

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/new-guide-helps-correctional-facilities-keep-vulnerable-people-safe-under-prea>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections, in conjunction with the [National PREA Resource Center](#) created under the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act has developed a new resource for correctional administrators and staff about housing at-risk individuals without the use of isolation. This guide, [Keeping Vulnerable Populations Safe Under PREA: Alternative Strategies to the Use of Segregation in Prisons and Jails](#), will help agencies comply with the National Standards to Prevent, Detect, and Respond to Prison Rape ([PREA Standards](#)), which place limits on the use of segregated housing for at-risk populations and victims of corrections-based sexual abuse. It also includes promising practices for managing the housing of populations at particularly high risk for sexual abuse in confinement: women; youthful inmates in adult facilities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI) individuals; and people who are gender nonconforming.

Since the 1980s, U.S. prisons and jails have relied on the use of segregation, or solitary confinement, to manage difficult and special needs populations. Although it varies by jurisdiction, segregation is used most commonly to punish individuals in confinement for violations of rules in correctional facilities (called disciplinary or punitive segregation), remove inmates from the general facility population who are thought to pose a risk to security or safety (administrative segregation), and protect individuals believed to be at risk in the general facility population (protective custody). Other reasons include ensuring the safety of inmates under investigation and holding those awaiting hearings.

Involuntary protective custody occurs when an individual is placed in segregated housing against his or her will. The PREA Standards emphasize that involuntary protective custody should be used to protect at-risk populations and victims of corrections-based sexual abuse only as a last resort and only after all other options have been explored. The message is abundantly clear: incarcerated people at risk for sexual victimization need to be housed safely without losing access to programming, visits, medical and mental health services, and group activities.

The use of segregation to house vulnerable inmates was one of the issues Vera worked on with the National Prison Rape Elimination Commission in 2006. At that time, corrections practitioners reported that segregation was the only way to keep truly vulnerable people safe, including those who had been raped while in confinement. These practitioners recognized that involuntary protective custody was restrictive and was experienced as punishment by at-risk inmates, but they believed it was the only option. It is clear from jurisdictions around the country that there are other strategies.

The new guide, which draws on promising practices from correctional agencies around the country and is based on our work partnering with state departments of corrections in the [Segregation Reduction Project](#), offers practical strategies to help prisons and jails manage at-risk populations safely without automatically turning to the use of involuntary protective custody. These strategies include using case management systems to manage vulnerable populations, mixing compatible groups in open housing units in general population settings, and creating housing units targeted to people with similar special needs.

A webinar to introduce this guide is scheduled for April 21, 2015 at 2 p.m. EST. Michela Bowman, co-director of the National PREA Resource Center (and former Vera), and I will discuss the PREA Standards and walk participants through the recommendations in the guide. To register for this event, please visit [Vera's website](#).

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