



## **FAQs - Prolonged Solitary Confinement in U.S. Prisons**

### ***Why should people of faith care about the use of prolonged solitary confinement?***

All major religions recognize the inherent dignity of each human being and their capacity for redemption. Prolonged solitary confinement desecrates a person's inherent dignity, denies the essential human need for community, and impedes genuine rehabilitation.

### ***What is the history of solitary confinement in the United States?***

Dr. Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin and several Quaker leaders first instituted solitary confinement at Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, believing that total isolation and silence would lead to penitence (hence, the term 'penitentiary' was coined). That led to the building of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Penitentiary in 1829, which only had solitary confinement cells. However, instead of becoming penitent, the prisoners developed serious mental health problems. The Quakers recognized that solitary confinement caused severe psychological harm and apologized for their use of solitary confinement. Unfortunately, the U.S. has let history repeat. In 1983, Marion prison in Illinois instituted a permanent 'lock down' of their entire facility, in which inmates were confined alone in their cells for 23 hours per day. The use of solitary confinement has increased dramatically since then. In 1989, California built Pelican Bay State Prison to house prisoners exclusively in isolation (the first "supermax" prison). Today, there are 44 state-run supermax prisons and one federal supermax prison.

### ***How does the United States use of solitary confinement compare to other nations?***

The United States has become a world leader in holding prisoners in prolonged solitary confinement. The United States reportedly has five percent of the world's population, 25 percent of its prisoners, and the vast majority of prisoners in long-term solitary confinement.

### ***How many prisoners are held in solitary confinement today?***

Experts estimate that at least 80,000 people in the U.S. criminal justice system are held in solitary confinement. The 2006 Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons (the Commission), issued a report, *Confronting Confinement*, stating that from 1995 to 2000, the growth rate of segregation units significantly surpassed the prison growth rate overall: 40 percent compared to 28 percent.

### ***How much does housing prisoners in solitary confinement cost compared to housing prisoners in the general prison population?***

Experts have found housing a prisoner in solitary confinement can cost as much as \$50,000 more annually compared to general prison population housing, largely because solitary confinement units require significantly more staffing. The Commission reported that housing prisoners in solitary confinement units can double the cost of housing prisoners.

***What does ‘prolonged’ solitary confinement mean?***

It depends who says it. For the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), the term ‘prolonged solitary confinement’ is equated to torture — the point when the use of solitary confinement results in severe mental or physical pain or suffering.

In a 2011 report, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan Mendez, cited 15 days as ‘prolonged solitary confinement,’ noting that some of the psychological effects caused by isolation become irreversible at that point.

The American Bar Association Standards for Criminal Justice defines ‘long-term isolation’ as 30 days or more, for the purpose of setting a deadline by which prisoners in solitary confinement are given increased due process protections.

***Who is held in solitary confinement and why are they placed in isolation?***

One would expect it to be only the ‘worst of the worst.’ While there are prisoners placed in solitary confinement due to extreme violent behavior, that is not the case for the majority. In some prisons, solitary confinement has become a default tool to manage prisoners who fail to follow prison rules. As a result, many mentally ill prisoners end up in solitary confinement, since this population has great difficulty understanding or following such rules, especially when their illnesses go untreated.

***Is it possible to limit the use of solitary confinement and still keep prisons safe?***

Yes, a growing number of states that have safely reformed their solitary confinement policies. For example, in Mississippi, the number of incidents involving prisoner-on-prisoner violence and prisoner-on-staff altercations fell drastically when corrections officials implemented significant reforms in 2007, limiting the use of solitary confinement. “The [segregated housing] environment . . . actually increases the levels of hostility and anger among inmates and staff alike,” Donald Cabana, former Mississippi Warden, told the Commission in 2006. Maine Department of Corrections Commissioner, Joseph Ponte, ushered in reforms leading to a 70 percent reduction in Maine’s solitary confinement population in 2011. “Over time, the more data we’re pulling is showing that what we’re doing now [through greatly reduced use of solitary confinement] is safer than what we were doing before,” Ponte stated in a video interview with the National Religious Campaign Against Torture.

***How does the use of solitary confinement impact reentry of prisoners into society?***

Inmates who have been held in solitary confinement are significantly more likely to recommit crimes after they complete their sentences than prisoners who have been held in the general prison population. For example, a Washington state study of over 8,000 former prisoners found that people who were released directly from segregation had a much higher rate of recidivism than individuals who spent some time in the general prison population before returning to the community: 64 percent compared with 41 percent.

**Go to [www.nrcat.org/prisons](http://www.nrcat.org/prisons) to get involved with NRCAT’s work on solitary confinement**