

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/why-we-are-studying-causes-consequences-solitary-confinement>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Every day, tens of thousands of incarcerated people are held in restrictive housing (commonly known as solitary confinement or segregation) in Americas prisons and jails.

Confined to a cell no larger than a parking space for at least 23 hours a day, isolated from social interaction, and deprived of sensory stimulation, the [effect on the mental well-being](#) of the person [may be profound](#). Yet, despite its far reach and the recent surge in public awareness and scholarly research devoted to understanding this practice, relatively little is known about the use of restrictive housing.

Indeed, as concluded by a recent [study](#) released by collaborators from the Association of State Correctional Administrators and the Arthur Liman Public Interest Program at Yale Law School (ASCA/Liman), as well as a 2016 National Institute of Justice [publication on restrictive housing](#), inconsistencies among jurisdictions and researchers abound regarding how restrictive housing is defined, operationalized, and measured. This prevents comparisons between (and often, within) systems to easily be made, which may mask the full extent of this practices use.

Currently, the best available statistics on restrictive housing come from the aforementioned ASCA/Liman study. Based on surveys of prison systems nationwide, this group found that *at least* 5 percent of incarcerated persons over 67,000 people were held in restrictive housing units on a given day for 22 hours or more each day, and for 15 continuous days or more at a time. However, this figure does not consider those who may be confined in segregated conditions for less clearly defined time periods, nor the hundreds of thousands of people held in U.S. jails or in juvenile and immigration detention centers. This fact, plus findings from the Vera Institute of Justice's previous work in this area, offers evidence that a much larger proportion of incarcerated persons have been placed in restrictive housing than what current data tells us. For example, in 2014 [Vera found](#) that, when using one-day snapshot data, approximately 5 percent of Pennsylvanias prison population were in some form of segregation at the time of the study. However, when comprehensive facility administrative records were analyzed, it was found that *25 percent* of the states incarcerated population had spent time in segregation during the previous year.

In addition to our research, results from other studies suggest that the use of restrictive housing units may be negatively impacting more people than previously considered. A nascent yet growing body of research calls to attention the [occupational and traumatic stressors faced by corrections officers](#) who work in general population units stressors that may be damaging to their mental and physical health and family relationships. However, research has yet to consider the impact of working in the uniquely challenging and stressful environment of restrictive housing.

Therefore, a host of important questions surrounding this controversial practice remain. *How many people experience restrictive housing during a year? What are the reasons they are placed there? Is restrictive housing administered equitably across demographic groups? What is the impact of working in these units on corrections staff?* Vera wants to delve into these unknowns by thoroughly examining definitions, policies, and practices associated with the widespread use of restrictive housing. To that end, the National Institute of Justice has provided Vera with a \$1.4 million grant to further explore [the causes and consequences of restrictive housing in Americas prisons and jails](#) to illuminate how restrictive housing is applied in correctional facilities across the nation.

Our work will be guided by a rigorous research plan of action. First, in lieu of relying solely on one-day snapshot data, we will analyze detailed administrative records data to determine how and why incarcerated people are moved from and into restrictive housing and how much time they spend there. We will also use a national survey of corrections departments to uncover the assorted types of segregated confinement found in prison and jail facilities. Further, in conjunction with the University of North Carolina and Oregon Health & Science University, we will conduct facility observations and hold interviews with corrections staff in an effort to assess the impact that working in restrictive housing units has on the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of corrections officers.

Through this upcoming study, Veras hope is not only to build upon the relatively small body of knowledge on restrictive housing, but also to pave the way for additional, data-driven criminal justice reform.

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