



# Reducing Isolation

*A report on the key findings of national isolation data*

## Introduction

The detrimental and counter-productive effects of the use of isolation and room confinement have been known since the first experiments of solitary confinement at the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia nearly 200 years ago. In the 1820s, the Quakers built the first American prisons with individual stone cells kept bare except for a Bible to encourage self-reflection and repentance. The belief was the criminal would use the time alone to repent, pray and find introspection. Instead, many went insane, committed suicide or were not able to function in society and the practice was slowly abandoned.

Isolation returned to adult facilities about 50 years ago for reasons cited such as overcrowding, increasingly violent inmates, insufficient funding for security and need for repressive behavior management strategies. The practice moved into juvenile facilities with other adult practices and policies superimposed on new agencies responsible for young offenders due to a lack of alternatives.

Today, many states have passed laws limiting or prohibiting the use of isolation - also known as solitary confinement, room confinement, seclusion, segregation - for young offenders. Studies of the impact on youths show in addition to the extreme risk of suicide, isolation adds to deteriorating mental health and exacerbates trauma symptoms. The recently-reauthorized Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) calls for the monthly reporting of uses of isolation in juvenile facilities with the belief that holding facilities and agencies accountable will help reduce and eventually eliminate the use of isolation and room confinement.

Performance-based Standards (PbS) has been working to reduce the use of isolation and room confinement since the program was launched in 1995 by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). PbS is a voluntary continuous improvement program that provides national standards for facility operations and a three-part cycle of activities that uses outcome measures and survey data to monitor conditions of confinement, including use of isolation, identify practices that result in both negative and positive outcomes and an on-line improvement plan that will be assessed every six months with new data.

### KEY FINDINGS



Use of isolation is increasing, but the average duration is decreasing.



Most youths are put in isolation as a consequence for a rule violation.



Youths sleep for an average of about nine hours at night and spend over an hour of their day confined to their sleeping rooms.

## Isolation Data

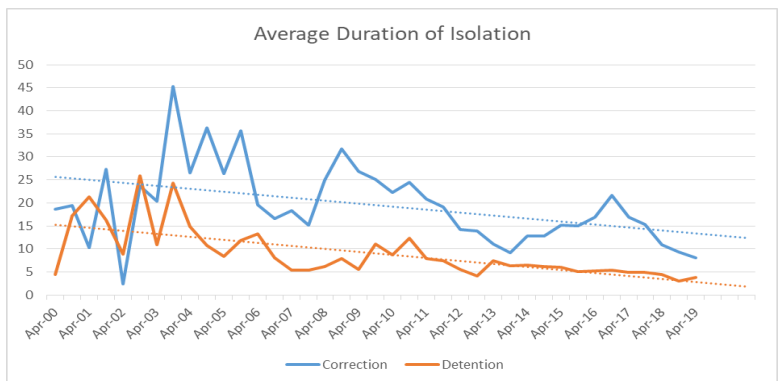
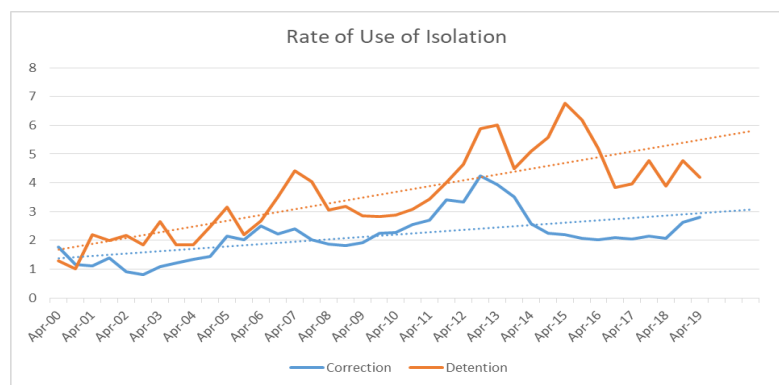
PbS' data is the most timely, uniform and comprehensive available. Participants adhere to a strict definition of isolation: Any time a youth is separated from the youth population and placed in a room or cell alone for 15 minutes or longer. When a youth is placed in isolation at the end of the day and not allowed to leave until the next morning, the sleeping time is included. Participants report all uses of isolation during the months of April and October. PbS uses a multi-layered data quality process, including on-site verification, to ensure definitional compliance and comprehensive reporting. Here's what we know about use of isolation and room confinement in about 200 facilities participating in 37 states:

*Use of isolation is increasing, but the average duration is decreasing.*

Isolation is intended to be a brief, supervised period of time for a youth to cool down to prevent injury to the youth and others. It can prevent fights and injuries when used appropriately. Over the years, many facilities have closed segregation units where youths would be placed for weeks and months without regular programming, communication and interaction with other youths and staff. In that light, more uses with shorter times may be a significant step toward reducing the use of isolation.

PbS asks youths if they have been in isolation (locked down) to consider with the administrative data. The youths have pretty consistently reported a split: about 45 percent say they have been locked down and slightly more say they have not been locked down. (The rest refused to answer or did not answer.)

Juvenile facility and agency leaders across the country are working to develop and implement behavior management strategies that create safe and healthy cultures and positive, nurturing relationships between youths and staff, which remove the need for isolation. They are also developing alternative approaches to de-escalate youths, train staff on adolescent



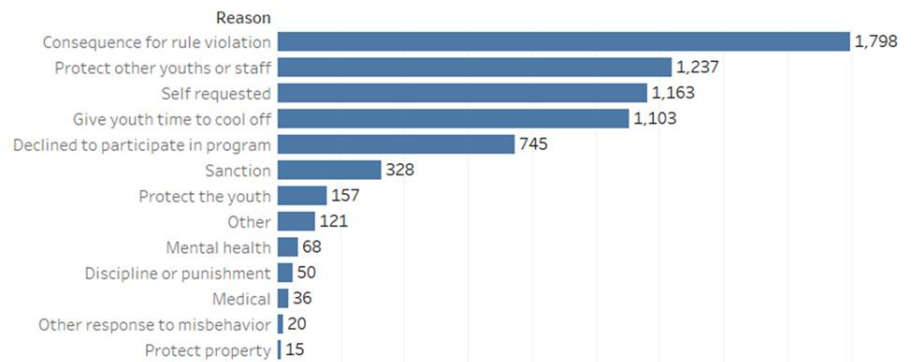
development and skills to build relationships with the youths and increase activities to keep youths engaged, learning and offering youths opportunities to practice making decisions.

*Most youths are put in isolation as a consequence for a rule violation.*

In order to develop effective strategies to reduce isolation, facility leaders and staff need to know the reason why the restriction was imposed. In April of 2017 PbS began asking participants to describe why each youth was placed in isolation and gathered a long list of reasons that fall into two main categories: as a response to youth’s behavior and for administrative or non-behavior-related purposes, e.g. shift change, staff shortage or how youths are managed during hygiene or chore times. Regardless of the reason, the practice puts youths at risk for suicide and needs to be addressed. More than half of the suicides in custody were youths who were confined to their rooms and nearly two-thirds had a history of room confinement<sup>1</sup>.

Counting and reporting the reasons for use of isolation separately already has prompted facility staff and agency leaders to rethink practices and have quickly implemented effective alternatives that are reducing isolation and room confinement. For example, instead of placing all youths in their rooms for shift change, youths stay in a day room or common area.

The use of isolation as a response to a youth’s behavior has been slower to change, perhaps reflecting the time needed to change behavior, for both youths and staff. Many agency policies prohibit the use of isolation for punishment, noting that it’s



not proven to be effective to deter or change negative behaviors. However, often it is the first response to misbehavior out of habit, lack of training or lack of alternatives. Facilities that have made progress reducing and eliminating isolation employ a three-pronged strategy:

- 1) Create a staff leadership team and get buy-in from all staff. Use the evidence of the harm, ineffectiveness and risk of suicide the practice poses. Establish a team to focus on the issue, come up with alternatives to isolation, communicate leadership support in agency publications and strategic planning and continually measure and share progress.

<sup>1</sup> Hayes, Lindsay. (2009). *Juvenile Suicide in Confinement: A National Survey*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.



2) Train and support staff. The leadership team with staff input identify the training needed and it's provided. Measure staff fear, job satisfaction, how well trained and supported staff feel and communicate results.

3) Review the behavior management system and ensure it is based on incentives. Have the youths choose the incentives, recognize positive behaviors and create fun joint activities for youths and staff to fill times when there is no available programming or education alternative.

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To create a full picture of use of isolation and room confinement, PbS also asked participants this year to record the daily activities for youths on each unit. Over the years it became clear that youths are in their rooms for reasons that are not scheduled and not event-driven, such as when programming is canceled or there is no programming or activity provided. Historically called idle-waking time, it is problematic because generally it does not initiate suicide prevention monitoring strategies and like the old adage warns: "an idle mind is the devil's workshop."

Facilities are asked to record the time youths wake up and the time the lights go out and report the number of hours of education, recreation, leisure activity, other facility programs and when youths are in their sleeping rooms for each day by facility unit. The data collection is new but preliminary results show youths sleep for about nine hours on weekday nights and about 30 minutes more on weekend nights and spend between 75 – 80 minutes in their rooms both weekdays and weekends.

The more known about isolation and room confinement, the better able juvenile justice professionals will be to reduce its use.

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## About

This report was written by Kim Godfrey, PbS Executive Director, and published by the PbS Learning Institute Inc., Braintree, MA. The PbS Learning Institute is a private, non-profit organization incorporated in 2004 to expand and sustain the PbS project when federal funding terminated. Also in 2004, PbS won the Innovations in American Government Award from the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University for uniquely and effectively addressing conditions of confinement and continues its work to ensure all youths are treated like one of our own.