

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/why-are-people-sent-to-solitary-confinement>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Solitary confinement, a widespread practice in U.S. prisons and jails, has been shown by an [extensive body of research](#) to have harmful and long-lasting negative effects on people held there, without evidence of improved safety for the correctional facilities or the community. Many people assume that solitary confinement is used only for serious and violent behavior, but violence is typically *not* the most common reason that people are sent there. The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) has found that incarcerated people are frequently sent to restrictive housing in response to low-level and nonviolent misbehaviors, because they need protection, due to custody or risk assessments, or in response to symptoms of mental illness.

Vera partnered with eight state prison systems and two local jail systems from 2015 to 2018 to analyze their use of restrictive housing and recommend reforms to significantly reduce that use. This fact sheet includes selected findings from these assessments for illustrative purposes. Many of the systems have since addressed issues highlighted here by implementing concrete reforms; however, such issues still exist in numerous jurisdictions around the country.

Solitary confinement is used not only in response to the most dangerous behaviors, but rather as a broad catch-all to respond to a wide range of behaviors, including low-level and nonviolent misbehaviors, and to manage vulnerable populations, including those experiencing symptoms of mental illness or requiring protective custody.

Restrictive housing is not reserved solely to punish serious and violent behavior; in fact, the majority of people are sent there for nonviolent infractions.

Many people with mental illnesses are in restrictive housing often as a result of behaviors related to mental illness.

People who need protection are often placed in restrictive housing.

SPECIAL REPORT (CHAPTERED)

PUBLICATION

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