



Prison Conditions ^[1]

The warehousing of one in 100 Americans has all but eradicated rehabilitative programs, and the conditions of confinement in jails, prisons, and detention facilities have dramatically worsened. In 2011, conditions became so “horrendous” in California—home to some of the country’s harshest “Three Strikes, You’re Out” enhanced sentencing laws—that the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Plata* required the state to release up to 46,000 prisoners after finding that its severely overcrowded prisons and grossly inadequate medical and mental health care is “incompatible with the concept of human dignity and has no place in civilized society.”

About 75,000 people in the United States are held in solitary confinement, spending 23 or more hours a day in small cells, allowed out only for showers, brief exercise, or medical visits, without telephone calls or visits from family members. The use of long-term isolation escalated after “tough on crime” policies led states to build super-maximum-security prisons in the 1980s and 1990s. Studies show that people held in long-term solitary confinement suffer from anxiety, paranoia, perceptual disturbances, and deep depression. Nationwide, suicides among people held in isolation, who make up 3 to 8 percent of the nation’s prison population, account for about 50 percent of prison suicides. Some states and the federal government recently enacted reforms to restrict solitary confinement for juveniles and people with mental illness and to reduce the maximum time that can be spent in solitary.

EJI investigates abusive and dangerous prison conditions in Alabama—where prisons hold more than double (190 percent) their design capacity and have the highest inmate-to-officer ratio in the country. A dramatic increase in violence, inmate murders, and corruption has been documented and exposed by EJI staff, and our reports about widespread rape and sexual abuse of incarcerated women at Tutwiler Prison for Women, the physical and sexual abuse of male prisoners by officers and staff at three other Alabama prisons, and the murder of a young inmate by correctional officers have led to federal investigations, prosecutions, and mandated reforms. Alabama is an outlier in its refusal to meaningfully address its prison crisis, and EJI continues to challenge the Alabama Department of Corrections to reform unconstitutional prison conditions.

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