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facility before, and so on my first visit, just talking to the kids, I was really shocked first by how young they seemed. You know, some of these kids are 12, 13, 14 years old. I'm a parent, so I've spent a lot of time around kids. I've never seen kids in a setting or environment like this. So yeah, it was personally heart-wrenching. And the kids also seemed timid and just like they were walking on eggshells. I was interviewing them in a small room, and usually the kid was sitting closest to the door, and at the end of the interview, all of the kids, they were afraid to touch the doorknob. They were like, "We're not allowed to touch doors." I had to kind of like squeeze past the youth in order to touch the doorknob, and it was just very awkward. And it was just one illustration of how fearful they were of making a wrong move.

T.S.: Take the reader on a sensory tour with your words of what you sensed inside this facility.

S.R.: When you enter any jail, you go through a sally port, which is two secured doors with a vestibule in between. And there's that distinctive clank of the heavy secured door. The doors are operated from a control booth, so you don't touch the doors, but it clanks behind you. I've heard other people talk about how intimidating that sound is, how distinctive. It's a sound that you don't hear anywhere other than jails and prisons. After entering, there's an area for visitation, and the kids, unless a special exception is made, the visits are behind glass, so the kids would sit on one side and the families would sit on the other side of the glass. And then in the center of the facility, there's the control booth, with tinted windows, so you can't see into that control booth, but the staff inside can see you, and that's where all the doors are operated. And then there are three wings that are the housing units, so that'll be a hallway lined with individual cells, and each cell has a window in the door, and then there's a day room area at the end of the hall that has just a table that's secured to the floor. And inside the cells, when we visited, depending on the time of day, there might be some kids in the classroom or in their cells, or sometimes they might be all in their cells. The cells are very sparse, so if a kid is in the Youth Care Center program, they got a warmer blanket and a bath mat on the floor, and they were allowed to have pictures of three family members on the wall. But for kids who weren't in that program, they just had your mattress on a concrete slab, a thin blanket, one book and the Bible. If they were on disciplinary status, they just had the Bible. It was clean; it struck me as a clean and freshly painted facility.

T.S.: The report notes that 70 percent of the youths in NORCOR meet criteria for a mental health diagnosis. Can you expand on that?

S.R.: That's a general stat, for state and national figures – estimates about how many



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Northern Oregon Regional Corrections Facilities, or NORCOR, is a multi-county jail in The Dalles. It includes a juvenile detention facility, which was the subject of an investigation by Disability Rights Oregon, which reported "inhumane" conditions for youths.

kids have a mental health diagnosis who are in the criminal justice system. But I think it's safe to say that probably all youth who are involved in the criminal justice system have a history of trauma, and trauma often goes hand in hand with mental health concerns. We certainly interviewed kids who struggled with impulses to harm themselves – head banging, cutting, scratching, scratching their skin. That was a struggle that kids told us about.

T.S.: The NORCOR scorecard your report talks about, with items like "hands above waist," or "talking in line," or "doing the minimum," it seems like that's part of a vicious cycle. Is that right?

S.R.: The way their system works is a kid has to earn his or her way off of disciplinary status by passing shifts, that scorecard is used to determine whether or not the kid passed the shift. The conditions of consignment

for kids who are on disciplinary status were very hard to endure. And so it was very hard to pass shifts, because you could fail for things like falling asleep or for mental-health-related behavior, like you're closed in yourself for hours on end and you're feeling really anxious and upset and you start to yell.

There's a lot of research that shows that conditions of solitary confinement exacerbate mental health issues for people that have pre-existing conditions and can cause a mental health issue for someone who hasn't had any history. So yeah, I would say that was a vicious cycle. It was very hard to comply with the conditions that presumably would get you off of disciplinary status. The system is also arbitrary in that it was based on just an individual staff person's report. We saw lots of records where the pass box was scribbled out, and then the fail box was filled in, or the fail box

was filled in but no reason was cited, or the reasons themselves, like looking around, talking, hands above waist, these are things that I think staff could turn a blind eye to, or could enforce.

T.S.: The report shows a facility that is keeping its juveniles behind bars for nearly twice as long as nearby Multnomah County facilities. NORCOR has also struggled financially as an institution. Do you think NORCOR is paying bills by intentionally keeping youths incarcerated for longer time periods?

S.R.: What I can say is that it's my understanding that NORCOR has struggled to remain financially viable in recent years, and so I think they're pursuing contracts both on the adult side and the juvenile side with whatever entity they can contract with in order to fill beds. I think the factors driving the length of stay is a complicated question. I think the county juvenile departments really need to try to dig down into that data and understand what's causing delays. I think a lot of the delays are preadjudication delays, so it's just a matter of getting kids' cases through the system.

T.S.: One of the pillars of American society is the idea of responsibility. When an adult is incarcerated, the assumption most of the time is that it's his or her responsibility. Can you talk about how this concept applies, or doesn't, to those under 18?

S.R.: Studies show that most youth outgrow "delinquent behavior," so we just know in terms of adolescent brain development, adolescence is a period when kids are still figuring out the consequences of their actions and they're more likely to take risks. As a society, we really need to invest in these kids' long-term success. And when we lock them up behind closed doors, especially in a facility like NORCOR, where they're not getting rehabilitative services, they're not getting, frankly, the love that all children are entitled to, we're basically writing off their futures. Because the evidence is out there, and we know that those types of interventions actually make

kids more likely to get de eper involved in the criminal justice system.

T.S.: The report's recommendations show that improvement may be needed in a range of institutions and agencies to fix what's going on at NORCOR. What recommendation contained in this report would you emphasize as most important, and why?

S.R.: Juvenile detention facilities should be licensed and regulated. I think that's kind of an overarching recommendation, and if there was a state entity that was charged with ensuring safe conditions, adequate health care and programming, adherence to trauma-informed and evidence-based practices and preventing the youth solitary confinement, I think that would be a great solution to the problems at NORCOR and to the potential problems at other places.

T.S.: Where NORCOR is concerned, is it more about revising the playbook or throwing the playbook out and starting over?

S.R.: The rules that really jump out to an outside observer as out of line and not really related to any disciplinary goal, it's easy to scratch those rules out, but to create a real cultural shift at NORCOR and make it a place where kids feel safe and supported and they are learning tools to go out and become healthy, happy members of their communities, that would require a major overhaul.

T.S.: What have I not asked about that you would want to let Street Roots readers know?

S.R.: Noelle Crombie from The Oregonian went out to NORCOR on Monday (Dec. 4), and there were only six kids in custody, so that's a big question that I have, is how did they clear out the facility, and what happened with that?

T.S.: How many were there when you were doing your investigation?

S.R.: At each of our visits, there were more than 20.