

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/addressing-the-overuse-of-segregation-in-u-s-prisons-and-jails/momentum-builds-in-2017-to-reduce-the-use-of-solitary-confinement>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In a year that many were concerned would bring a more punitive approach to criminal justice, a growing number of correctional leaders in states both red and blue, working with Vera as part of our Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative (SAS Initiative), joined an effort to change what has been called one of the cruelest forms of punishment. The movement to safely end the use of solitary confinement also referred to as restrictive housing or segregation expanded as five corrections agencies actually began to implement changes aimed at reducing the number of people held in segregation, and five new allies took steps to change by evaluating their practices.

Today, we released findings and recommendations for New York City and Middlesex County, New Jersey. Reports for all five corrections agencies who embarked on this work since 2015 can be found on [Vera's website](#) and the [Safe Alternatives to Segregation Resource Center](#). These partners have shown leadership in recognizing the damage that solitary confinement does to those who experience it, damage that can persist well after a person is released from prison or jail, the potential harmful effects on the staff who work in those environments, and the ill effects the practice has on prison safety and culture itself.

Vera started on this path a dozen years ago, when we established the [Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons](#), and published [Confronting Confinement](#), which drew attention to the overuse of solitary confinement. Leaders from Washington, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Maryland, and Bernalillo County, New Mexico soon joined with us in the vanguard to examine and change their practices.

The path continued when Vera launched its Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative, generously funded by the Robert W. Wilson Charitable Trust and the Bureau of Justice Assistance, in 2015. Numerous states and counties applied to partner with us and examine their practices with an aim to reform. Details of what we learned is outlined in the five reports, starting with baseline recommendations that restrictive housing be used only:

Middlesex County, NJ; Nebraska; New York City; North Carolina; and Oregon are in different phases of their implementation work: Nebraska has eliminated the use of restrictive housing as a punishment for rule violations; North Carolina has begun programs to divert people with serious mental illness from restrictive housing and into treatment units, and abolished the use of restrictive housing for those age 17 and younger; Middlesex County, New Jersey reports a reduction in their average daily population and average length of stay in restrictive housing by over 50 percent; New York City has eliminated the use of punitive segregation for people 21 and younger, and reports a reduction in punitive segregation by 70 percent; and Oregon is developing a comprehensive plan to implement system-wide reforms.

In the meantime, five new states began working with us this year: Louisiana, Minnesota, Nevada, Utah, and Virginia. That's 13 states and 3 counties more than a quarter of all states that vary by size, mission, and geographic location. In addition to these sites, corrections agencies who are represented on the initiative's [advisory council](#) have forged ahead with their reforms, with Colorado most notably [announcing](#) their elimination of long-term solitary confinement (longer than 15 days). Experts in mental health, corrections, and those with lived experiences who are on the advisory council have continued to bring national attention to this issue, most recently being featured in a CBS' [60 Minutes](#) special with Oprah Winfrey.

It's no longer a vanguard, it's a movement. We are proud to end the year in partnership with these leaders who are able to advocate for and make the changes needed, knowing the difference it will make in the lives of people incarcerated in our prisons and jails, in the lives of those working there, and in the communities which 90 percent of incarcerated people will go home to.

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