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by [Garrett Zehr](#) | September 8, 2015

Prison officials across the country dedicated themselves to reducing the use of solitary confinement as they released a ground-breaking survey showing as many as 100,000 people were in solitary as of last fall.

Prolonged isolation of individuals in jails and prisons is a grave problem in the United States, said a [press release](#) by the Association of State Correctional Administrators, which is directly responsible for the administration of correctional systems across the U.S. The insistence on change comes not only from legislators across the political spectrum, judges, and a host of private sector voices, but also from the directors of correctional systems at both state and federal levels.

The report [Time-in-Cell](#), produced by the Association and the Yale Law School Liman Program, is the first to provide such a comprehensive analysis of the statistics and conditions of solitary confinement across the United States.

The research was based on a survey of 130 questions that was sent to the directors of all prison systems and details responses from 46 jurisdictions.

The report highlights the solitary population totals received from 34 jurisdictions, representing 73 per cent of the more than 1.5 million individuals incarcerated in state and federal prisons alone (not including local jails).

The report found that 66,000 individuals were held in secure housing in U.S. prisons, which includes administrative segregation, disciplinary segregation and protective custody. Using these numbers, the authors extrapolated that in all prisons across the United States, 80,000 to 100,000 individuals were held in solitary in the fall of 2014.

However, the actual number of individuals in solitary in the U.S. is likely much higher, since the study was solely restricted to prisons and did not include people being held in jail, juvenile facilities, or immigration and military detention.

Previously, the numbers of people in solitary were notoriously [difficult to determine](#) because of state-by-state variances, shortcomings in data collection and differences in defining solitary confinement. Although a few in-depth reports and litigation have provided detailed accounts of specific systems, relatively little nationwide information exists about the number of people held in restrictive housing, the policies determining their placement, how isolated the settings are, and whether the rules governing social contact, activities, and length of stay vary from place to place, the reports notes.

Studies about solitary that are often cited are more than a decade old and often underestimate the reality, with numbers ranging from anywhere between 25,000 and 80,000. For example, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedys pegged the number of individuals in solitary at 25,000 in [his recent concurrence](#) in *Davis v. Ayala*, where he notably criticized the practice of solitary.

Prison officials predicted the high numbers shown in the report will soon be out-dated. Having current information is one contribution of this report. So is the documentation of the commitments of correctional officials nationwide to reduce these numbers dramatically, says the study. Thus, directors of prison systems believe that these numbers are wrong in the sense that they are or will soon be out-of-date, based on their plans to cut back on the use of isolation and to change the conditions in it.

In addition to the numbers, the report also focuses on the conditions faced by individuals in one type of secure housing: administrative segregation.

The study found practices of administrative segregation varied significantly across the country, but found that in many jurisdictions, individuals spent 23 hours per day in their cells and were often locked up 24 hours per day on weekends. In general, the amount of time allowed outside of cell ranged from three to seven hours per week.

The size of cells of the jurisdictions surveyed ranged from 45 to 128 square feet and sometimes two people were locked in the same cell. Reading materials were limited in most jurisdictions, either by total number of items or by cubic foot. For example, individuals in segregation in the District of Columbia are only allowed one book. The report found that a few jurisdictions located in hot, humid climates, including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas, do not even have air conditioning in their solitary confinement

units.

In several jurisdictions, individuals were only permitted one phone call and social visit per month. In virtually all jurisdictions, individuals could lose programs, visits, phone calls and possessions as sanctions for misbehaviour.

In most jurisdictions, administrative segregation had no fixed endpoint. The report found that only two states Colorado and Georgia impose any time limit on solitary confinement. In a substantial number of jurisdictions, people remained in segregation for more than three years, while many jurisdictions don't even track the number of continuous days that individuals are held in solitary.

The study found that Black and Hispanic individuals were over-represented in administrative segregation. Of the 22 jurisdictions that responded to questions related to race, 21 jurisdictions contained a smaller percentage of White individuals in segregation than the total prison population. On average, Black individuals made up 47 per cent of the administrative segregation population versus 39 per cent of the total male prison population. Hispanic individuals were 14 per cent of the administrative segregation population compared to 12 per cent of the total male prison population.

Of the jurisdictions surveyed, [Arkansas has the highest percentage](#) of men being held in solitary. The report found 7.5 per cent of Arkansas nearly 14,000 men are held in isolation for 30 days or more.

The study also notably found that in 2013, more than 4,400 individuals were released directly from solitary confinement to the streets.

To evaluate trends in the use of solitary, the researchers compared the 2014 data with data from 2011. For many jurisdictions, the number of individuals in segregation was roughly comparable after three years. Colorado was a notable exception, with a decrease from 7.4 per cent of individuals in solitary out of the total of all incarcerated individuals in 2011 to 1.1 percent in 2014. Some of the jurisdictions had a small increase, the largest being Kansas, which went from 4 per cent in 2011 to 6.3 per cent in 2014.

The findings complement research that began in 2012 when the researchers set out to address the lack of data about solitary in the United States. In 2013 they [released a study](#) called *Administrative Segregation, Degrees of Isolation, and Incarceration: A National Overview of State and Federal Correctional Policies*, which analyzed criteria for placement and release from administrative segregation. That study found that the criteria for entry into solitary were very broad, as was the discretion given to correctional officials. In short, at the formal level, getting into segregation was relatively easy, and few policies focused on how people got out, researchers said of that report.

The findings of the 2013 report and the report just released both contributed to the conclusions by the Association of State Correctional Administrators to commit to dramatic change.

No matter what position in government a person holds legislator, judge or the head of an entire prison system the shared sense is that now is the time to reject the use of isolation as a tool of prison management, said [Yale Law School professor Judith Resnik](#), who works with the Liman Program. Directors of prison systems see first-hand the harms that solitary confinement imposes for those held, the staff overseeing the process, and the communities to which prisoners return, she said.

Reasons cited in the report for the desired reduction in the use of solitary included the required additional training for staff, prisoner and staff well-being, pending lawsuits challenging policies and significant costs. A few directors also said that it was important because it is the right thing to do.

Prison officials are not just seeking to reduce the number of prisoners in isolation, Resnik noted, but also to change the way that restricted housing is practised to stop denying social contact. There is a lot to fix, and the heads of many prison systems, in a host of jurisdictions, are talking about how to do so, she said.

Despite the consensus emerging from prison officials about the need to bring drastic changes to solitary, their employees are not all in agreement.

Today's disciplinary confinement policies have evolved over decades of experience, and it is simply wrong to unilaterally take the tools away from law enforcement officers who face dangerous situations on a daily basis, the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association [told the New York Times](#) in response to the prison directors statement calling for a reduction in the use of solitary. It is a fact that many of our corrections facilities have become more overcrowded with a higher proportion of violent offenders than ever before, and any policy changes must prioritize the safety and security of everyone who works or resides in these institutions, the organization said. Prison guard unions have considerable clout and have often [clashed with calls for prison reforms](#).

However, the unions may be facing an uphill battle in their resistance to change as the researchers note that the study's findings and the resolution of prison officials are just parts of the growing momentum to reduce and reform the practice.

This Report is only one aspect of ongoing cooperative undertakings, across the public and private sectors, to reduce and to eliminate the isolation of prisoners, so as to enable prisoners and staff to live and work in safe environments, respectful of human dignity, the study concludes.

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October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

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September 29, 2022

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