**Isolated individuals**

*Definition: An isolated individual is a person who withdraws from the majority of the regime, and/or has limited engagement with staff and/or other prisoners, and/or spends most of the day in their cell.*

Isolation, and especially long-term isolation, can significantly increase an individual’s risk of self-harm and suicide or involvement in violence. Long-term isolation is also associated with an increased risk of mental health problems, depression, poorer pain management, and poor health outcomes.

We know from previous population snapshots that the number of prisoners recorded as isolating have previously been rising. Therefore, we need to be mindful of the additional impact that Covid-19 restrictions will have on this cohort. A further population snapshot including those isolating and the use of segregation is planned during September, and the findings will be published later this year.

The impact of Covid-19

The restrictions introduced in prisons due to the onset of Covid-19 have, for most people in prisons, resulted in prolonged and regular periods of isolation. Regimes have been limited to manage the potential spread of the virus, with many forms of purposeful activity for prison residents curtailed or stopped altogether.

As prisons move through the recovery phases to a more established and regular regime, there is a need to consider those that were previously identified as isolating and those that continue with ongoing isolation despite the widening opportunities to access regime. Both groups of individuals need to be properly identified, and supported to ensure the associated risks with isolation are mitigated.It is possible that prisoners in higher risk age groups or with medical concerns may choose to continue to isolate while they consider the threat of the virus is still present. This may be a particular risk where there has been an outbreak in the local area, and community restrictions have been reinstated.

Alternatively, some prisoners that were previously identified as isolating may be taking a more active part in of the current restricted regime due to the reduced cohort size that they would mix within during unlock or activities. These arrangements may have helped address some prison residents’ previous concerns for engaging in the wider regime. However, as full regimes return, there is also a risk that some residents may revert to isolating behaviour as a result.

The illicit economy has been disrupted by restrictions put in place, and prisoners may have accrued more debt to pay for scarce items. Debt is a driver of violence and self-harm, and some prisoners may isolate to avoid situations where they meet those who are chasing debt. Staff should consider published guidance on debt to pick up signs as prisoners may not openly refer to it.

The suspension of social visits will have had an impact on relationships with family and friends outside the prison and may have contributed further to individual’s feelings of isolation and loneliness. The measures to mitigate this such as video calls have had some success but have not been experienced positively by all. Relationship breakdown is a major risk factor for self-harm and suicide, so it is important for key workers and other staff to be asking those who appear isolated about their contacts outside the prison and taking steps to facilitate links by whatever means are available.

Individuals falling into any of these risk categories should be identified locally by prisons. Listeners and other peer supporters could be a useful source of information about who is isolated, as well as part of the solution. Locally prisons should be raising staff awareness through SIM meetings and staff information bulletins, focusing on how they can best identify previous and current isolated individuals. There should also be a focus on adopting a consistent approach to support and manage these individuals.

If there is a concern that an individual is at risk of self-harm or suicide, an Assessment, Care in Custody, and Teamwork (ACCT) should be opened immediately, by using a Concern and Keep Safe Form. This can be completed by any member of staff.

Resources:

* It may be helpful for establishment safety teams to work through the self–assessment for isolated individuals that is available within the self-assessment tool: [Safety self-assessment tool](https://intranet.noms.gsi.gov.uk/groups/safety/safety-self-assessment-tool-sat)
* Staff guidance is available to assist establishments in raising local awareness of those that may be isolating: [Isolating individuals staff guidance](https://intranet.noms.gsi.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/999691/Isolating-Individuals-staff-guide-March-20.pdf)
* Evidenced based practice summary on the Impact of isolation and how to mitigate it can be found here: [Evidence based practice summary](https://intranet.noms.gsi.gov.uk/groups/rehabilitative-culture/evidence-based-practice-summary-infographic-mitigating-the-impact-of-isolation)
* The [Wellbeing Plan](http://hmppsintranet.org.uk/resources/in-cell-materials/wellbeing/), has been launched as a new tool for prison residents to assist making informed choices about their own safety and resilience, and thinking about their risks, triggers, and protective factors.
* [Conversational Playing Cards](http://hmppsintranet.org.uk/resources/in-cell-materials/activities/) are useful prompts for us and residents to assist getting to know each other, so we can notice when things aren’t quite right, or open up conversations with individuals who may be struggling.
* The [self-harm guide for staff](https://intranet.noms.gsi.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/993494/HMPPS-Self-Harm-Guide-231219.pdf) contains useful information for understanding self-harm and different avenues of support available.
* Guidance for managers, staff and prisoners on debt can be found on the intranet: [Prisoner debt support](https://intranet.noms.gsi.gov.uk/support/safety/prisoner-debt); specific guidance on managing debt as restrictions lift can be found here: [Guidance for managing debt](https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/except/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Debt-guidance-FINAL-DRAFT.docx)
* Peer support guidance is available to help you set up and make the most of peer support opportunities. [Peer support schemes](https://intranet.noms.gsi.gov.uk/news-and-updates/notices/peer-support-schemes-how-to-set-up-and-run-them)