

ENDING TORTURE BY SOLITARY CONFINEMENT IN ILLINOIS

By Chris Bridges, David Shapiro, and Kate Schwartz

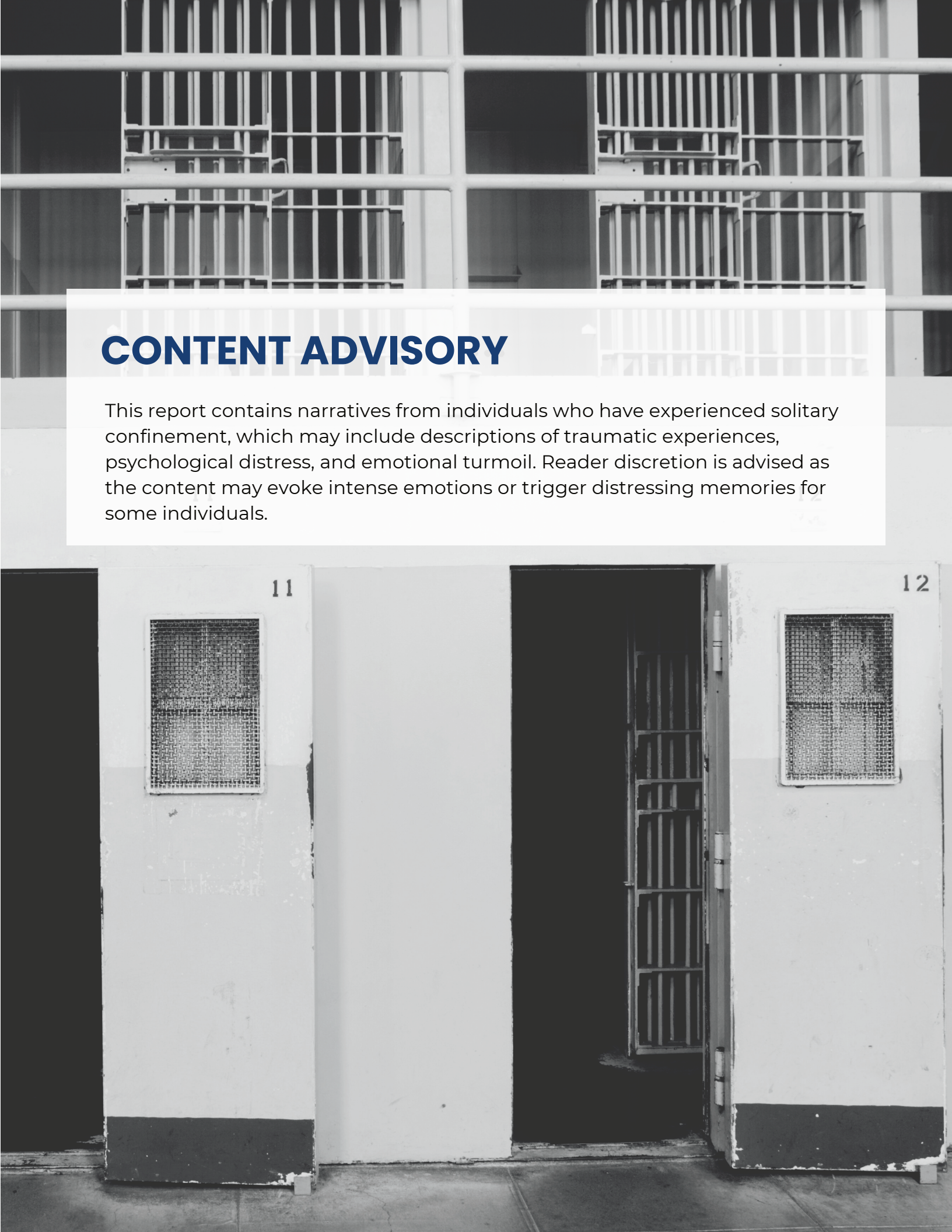


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes the urgent need for serious solitary confinement reform in Illinois. **Prisons exist to punish and rehabilitate people—not to torture and destroy them.** Solitary confinement literally causes the brain to shrink, and it induces a broad range of severe harms, up to and including psychosis and suicide. **As practiced in Illinois, solitary confinement constitutes torture under international human rights law.**

Serious solitary reform would also improve prison safety, limit unnecessary costs, reduce recidivism, and improve community safety. In fact, several other states have enacted legislation placing real constraints on the use of solitary confinement.

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A black and white photograph of a prison building. The upper portion of the image shows a series of windows with vertical metal bars. Below this, a white rectangular box contains the text 'CONTENT ADVISORY'. The lower portion of the image shows two prison doors, numbered 11 and 12. Door 11 is closed and has a small, square, mesh-covered window. Door 12 is open, revealing a dark interior with vertical bars. The ground in front of the doors is a flat, light-colored surface.

CONTENT ADVISORY

This report contains narratives from individuals who have experienced solitary confinement, which may include descriptions of traumatic experiences, psychological distress, and emotional turmoil. Reader discretion is advised as the content may evoke intense emotions or trigger distressing memories for some individuals.

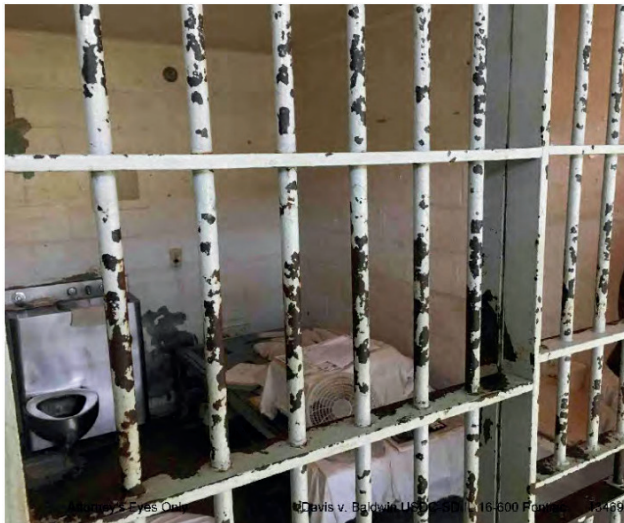
SOLITARY CONFINEMENT CAN DESTROY PEOPLE

As early as 1890, the U.S. Supreme Court noted that even short periods of solitary confinement caused people to fall “into a semi-fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them,” while “others became violently insane” or “committed suicide.” Even those who “stood the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity.”¹

Judge Patrick Murphy, sitting in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Illinois, found that prolonged isolation has negative impacts on incarcerated people, impacts which can last for years even after they are released from solitary.²

Modern science has now proven the extreme harm of solitary confinement. Isolation can cause “an extremely broad range of harmful psychological reactions.”³ These include “panic, withdrawal, hypersensitivity, ruminations, cognitive dysfunction, hallucinations, loss of control, irritability, aggression, rage, paranoia, hopelessness, lethargy, depression, a sense of impending emotional breakdown, self-mutilation, and suicidal ideation and behavior.”⁴ **Solitary confinement can drive previously healthy people to mental illness, in addition to worsening preexisting psychiatric conditions.**⁵ No wonder, then, that people in solitary confinement account for almost half of all prison suicides, even though they account for a small portion of the American prison population.

Pontiac Correctional Center - West House One Gallery cell



Solitary confinement may literally cause the brain to shrink.⁶ Isolation has been shown to affect the neurological structure of rodents, with their brains exhibiting “smaller neurons, with fewer branches in the hippocampus and cerebral cortex regions, which affect learning, memory, and executive brain functions.”⁷ In humans, “[c]onditions of severe and sustained stress[,]” like those experienced by people in solitary confinement, harm the hippocampus, which “physically shrinks,” and “begins

to fail in its functioning, with loss of emotional and stress control, loss of stress regulation, sometimes defects in memory, spatial orientation, and other cognitive processes, and in extreme cases, lasting changes in mood, including severe depression.”⁸

In fact, “even one week in solitary can lead to significant changes in electrical activity in the brain, reflecting “slowed brain activity and poorer performance on intellectual and perceptual-motor tests.”⁹

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT CAN DESTROY PEOPLE

Pontiac Correctional Center - Exterior view of West House cells

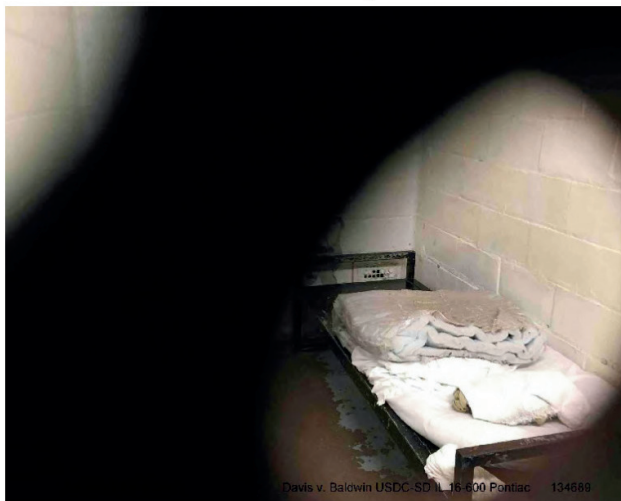


Dixon Correctional Center - Cell in mainline restrictive housing unit

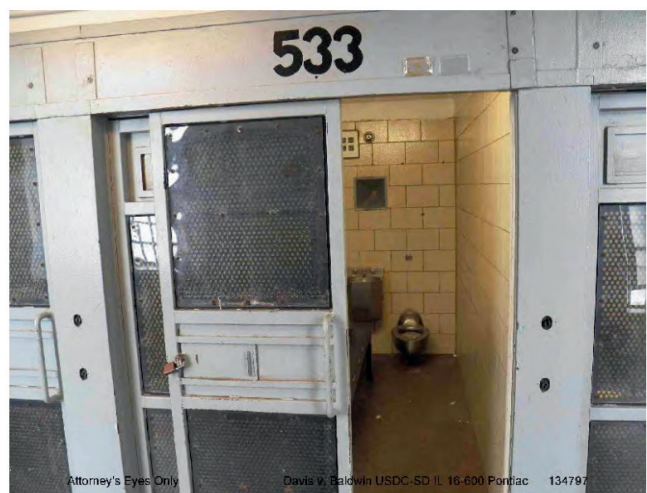


Dr. Craig Haney, a leading national expert on mental health in prisons, conducted a comprehensive review of restrictive housing units in Illinois. Dr. Haney found that these units “clearly constitute what is meant in correctional practice and in the scientific literature as ‘solitary confinement.’ The IDOC prisoners who are housed in these units are thus being exposed to what has been long-considered a very dangerous form of isolation.”¹⁰ **Many of these IDOC units are “especially severe,” subjecting “prisoners to conditions and forms of treatment that go beyond being painful, unpleasant, and potentially harmful to being outright dangerous to prisoners’ mental health and well-being”.**¹¹

Pontiac Correctional Center - West House One Gallery cell



Pontiac Correctional Center - North House cell door



FOUR ILLINOISIANS WHO SURVIVED SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

BRIAN BEALS

WRONGLY CONVICTED, SPENT 35 YEARS INCARCERATED



MR. BEALS TODAY

Before his exoneration, Mr. Brian Beals spent 35 years incarcerated in Illinois prison facilities for a crime he did not commit. In January of 2023, he finally returned home when his wrongful conviction was dismissed. Mr. Beals recalls that his first long segregation stint caused him to rely on anything and everything available to survive it: “I had to step back from reality and find new ways to get through the isolation. In order to cope, I relied on my imagination.” Mr. Beals described this coping tool as his “imagination on steroids.” He would often “use all of my energy to go to a place deep inside my head but eventually food trays would come, and I’d have to wake up or leave that mental escape momentarily and then find that place all over again.” If it wasn’t for veteran incarcerated people who suggested he become an expert in this coping technique Mr. Beals feels he may have “gone crazy.”

His toughest time in segregation was at Pontiac Correctional Center. He recalls an army of mice—numbering in the thousands—would come at night into his and other cells. He would have to barricade the bottom gap in the door to protect himself. He recalls having to stuff his shoes and make sure that his floor was clean every day in order to thwart the mice from invading his small, confined space. As a result, not only could he not sleep at night, but he also wouldn’t want to as he had to stand guard for invasion from mice each night. One time, he learned the hard way and woke up to mice burying themselves in his shoes. Other incarcerated individuals fared worse. He recalls one man a few cells down from him who lit himself on fire because he couldn’t take it anymore. Mr. Beals recalls the guards being indifferent to that situation.

Upon release from prison, Mr. Beals has done everything he can to push for prison reform and share his experiences in hopes that someone or something will change the policies and practices used against incarcerated individuals. While he feels blessed to have his mental faculties intact, he knows several other incarcerated individuals who have not been able to reacclimate themselves to the outside world, especially those who served in solitary confinement like him.



MR. BEALS WITH HIS MOTHER IN THE EARLY 90'S

FOUR ILLINOISIANS WHO SURVIVED SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

ANGEL PANTOJA

Mr. Angel Pantoja was first incarcerated at the age of 17 and spent significant time in segregation units. He recounts that in "F" house at Stateville, there were mice, roaches, and other bugs everywhere. Everyone had to go to sleep with a hat on because the roaches would crawl into their ears. Some people would always keep their food hanging from the ceiling so the mice wouldn't eat their food. Mr. Pantoja also recalls his time in "I" House at Stateville. The temperatures of the shower were either ice cold in the winter or boiling hot in the summer.

He recalls often using the word "bug" to describe people who had suffered significant mental hardship due to their time in segregation units. He notes many people "just kept losing their mind due to the amount of time people had to spend in there."

He recalls that the yard looked like a little dog cage and there was one person for every cage. "You actually feel like a dog. I remember just sitting in the cell and listening to everyone around me. I just tried to remind myself to stay strong and not lose my mind." In order to try and remain sane, Mr. Pantoja would write and read books. "I remember listening to guys on the gallery, and to me, as I look back now, and after years of trauma-informed care study, I know everyone was just in pain. The amount of mental anguish happening under those conditions was immense."

Right before Mr. Pantoja arrived, one young incarcerated individual had committed suicide. He was very young and just couldn't go on. "Those walls are specifically designed to break you. Let's throw out the argument of rehabilitation. Much like you would break a wild horse. They have to find ways to break you to make you passive. Sad they would use these inhumane conditions to break a human down like that but they do." Mr. Pantoja shared, "the most inhumane thing that happened to me there: My parents decided to visit me there. I was handcuffed with chains around my feet and waist. An officer was walking me to the visit area. In Pontiac (it's through a glass). My mother sees me wrapped up in chains and then locked to the stool in front of the glass and broke down. She immediately started screaming, "you're not an animal, you're not an animal. Why are you doing this?" And my dad was pulling her away. And all I can say, it's going to be okay mom."

When asked about how he coped after release from prison, Mr. Pantoja shared that he didn't feel comfortable at all. "I remember riding the pink line around the city and feeling very uncomfortable and then I wanted to quit my job. My boss told me first, go talk to someone. I took her advice and got connected with a therapist at the Chicago Justice Center and they told me I have PTSD. She told me, there's nothing you could have done to prevent this. You went in as a seventeen-year-old child. You lived 23 years of your life there. You weren't going to come out unscarred."

Today, Mr. Pantoja works at Adler University as the Project Coordinator for the Institute on Public Safety and Social Justice.

FOUR ILLINOISIANS WHO SURVIVED SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

MICHAEL JOHNSON

In November 2023, Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson wrote a judicial opinion describing what an Illinois man named Michael Johnson experienced while in solitary confinement.

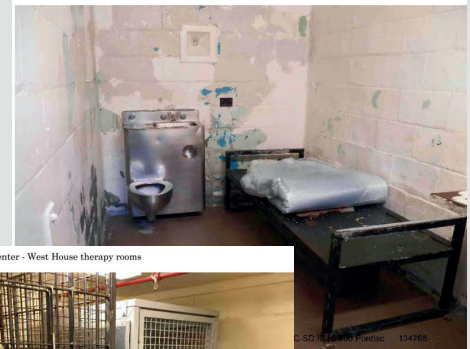
For nearly three years, petitioner Michael Johnson—whom the Illinois Department of Corrections has classified as “seriously mentally ill” based on his bipolar disorder, severe depression, and other diagnosed conditions—was held in solitary confinement at Pontiac Correctional Center, a prison two hours from Chicago. During that time, Johnson spent nearly every hour of his existence in a windowless, perpetually lit cell about the size of a parking space. His cell was poorly ventilated, resulting in unbearable heat and noxious odors. The space was also unsanitary, often caked with human waste. And because Pontiac officials would not provide cleaning supplies to Johnson unless he purchased them from the commissary, he was frequently forced to clean that filth with his bare hands. Johnson was allowed out of his cell to shower only once per week, for 10 brief minutes.¹²



As Justice Jackson explained, Mr. Johnson faced over three years of “yard restrictions” which prevented him from leaving his solitary confinement cell for an exercise yard for over three years. “Thus, for three years, Johnson had no opportunity at all to stretch his limbs or breathe fresh air.”¹³

As a result, Justice Jackson continued, Mr. Johnson’s “mental state deteriorated rapidly. He suffered from hallucinations, excoriated his own flesh, urinated and defecated on himself, and smeared feces all over his body and cell. Johnson became suicidal and sometimes engaged in misconduct with the hope that prison guards would beat him to death. His muscles also became prone to spasms and cramping, and he often complained of overwhelming fatigue.”¹⁴ **Mr. Johnson’s condition improved only when he was finally removed from solitary and transferred to a mental health unit.**¹⁵

Pontiac Correctional Center - West House One Gallery cell



Pontiac Correctional Center - West House therapy rooms



Pontiac Correctional Center - West House One Gallery cell



PICTURES OF PONTIAC CORRECTIONAL CENTER

FOUR ILLINOISIANS WHO SURVIVED SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

JOSEPH MAPP

Mr. Joseph Mapp served 26 years, 5 months, and 26 days in prison in Illinois. Mr. Mapp recalls being forced into a segregation unit under an erroneous charge. “In 2018, I was placed in segregation during Thanksgiving. At that time, I had been a “model incarcerated individual,” and was a teacher's assistant, peer educator, and frequently engaged in positive activities with other incarcerated individuals.” As a teacher's assistant, Mr. Mapp would be allowed to receive necessary school supplies such as clear folders that were provided by instructors and approved by the Warden to be in Mr. Mapp's possession. One day he received a guard shake down by internal affairs and they found those clear folders. As a result, “they put me in segregation for 30 days while doing an investigation despite the fact I kept telling them I was permitted to have those items by the Warden.”

Mr. Mapp recalls being given a shower about two times a week. Notably, he was confined to sitting in cells made of cinderblock that provided no air circulation. “In the summer-time, these isolation cells would trap heat and in the winter time, it would trap the cold. If it was 90 degrees outside, it would be 110 degrees inside the cell house and even more in a segregation unit.”

Mr. Mapp states, “if you think there should be humanity of any kind in any way inside prison, it's important to note that it's impossible to be humane in an inhumane environment.” Mr. Mapp reflected on all the individuals with mental health issues who were and are in segregation and the challenges they must overcome. He noted, “everyone in segregation, they are just trying to maintain any mental sanity they have left, and yet they're locked away in an environment that's always loud. People are located far away from each other so they constantly yell down to others at all hours of the day causing anybody present to lose sleep and not continuously be interrupted from any mental comfort they can conjure up in those isolated cells.”

He recalls the humiliation he suffered when he would get a visit from a family member and would be forced to engage in the practice of being strip searched, made to bend over, and then shackled at his waist, hands, and feet to go to the next area. **“I remember struggling to walk into that area while shackled and a guard holding my chain like a dog on a leash.”** The humiliation would continue as Mr. Mapp would then be forced to strip naked in front of guards with absolutely no respect for privacy, told to bend over a second time, and then re-shackled just to be taken to see a family member. Most of these visits were behind a glass window so he could not have any physical contact with another person. “In order to maintain my dignity, I would decline family visits just so I could avoid being subjected to that invasive strip search and shackling procedure over and over.”

Despite having been released from prison some time ago, Mr. Mapp still feels very impacted by all his experiences inside of prison. It has taken Mr. Mapp some time to trust others and trust himself as well. Mr. Mapp notes, “I am beyond blessed to have a strong support system when I got out of prison and know that my experience makes me an outlier. Many other formerly incarcerated individuals aren't afforded those same opportunities, same mentors, nor the same support networks.” **Today, Mr. Mapp works as the Director of Reentry at Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation.**

ILLINOIS KEEPS HUNDREDS OF INDIVIDUALS IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT, SOMETIMES FOR YEARS AND DECADES

According to information compiled by the Uptown People's Law Center based on Illinois Department of Corrections records, **there were at least 600 people in solitary confinement in Illinois at any given time between May 2018 to May 2023.**¹⁶As late as May 2023, there were over 1,000 people in solitary confinement.¹⁷

OF PEOPLE IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

between January 2011 - May 2023

10 DAYS+ → **65,367**

6 MONTHS+ → **11,212**

10 YEARS+ → **44**

In addition, in the approximately 12.5 year period between January 2011 and May 2023, over 65,000 people spent ten or more days in solitary confinement.¹⁸Forty-four people spent over ten years in solitary confinement, and 11 people spent over twelve years in solitary confinement.¹⁹

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT IN ILLINOIS CONSTITUTES TORTURE AND VIOLATES INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

Some two centuries ago, when Charles Dickens observed solitary confinement at an American prison, he wrote: "I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body."²⁰

Yet even today, as you read this report, people in solitary confinement in Illinois are being tortured, on a daily basis, in violation of international human rights law. The United States has ratified both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the United Nations Convention Against Torture, which prohibit both "torture" and "cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment."²¹ The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, often referred to as the "Mandela Rules," define the conditions under which solitary confinement becomes torture and, therefore, violates international human rights law. **Specifically, the Mandela Rules provide that confinement without meaningful human contact for 22 or more hours a day for a period greater than 15 days constitutes "torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment."**²²

Right now, people in solitary in Illinois facilities not only experience the beginning of torture that occurs after the fifteenth day of solitary confinement under international human rights law. As discussed in the previous section of this report, they suffer the continuation of torture—and its cumulative and worsening effects—for weeks, months, years, and decades on end.

BLACK ILLINOISIANS ARE SUBJECTED TO SOLITARY AT A DISPROPORTIONATE RATE

Dixon Correctional Center - X House restrictive housing unit, crisis area on B Wing



In Illinois, Black people suffer the torture of solitary confinement more frequently than white people. To begin, Black Illinoisians are more than seven times more likely to be incarcerated than white Illinoisians.²³ But even among people who are incarcerated in Illinois, being Black greatly increases the chances of experiencing solitary confinement. **According to one study, Black people accounted for 54.7% of the Illinois prison population, and 73.5% of the Illinois solitary confinement population.** In contrast, white people accounted for 31% of the Illinois prison population and only 13.4% of the Illinois solitary confinement population.²⁴

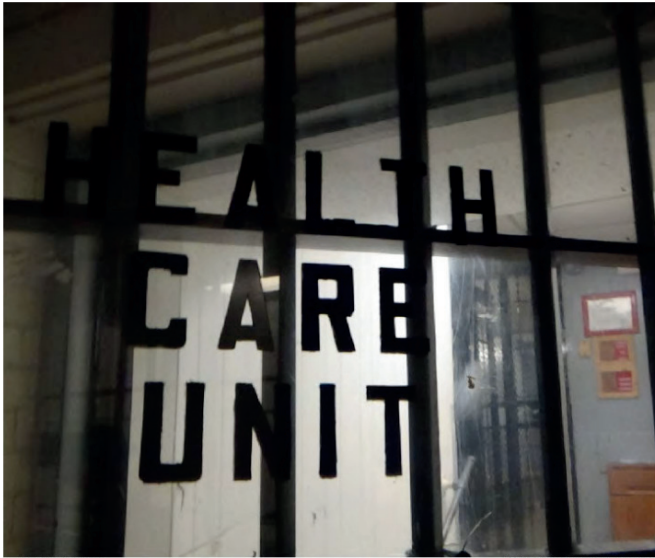
RESTRICTING SOLITARY CONFINEMENT IMPROVES PRISON SAFETY AND REDUCES COSTS

For many years, corrections officials believed that solitary confinement would improve safety by isolating dangerous individuals.²⁵ Years of research data and statistical analyses now show otherwise. Increased use of solitary confinement is “not associated with reductions in facility or systemwide misconduct and violence.”²⁶ **Instead, studies show that “[p]risons with higher rates of restrictive housing [have] higher levels of facility disorder.”**²⁷

As Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Corrections, Rick Raemisch abolished long-term solitary confinement throughout the state, implementing alternatives that included step-down programs and mental health units. He later recounted that at the time he implemented the change, “not everyone agreed with my new policy. But the corrections officers who had initially opposed it changed their minds after they began to see positive results.”²⁸ In fact, a report by the Vera Institute of Justice notes that **“Corrections staff often report experiencing significantly lower stress levels and increased feelings of safety after leaving solitary to work in less restrictive units, or when working in solitary units that have implemented substantial reforms.”**²⁹

RESTRICTING SOLITARY CONFINEMENT IMPROVES PRISON SAFETY AND REDUCES COSTS

Menard Correctional Center - Interior of crisis cell on North 2



In Mississippi, for example, the number of incidents requiring the use of force plummeted simultaneously with a drastic drop in the solitary confinement population.³⁰ In North Dakota, extreme incidents such as suicide attempts and cell flooding used to occur three or more times every week in solitary confinement units. After dramatic reductions in the use of isolation, those types of incidents occur only a few times a year.³¹ **Within a year of launching solitary confinement reforms, Maine prisons reported “substantial reductions in violence.”**³²

Solitary confinement also costs taxpayers far more than incarceration in general population, thereby decreasing available funding for measures that would make could make prisons safer and more humane.³³

For example, at an Illinois prison that has since been closed, keeping a person in solitary confinement for one year cost approximately \$92,000, compared to an average cost of approximately \$37,000 to incarcerate a person in Illinois for a year.³⁴

Solitary is more expensive because operations are more staff-intensive. Staff delivers meals, mail, toilet paper, and other necessities to each person, and generally one or two staff members are required to physically restrain and escort each person in solitary any time they leave their cell for showers, recreation, or other activities.

Logan Correctional Center - Restrictive housing cells in Building 15



REDUCING SOLITARY CONFINEMENT BENEFITS COMMUNITY LIFE AND SAFETY

Restricting the use of solitary confinement also makes communities safer. Most people who are incarcerated will be released, and “the impact of long periods of isolation on their health, employability, and future life chances will be felt in the families and communities to which they return.”³⁵ **Solitary confinement causes permanent harm that persists well past release from prison.** Many who survive solitary do not ever recover from it. Compared to other incarcerated people, those who experience solitary are nearly 25% more likely to die in their first year after release, 78% more likely to commit suicide, and 127% more likely to die of an opioid overdose within 14 days of leaving prison.³⁶

Dixon Correctional Center - Cell in mainline restrictive housing unit



The Vera Institute of Justice report collected studies and concluded: **“Research suggests that time spent in solitary may actually increase people’s likelihood of post-release offending, especially violent re-offending.”**³⁷

In contrast to solitary confinement, increasing time spent outside a cell can promote rehabilitation. According to the United States Department of Justice, “Correctional systems should seek ways to increase the minimum amount of time that inmates in restrictive housing spend outside their cells . . . Out-of-cell time should include opportunities for recreation, education, clinically appropriate treatment therapies, skill-building, and social interaction with staff and other inmates.”³⁸

Pontiac Correctional Center - South Mental, first floor



OTHER STATES HAVE ENACTED LEGISLATION CURTAILING SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

In recognition of the inhumane nature of solitary confinement and its devastating psychological toll on people who are subjected to it, several states have enacted laws to restrict the use of solitary confinement in their correctional institutions.

Illinois should join Washington, New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey in leading the way on reforming solitary—and thereby abolishing torture.



New York: New York enacted the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement Act (“HALT Act”) in 2021, and the law went into effect on March 31, 2022.³⁹ Notably, under the HALT Act, individuals in segregated confinement for any period must be offered “out-of-cell programming” at least 4 hours per day, including at least 1 hour for “recreation.”³⁹



Connecticut: A Connecticut law that became effective July 1, 2022, (the “2022 PROTECT Act”) restricts the permissible use of “isolated confinement for incarcerated persons.”⁴⁰ Under the 2022 PROTECT Act, the term “isolated confinement” refers to “any form of confinement” within a cell for 19 or more hours.⁴¹ The 2022 PROTECT Act sets a cap of 15 consecutive days in isolated confinement, or 30 total days within any 60-day period.⁴²

In addition, during any period of isolated confinement, the 2022 PROTECT Act requires people to be provided access to reading materials, paper and a writing implement; at least 3 showers per week, and a minimum of 2 hours per day out of a cell, including at least 1 hour for recreational purposes.⁴³



New Jersey: In July 2019, New Jersey Enacted the Isolated Confinement Restriction Act (“ICRA”), which went into effect on August 1, 2020.⁴⁴ The ICRA defines “isolated confinement” to mean confinement in a cell “with severely restricted activity, movement, and social interaction” for more than 20 hours a day.⁴⁵ New Jersey requires 4 hours of out-of-cell time for people in prisons. The ICRA prohibits prisons and jails from keeping anyone in solitary confinement for more than 20 consecutive days or longer than 30 total days during a 60-day period.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

There is simply no excuse for Illinois's use of solitary confinement. Other states have adopted solitary confinement reform with real teeth, and Illinois must do the same to prevent further torture, mental destruction, and death in its prisons. **The time to act is now.**

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