What is solitary confinement? Solitary or “supermax” confinement is the practice of placing a prisoner alone in a cell for 22-24 hours a day with little human contact or interaction; reduced or no natural light; restriction or denial of reading material, television, radios and other property; severe limits on visitation; and the inability to participate in group activities. Almost all human contact occurs while the prisoner is in restraints and behind some sort of barrier.

Who is in solitary confinement? There is a popular misconception that solitary is used only for the most violent and dangerous prisoners. In fact, at least 25,000 people are held in solitary confinement every day in this country and the majority of them are severely mentally ill or cognitively disabled. Low-risk “nuisance prisoners” are also housed in solitary because they have broken minor rules or filed grievances or lawsuits. Children held in adult prisons are also held in solitary “for their own safety.” If the use of solitary confinement were restricted solely to the dangerous and the predatory, most supermax prisons would stand virtually empty.

What happens to people in solitary confinement? People placed in solitary exhibit a variety of negative psychological reactions, including severe and chronic depression; self-mutilation; decreased brain function; hallucinations; and revenge fantasies.

The Truth About Solitary Confinement:

Jeopardizes Public Safety
Prisoners deprived of normal human contact cannot properly reintegrate into society, resulting in higher recidivism rates.
In California and Colorado, data show that nearly 40% of the supermax population is released directly from isolation into the community. Most states follow similar practices.

Wastes Taxpayer Dollars
Building solitary confinement units costs two to three times more than conventional prisons.
A 2007 estimate in Arizona put the annual cost of placing someone in supermax at $50,000 compared to only $20,000 for the average prisoner. In Texas it costs 45% more to house prisoners in solitary than in conventional prison.

Inhumane and Harmful
Solitary confinement causes and exacerbates mental illness, leading prisoners in solitary to attempt suicide at significantly higher rates than those in the general prison population.
The mentally ill often deteriorate catastrophically in solitary, leading courts to consistently find that subjecting the mentally ill to solitary is cruel and unusual punishment.
Since the vast majority of prisoners in solitary confinement are eventually released back into the community, it is imperative that we invest our limited public dollars in proven alternatives that lead to greater rehabilitation and pave the way for successful reentry and reintegration.

**BETTER, MORE COST-EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVES:**

As the nation’s largest public interest law organization, with affiliate offices in every state and a legislative office in Washington D.C., the ACLU works daily in courts, legislatures, and communities to promote smarter criminal justice policies.

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8. Grassian, supra note vii; Haney, supra note vii; Lanes, supra note i.
10. Grassian, supra note vii; Lanes, supra note i.
14. Mears, supra note iii at 2.