

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/mississippi-docs-emmitt-sparkman-on-reducing-the-use-of-segregation-in-prisons>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Editors note: Mississippi Department of Corrections Deputy Commissioner Emmitt Sparkman oversees the Division of Institutions and is Superintendent of the Mississippi State Penitentiary (Parchman). He writes in response to the article [Prisons Within Prisons: The Use of Segregation in the United States](#) in the October issue of Federal Sentencing Reporter.

Reducing the use of segregation has many benefits for corrections. Over time we turned to segregation more and more as a way to control our populations. Now we're beginning to find it is overused and that other alternatives can be used to operate safe prisons.

If you had talked to me before we started our project to reduce the use of segregation, I'd have told you that the majority of offenders in our long-term segregation were dangerous and a threat to staff and offender safety. But when we looked at their cases, we saw that many of the people we were holding in segregation were not a threat. They started with minor violations, were put in segregation, and continued with disruptive but not violently disruptive behavior.

Here's an example of behavior that makes people mad, but isn't dangerous: an inmate uses vulgarity toward staff. In most states, there's no evaluation as to what danger he poses to himself or others, to look at his record and ask: Is there any history of violence? In segregation, he's mad and responds with more vulgarity. He gets another rule violation and we tack on 30 days. Soon you have a guy who has never used violence doing three to four years in segregation. He probably needs some anger management.

In Mississippi, when we started moving people to lower security levels, we found that there was no increase in violence. We were able to identify inmates who were a threat, and those people remained in segregation. But they participated in programs, we gave them more freedoms, and we saw a huge decrease in violence in that unit.

Typically, people in segregation just sit idle and alone, sometimes for years. You have to give a guy an incentive to do better and what works with one person might not work with another. One guy may have been locked up for years and for the first time he's able to hug his mother. Another gets to play basketball with a group of offenders. Another gets to take his GED. There's always that 1 percent who aren't able to participate, but you can't let them affect what you do with the other 99 percent. Once prisoners in Unit 32 (Parchman's former segregation unit) saw the incentives they could get, every week we saw inmates progress to the next level.

Reducing the use of segregation has positive effects on staff too, so we've been able to improve their work conditions. In segregation, you typically have two-on-one escorts and use restraints, and there are continuous searches and that's a drain on staff. When we had large numbers of people in segregation, staff were under constant pressure. With these lower numbers, there's much less stress on staff.

And reducing segregation saves money. In 2007, we had nearly 1,300 inmates in long-term segregation and were spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on litigation and maintaining the physical plant. Once we reduced segregation to 335 inmates, we were able to close Unit 32. We moved staff to other locations and there was attrition; we saved approximately \$5.6 million a year and were able to avoid layoffs and furloughs.

In corrections, we're so busy with day-to-day operations, sometimes we don't step back and look at what we're doing. We've been conditioned that 23-hour lockdowns make it safer, make it better for staff and other offenders and for the system. In Mississippi, we've found that's not necessarily true.

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