

Durbin commends President Obama's leadership in addressing solitary confinement

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Senator held first hearing on human rights issue in 2012 and called for the end of solitary confinement of juveniles at second hearing in 2014



WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) today praised **President Obama**’s decision to ban the use of solitary confinement for juveniles – [a move he called for at Senate hearing he chaired in 2014](#). Durbin is the lead Democratic cosponsor of bipartisan criminal justice reform legislation – the *Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015* – which includes a similar ban. The legislation also grants

judges greater sentencing flexibility for certain low-level offenders and establishes recidivism reduction programs, while targeting violent criminals. President Obama called for the passage of criminal justice reform legislation in an [op-ed that ran in the Washington Post](#) today.

“President Obama’s announcement that he will ban the use of solitary confinement for juveniles in the federal corrections system, and reform and limit its use in other populations is backed by growing evidence that conditions in extreme isolation can be severe, lead to serious long-lasting harm, and actually increase the threat to public safety. As he said in his op-ed today, in America, ‘we believe that when people make mistakes, they deserve the opportunity to remake their lives.’ To that end, I will continue working with my colleagues to enact smart, fair reforms to our justice system,” said Durbin.

Examining Solitary Confinement as a Human Rights Issue:

As Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights, Senator Durbin held the first-ever Congressional hearing on solitary confinement in June 2012 where Anthony Graves – the 12th death row inmate in Texas to be exonerated – testified. In his hearing, Durbin emphasized the importance of reforming the way we treat the incarcerated and the use of solitary confinement in prisons and detention centers around the country. As a result of the hearing, the federal Bureau of Prisons agreed to Durbin’s request to submit to the first independent assessment of its solitary confinement policies and practices.

Durbin has met with Bureau of Prisons Director Charles Samuels several times to push for additional reforms and encourage a sufficiently robust assessment of the Bureau’s segregation practices. Since Durbin’s 2012 hearing, the Bureau of Prisons has reduced its segregated population by more than 25 percent. In addition, the Bureau of Prisons closed three of its Special Management Units, a form of segregated housing, due to the reduction in the segregated population.

In 2014, Durbin held a second hearing on solitary confinement in which he called for an end to the use of solitary confinement for juveniles, pregnant women and those with serious and persistent mental illness. Damon Thibodeaux – a man held in solitary confinement for 15 years before his exoneration and release from prison – testified at the hearing.

In February 2015, the Bureau of Prisons released the independent assessment Durbin requested following his first solitary confinement hearing. Following the report, which is available [here](#), Durbin said: *“Though improvements have been made – most importantly in the declining number of inmates in solitary confinement – there is still*

much more work to be done.... The fact remains that the United States holds more prisoners in solitary confinement than any other democratic nation in the world. The findings and recommendations of this report provide further evidence that we must fundamentally reform our approach to solitary confinement.”

Additional Information about the Use of Solitary Confinement:

During the last several decades, the United States has witnessed an explosion in the use of solitary confinement for federal, state, and local prisoners and detainees. Today, more than 2.3 million people are imprisoned in the United States. This is – by far – the highest per capita rate of incarceration in the world.

Solitary confinement – also called restricted housing, supermax housing, segregation and isolation – is designed to separate inmates from each other and isolate them for a variety of reasons. Originally used to segregate the most violent prisoners in the nation’s supermax prisons, the practice has been used more frequently in recent years, including for the supposed protection of vulnerable groups like immigrants, children and LGBT inmates. According to a recent study by the Arthur Liman Public Interest Program at Yale Law School and the Association of State Correctional Administrators, prisons in the United States held an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 people in segregation in 2014.

Prisoners in isolation are often confined to small cells without windows, with little to no access to the outside world or adequate programs and treatment. Inmates are confined to these cells for up to 23 hours a day. Such extreme isolation can have serious psychological effects on inmates and can lead to mental illness, self-mutilation and suicide. According to several state and national studies, at least half of all prison suicides occur in solitary confinement.

In addition to the impact solitary confinement has on inmates, there are also public safety and fiscal concerns with the practice. The bipartisan Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons found that the use of solitary confinement often increased acts of violence in prisons. It also is extremely costly to house a prisoner in solitary confinement.