

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/revealing-the-prisons-within-prisons>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Isolation is at the core of incarceration.

Prisons often located in remote corners of the country are surrounded by high walls that visibly separate those who are incarcerated from the community. Prisons also employ a wide range of housing practices to limit incarcerated people's physical freedom, contact with others, and access to privileges and programming effectively creating [prisons within prisons](#). Collectively, these types of placements are known as restrictive housing, solitary confinement, or segregation. Although practices vary by jurisdiction, individuals placed in restrictive housing units are typically kept in their cells for 22 hours or more each day.

Some of the most comprehensive research on restrictive housing comes from a [series of studies](#) conducted by the Association of State Correctional Administrators in collaboration with Yale's Arthur Liman Public Interest Program (ASCA/Liman). These studies collected data on the number of people held in restrictive housing, compared written policies on administrative segregation, and examined physical conditions and access to outside contact and programming.

Widening the lens of restrictive housing

These important studies have shed new light on the prevalence of a practice that is widely acknowledged to cause [long-lasting harms](#). But the prevalence of restrictive housing may actually be even higher because of two important challenges when measuring its use. First, the definition drives the results. For example, [the most recent ASCA/Liman study](#) focused on extended restrictive housing defined as confinement to a cell for 22 or more hours a day for at least 15 continuous days. Consequently, confinement for 21 hours a day or less than 15 days didn't count.

Second, there are a multitude of ways that prisons isolate people and restrict their movement or access to programming *besides* solitary confinement. For example, a general population unit in one state prison might restrict people to cells for many hours a day, while another state prison may house people in a dormitory setting with more freedom of movement. Sometimes, general population units are placed on lockdown for a matter of hours or days due to security concerns. During these periods, movement around the unit and access to programming are severely limited, thereby mimicking solitary confinement.

To address these challenges, the Vera Institute of Justice is conducting research that not only seeks to better understand the use of solitary confinement, but also the conditions of confinement for the prison at large. [Our project](#), which includes a survey of prison and jail administrators, analysis of administrative data, policy reviews, and interviews with correctional staff, compares conditions of all housing types and varying security levels. We will include units that prison administrators might not necessarily consider to be restrictive housing, such as protective custody, death row, specialized mental health units, and even general population in maximum security facilities. Our survey will collect information on the conditions of each type of housing, including access to personal items and programming, mental health evaluations, and contact with other incarcerated people.

Who is placed in restrictive housing, why, and how?

Past research has revealed that certain demographic groups are more likely to be assigned to restrictive housing. For example, Black people are [overrepresented in solitary confinement](#) compared to their presence in the general prison population. [Young adults and people with serious mental health issues](#) are also at higher risk of being placed in restrictive housing. In order to better protect marginalized populations, it is critically important to understand more about these treatment disparities. Therefore, through analysis of prison administrative data, we will examine the individual-level factors that predict placement in restrictive housing.

We also seek to better understand the processes by which people enter and leave restrictive housing. Placement policies vary by jurisdiction, and [individuals may be removed from general population housing for a wide range of reasons](#), including as punishment for a disciplinary infraction, in response to a perceived security risk, or for the person's own protection from others. Therefore, we are asking prison administrators to explain the possible reasons a person may be assigned to different housing types, and which staff members are authorized to make these decisions. We will also collect information on review and evaluation processes, as well as steps that can be taken toward eventual removal from the restrictive housing placement.

What is the impact on corrections officers' wellbeing?

Restrictive housing environments may negatively impact not just incarcerated people, but also the employees who work on those units. Prison staff frequently experience high workloads, stressful conditions, and exposure to violence, leading to [corrections fatigue](#), an overall decline in health and functioning both in and outside of the workplace. Symptoms include anxiety, decreased empathy, increased substance use, and social isolation. A study published last month found that [nearly 20 percent of correctional staff displayed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#), a rate comparable to war veterans.

It is possible that corrections fatigue may be more prevalent or more severe among employees assigned to restrictive housing units, due to higher perceived levels of danger, increased supervisory responsibility, and a more isolating physical environment. However, very little is known about the specific experiences of staff members who work in higher-security settings compared to those who work among

the general prison population. Our study will comprehensively address the topic of corrections officers experiences working in restrictive housing settings.

By broadening the scope of our research to include all housing types and by using a variety of methods and data sources, we hope to achieve a better understanding of the ways in which restrictive housing is used in prisons throughout the United States.

PUBLICATION

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