

Solitary Confinement: Common Misconceptions and Emerging Safe Alternatives

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REPORT SUMMARY

For More Information

The Vera Institute of Justice is an independent nonprofit organization that combines research, demonstration projects, and technical assistance to help leaders in government and civil society improve the systems people rely on for justice and safety. For more information about this or other publications from Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections, contact Ram Subramanian at rsubramanian@vera.org.

This publication is the first in a series about solitary confinement, its use and misuse, and how to safely reduce it in our prisons and jails. This series was made possible in part by the Robert W. Wilson Charitable Trust. Both during his lifetime and currently through his charitable trust, Mr. Wilson supported Vera's work with government partners around the country to reduce our nation's reliance on solitary confinement and improve conditions of confinement. We are honored to name this series of publications in his memory.

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There are indications that the use of solitary confinement (also known as segregated housing) has grown substantially in recent years (perhaps as much as by 42 percent between 1995 and 2005), yet the precise number of people held in segregated housing on any given day is not known with any certainty. Estimates range from 25,000 (which includes only those held in supermax facilities) to 80,000 (which includes those held in some form of segregated housing in all state and federal prisons). None of these estimates include people held in segregated housing in jails, military facilities, immigration detention centers, or juvenile justice facilities in the United States. Moreover, because these estimates are only one-day snapshots, they most likely underestimate the total number of people subjected to one or more periods in solitary confinement over the course of their incarceration.

Against this backdrop, evidence mounts that solitary confinement produces many unwanted and harmful outcomes—for the mental and physical health of those placed in isolation, for the public safety of the communities to which most will return, and for the corrections budgets of jurisdictions that rely on the practice for facility safety. As these negative impacts have come to light, concern about its overuse has grown. The severe conditions to which people in segregated housing are subjected are now regularly exposed by mainstream journalists. Incarcerated people who participate in hunger strikes against its use, such as those at Pelican Bay state prison in California in 2013, receive sympathetic national attention. A subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee held a series of hearings in 2012 and 2014 focused on reassessing the use of solitary confinement. In 2014, 10 states announced or implemented policy changes to reduce the number of adults or juveniles held in segregated housing, improve the conditions in segregation units, or facilitate the return of segregated people to a prison's general population. And, most recently, New York City's Department of Correction made the historic decision to ban the use of segregated housing for all those in its custody 21 years old and younger.

Despite increased attention to the issue, many people—policymakers, corrections officials, and members of the public—still hold misconceptions about and misguided justifications for the use of solitary confinement. This report aims to dispel the most common of these misconceptions and highlight some of the promising alternatives that are resulting in fewer people in segregated housing.

Read the complete report: www.vera.org/solitary-confinement-misconceptions-safe-alternatives.

A photograph of a prison cell. In the foreground, there is a long, narrow metal bed. To the right, there is a small table on a stand. In the background, there is a window with vertical bars. The walls are light-colored and appear somewhat worn.

Safe Alternatives to Segregation

In March 2015, the Vera Institute of Justice launched the Safe Alternatives to Segregation (SAS) Initiative—a two-year national campaign aimed at reducing the number of incarcerated people held in segregated housing while simultaneously improving safety in prisons and jails. In addition to providing technical assistance to state and local jurisdictions selected through a competitive bidding process, SAS features a series of publications and an online resource center (to be launched in fall of 2015) that highlight the latest research and policy analysis by leaders in the field. For more information about SAS, contact Christine Herrman, project director, Center on Sentencing and Corrections, at cherrman@vera.org.