

Dangerous Overuse of Solitary Confinement in the U.S.

TO: Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution,
Civil Right

ATTN: Senator Dick Durbin, Chairman

FROM: M.I.S.S. "Solidarity Not Solitary" Mothers of
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SUBJ: Dangerous Overuse of Solitary Confinement in the
U.S.

Over the last two decades corrections systems have increasingly relied on solitary confinement as a prison management tool – even building entire institutions called "supermax prisons" where prisoners are held in conditions of extreme isolation, sometimes for years or decades. Although supermax prisons were rare in the United States before the 1990s, today forty-four states and the federal government have supermax prisons, housing at least 25,000 people. But this figure does not reflect the total number of prisoners held in solitary confinement in the United States on any given day. Using data from a census of state and federal prisoners conducted by the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, researchers estimate that over 80,000 prisoners are held in "restricted housing," including prisoners held in administrative segregation, disciplinary segregation and protective custody – all forms of housing involving substantial social isolation.

U.S. Bureau of Justice statistics show that in 2010 there were more than 1.4 million inmates in state prisons. However, there are no official estimates for how many state prisoners are mentally ill or in isolation. But prisoners' rights advocates around the nation say putting mentally ill inmates in long-term solitary confinement amounts to cruel and unusual punishment.

This massive increase in the use of solitary confinement has led many to question whether it is an effective and humane use of scarce public resources. Many in the legal and medical field criticize solitary confinement and supermax prisons as both unconstitutional and inhumane, pointing to the well-known harms associated with placing human beings in isolation and the rejection of its use in American prisons decades earlier.