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OPINION

Abandon outdated practice of juvenile seclusion: Harvey J. Reed (Opinion)

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By [Guest Columnist/cleveland.com](#)

juvenile prisons.jpg

Guard Deborah Hoppert keeps watch as inmates go to class at Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility in Highland Hills, Ohio, in this 2006 file photo.

(Dale Omori, The Plain Dealer, File, 2006)

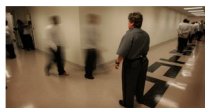


Harvey J. Reed is director of the Ohio Department of Youth Services

As a juvenile justice professional for 38 years, I have been fortunate to watch many youth turn their lives around, but I also have witnessed far too many fail. The role that seclusion may have played in making that difference is increasingly open to question, but I'm convinced that seclusion no longer has a place in our system of juvenile justice.

Fortunately, in Ohio there's good news on that score. Since 2011, under Gov. John Kasich's administration, the state's juvenile justice system has undergone extraordinary reforms. As director of the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS), I have helped advance those improvements, which have impacted every aspect of our department's mission, including youth assessment, treatment, release and re-entry processes, and parole supervision.

Along with juvenile courts, DYS now relies on a continuum of programs to serve youth closer to their families and in the least restrictive setting. As a result, our facility population has decreased from 1,555 youth in 2008 to an average of 476 today.



Judge ends federal monitoring of Ohio's youth prison system

With this decreased population, we are now serving youth with the most needs. My leadership team and I began to reconsider the best way to impact the youth in our care. We paid attention to adolescent development research. What stood out is that brains are still developing during adolescence, and it's normal for youth to test boundaries, seek new experiences, act impulsively, and make poor decisions. With a better understanding of adolescent development comes greater responsibility.

It was a long-held belief that seclusion was a necessary "tool" to address rule violations and could change behavior. However, the research was pointing out that isolation causes

psychological damage. Examining our own data, we found that as we increased seclusion, violence also increased. Also concerning, isolation meant less treatment and programming opportunities to rehabilitate youth.

We made the decision that seclusion would only be used as a last resort, when youth are out of control and a harm to themselves or others, and only for as long as necessary.

Making the shift away from seclusion as a punishment was not easy. Clearly, we still needed to hold youth accountable for their actions. We implemented a permanent plan called the [Path to Safer Facilities](#) in 2014, focusing on preventative measures, meaningful activities for youth, behavioral health interventions, and consequences that help youth learn.

We also established core values for DYS, including: "Treat everyone the way you would like to be treated;" "Every life matters;" and "We strive to provide youth everything they need to succeed."

I'm proud that staff were willing to take a fresh look at an old practice -- seclusion as punishment -- and ask tough questions like, "Is this the best for youth? Is this what I would want for my child?"

While there were some cynics as we made changes, I did my best to communicate openly and often with staff.

Seclusion does not promote responsibility, involve learning or require making restitution. Today we're holding youth accountable for misbehavior by taking away privileges and extracurricular activities, requiring meaningful writing assignments, and having youth apologize and find ways to help those they have harmed. We're also increasing the

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behavioral health treatment regimen to help youth better understand negative behavior and hopefully prevent it from reoccurring.

Making the change has had great results. Seclusion hours decreased by 89 percent while violent acts decreased by 22 percent when comparing 2014 to 2015. The move away from seclusion has intensified the attention on prevention and treatment efforts, and more importantly it has emphasized sound juvenile justice practices that help keep youth and staff -- and, ultimately, Ohioans -- safe.



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On April 19, Assistant Director Linda Janes represented the Ohio Department of Youth Services at the launch of [Stop Solitary for Kids](#), a national campaign to change the way we discipline young people in lockup. This joint effort by the Center for Children's Law and Policy, the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators, and the Justice Policy Institute aims to end solitary confinement by working with key decision-makers in all three branches of government at every level through research, public education, policy reform, training, and technical assistance.

From what I witnessed on the inside of juvenile correctional facilities, the end of seclusion as a punishment can't come soon enough. It perpetuates youth continuing to act out rather than rehabilitating, making conditions less safe for youth and staff alike. In the end, seclusion as a punishment harms, rather than improves, public safety.

Solitary confinement should only be used as a temporary safety measure after all other options have been exhausted -- it should never be a punishment for any child.

Harvey J. Reed is director of the Ohio Department of Youth Services.

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