Ohio Changes Policy on Solitary Confinement for Juveniles

by Kate Campbell

Ohio will drastically reduce the use of solitary confinement as a punishment for juveniles in its correctional system, with plans to eventually get rid of the practice altogether, according to a Department of Justice (DOJ) press release on May 21, 2014.

The DOJ issued an order for all Ohio correctional facilities to limit the length of solitary confinement for young prisoners and ensure that they receive proper mental health care. According to a report by news radio station WBUR, the order will limit seclusion punishments to four hours for Ohio prisoners ages 10-21, and will phase out the practice completely after time. The changes will begin September 1, 2014.

Research Shows Effects of Solitary Confinement

Research from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has shown that solitary confinement can be especially damaging to juveniles. Because mental health problems often cause behaviors that land kids in solitary confinement, the over-use of solitary confinement only continues the cycle. Representatives from the DOJ hope that this order will encourage correctional facilities to provide better mental health programs that address juvenile prisoners' mental health needs.

According to the press release, the DOJ began investigating the conditions of Ohio juvenile correctional facilities in 2007 and found many problems, including poor care for the mentally ill and excessive use of solitary confinement. The DOJ moved in 2008 to fix the violations, but data gathered in 2013 showed that Ohio prisons continued to rely too much on solitary confinement.

The DOJ gathered data from the all-male juvenile facilities in Ohio. Reports found that in the second half of 2013, 229 boys with mental health problems spent a total of 60,000 hours in solitary confinement. Many of the juveniles were experiencing suicidal thoughts or had harmed themselves during their confinement.

Remembering the Purpose of Solitary Confinement

In spite of the downsides of solitary, it is sometimes necessary as a safety measure, and can be effective when used with limits and for a short time. Rick Raemisch, executive director of the Colorado Department of Corrections, voluntarily spent 24 hours in solitary confinement in February 2014, just to know what it is like. In the op-ed article he wrote for The New York Times, Raemisch says that solitary confinement "allows a prison to run more efficiently for a period of time."

However, Raemisch emphasizes that "by placing a difficult offender in isolation you have not solved the problem — only delayed or more likely exacerbated it." He says the role of correctional facilities is to protect the community by releasing people better than when they came into prison, not worse. With this in mind, other facilities are looking to change their policies about solitary confinement. Recently, correctional facilities in the state of New York banned the use of solitary confinement on prisoners under 18 and set up alternative programs for those with mental health conditions. ■