

# The kids from the hall

*An overwhelming number of youths in the custody of the Oregon Youth Authority are living with a mental illness. So why does the OYA still employ such a controversial measure like solitary confinement on the population? The state and advocates are each seeking to change how it manages troubled youths.*

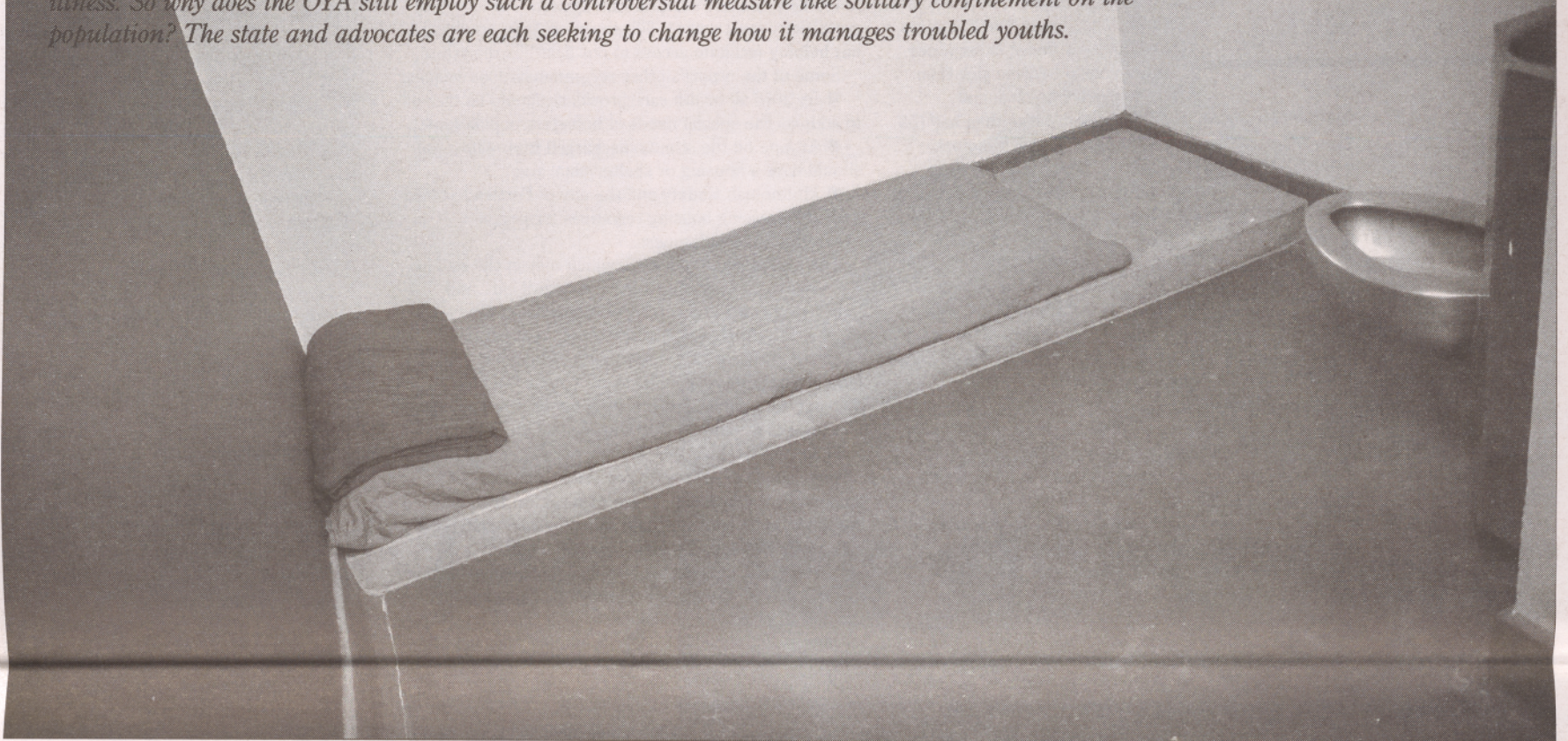


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*Each of MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility's 35 isolation rooms looks like this. It's an 8-by-9-foot room with a metal toilet and concrete bed adorned with a padded mat. These rooms are a reminder of how the correctional facility was modeled after adult prisons. OYA staff hope that with the implementation of its 10-year plan, these rooms will be replaced with solitary rooms that are much "softer" in nature.*

**BY EMILY GREEN**  
STAFF WRITER

In 1891, George Breckonridge was the first juvenile to be placed into custody at the reform school for boys in Woodburn, Ore. His crime was stealing a newspaper off his neighbor's porch. Fast-forward 124 years, and the population within the walls of what is known today as MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility is markedly more troubled.

Dan Berger is one year into his tenure as MacLaren's superintendent. In 2015, he's faced with trying to implement newer, proactive approaches to youth detention in a de facto mental hospital that's sprawled across a 180-acre campus covered with an aging infrastructure. As MacLaren and the other six Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) detention facilities expand their vocational and treatment programs in an effort to better serve their youth, ages 12 to 24, they're still employing an antiquated practice that many are saying should be scaled back, if not abolished entirely.

Solitary confinement is not a term OYA staff likes to use, but the rows of bare, concrete rooms in the north and south blocks of MacLaren's Intervention Unit building are just that. The 8-by-9-foot cells contain a metal toilet and slab of concrete with a thin, padded mat intended to serve

as a bed, and nothing more.

Mental health experts at the ACLU, Cascadia, Mental Health Association of Portland and Multnomah County all told Street Roots that any amount of time in solitary confinement is harmful to youth and exacerbates any symptoms of trauma and mental illness that are present. The effects are also well documented and include hallucinations, revenge fantasies, increased anxiety, severe chronic depression, self-mutilation and suicide among other psychological, physical and developmental problems.

A snapshot released by OYA in July showed 89 percent of females and 70 percent of males among the 639 youth within the state's custody had at least one mental disorder. These percentages are higher than national averages for both incarcerated juveniles and incarcerated adults with a mental disorder. The percentage of females with disorders fluctuates often because they only comprise 8 percent of the population. Mental disorders among inmates range from trauma-related and anxiety disorders to schizophrenia and autism spectrum disorders. In addition, many inmates have experienced sexual abuse, neglect and other forms of childhood trauma.

Over the past decade, OYA detention facilities have seen a 38 percent decline in

their populations, but at the same time, says OYA Chief of Facility Operations Erin Fultz, inmates have become "more and more acute on every level." The seriousness of criminality, mental health and substance abuse issues are increasingly elevated among students at the facility, she says. At the same time, the staff-to-inmate ratio has remained the same.

Fultz says "in the old days" at MacLaren, two to three staff members in each 25-person living unit, or cottage, would oversee 15 or 20 youth who were relatively stable and five or six who were "highly acute," meaning they needed closer supervision. Now, the same two to three staff members are responsible for a living unit that houses 25 highly acute kids.

Fultz says that while the rate of mental health disorders among OYA students system-wide has increased, it may only be on paper. "It's always felt like it was high," she says. "The way we collect data has evolved and we're better at diagnosing mood disorders now."

How those youths are treated while incarcerated, particularly with regard to solitary confinement, has attracted the legal concerns of prisoner and youth rights advocates.

They say OYA should not be allowed to

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*On the cover: The North Block of MacLaren's Intervention Unit, which houses 35 isolation rooms. Staff told Street Roots that only two of the isolation rooms were occupied. On an average day, about nine kids in OYA facilities are in isolation rooms.*