



News from a Nation in Lockdown
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Solitary Confinement: FAQ

What is solitary confinement?

Solitary confinement is the practice of isolating prisoners in closed cells for 22-24 hours a day, virtually free of human contact, for periods of time ranging from days to decades. Few prison systems use the term “solitary confinement,” instead referring to prison “segregation.” In California, long-term solitary confinement units are referred to as Security Housing Units (SHUs); in New York, the same acronym stands for Special Housing Units. In Oregon, the long-term isolation units are called Intensive Management Units (IMUs), while in Pennsylvania they are called Restricted Housing Units (RHUs). In the federal system, one type of extreme solitary confinement takes place in Communication Management Units (CMUs). Despite the variety of names, the general practice of incarceration in these units and facilities is solitary confinement.

Some people are held in solitary confinement in special “supermax” prisons, such as California’s Pelican Bay, Virginia’s Red Onion, and the federal government’s ADX in Florence, Colorado. At least 44 states and the federal system now have supermax prisons, which are generally composed solely of solitary confinement cells. Other prisoners live in SHUs, RHUs, and IMUs within ordinary prisons, and even inside local jails.

Some systems make a distinction between various reasons for solitary confinement. “Disciplinary segregation” is time spent in solitary as punishment for violating prison rules, and usually lasts from several weeks to several years. “Administrative segregation” relies on a system of classification rather than actual behavior, and often constitutes a permanent placement, extending from years to decades. “Involuntary protective custody” is especially common among juveniles in adult prisons, LGBT prisoners, and other at-risk prisoners, who live in indefinite isolation despite having done nothing wrong.

How many people are held in solitary confinement?

The number of people held in solitary confinement in the United States has been notoriously difficult to determine. The lack of reliable information is due to state-by-state variances and shortcomings in data gathering and in conceptions of what constitutes solitary confinement. However, a census of state and federal prisoners conducted in 2005 by the Bureau of Justice Statistics—and cited by the Vera Institute of Justice—found more than **81,622** people held in “restricted housing.” A widely accepted 2005 study found that some **25,000** of these segregated prisoners were being held in supermax prisons around the country.

The 2000 census of prisoners—cited by the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons—found **80,870** people in restricted housing, including 36,499 in administrative segregation, 33,586 in disciplinary segregation, and 10,765 in protective custody. The 2000 figures represented a 40 percent increase over 1995, when 57,591 individuals were in segregation. (During the same period of time, the overall prison population grew by 28 percent.)

The census figures do not include prisoners in solitary confinement in juvenile facilities, immigrant detention centers, or local jails; if they did, the numbers would certainly be higher. (Rikers Island alone has 990 isolation cells, according to the New York City Department of Corrections.)

Who gets put in solitary confinement?

Far from being a last-resort measure reserved for the “worst of the worst,” solitary confinement has become a control strategy of first resort in many prisons and jails. Today, an incarcerated person can be placed in complete

isolation for months or years not just for violent acts, but also for non-violent offenses like possessing contraband, testing positive for drug use, ignoring orders, or using profanity. Thousands of prisoners are held in indefinite solitary confinement because they have been named as gang members by other prisoners who are rewarded for the information. Others have ended up in solitary because they have untreated mental illnesses, are children in need of “protection,” are gay or transgender, are Muslim, have unsavory political beliefs, or report rape or abuse by prison officials. In Virginia, a group of Rastafarian men were placed in solitary—some for more than a decade—because they refused to cut their hair on religious grounds.

Prisoners receive terms in solitary based on charges that are levied, adjudicated, and enforced by prison officials with little or no outside oversight. Many prison systems have a hearing process, but these are seldom more than perfunctory. Prison officials serve as prosecutors, judges, and juries, and prisoners are rarely permitted representation by defense attorneys. Unsurprisingly, in most prison systems, they are nearly always found guilty.

What are conditions like in solitary confinement?

For those who endure it, life in solitary confinement means living 23 to 24 hours a day in a cell. Federal prisoners in disciplinary segregation, for example, typically spend two days a week entirely in isolation, and 23 hours a day in their cell the remaining five days, when they are allotted 1 hour for exercise. Exercise usually takes place alone in an exercise room or a fenced or walled “dog run.” Some prisoners are escorted, in shackles, to the shower, while others have showers within their cells. They may or may not be allowed to leave their cells for visits or to make telephone calls.

Solitary confinement cells generally measure from 6 x 9 to 8 x 10 feet. Some have bars, but more often they have solid metal doors. Meals generally come through slots in these doors, as do any communications with prison staff. Within these cells, people live lives of enforced idleness, denied the opportunity to work or attend prison programming, and sometimes banned from having televisions, radios, art supplies, and even reading materials in their cells. For prisoners’ own descriptions of solitary confinement, see our Voices from Solitary project.

How long do people spend in solitary confinement?

Terms in solitary range from days to several decades. Precise figures are scarce, but a number of state prison systems have made some information available.

For example, California Undersecretary of Operations Scott Kernan testified in 2011 that the average term in solitary confinement in California is 6.8 years. Later that year, the CDCR released statistics relating to the length of terms in the SHU. Of the 1,111 people held in the SHU, over 513 served 10 years or more, 78 of whom has been in the SHU at least 20 years; 544 others had spent more than 5 years but fewer than 10 years.

In Texas, the average person held in administrative segregation spends more than 4 years in solitary, with the longest serving person being isolated for 24 years. In Colorado, the average term in solitary confinement is 18 months.

The 52 people on death row executed in 2009 had spent an average of 14 years in solitary confinement before their executions, with one spending over 30 years in isolation before execution. In the federal system, Thomas Silverstein has been held in solitary confinement under a “no human contact” order for 28 years.

The group of Louisiana prisoners known as the Angola 3 have spent perhaps the nation’s longest terms in solitary confinement. One of them spent 29 years in solitary before being released. The other two have now entered their 40th year in solitary confinement.

What are the psychological effects of solitary confinement?

Following extensive interviews with people held in Pelican Bay’s SHU in 1993, Dr. Stuart Grassian found that solitary confinement induces a psychiatric disorder characterized by hypersensitivity to external stimuli, hallucinations, panic attacks, cognitive deficits, obsessive thinking, paranoia, and a litany of other physical and

psychological problems. Psychological assessments of Pelican Bay's solitary confined prisoners indicated high rates of anxiety, nervousness, obsessive ruminations, anger, violent fantasies, nightmares, trouble sleeping, as well as dizziness, perspiring hands, and heart palpitations.

In testimony before the California Assembly's Public Safety Committee in August 2011, Dr. Craig Haney discussed the effects of solitary confinement: "In short, prisoners in these units complain of chronic and overwhelming feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and depression. Rates of suicide in the California lockup units are by far the highest in any prison housing units anywhere in the country. Many become deeply and unshakably paranoid, and are profoundly anxious around and afraid of people (on those rare occasions when they are allowed contact with them). Some begin to lose their grasp on their sanity and badly decompensate."

In New York, California and Texas, it has been found that suicide rates are significantly higher among prisoners held in solitary confinement than in general population. For more on the psychological effects of solitary confinement, see our fact sheet on the topic.

Are people with mental illnesses put in solitary confinement?

Yes, in large numbers. Over the past 30 years, prisons and jails have become the nation's largest inpatient psychiatric centers, and solitary confinement cells, in particular, are now used to warehouse thousands of prisoners with mental illness. In a 2003 report, Human Rights Watch estimated, based on available state data, that one-third to one-half of people in isolation had some form of mental illness.

A 2003 report by New York's Correctional Association found that prisoners diagnosed with mental illness made up 11 percent of the state's overall prison population, they constituted nearly a quarter of the prisoners in lockdown. Many of the SHU prisoners the CA interviewed for the report were "actively psychotic, manic, paranoid or seemingly overmedicated."

Recognizing that solitary confinement worsens existing psychiatric conditions and causes severe suffering in prisoners with mental illness, several court decisions and pieces of legislation have been crafted for their protection.

Are juveniles held in solitary confinement?

Yes. While juveniles are often placed into solitary for their own protection, the experience of confinement is particularly damaging to young people. A 2012 Human Rights Watch report notes: "Youth offenders often spend significant amounts of their time in US prisons isolated from the general prison population. Such segregation can be an attempt to protect vulnerable youth offenders from the general population, to punish infractions of prison rules, or to manage particular categories of prisoners, such as alleged gang members. Youth offenders frequently described their experience in segregation as a profoundly difficult ordeal."

According to the Campaign for Youth Justice, data shows that juveniles are 36 times more likely to commit suicide in an adult jail than a juvenile detention facility and 19 times more likely to kill themselves in isolation than in general population.

Juveniles are frequently held in solitary in local jails before they have even been convicted of a crime, simply because there is nowhere else to put them. Children are also held in solitary in juvenile jails and detention facilities. A 2011 California audit found that children in juvenile facilities had been held in isolation for 24 hours straight hundreds of times from January-April 2011. This is in violation of state regulations that dictate juveniles may not be isolated more than 21 hours per day.

How much does solitary confinement cost?

Solitary confinement units cost more to build than the average prison and cost more to house per prisoner per year than someone held with the general population. Nationally, it has been estimated that on average, a year in solitary costs taxpayers \$75,000. The average for general population prisoners was about \$25,000 annually.

In 2003, the cost of housing a level 5 Administrative Maximum, or “supermax,” prisoner at Ohio State Penitentiary was \$149 daily and \$54,385 a year. The cost of housing a maximum-security prisoner was \$101 a day and \$26,865 a year. For people in general population, the cost was \$63 a day or \$22,995 a year—less than half the cost of an Administrative Segregation prisoner.

In addition, solitary confinement has been associated with significantly higher construction costs per cell. For example, Wisconsin’s Boscobel supermax facility was built to house 500 people in solitary at a cost of \$47.5 million (in 1990 dollars), or over \$95,000 per bed. Even more significantly, Tamms Correctional Center in Illinois cost \$73 million to build in 1998 and was designed to hold 500 people in isolation, giving a construction price tag of approximately \$146,000 per bed. Solitary Watch has released a fact sheet on this issue with more specific data on various states.

What are the alternatives to solitary confinement?

Given the high number of people held in solitary confinement, many states have or have been called on to reexamine the means by which they classify which prisoners should be segregated. The reform of classification systems led to the significant reduction of Mississippi’s solitary confinement population, including the transferring out of approximately 800 supermax prisoners at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman. Rather than leading to an increase in problems, there were significant decreases in violence and the need for violent cell extractions.

Maine’s Department of Corrections, under the leadership of Joseph Ponte, has slashed the number of its Special Management Units by nearly half, from a consistent 132 to 69 as of today. The reforms came about in response to the reality that many people were placed in the SMU for small infractions, which subsequently led to many having to spend increasing periods of time in the SMU due to lashing out against isolation. The model being used by Ponte comes from the one used by the South Portland Long Creek Youth Development Center, a juvenile detention facility. Bouffard reduced the duration of solitary confinement in the facility, which has seen a drop in recidivism from 75 percent to 20 percent within a year.

The 2006 report of the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons found that solitary confinement was related to higher than average recidivism rates, particularly if those subjected to it are released back into the community directly from solitary, and that recidivism could be reduced if structured, evidence-based programming and educational opportunities are made available to those in solitary.

What do international bodies say about solitary confinement?

The Committee Against Torture, official governing body of the UN Convention Against Torture that the United States ratified in 1994, has recommended that the practice of isolation be abolished. The UN Human Rights Committee has, in 1992, suggested that prolonged isolation may amount to a violation of international human rights law. Similarly the UN committee on the Rights of the Child has urged for an end to the use of solitary confinement against minors.

In October 2011, the UN’s chief torture investigator called on UN member nations to ban nearly all uses of solitary confinement in prisons, warning that it causes serious mental and physical harm and often amounts to torture. Juan Mendez, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment, presented a written report on solitary confinement to the UN General Assembly’s Human Rights Committee, which singled out for criticism the routine use of supermax isolation in the United States.

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Solitary Watch is a web-based project dedicated to bringing the practice of solitary confinement out of the shadows and into the light of the public square. For more information, go to www.solitarywatch.com or contact: Solitary Watch, PO Box 11374, Washington, DC 20008 / solitarywatchnews@gmail.com.