The Use of Torture in Interrogations

Sound science, sound policy

Torture during interrogations is defined by the United Nations as cruel or degrading treatment of a person, with the intent of obtaining intelligence or a confession.\(^1\) Any form of torture is prohibited in the United States, including during times of war.

Unsurprisingly, torture produces serious and lasting trauma in the victims of torture. While some may accept this in the interest of national security, the severe cost of torture extends to the individuals who apply torture techniques as part of national security investigations. Policy-makers should take all of this into account when evaluating the use of torture in interrogations.

The following science-based arguments are particularly relevant for the debate on the use of torture in interrogations:

- Torture is ineffective and liable to produce false information
- All parties involved in torture suffer long-term damaging effects
- Torture has severe adverse consequences for society

**Torture is ineffective and liable to produce false information**

- The use of abusive interrogation techniques is often based on the assumption that a suspect is withholding intelligence. Research has confirmed that interrogators cannot reliably tell when a suspect is withholding information. Innocent suspects who do not possess valuable information are likely to appear defiant and resistant to interrogators, and are interrogated more violently.\(^2\)
- Numerous survivors of torture report they would have said whatever they believed would make the torturers stop.\(^3\)
- Longitudinal studies show that false confessions are among the main causes of wrongful criminal convictions, especially for the most serious crimes. About one-quarter of wrongful conviction cases involve false confessions.\(^4\)
- Research has demonstrated that professionally trained interrogators are able to identify deception at a rate only marginally above chance.\(^5\)

**All parties involved in torture suffer long-term damaging effects**

- Systematic data analyses of the effect of torture suggest that torture survivors suffer severe life-long damage in their physical, psychological, and economic functioning.\(^6\)
- The traumatic consequences of torture extend to families of the victims, and span across multiple generations of survivor communities.\(^7\)
- Research evidence confirms that even if a society justifies the use of torture, perpetrators of harsh interrogation techniques experience long-term negative psychological effects as a result of their actions.\(^8\)

**Torture has severe adverse consequences for society**

- Scientific studies illustrate that impunity for perpetrators of torture are linked to frustration, insecurity, and addictive as well as violent behavior in the community.\(^9\)
- The United States endangers its citizens who are imprisoned abroad because of its own failure to abide by international standards for an ethical treatment of detainees.\(^10\)
- Since torture in interrogations occurs in secrecy, i.e. in a void of legal, professional, or community oversight, the human rights of all parties involved are not protected.\(^11\)
Policy recommendation

The use of torture undermines the credibility of the United States in advocating for international human rights. Furthermore, as the research evidence above illustrates, torture is ineffective and has far-reaching damaging consequences for American citizens. This is ethically unacceptable. Therefore, the United States and its military should once and for all outlaw all interrogation techniques that are cruel, dehumanizing, and degrading.


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For more information, please contact Alex Ingrams, SPSSI Policy Coordinator, at aingrams@spssi.org, or (202) 675-6956.

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References