

Reducing Segregated Housing: But – What Else Can We Do?



Photo: Martin Vargas

The serious consequences of extended segregated housing – both for the prisoner subjected to it and for the public safety of his or her future community – have been well documented. But some would say there is no alternative; prisoners misbehave, and they must be punished. What else can we do to maintain order in our prisons?

Three major approaches have evidence and experience behind them. Here's what we can do instead:

1. Use a range of graduated sanctions.

Because of its devastating impact on mental health and social skills, segregation should never be the first option for responding to behavior issues. Lower levels of infractions that do not involve violence toward others can be dealt with through temporary, less severe sanctions. Here are some of the many alternatives to disciplinary segregation identified by the U.S. Department of Justice¹:

- Forfeit “good time,” which reduces sentence length
- Loss of privileges, such as visiting and phone calls
- Move to less desirable housing
- Loss of participation in a program or group activity
- Impound personal property, such as a CD player or musical instrument
- Require extra duty, or
- Delay parole date.

Does this mean correctional officers will be less safe? When Colorado reduced its use of extended solitary confinement, it found that prisoner-on-staff assaults actually *declined*.²

2. Reward positive behavior.

Public safety-minded correctional systems are increasing incentives for positive behavior rather than spending their scarce resources responding to discipline problems. For example:

- Kevin Kempf, Director of Idaho’s Department of Corrections, has allowed prisoners who have gone 3 months with no disciplinary offenses to buy pizzas from a local partner.³
- Mr. Kempf is also partnering with local school districts to set up “art in the yard” events where prisoners can display and sell their art to the community.
- In Ohio, some segregated housing units were converted to “limited privilege unit” that allowed more out-of-cell time and privileges. Prisoners can gain early release by participating in pro-social activities such as anger management and problem-solving programs (ASCA, 2016).
- Privileges such as time to work out, access to desirable food, job opportunities, and more desirable housing assignments can be offered to prisoners who have good records.

¹ U.S. Department of Justice (2016). *Report and Recommendations Concerning the Use of Restrictive Housing*.

² Association of State Correctional Administrators, The Arthur Liman Public Interest Program, Yale Law School (2016). *Aiming to Reduce Time-in-Cell*

³ Solitary Watch (2016). “This is a Public Safety Approach”: Solitary Confinement Reform Begins in Idaho.

3. Reduce the conditions that make prisons less safe.

Many states are taking a hard look at conditions within their prisons that lead to hopelessness, anger, violence, and self-harm. Then they are developing innovative programs to change those conditions. If they are successful, prisoners will be more successful in finding jobs and rejoining their families when they re-enter communities. In the short term, prisons will be safer places for both correctional officers and prisoners.

Offer effective programs to help prisoners with mental illness

For example: Prisoners with mental illness, especially severe mental illness, often have difficulty complying with prison rules. They may also have a range of challenges in social interactions. Long periods in segregated housing can make even healthy persons develop mental problems; for people who already have them, they just get worse. What can be done?

- In South Carolina, the Department of Corrections is developing a program to screen and evaluate prisoners to identify those in need of mental health care. It is also developing a training program to help staff intervene appropriately when there is a crisis (ASCA, 2016).
- In Colorado, prisoners with Serious Mental Illness were moved from segregated confinement to residential treatment units where they are offered 10 hours of therapeutic interventions and 10 hours of recreational programming weekly (ASCA, 2016).

Teach ways to de-escalate conflict

Vera Institute of Justice also urges prisons to “use communication and de-escalation techniques to resolve conflict.”⁴ Both prisoners and correctional officers can learn techniques to dial-down conflict situations that can lead to threats and violence. In a striking example:

- In Colorado, prisoners in restrictive housing have access to “de-escalation rooms” that may offer soothing wall colors, dim lights, and a comfortable chair. People can listen to calming music, use exercise balls, or participate in art therapy (ASCA, 2016).

Improve conditions in restrictive housing

Prisons and jails can also decrease the likelihood of permanent harm to individuals’ mental health as a result of extended segregated confinement. For example:

- The Hampden County Sheriff’s Department in Massachusetts distributes preprogrammed MP3 players to people in restricted housing as a reward for positive behavior. The players have self-help programs, music, nature sounds, and audio books (Vera Institute, 2018).
- Prisons can give prisoners a date certain on which their confinement will end unless there is a serious infraction and keep their word.
- In Oregon, people in segregated housing can view nature videos in a “Blue Room” – an innovation that both staff and prisoners say has led to a “calmer atmosphere in the unit” and fewer disciplinary infractions (Vera Institute, 2018).

⁴ Vera Institute of Justice (2018). *Rethinking Restrictive Housing: Lessons from Five U.S. Jail and Prison Systems*.