Barack Obama in 2015 became the first U.S. president to visit a federal prison and at the time asked whether "we really think it makes sense to lock so many people alone in tiny cells for 23 hours per day, often for months or years."

In 1993, Craig Haney, a social psychologist, interviewed inmates in solitary confinement at Pelican Bay State Prison in California, a super-maximum-security institution.[100] Twenty years later, he reinterviewed seven of the inmates who had spent two decades in windowless 6- by 11.6-foot isolation cells and other inmates who had spent at least ten years in solitary confinement at Pelican Bay. The inmates who were interviewed had been sentenced to prison for violent crimes although they primarily were confined in isolation because they were gang members or gang associates who posed a threat to correctional personnel or to other inmates. The only way out of isolation for these inmates was to become an informant and to risk retribution for being a snitch. Individuals in solitary confinement at Pelican Bay (Special Housing Unit or SHU) were denied personal phone calls and were prohibited from physically interacting with visitors. Haney found that there had been a complete mental and psychological deterioration of the inmates, who resembled zombies devoid of emotions and who possessed an inability to interact with other human beings.

Haney described the men as suffering from profound sadness. "They were grieving for their lost lives, for their loss of connectedness to the social world and their families outside, and also for their lost selves. . . . Most of them really did understand that they had lost who they were, and weren't sure of who they had become."

Sixty-three percent of inmates in solitary for more than ten years said they were on the verge of an "impending breakdown," but only 4 percent of the maximum-security inmates who were interviewed who were not in solitary confinement shared this feeling. Seventy-three percent of inmates in isolation reported chronic depression, and 78 percent felt emotionally empty, as compared to 48 percent and 36 percent among the maximum-security inmates who were not in solitary confinement. The inmates in long-term solitary also suffered from anxiety, paranoia, perceptual disturbances, and deep depression.

Even after being released, inmates who had spent extended time in solitary confinement were easily startled, were fearful of crowds, sought out confined spaces, were overwhelmed by sensory stimulation, and suffered from various psychological disorders. Studies also indicate that solitary confinement leads to higher rates of recidivism.

Juan E. Mendez, special rapporteur on torture for the United Nations, concluded that confinement of prisoners in solitary at Pelican Bay amounted "to torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment" and was "contrary to the practices of civilized nations."

Roughly seventy-five thousand state and federal inmates as of 2015 were held in solitary confinement in the United States, most of whom are confined in their cells for twenty-three hours per day and only are allowed outside of their cells for showers, exercise, or medical visits.

The use of isolation cells escalated in the 1980s and 1990s when prison overcrowding and long-term sentences and the increased incarceration of gang members led to an escalation of violence that prison officials controlled through the isolation of inmates considered to pose a threat to the stability of institutions. Solitary confinement also was used to provide security for gay, bisexual, transgender, and physically challenged prisoners.

California, Colorado, Washington, Illinois, Oregon, and New York have introduced reforms to their system of solitary confinement. New York ended a system in which four thousand inmates were locked up for twenty-three hours a day, in 6- by 10-foot cells with little human contact or access to rehabilitative programs and a diet that at times was restricted to a slab of bread and potatoes known as "the loaf." In January 2016, President Obama issued an executive order prohibiting the use of solitary confinement in federal prisons against juveniles and prisoners who commit "low-level infractions." Obama recounted the story of sixteen-year-old Kalief Browder, who was sent to Rikers Island in New York City in 2010 to await trial after being accused of stealing a backpack. Kalief was released in 2013 after spending nearly two years in solitary confinement without ever standing trial or being convicted. Kalief subsequently committed suicide at age twenty-two. President Obama in explaining his executive order in an op-ed wrote, "How can we subject prisoners to unnecessary solitary confinement, knowing its effects, and then expect them to return to our communities as whole people? . . . It doesn't make us safer. It's an affront to our common humanity."