

California solitary confinement statistics: Year One after landmark settlement

Indefinite solitary confinement numbers down by 99%

A year after the historic settlement in [Ashker v. Governor of California](#) mandated an end to indefinite solitary confinement in California, new data shows that the settlement succeeded in moving virtually all prisoners in those categories out of solitary.

BACKGROUND: THE ASHKER CASE AND SETTLEMENT

For years, California isolated more people, for longer periods, than any other state. In the Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit (SHU) and other California SHUs, prisoners were isolated in near-total solitude 23 to 24 hours a day, denied telephone calls, contact visits, and vocational, recreational, or educational programs. California not only locked people away for prolonged periods – often decades – it also did so predominantly on the basis of alleged “gang affiliation,” as opposed to actual infractions of prison rules.

In 2015, *Ashker* plaintiffs, including the leadership of a broad coalition of prisoners who had organized an enormously successful series of hunger strikes to draw attention to the human rights abuses endemic to the California solitary system, agreed to a [comprehensive settlement](#) that fundamentally altered many aspects of the cruel and unconstitutional solitary confinement regime.

Among other important provisions limiting California’s future use of solitary, the settlement mandated California to review *all* current “gang-validated” SHU prisoners *within one year* to determine whether they should be released from solitary under the settlement terms.

THE NUMBERS: MONITORING STATISTICS FROM YEAR ONE

→ **Pelican Bay’s long-term (10+ years) solitary population has dropped 99%, from 513 to 5**

In 2011, a shocking **513** individuals had spent over 10 years in solitary confinement at Pelican Bay. Other California prisons also housed enormous long-term solitary populations. Today, only **five** SHU prisoners have been held in the Pelican Bay solitary confinement unit for over 10 years, and they are expected to be released from solitary shortly, or at least given a release date.

→ **Between October 2015 and October 2016, California has reviewed 1,557 prisoners, and endorsed 1,532 of those men for transfer out of solitary, and transferred at least 1,512 of them – 97%**

The settlement required the California Department of Corrections to review the situation of over 1,557 prisoners within a year: the entire population of California prisoners held in indeterminate solitary confinement based on allegations of gang affiliation as well as anyone who had been in the Pelican Bay SHU for over 10 years. All 1,557 reviews were completed as required.

The reviews have resulted in 1,532 people being endorsed for transfer out of solitary confinement, to less restrictive housing. Nearly all of those transfers have already occurred (1,512) and the rest are expected shortly. Another 12 prisoners are now serving determinate SHU terms and have set SHU release dates, as opposed to their previously indeterminate terms.

All told, the number of California prisoners in indefinite solitary confinement has dropped by 99%.

→ Between December 2012 and August 2016, the State's entire solitary confinement population has fallen by 65%, from 9,870 to 3,471.

California began reducing its solitary population shortly after *Ashker* was filed, in response to both the lawsuit and the pressure brought to bear by the hunger strikers. In December of 2012, at the very beginning of this trend, there were 9,870 men (or 7.5% of the male prison population) in some form of isolation or another (including serving a set disciplinary term for prison misconduct). As of August 2016, that number has dropped to 3,471 (2.7% of the population).