stage was solitary confinement, a form of mental torture.

I then discovered that although there are human rights instruments prohibiting torture, some specifically mentioning solitary confinement, there was a new trend of 'Supermax prisons', especially in the United States, completely predicated on solitary confinement of the

strictest sort, and that prisoners can be isolated for many, many years. These started in the US, but can now be found in other countries including Australia, Brazil, Peru and Holland. So far there is no Supermax in the UK, although the idea has been mooted in the past.

I visited two Supermax prisons in the US when making a documentary film in 1999. At the time, officials were less cautious or less aware of the criticism of these prisons, and I had quite extraordinary access that nowadays we just wouldn't get. I got to see all areas of the prison and spoke to prisoners and prison staff. This was the basis of my PhD and recent book *Supermax*.

Supermax stats

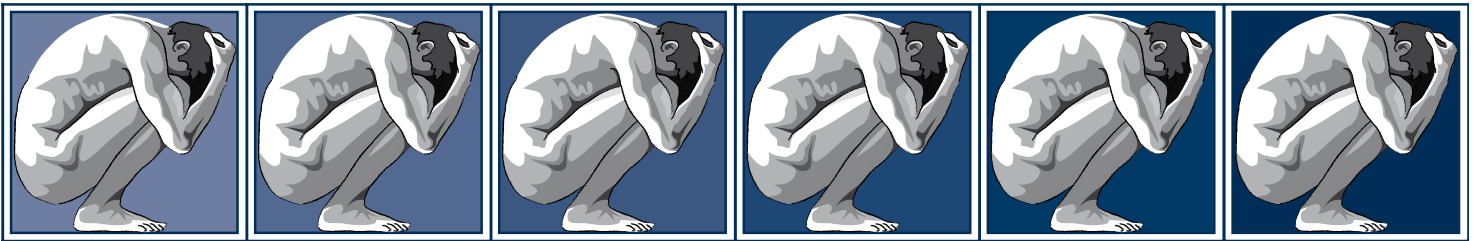
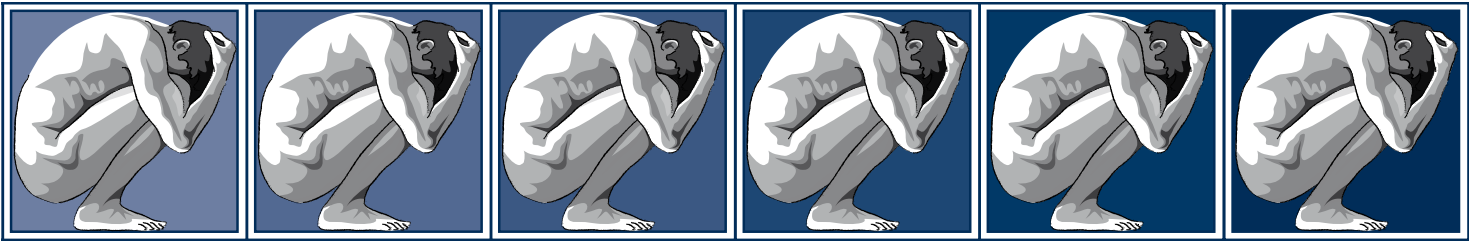
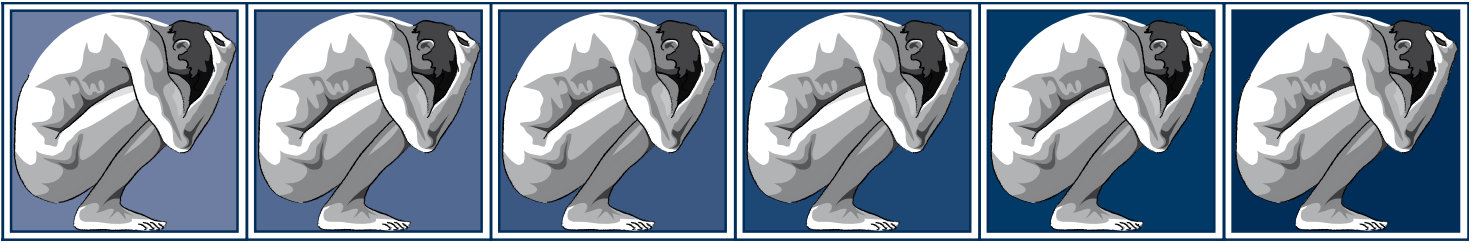
- The Federal Government and an estimated 44 states in the US operate at least one Supermax prison.
- Prisoners spend between 22.5 and 24 hours a day alone in concrete cells measuring 70 to 80 square feet.
- The prisons house anything from several hundred to over 1,000 prisoners.
- Prisoners can be placed in a Supermax for offences ranging from murder and grievous bodily harm to minor offences such as disrespect, disobedience, tattooing and damage to property.
- Between 1995 and 2000, the numbers of prisoners isolated across the US rose by 40 per cent. [Source: Vera Institute of Justice, 2005]
- Today, as many as 100,000 people may be living in solitary confinement in America alone – at least 25,000 in a Supermax and the rest in 'segregation units' in other prisons. [Source: <http://solitarywatch.com/about>]



JW: What distinguishes a Supermax prison from a normal prison?

SS: Supermaxes are specifically designed to keep hundreds of prisoners in complete solitary confinement. Prisoners are kept alone in small cells for 23 hours a day. The time they are legally required to have out of their cells is also spent alone in small barren exercise yards. All their food is brought to their cell, guards don't communicate with them at all, and they have no physical contact aside from when they're being shackled. Everything is built to give them the minimum according to legal requirements so they have very little meaningful human contact, sometimes for decades. And unlike physical torture, where the body has defence mechanisms to cope and eventually will just shut down, the mind doesn't have this ability, so it just goes on and on.

Evil is a word that is used a lot in terms of Supermax prisoners. I would turn it on its head and say that Supermaxes are evil places. The prisoners I spoke with didn't seem bad, just sad and with very poor social skills, quite unused to even holding a conversation.



JW: Where does rehabilitation fit into this?

SS: Well, we still have in our official aims that the purpose of prisons is to rehabilitate prisoners – and the same in America – but Supermaxes don't rehabilitate. In my view, they make people worse. And most prisoners will eventually be released. If you release someone who has had virtually no human contact back into society without any support, many will end up going straight back into prison. Some live very solitary lives, but others go on to do some terrible things. One example is of a car thief who initially had a short sentence but ended up in a Supermax and who, on his release, went on to murder three people. This is someone who hadn't previously shown violent tendencies. Not only do Supermaxes not control violence, but they can also breed violence.

JW: The argument is that some prisoners are so dangerous that this is the only safe way to incarcerate them, but you contest this?

SS: That is the argument, but when I looked at who is actually held in these prisons I discovered that only a tiny percentage can be classified as extremely dangerous. Many are small time criminals, what you might call 'ordinary decent criminals', who have big mouths but who aren't necessarily violent or dangerous.

A lot of prisoners are also mentally ill. People who broke the rules because they didn't understand them, which then starts a vicious cycle because in prison if you

break a rule no one asks why you broke it, they just see a troublemaker who needs to be punished. People who break the rules repeatedly are sent into Supermax prisons where the situation becomes even worse.

Children are also incarcerated, which to me is another level of stupidity. To take someone whose mind is still being shaped and put them, as one of my colleagues Craig Haney described it, 'in the deep freeze of isolation', then that's their life gone forever.

It's tragic, because often those who end up in Supermax prisons are those who are least able to tolerate it, and their situation deteriorates rapidly. You see very crude obvious forms of severe mental illness in Supermaxes – people banging their heads against the wall, not able to speak properly, without any support or human contact – you have to ask: what good will come of this?

JW: You say prisoners can be isolated for decades. How easy is it to get out once in?

SS: Supermaxes are very hard to leave because you have to earn your way out, which becomes very hard when placed under the mental stress of isolation. One classic example is that severely mentally ill prisoners often smear themselves with faeces. Any mental health professional will tell you that this is a sign of extreme mental distress, but in a Supermax they are just seen as troublemakers.

Another example is prisoners who have been misclassified as gang members. They are told that they must give information about the gang in order to leave the Supermax, which of course they can't give because they're not gang members. So it's a Catch 22 situation, and this happens all the time.

JW: Many of the countries that have these Supermax prisons are democracies where you wouldn't expect this to happen. Why do you think this is?

SS: Supermaxes are politically very attractive. Politicians can't really do much about crime but they can make promises, so they spend a lot of money building these huge prisons and the public feels reassured.

JW: So we can blame the politicians?

SS: Politicians will be politicians and have their own considerations. One of my main criticisms is of the architects who design these prisons. These are professional people who thought very carefully about how to maximise isolation and ensure that prisoners have the minimum sensory stimulation possible within the law.

So the cells are designed in such a way that the only thing prisoners can see when they look outside is a wall. And because prisoners are legally required to have a certain amount of light in their cell, architects worked out

ALUMNI VIEWPOINT



John Forté on studying in prison

Strictly speaking, I am not an LSE alumnus. However, while serving a 14 year prison sentence for a non-violent drug offence at FCI Fort Dix in the States, I decided to undertake a

BSc Politics and International Relations through the external programme. I did not complete the degree because my sentence was commuted after seven years – but it was an enlightening experience. The educational staff department at Fort Dix was limited at best. I had no access to computers or a study group. While my exams were proctored by a member of the educational department, I was on my own for the most part. I felt as if I had to read everything (from the required reading to the suggested reading... and then some). Of course, this meant that I had to order a lot of books. Initially, the prison offered significant resistance, stating that the Bureau of Prisons had a policy that allowed an inmate no more than five books in his or her possession at a time.

I chose politics and international relations because, ironically enough, I became more interested in the world only after I was removed from it. I was fascinated with global affairs and how those seemingly large scale events ultimately impacted on us as individuals. I familiarised myself with the cast of characters – the heads of state and wielders of power. I began connecting the dots, gaining a perspicacity into seemingly disparate articles that were reported in newspapers, magazines, and journals. I met some of the most brilliant minds over the course of my incarceration. My fellow inmates should neither be discounted nor discredited because of the unfortunate nature of their circumstances. Some of them, by their own admissions, were young and foolish when they made the mistakes that landed them in prison. If they want a chance to do better they should be provided with that chance.

John Forté is now a successful singer/songwriter and music producer. For more information go to www.johnforte.com

“Often those who end up in Supermax prisons are those who are least able to tolerate it”

how to provide this using skylights rather than windows, to completely cut them off from the world.

I find this very disturbing. These architects belong to professional organisations. When I think of architecture I think of aesthetics and ethics, and Supermaxes are not only unaesthetic but their design must breach every level of professional ethics, so I feel they, too, bear a responsibility.

JW: In your book, you touch on the idea that the system may also brutalise the guards, so you don't feel the same about the guards?

SS: No, the guards are interesting because as far as they are concerned they are doing society a useful service by taking these people off our hands. I don't think they can think about the implications of what they do because if they were to stop and think that these prisoners are human beings, I don't think they could do their job.

There is a lot of fear, and the staff I spoke to did believe that they were guarding these super predators who could do almost anything. So prisoners aren't given chicken on the bone because the bones could be made into weapons and they're not allowed spicy food because they might spit into a guard's eyes. All sorts of nonsensical reasons are given for these deprivations, but again I think this makes it easier for guards to do their jobs.

What I feel about mental health professionals however...

JW: So there is mental health provision in Supermaxes?

SS: There is some type of mental health presence but it varies greatly. In one of the prisons I visited, a mental health nurse would do daily rounds by standing at the entry of the housing unit and shouting out 'are you all right, does anyone need me?', which is clearly inadequate.

Health professionals have clear guidelines regarding ethical behaviour but these don't seem to apply in Supermaxes. For example, mental and physical health examinations are often conducted in the presence of two guards. So a prisoner is expected to tell someone that he is breaking down in the presence of the people who control him. He has no guarantee that this information won't be used against him, and in fact it often is.

I wrote the *Sourcebook on Solitary Confinement*, to inform prison personnel about what the medical literature says about the damaging effects of solitary confinement and to look at the ethical issues that all prison officials and health staff should be aware of.

JW: It seems from the practices you describe that Supermaxes operate outside of the rules that the rest of society has to adhere to. Is this true?

SS: Well, the American courts have increasingly intervened to order Departments of Corrections (DOC) to provide health services for prisoners, but they can't supervise what goes on after they give the orders. In one state, for example, they ruled that the institution in question was not the right environment for those who were already mentally ill, and ordered the DOC to remove mentally ill prisoners. So they set up a new unit, the Psychiatric Services Unit, to house these prisoners separately, but in the same conditions. They gave them group therapy, but this consisted of prisoners standing in individual cages in a semicircle while the psychologist stood in the centre wearing eye goggles in case she was spat on. This raises serious ethical questions, but on paper, the DOC did what it was ordered.

If you look at court judgements it is clear that they are outraged by the practices going on in Supermaxes, but unfortunately they haven't gone so far as to say that Supermaxes drive people mad or to shut them down.



Ask the big questions

JW: So there are signs that Supermaxes are not welcome by all?

SS: Guantanamo Bay did a lot to raise public awareness and people are now making the connection, because Guantanamo was modelled directly on Supermaxes. But I don't think that Supermaxes will simply be closed down, especially as prison systems are hugely overcrowded, so what is there, will be used.

My hope is that the financial pressures caused by the recent economic crisis will push states to rethink the Supermax concept, because it is too expensive. It costs twice as much to hold someone in solitary confinement as in a normal prison – so it is an expensive way to make people worse.

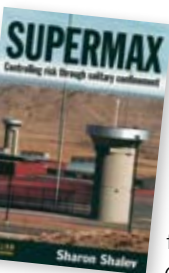
I also think that there has to be a system of penalties, particularly for architects and health professionals. Sadly, I don't think we can expect people to just start behaving ethically, but if they knew they could lose their job or their licence to practice, then maybe things would be a bit different. That is where I think we should apply the pressure now. ■



Sharon Shalev is a fellow in the Mannheim Centre for the Study of Criminology and Criminal Justice at LSE, one of the largest criminological groupings in Europe, and an associate at the International Centre for Prison Studies.



Jess Winterstein is deputy head of press at LSE.



Dr Shalev's book *Supermax: controlling risk through solitary confinement* (Willan Publishing, 2009) won the British Society of Criminology's Book Prize for 2010. *The Sourcebook on Solitary Confinement* can be downloaded at

www.solitaryconfinement.org/sourcebook



Is population growth good or bad? This is one of the questions that students on LSE100 – a new course that challenges students to work across disciplines to consider major issues of the day – will address.

Population growth is an old but unresolved debate (in)famously associated with Thomas Malthus; one that is moving up international agendas today. We know that if you do the maths, the world's population could theoretically fit into the state of Texas, but it probably would not be a very pleasant way to live.

It is a debate that is both complex and simple at the same time – one that incorporates issues about global security, sexuality, food production, reproduction and ethics, to name a few. Headlines might claim that the best way to reduce climate change is to use contraception, but the causality is tangled.

Both sides of the debate tend to take a macro-level perspective. We know that most of the world's rapid population growth is concentrated in low income countries, and although the era of explosive global growth is over, the populations of many low income countries look set to keep growing in the next decades. In many ways, rapid population growth might be interpreted as a success story. Why? Because population growth has been driven by rapid declines in mortality rates, even though preventable deaths for much of the world's population remain at unacceptably high levels.

Mortality is just one part of the equation, however. Rapid population growth is also fuelled by high fertility. If we take a micro-level perspective when considering whether population growth is good or bad, then the assessment might change. At the individual, family and household level, the impact of population growth

in low income countries can be negative. Women with high fertility have a much higher risk of dying due to pregnancy related causes, including unsafe abortion. Babies born soon after a preceding birth are more likely to die during infancy. At the same time, larger families allow economies of scale and offer opportunities to spread risk. The paths of the demographic superpowers, China and India, provide contrasting views of the implication of, and appropriate responses to, population growth.

In some high income countries population growth is negative, sparking different sorts of debates and policy reactions. Fertility is supported to varying extents through family policies, including the subsidised provision of assisted reproduction. The policy and media debates change again, focusing on the 'right' sort of fertility, with immigrant fertility frequently in the spotlight, despite the poor evidence base.

By posing such a simplistic question to LSE100 students, we have to engage with the extremes of the debates. Inevitably we condense and simplify, but it remains one of the big questions, and one that has relevance for everyone, now and in the future. ■



Ernestina Coast is a senior lecturer in population studies at LSE.

To find out more about population studies at LSE, see lse.ac.uk/socialPolicy/Researchcentresandgroups/populationAtLSE. For information about LSE100: The LSE Course, which is now compulsory for all first year undergraduates, see lse.ac.uk/LSE100

