

The High Cost of Solitary Confinement

Solitary confinement is the act of physically and socially isolating individuals for up to 24 hours per day in cells that measure, on average, smaller than a parking space. According to a 2023 report, at least 122,000 people are in solitary on any given day in U.S. prisons and jails.¹ Some remain in solitary for months, years, or even decades. According to the United Nations, the U.S. holds far more individuals in solitary confinement than other countries, for longer periods of time, and with fewer protections.²

Solitary confinement is known to cause serious psychological, neurological, and physiological damage after only short periods of time, and these effects can persist long after an individual is released.³ Studies have also shown that, contrary to its stated goals, solitary confinement actually increases recidivism and fails to reduce prison violence.⁴

While the costs borne by individuals forced into solitary confinement are immeasurable, the practice is also far more expensive than other forms of incarceration, as well as alternatives to incarceration. Beginning with construction and extending through operation and reentry, the costs of solitary confinement substantially outpace those of typical incarceration.

Although exact figures are difficult to obtain, estimates suggest that housing an individual in solitary confinement can cost up to three times more than incarceration in the general prison population.⁵ Additionally, there are many indirect, or hidden, costs of solitary confinement, including medical care and re-incarceration. As these costs have become clear, some states have recognized the potential savings from limiting the use of solitary confinement.

Why Is Solitary Confinement So Expensive?

“Supermax housing illustrates a policy that was implemented with little credible research to establish its need or effectiveness. Given what amounts to a recurring fixed cost, it precludes prison systems from investing the funds in other policies. And, ironically, it may contribute to the very problems that it was designed to alleviate.”

—Daniel Mears, Professor of Criminology, FSU⁶

In large part as a response to the “tough on crime” policies of the 1980s and 1990s, many jurisdictions began building “supermax” prisons modeled after the most restrictive and controlling prisons in the country.⁷ More than two-thirds of states, as well as the federal government, now operate supermax facilities.⁸ Due to their unique layout and heightened security features, the construction of these facilities has cost two to three times that of a typical prison.⁹

- The Tamms Correctional Center in Illinois cost \$73 million to build in 1998 and was designed to hold 500 individuals, a cost of about \$146,000 per bed.¹⁰
- The federal supermax facility, ADX Florence, was completed in 1994 at a price tag of \$60 million, a cost of over \$122,000 for each of its 490 beds.¹¹
- Pelican Bay State Prison in California was built in 1989 for \$230 million to hold 1,056 individuals, which amounts to nearly \$218,000 per cell.¹²

This disproportionate cost of supermax prisons and solitary confinement units extends beyond construction to operation. Staffing costs account for more than two-thirds of total state prison expenditures overall.¹³ The use of solitary confinement only exacerbates these costs due to the substantial staffing requirements for these units. Individuals in solitary confinement typically need to be escorted by multiple officers whenever

leaving their cells, and generally are not allowed to assist with prison operations such as meal preparation and cleaning.¹⁴

These requirements and restrictions lead to much higher prisoner-to-officer staffing ratios, thereby drastically increasing the cost of solitary confinement. According to one study, federal segregated housing units had an average prisoner-to-officer ratio of 41:1, compared to a ratio of 124:1 in the general population, meaning solitary confinement requires more than three times the amount of staff to operate.¹⁵ Additionally, staff who work in solitary confinement units are often at a greater risk of harm from occupational hazards, psychological trauma, and physical injury.¹⁶ High staff turnover rates due to the conditions of solitary units may also lead to higher costs in training new employees, overtime shifts, and addressing medical issues.¹⁷

Who Pays for Solitary Confinement?

Solitary confinement is used in prisons and jails on the federal, state, and local levels, as well as in immigration and juvenile detention facilities. This means the high financial costs of solitary are borne by taxpayers and governments in every state. However, almost no states publish official data on the costs associated with solitary confinement, which has left researchers, reporters, and advocates to compile figures from limited publicly available resources. While it is difficult to obtain comprehensive figures on the exact cost of solitary confinement across the country, the available data demonstrates just how expensive this system truly is.

- ADX Florence was built to be the most secure prison in the country. The estimated daily cost to house a person at ADX in 2013 was \$216.12, compared to \$85.74 for those in the general population.¹⁸ Additionally, segregated housing units within other federal facilities are also all more expensive to operate than the general population.¹⁹

■ Texas confines one of the highest numbers of people in solitary confinement, and many are kept in isolation for years.²⁰ In Texas, the cost of incarcerating an individual in solitary confinement is 45% more than if they were housed in the general population.²¹ According to a 2016 report, because of the overuse of solitary, the state of Texas has spent an additional \$46 million each year to house this population.²²

■ A 2016 report revealed that the daily cost of housing an individual in one of Ohio's two supermax prisons was more than twice that of a minimum or medium-level facility—\$139 per day versus \$54 at other facilities.²³ The use of solitary in these supermaxes has cost the state an additional \$25 million each year.

Hidden Costs of Solitary

“We should not incarcerate people in an environment that worsens mental illnesses, costs significantly more money, decreases public safety, and is extraordinarily cruel.”

—John Thompson, survivor of 14 years in solitary²⁴

While the concrete costs of incarceration are clear, communities end up paying a much higher price than it may seem. Some of the main “hidden” costs of solitary confinement include lawsuits, medical care, and recidivism.

Lawsuits have sometimes proven an effective means of holding governments accountable for the horrors of solitary confinement. Lawsuits brought by survivors of solitary confinement or the families of those who lost their lives in isolation place a real strain on local government budgets. One county in New Mexico was ordered by a jury to pay \$22 million to a man who was held in solitary pre-trial for nearly two years and severely neglected.²⁵ New York City settled a lawsuit brought by individuals wrongly detained in solitary for \$53 million.²⁶ In addition to holding officials accountable in specific cases, lawsuits have emerged as a method of spurring reform in states and counties worried about the financial impacts of these practices.²⁷ By reducing or eliminating solitary confinement, governments can save millions in legal costs.

Additionally, the financial cost of health care for incarcerated people falls on the government. Solitary confinement is known to cause severe harm to people's mental and physical health.²⁸ The cost of treating the health consequences of solitary can add up quickly, as conditions are likely to worsen the longer an individual is isolated.²⁹ While it is impossible to estimate the human cost of those who sicken, die, or take their own lives while in solitary, reducing the use of solitary can save millions in health costs each year. For example, New York advocates estimate that the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act will save the state and local communities almost \$3 million annually in medical costs alone.³⁰

Another hidden cost of solitary lies in the effect of long-term isolation on people's ability to adjust to life after release. Individuals who were incarcerated in solitary confinement

are more likely to end up back in prison than those who were housed only in the general population.³¹ When people are released directly from solitary confinement, the recidivism rate increases even more dramatically.³² The high rate of recidivism results in part from fewer opportunities and more obstacles to employment for survivors, since individuals held in solitary confinement are almost always restricted from participating in work programs or skill-building activities.³³ Conservative estimates place the cost of recidivism at \$6.72 million annually for New York State prisons alone.³⁴

Reforms Lead to Savings

Spurred by litigation, legislation, leadership, and local activism, a handful of states have recently taken steps to reduce the number of people they hold in solitary—a move that has clear fiscal benefits.

In 2019, New Jersey passed the Isolated Confinement Restriction Act, a groundbreaking bill that went further than any others at the time in limiting solitary confinement.³⁵ A 2016 estimate by the ACLU of New Jersey conservatively suggested that the state could save more than \$5 million annually by reducing the use of solitary by only 50%.³⁶ As the state continues to implement the law, there is an opportunity to save even more.

In 2021, New York lawmakers passed the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, a bill that drastically limited the use of prison isolation across the state.³⁷ In addition to ending a practice akin to torture, this bill is estimated to save New York State \$132 million a year.³⁸ The bulk of these savings (\$80.36 million) will come from closing down the most expensive facilities and units, which have drastically higher operating costs than typical prisons.³⁹ Over the next ten years, the HALT Act has the potential to save New York State taxpayers \$1.32 billion.⁴⁰

Following a drop in its incarcerated population, Connecticut opted to close its only supermax prison in 2021.⁴¹ Despite the fact that it incarcerated only 55 people, the closure of Northern Correctional Institution will save the state \$12.6 million in annual operating costs.⁴² In addition, advocates who helped pass the PROTECT Act, a law similar to New York's HALT Act, estimate that it will save the state more than \$14 million per year.⁴³

Tamms Correctional Center in Illinois was a notorious supermax prison that was closed in 2013. Prior to its closure, the Tamms facility operated at a cost three times greater than other facilities in the state.⁴⁴ Of the individuals held at Tamms, 25% were subjected to isolation for more than ten straight years.⁴⁵ In the first year following the closure of the supermax facility, the state was estimated to save \$21.6 million, with an additional \$26.6 million in ongoing annual savings.⁴⁶

Limiting the use of solitary confinement not only relieves the immediate operating costs associated with it, but also opens up other financial opportunities. Advocates in California estimate

that legislation limiting the use of solitary confinement could save the state a minimum of \$61 million in direct costs, and that repurposing the facilities previously used for solitary would have massive potential for additional savings.⁴⁷

Redirecting Savings to Treatment and Rehabilitation

While the majority of people in solitary confinement can be released to the general prison population at substantial cost savings, others require special housing or programming, which can incur additional expenses. Some of those who end up in solitary are vulnerable individuals with special needs, and it is vital that adequate funds be spent to allow them to do their prison time in a more humane and rehabilitative environment.

A disproportionate number of people in solitary, for example, have underlying mental health challenges, including serious mental illnesses, which is only exacerbated by isolation.⁴⁸ One report from Human Rights Watch estimated, based on available state data, that one-third to one-half of those held in isolation had some form of mental illness.⁴⁹ The best solution for these individuals is a psychiatric in-patient facility or community mental health care outside of prison; but as long as they are incarcerated, they require special care, often in a dedicated treatment unit. The most effective therapeutic units, such as the CAPS (Clinical Alternative to Punitive Segregation) in New York City's jails, yield dramatic reductions in violence and self-harm and far better clinical outcomes when compared with solitary confinement. However, such units do require an additional investment, largely to pay for clinical staff.⁵⁰

Another example is the Resource Team model developed by the public health group Amend at UCSF, based on approaches utilized in Norwegian prisons. This approach has succeeded in securing out-of-cell time and human interaction for incarcerated individuals who had previously been in solitary confinement for years or even decades. Many had been diagnosed with serious mental illness and/or histories of prison rule violations, including violence. The model requires funds for additional staffing and staff training (although in Oregon, some staff have been so motivated by this more humane approach that they have volunteered their time to participate).⁵¹

More broadly, intensive educational and rehabilitative programming for all incarcerated people has shown to dramatically reduce the incidence of prison violence as well as lowering recidivism rates.⁵² While such programs are often bolstered by volunteers, they can also require some additional spending on the part of corrections departments.

Eliminating or drastically reducing the use of solitary overall offers substantial savings to offset such costs, while at the same time creating a more safe and humane prison environment for staff and incarcerated people alike.⁵³

On an even broader level, spending on education and social services outside of prison saves taxpayers money by keeping people from landing behind bars to begin with, as well as in

solitary confinement. For example, although lack of education is a proven driver of incarceration, California spent an average of \$11,495.33 on each K-12 student in the state's public school system in 2018, and \$64,642 on each person incarcerated in its prisons.⁵⁴

Similarly, community mental health care that treats underlying mental health needs and trauma is far more cost-effective than incarceration, as well as more humane. For example, in 2021 New York City spent an average of \$41,833 annually to provide supportive housing and care to people with mental illness, in contrast to an astronomical \$556,539 per person to keep people in its jails.⁵⁵

Resources

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