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**News from a Nation in Lockdown**

**www.solitarywatch.com**

**Solitary Confinement:**

**FAQ**

**What is solitary confinement?**

Solitary confinement is the practice of isolating inmates 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 Pennsylvannia 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 inmates 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](http://www.urban.org/uploadedPDF/411326_supermax_prisons.pdf) 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 adults prisons, LGBT inmates, 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](http://www.jstor.org/pss/10.1525/fsr.2011.24.1.46)–found more than **81,622** inmates held in “restricted housing.” A widely accepted [2005 study](https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/211971.pdf.) 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](http://www.vera.org/download?file=2845/Confronting_Confinement.pdf)–found **80,870** inmates 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 inmates 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](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/11/21/city-to-sharply-increase-solitary-confinement-cells-on-rikers-island/).)

Many states do not make public any information on the number of prisoners they hold in segregation. Some of the available data is as follows:

* In 2010, a spokesperson for the U.S. Bureau of Prisons [told CNN](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-02-25/justice/colorado.supermax.silverstein.solitary_1_solitary-confinement-federal-prison-system-cell/2?_s=PM:CRIME) that there were about **11,150** federal inmates being held in “special housing.” ADX Florence holds approximately 400 of these inmates in ultra-isolation.
* In California in 2011, Scott Kernan, Undersecretary of Operations of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, testified before the [California Assembly’s Public Safety Committee](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/08/24/historic-california-assembly-hearing-on-solitary-confinement/) that approximately 3,000 inmates were held in California’s Security Housing Units, including over 1,100 at the Pelican Bay State Prison SHU alone. A 2009 report from [California’s Inspector General](http://www.oig.ca.gov/media/reports/BOA/reviews/Management%20of%20the%20California%20Department%20of%20Corrections%20and%20Rehabilitation%27s%20Administrative%20Segregation%20Unit%20Population.pdf.) found 8,878 inmates in Administrative Segregation Units. This means that, all told, there are close to **11,000** prisoners in solitary confinement in California.
* As reported by the [*Houston Chronicle*](http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Some-prisoners-in-solitary-for-years-in-Texas-2132621.php) based on figures from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, in 2011 there were over 5,205 inmates in long-term isolation in administrative segregation, and approximately 4,000 more serving shorter terms in solitary for disciplinary violations–for a total of more than **9,000**.
* According to a 2003 report by the [Correctional Association](http://www.correctionalassociation.org/publications/download/pvp/issue_reports/lockdown-new-york_report.pdf), New York state had approximately **5,000** inmates in disciplinary lockdown in 2003.
* At the end of 2011, [Pennyslvania Department of Corrections](http://www.cor.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/research%20statistics/10669/monthly_population_reports/568195) reported that **2,406** inmates were held in segregation in the state’s Restrictive Housing Units.
* A [2011 study](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/11/18/new-study-solitary-confinement-overused-in-colorado/) of the Colorado prison system by independent researchers funded by the National Institute of Corrections found that nearly 1,500 inmates, or 7% of the prison population, were in administrative segregation and a further 670 in disciplinary segregation–for a total of more than **2,100**.
* In Virginia, according to [a 2012 article in the Washington Post,](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/va-prisons-use-of-solitary-confinement-is-scrutinized/2011/11/28/gIQAkKHuhP_story.html) there were **1,800** inmates in solitary confinement, 500 of whom are held at the supermax Red Onion State Prison.
* A 2007 report by the [American Friends Service Committee](http://afsc.org/sites/afsc.civicactions.net/files/documents/Buried%20Alive.pdf) found **1,623** inmates held in isolation in Arizona’s SHUs.
* In a 2008 report to the state legislature, the [Michigan Department of Corrections](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/03-01-09_-_Section_925_271392_7.pdf) said that that the daily average number of inmates held in administrative segregation in FY 2007-08 was **1,294.**

These eight state prison systems and the federal prison system alone hold a combined total of more than **44,000** prisoners in isolated confinement.

**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, inmates can be placed in complete isolation for months or years not only for violent acts but for 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 inmates 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](http://solitarywatch.com/2010/02/11/rastafarians-spend-a-decade-in-solitary-for-refusing-haircuts/) were placed in solitary–some for more than a decade–because they refused to cut their hair on religious grounds.

In California, for example, the [California Code of Regulations](http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/Regulations/Adult_Operations/docs/Title152006Final.pdf), Title 15, Section 3315, outlines two dozen “Serious Rule Violations” that can result in placement in the SHU. These include “Possession of five dollars or more without authorization,” “Tattooing or possession of tattoo paraphernalia,” “Participation in a strike or work stoppage,” and “Self mutilation or attempted suicide for the purpose of manipulation.” [Approximately 50 percent](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/07/18/who-are-the-hunger-strikers-how-prisoners-land-in-pelican-bays-shus/) of California SHU inmates may have committed no offense at all; instead, they are held in solitary due to the gang “validation” process, in which inmates deemed to be active gang members are sent to six-year terms in the SHU. Gang validation can take place based in large part on anonymous accusations. Commonly, these anonymous charges come from validated inmates in the SHU, for whom the only hope for early release has been summarized as [“Parole, Snitch, or Die.”](http://escholarship.org/uc/item/04w6556f) Prisoners have also [earned points](http://www.whatthefolly.com/2011/08/30/transcript-charles-carbones-testimony-on-the-harmful-impacts-of-solitary-confinement-practices-at-california%E2%80%99s-secure-housing-units-shu-prison-facilities/) toward gang validation simply by possessing the book *The Art of War* or making reference to prison activist George Jackson.

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](http://solitarywatch.com/2010/08/03/inmates-due-process-rights-routinely-suppressed-in-california-prisons/).

**What are conditions like in solitary confinement?**

For the inmates who endure it, life in solitary confinement means living 23 to 24 hours a day in a cell. Federal inmates in [disciplinary segregation](http://www.washlaw.org/pdf/Guide_to_Segregation_in_Federal_Prisons.pdf), 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, inmates 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.

The isolation unit at [Stateville Correctional Center](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/30/090330fa_fact_gawande#ixzz1j29vLkpH) in Joliet, Illinois has been described as consisting of “gray walls, a solid steel door, no window, no clock, and a light that was kept on twenty-four hours a day.” Similarly, inmates at [Pelican Bay State Prison](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5584254) in northern California were described as living in a “small, cement prison cell. Everything is gray concrete: the bed, the walls, the unmovable stool. Everything except the combination stainless-steel sink and toilet…You can’t move more than eight feet in one direction.”

Dr. Craig Haney, in [testimony](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/09/01/pawns-in-a-failed-experiment-testimony-of-dr-craig-haney-on-solitary-confinement/) submitted to the California Assembly’s Public Safety Committee, described the isolation of inmates in these cells: ”They have no contact with the normal social world either. Indeed, the only regular physical contact they have with another human being is the incidental brushing up against the guards who must first place them in handcuffs and chains before they escort them out of their cells and housing units. They visit loved ones through thick glass and over phones, and are thus denied the opportunity to ever touch another human being with affection. This has gone on unabated, for years and years, for some of these men for several decades now.”

For prisoners’ own descriptions of solitary confinement, see our [Voices from Solitary](http://solitarywatch.com/solitary-voices/) 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.

* California Undersecretary of Operations Scott Kernan [testified](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/09/22/the-truth-about-solitary-confinement-in-california) in August 2011 that the average term in solitary confinement in California is **6.8 years**. Validated gang members are sent to 6-year terms in solitary confinement (either SHUs or ASUs). In September, 2011, the CDCR [released statistics](http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com/2011/09/05/cdcr-releases-statistics-on-the-pelican-bay-shu/) relating to the length of terms in the SHU. Of the 1,111 inmates 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.
* According to the [American Friends Service Committee](http://afsc.org/sites/afsc.civicactions.net/files/documents/Buried%20Alive.pdf), the average time served in the supermax units in the Arizona prison system is **5 years**.
* In Texas, the average inmate held in [administrative segregation](http://crimeblog.dallasnews.com/archives/2009/07/thousands-of-texas-inmates-hel.html) spends **more than 4 years** in solitary, with the longest serving inmate being isolated for **24 years**.
* At [Red Onion State Prison](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/va-prisons-use-of-solitary-confinement-is-scrutinized/2011/11/28/gIQAkKHuhP_story.html) in Virginia, a recent memo states that inmates are on average isolated for **2.7 years**, with the range of stays being **2 weeks to 7 years**.
* In Colorado, the average term in [solitary confinement](http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_17608272) is **18 months**.
* A 2003 report by the [Correctional Association of New York](http://www.correctionalassociation.org/publications/download/pvp/issue_reports/lockdown-new-york_report.pdf) found that the average sentence in disciplinary segregation was **5.3 months**, while hundreds of inmates spent an average of **three years** in isolation. Several prisoners in administrative segregation have been isolated for more than **20 years**.
* According to an April 17th, 2003 memo, the Oregon Intensive Management Unit (IMU) “by design is not long-term housing. IMU houses inmates to provide programming toward behavior modification and to prepare them for return to general population.” However, Solitary Watch has received the housing history of one IMU inmate who spent **12 years** in the Oregon IMU before being sent to an out-of-state supermax unit.
* The 52 death row inmates executed in 2009 had spent an average of [14 years in solitary](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/oct/10/death-row-torture-chamber) confinement before their executions, with one spending over **30 years** in isolation before execution.
* In the federal system, Thomas Silverstein (described as America’s “[most isolated man](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/05/05/americas-most-isolatd-federal-prisoner-describes-10220-days-in-extreme-solitary-confinement/)”) 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](http://www.angola3.org/thecase.aspx) 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 Pelican Bay SHU inmates 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 diziness, perspiring hands, and heart palpitations.

In [testimony](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/09/01/pawns-in-a-failed-experiment-testimony-of-dr-craig-haney-on-solitary-confinement/) 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 SHU inmates 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](http://solitarywatch.com/2010/10/18/suicide-and-solitary-confinement-in-new-york-state-prisons/), [California and Texas](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-12-27-inmate-suicides_x.htm), it has been found that suicide rates are significantly higher among inmates in solitary confinement than in general population.

The psychological toll such a bleak environment wreaks on many of those who endure it is often compared to torture. One Pelican Bay SHU inmate [referred to solitary confinement](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/09/25/voices-from-solitary-the-life-negating-emptiness-of-the-pelican-bay-shu/) as “ a psychological-emotional storm” and a “ life negating emptiness.” In the federal system, Thomas Silverstein (described as America’s “[most isolated man](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/05/05/americas-most-isolatd-federal-prisoner-describes-10220-days-in-extreme-solitary-confinement/)”) has been held under a “no human contact” order for 28 years. In his own words, “I was not only isolated, but also disoriented…This was exacerbated by the fact that I wasn’t allowed to have a wristwatch or clock. In addition, the bright, artificial lights remained on in the cell constantly, increasing my disorientation and making it difficult to sleep. Not only were they constantly illuminated, but those lights buzzed incessantly. The buzzing noise was maddening, as there often were no other sounds at all. This may sound like a small thing, but it was my entire world.”

For more on the psychological effects of solitary confinement, see our [fact sheet](http://solitarywatch.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/fact-sheet-psychological-effects-final.pdf) 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](http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2003/10/21/ill-equipped), Human Rights Watch estimated, based on available state data, that one-third to one-half of inmates in isolation had some form of mental illness.

A 2003 report by [New York’s Correctional Association](http://www.correctionalassociation.org/publications/download/pvp/issue_reports/lockdown-new-york_report.pdf) found that inmates diagnosed with mental illness made up 11 percent of the state’s overall prison population, they constituted nearly a quarter of the inmates in lockdown. Many of the SHU prisoners the CA interviewed for the report were “actively psychotic, manic, paranoid or seemingly overmedicated.” As of September 1st, 2011, 173 inmates diagnosed with mental illness were held in solitary confinement at [Red Onion State Prison](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/va-prisons-use-of-solitary-confinement-is-scrutinized/2011/11/28/gIQAkKHuhP_story_1.html), out of a solitary confinement population of approximately 500.

In 2009, [Robert Foor](http://www.illinoistimes.com/Springfield/article-6079-private-hell.html), an Illinois inmate with mental illness, was placed in isolation and “became more mentally ill, mutilating himself by cutting and biting, and [attempted] to hang himself.” He ultimately died in solitary confinement at Tamms Correctional Center. Another Tamms inmate, [Anthony Gay](http://www.bnd.com/2011/08/28/1837463/inmate-wants-opportunity-to-get.html#storylink=cpy), “cut off a part of his genitalia, which a physician identified as ‘possibly a testicle’ and hung it from a string tied to his cell door. He was treated and then sent to a ‘strip cell”‘ as punishment. Though his mental health has been notably declining, he has faced increasing isolation and longer sentences, due to incidents of throwing feces and urine at guards.

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 to protect these inmates. In New York, for example, the [SHU Exclusion Law](http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/SHU_facts.pdf), which took effect in July 2011, mandates that prisoners with serious mental illnesses be diverted from solitary confinement units and instead be placed in residential mental health treatment units. The law has loopholes for “exceptional circumstances,” however, and critics charge that the diagnostic process is excluding many mentally inmates from the law’s protections. A [December 2011 hearing](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/12/13/new-york-state-lawmakers-hold-hearings-on-solitary-confinement-reforms-spike-in-prison-suicide-rate/) on the solitary confinement system highlighted a surge of suicides that have taken place despite reforms.

For summaries on various court cases and examples of mental health alternatives to solitary confinement, check out the [Correctional Association of New York’](http://www.correctionalassociation.org/publications/download/pvp/factsheets/Out_of_State_Models.pdf)s fact sheet on the issue.

**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](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/us0112ForUpload_1.pdf) 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 inmates, 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.

In Florida, [Ian Manuel](http://www.sptimes.com/2006/12/17/State/Does_separation_equal.shtml) spent 15 years in solitary confinement in adult prison for a crime he committed at age 13. He often cut himself, and he tried to kill himself at least five times. At Montana State Prison, [Raistlen Katka](http://helenair.com/news/solitary-confinement-barred-for-inmate-at-montana-state-prison/article_ab04bd60-cd50-11e0-a9d5-001cc4c03286.html) was placed in solitary confinement at age 17, received no mental health treatment despite self-mutilation and suicide attempts. [Katka](http://www.aclu.org/human-rights/aclu-asks-un-intervene-behalf-montana-juvenile-prisoner) was known to have “twice attempted to kill himself by biting through his wrist to puncture a vein” before he was removed from solitary.

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. A 2010 investigation by the [Texas Observer](http://solitarywatch.com/2010/10/22/children-routinely-held-in-pre-trial-solitary-confinement-in-texas/) found that children are routinely held in pre-trial solitary confinement in Texas. A 16-year-old in [Alaska](http://solitarywatch.com/2010/07/08/alaska-teen-spends-17-months-in-solitary-before-trial/) spent 500 days in solitary while awaiting trial, and another in [Tennessee](http://solitarywatch.com/2010/10/14/teen-held-in-solitary-in-tennessee-jail-because-he-cant-make-bail/) spent close to two years. [Rikers Island](http://solitarywatch.com/2011/11/21/city-to-sharply-increase-solitary-confinement-cells-on-rikers-island/) in New York City has also been known to hold juveniles in solitary both before and after trial. In one case, a 16 year old who cursed at a guard was placed in solitary for 20 days, during which time his mother claims he “had lost 20 pounds, and his hair was falling out,” due to the anxiety and stress of the experience.

Children are also held in solitary in juvenile jails and detention facilities. A [2011 California audit](http://californiawatch.org/dailyreport/juvenile-inmates-often-isolated-nearly-24-hours-straight-10757) 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.

**What effect does solitary confinement have on recidivism?**

On November 23, 2011, the California Department of Corrections published the “[2011 Adult Institutions Outcome Evaluation Report](http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/adult_research_branch/Research_Documents/ARB_FY_0607_Recidivism_Report_(11-23-11).pdf)”, the second of what CDCR promises to be an annual report of the recidivism rate of its institutions. The one-year recidivism rate for those in the SHU was 52.2% while those not assigned to the SHU had a one year recidivism rate of 47.6%. At two years, 64.9% vs. 60.2% were the figures, and by three years 69.8% (or, 4,189 of the 6002) were back in prison vs. 64.8% of those who hadn’t served time in the SHU.

The [2006 report](http://www.vera.org/download?file=2845/Confronting_Confinement.pdf) 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 inmates 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.

**How much does solitary confinement cost?**

Solitary confinement units cost more to build than the average prison and cost more per inmates per year than general population inmates. Nationally, it has been estimated that the average cost of a year in solitary [costs taxpayers $75,000](http://www.urban.org/uploadedPDF/411326_supermax_prisons.pdf).

For example, the California Department of Corrections released the following [housing costs](http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/COMIO/Uploadfile/pdfs/Pelican_Bay.pdf) for Pelican Bay State Prison:

* $70,641 per SHU inmate
* $58,324 per GP inmate
* $171,857 per PSU/EOP inmate
* $77,740 per ASU inmate
* $43,640 per Level l inmate

In 2003, the cost of housing a level 5 Administrative Maximum, or “supermax,” inmate at [Ohio State Penitentiary](https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/211971.pdf) was $149 daily and $54,385 a year. The cost of housing a maximum-security inmate was $101 a day and $26,865 a year. For general population inmates the cost was $63 a day or $22,995 a year–less than half the cost of an Administrative Segregation inmate.

In addition, solitary confinement has been associated with significantly higher construction costs per cell. For example, Wisconsin’s [Boscobel supermax](http://www.forbes.com/2006/04/15/prison-supermax-ross_cx_jr_06slate_0418super.html) facility was built to house 500 inmates 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 inmates, giving a construction price tag of approximately $146,000 per bed.

Solitary Watch has released a [fact sheet](http://solitarywatch.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/fact-sheet-the-high-cost-of-solitary-confinement.pdf) on this issue with more specific data on various states.

**How have the courts ruled on solitary confinement?**

In 1890, Supreme Court Justice Samuel Miller condemned the practice: “A considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi-fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others became violently insane; others still, committed suicide; while those who stood the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community.”–*In re Medley*, 134 U.S. 160, 168 (1890)

In 1995, federal judge Thelton Henderson wrote that solitary confinement “may well hover on the edge of what is humanly tolerable,” and that for those who have been diagnosed mentally ill, “placing them in [solitary confinement] is the mental equivalent of putting an asthmatic in a place with little air.” — *Madrid v. Gomez*, 889 F. Supp. 1146, 1265 (N.D. Cal. 1995).

This is a sentiment echoed by federal judge William Wayne Justice who in 2001 who wrote that: “[Solitary confinement] units are virtual incubators of psychoses–seeding illness in otherwise healthy inmates and exacerbating illness in those already suffering from mental infirmities.” –*Ruiz v Johnson*, 154 F.Supp.2d 975 (S.D.Tex.2001).

While courts have consistently indicated that inmates diagnosed with a psychiatric condition must be treated differently, the same cannot be said of those sent to isolation in general. For instance, while the *Gomez* ruling provided protections for individuals with mental health conditions, it was also determined that for the average inmate solitary confinement did not rise to the level of 8th amendment prohibitions of “cruel and unusual punishment.” In *Sandin v. Conner*, it was ruled that short term segregation “did not present a dramatic departure from the basic conditions of [the inmate's] sentence.”

For a discussion of the courts’ interpretations of the 8th and 14th amendments in relation to solitary confinement, check out our [fact sheet](http://solitarywatch.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/fact-sheet-solitary-confinement-and-the-law2.pdf) on the issue.

**What are the alternatives to solitary confinement?**

Given the high number of inmates held in solitary confinement, many states have or have been called on to reexamine the means by which inmates are classified as inmates who ought to be segregated.

In a 2011 [National Institute of Corrections study](http://www.ccjrc.org/pdf/2011_Solitary_Confinement_Report.pdf) of the Colorado prison found that the current use of solitary confinement (approximately 7% of the Colorado prison population) could be reduced if the classification system were reformed and administrative changes made. On January 20th, 2012, it was reported by the [Denver Post](http://www.denverpost.com/breakingnews/ci_19784708?source=rss) that the Colorado Department of Corrections began transferring 321 inmates out of administrative segregation. In [November 2011](http://blogs.westword.com/latestword/2011/11/solitary_confinement_overused_colorado.php), there were approximately 1,500 inmates held in administrative segregation and an additional 670 inmates in disciplinary segregation units. The DOC reviewed cases of inmates held in segregation for over one year. Of the approximately 870 cases reviewed by the Colorado DOC, 37 percent (321) were determined better suited for general population. As of [January 31st](http://www.doc.state.co.us/sites/default/files/opa/MnthyPop_Jan_0.pdf) the number of inmates in administrative segregation was down to 1,114 males and 24 females.

The reform of classification systems led to the significant [reduction of Mississippi’s](http://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/beyond-supermax-1.pdf) solitary confinement population, including the transferring out of approximately 800 supermax inmates 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](http://www.thecrimereport.org/archive/2011-07-maines-dramatic-reduction-of-solitary-confinement), has slashed the number of it’s Special Management Units by nearly half, from a consistent 132 to [69 as of today](http://www.maine.gov/corrections/adult/popreport.pdf). The reforms came about in response to the reality that many inmates were placed in the SMU for small infractions, which subsequently led to many inmates having to spend increasing periods of time in the SMU due to lashing out against isolation.

Ponte has ordered a number of changes, including

* ordered that inmates not be placed in isolation longer than 72 hours without his personal approval;
* imposed a seven-day limit on supermax stays for inmates being investigated for in-prison crimes (in the past, a prisoner might languish for months as an investigation dragged on without him being charged);
* reclassified and moved out of the supermax many prisoners who simply appeared to be there unnecessarily;
* stopped the once-frequent brutal “cell extractions” of uncooperative and often mentally ill inmates; there have been none since May;
* required guards to use what Ponte calls “informal sanctions” to discipline unruly prisoners, like taking away commissary or recreation privileges, as alternatives to “the hole.”

The model being used by Ponte comes from the one used by Rodney Bouffard, the superintendent of 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 precent to 20 percent within a year](http://www.thecrimereport.org/archive/2011-07-maines-dramatic-reduction-of-solitary-confinement).

**How do other countries use solitary confinement?**

The United Kingdom has approximately as [many total inmates](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/law/research/icps/downloads/wppl-8th_41.pdf) as the United States has in solitary confinement. While difficult to estimate, the UK likely has no more than 500 inmates in solitary confinement at any given time. There are two types of isolation units in the UK, intensive management units (akin to disciplinary segregation) and longer-term isolation units called Close Supervision Centers.

In the intensive management units, inmates placed for disciplinary issues may be held no longer than three weeks, with over a quarter of such inmates in Wandsworth prison held in isolation no longer than a few hours. The Close Supervision Centers are similarly rarely used, with a typical utilization of approximately thirty cells at any given time.

In a stark difference from practices in the United States, each prison in the UK has an Independent Monitoring Board consisting of local volunteers who perform inspections of the facilities and submit an annual report. Prisons must notify the IMB of every decision to place an inmate in isolation within 24 hours and the IMB is obliged to visit the facility within 72 hours of notification.

For more on the UK’s use of solitary confinement, refer to Solitary Watch reporter [Elisa Mosler’s article](http://solitarywatch.com/faq/solitarywatch.com/2012/01/19/solitary-confinement-in-great-britain-still-harsh-but-rare/) on the issue.

**What do international bodies say about solitary confinement?**

The [Committee Against Torture](http://www.law.upenn.edu/journals/conlaw/articles/volume11/issue1/Lobel11U.Pa.J.Const.L.115(2009).pdf), 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](http://www.solitaryconfinement.org/uploads/Istanbul_expert_statement_on_sc.pdf) has, in 1992, suggested that prolonged isolation may amount to a violation of international human rights law. Similary 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 members nations to ban nearly all uses of solitary confinement in prisons, warning that is 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](http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2011/10/prolonged-solitary-confinement-is-torture-says-expert/) 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. Mendex stated: “I am of the view that juveniles, given their physical and mental immaturity, should never be subjected to solitary confinement. Equally, in order not to exacerbate a previously existing mental condition, individuals with mental disabilities should be provided with proper medical or psychiatric care and under no circumstances should they ever be subjected to solitary confinement. My recommendations are, first, to see if we can have a complete ban on prolonged or indefinite solitary confinement. And I more or less arbitrarily defined that as anything beyond 15 days of solitary confinement, meaning someone being confined to a cell for at least 22 hours a day.”

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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](http://www.solitarywatch.com) or contact: Solitary Watch, PO Box 11374, Washington, DC 20008 / [solitarywatchnews@gmail.com](mailto:solitarywatchnews@gmail.com).