

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/change-is-relative-to-where-you-begin>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

For correctional systems, governments, and advocates seeking to reform the use of segregation, the goal should be more than emptying beds. Success should be measured by impacts in engagement, interactions, and safe environments not just bed use to reduce use of segregation beds without seeing a corresponding rise in violence system-wide.

This is not one effort. This is multiple efforts from a wide array of staff that change the range of possibilities. This is not a reform that will ever be complete, because segregation use should be constantly monitored.

For a correctional agency, change can be driven by legislation or litigation. Or change can be driven by the agency itself to improve public safety outcomes, increase institutional safety, or to create a more humane environment.

A systems approach looks at all the factors that contribute to the need to segregate an incarcerated person: the behavior and response to that behavior that gets the person there in the first place; the processes that occur (or perhaps lack of processes) to review the person's placement and prepare him or her to transition out; and the aftercare and placement when the person leaves.

If you don't have the resources to engage in a full system overhaul, **start where you are**. You can engage in comprehensive thinking about segregation reform without much in the way of resources, though those certainly help. Talk to the staff that work in these units, both custody staff and treatment providers. They will have ideas. Look at what other correctional systems are doing. Steal their ideas. Talk to incarcerated people who have done time in segregation or those who are currently doing time in segregation. Ask them what it will take to get them out of there.

Remember that the deepest end of the system segregation is prisons within prisons. It is where programming is needed most. For those who have been there a long time or who cycle in and out, transitioning out must be incremental over time to allow for adjustment to the increased stimulus and stressors of the general population.

But what do you do with someone who is so broken that they repeatedly hurt or kill their cellmates or violently attack staff? The hard truth is that there are people who are not ready to be in the general population and may never be. This doesn't mean they should get written off. Even for these people, segregation can be made less harmful and more humane. There must be consistent and constant review. We have a duty to keep the other incarcerated people and staff safe. We also have a duty to make sure that we are doing everything we can do to reduce the negative impacts of restricted housing. Small interventions make a difference.

Look at who is in your segregation beds: people who are mentally ill, for example, or involved in gangs and why they are there. Think about interventions that can be applied specifically to these populations. Start somewhere. Try something. If it doesn't make a positive impact, move on and try something else. You don't have to have a plan to fix your entire system. There is no such thing. Change is relative to where you begin.

Dan Pacholke is the former secretary of the Washington State Department of Corrections, where he served for 33 years. He is now the co-director of [Segregation Solutions](#), co-author of *Keeping Prisons Safe: Transforming the Correctional Workplace*, and co-founder of the [Sustainability in Prisons Project](#). He is featured in the TED Talk [How prisons can help inmates lead meaningful lives](#).

Washington State was one of the first sites Vera worked with on its segregation reduction work. For more information on the changes made in the state, check Bureau of Justice Assistance's report, [More Than Emptying Beds](#); for more information on Vera's segregation work, visit <http://www.safealternativestosegregation.org/about>.

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