

SMALL AND SAFE LIVING UNITS AT A GLANCE

Oregon Youth Authority | May 2021



Lower Youth-to-Staff Ratios: Why They Are Important

When youth in Oregon Youth Authority facilities are not at school, training programs, recreation, or work programs, they are typically in their living unit. Given how much time youth spend there, living units are an important component of their rehabilitation.

Just as classrooms run more effectively with fewer students and more teachers, facility living units work better when the staffing ratio is higher. Living units with smaller youth populations and higher staffing ratios have fewer incidents of violence, enhanced engagement, increased community- and relationship-building, and more skill-development opportunities.

Higher staffing ratios are important to ensure we give youth adequate time to meet their developmental and cultural needs, while sustaining physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe living units. These types of environments support healthy adolescent brain development in key areas such as emotion management, consideration for others, taking responsibility, and resisting peer influence.

“Smaller units ... work best in reducing incidents of violence, assist in reducing the use of isolation and restraint practices, increase overall staff and youth wellbeing and, thereby, has a positive long-term impact on youth and public safety.”

Michael P. Dempsey, executive director,
Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators

OYA's Current State

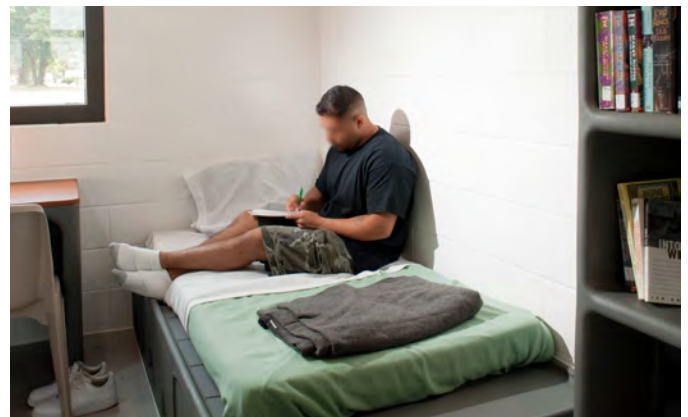
Average number of youth per living unit: 17-20
(lower than usual due to the COVID-19 pandemic)

Among the highest national averages, compared to all facilities participating in the Performance-based Standards (PbS) model. The average across all PbS participants is about nine youth per living unit.

Out of compliance with Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) standards for living unit staffing ratios. PREA requires a staff-to-youth ratio of 1:8 during youth waking hours, and 1:16 during youth sleeping hours.

What the Research Says

- Lower youth-to-staff ratios:
 - help to maintain a **therapeutic environment**,
 - may help to facilitate **problem identification and resolution**, and
 - are associated with **fewer instances of victimization**, including theft and abuse, in juvenile facilities.
- Youth generally express **fewer feelings of fear** in units with lower youth-to-staff ratios.



Sources: “Facility operations and juvenile recidivism,” OJJDP Journal of Juvenile Justice, 2017. “Construction, operations and staff training for juvenile confinement facilities,” JAIBG Program Bulletin, U.S. Dept. of Justice, 2001. “The correctional experiences of youth in adult and juvenile prisons,” Justice Quarterly, 2007. “The impact of juvenile inmates’ perceptions and facility characteristics on victimization in juvenile correctional facilities,” The Prison Journal, 2009.



Oregon Youth Authority
530 Center St. NE, Suite 500
Salem, OR 97301-3777
503-373-7205
oregon.gov/OYA

MISSION

OYA protects the public and reduces crime by holding youth accountable and providing opportunities for reformation in safe environments.

VISION

Youth who leave OYA go on to lead productive, crime-free lives.

VALUES

Integrity
Professionalism
Accountability
Respect

OUTCOMES OF SMALLER LIVING UNITS

Benefits of Lower Youth-to-Staff Ratios

Safer Staff and Youth

Data has shown that lower youth-to-staff ratios in our facilities lead to less use of isolation when staff are reacting to aggressive incidents (assaults and physical fights).

Isolation is not safe for young people, and it's detrimental to their mental health. The fact that our staff are not relying as much on isolation during aggressive incidents shows that they are doing a better job of working and connecting with youth in ways that are more beneficial. This is something that can happen more when the staffing ratio is higher.

More Equitable Services for Marginalized Youth

For youth of color and those who identify as LGBTQQI, experiences of trauma, marginalization, and disparate treatment in the justice system pose unique challenges.

Trust and relationship-building with living unit and facility staff — which happen much more easily with higher staffing ratios — are key to providing the right supports for youth with these experiences.

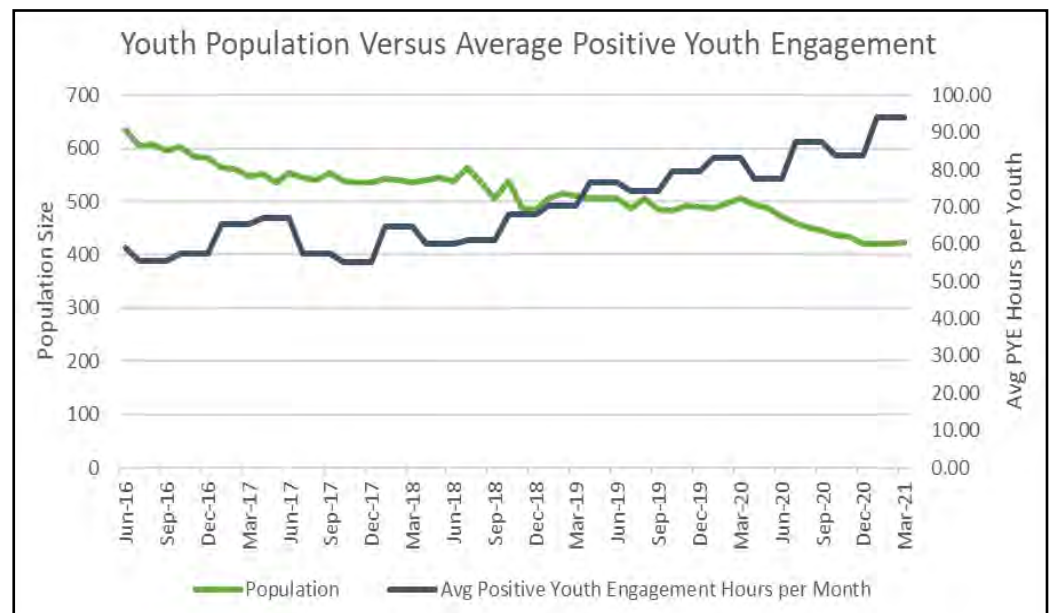
Research shows that youth of color have better outcomes when the services they receive are appropriate to their culture. This type of individualization can happen more easily in smaller living units.

More Individualized Treatment and Enhanced Public Safety

To increase public safety and reduce the chance our youth will commit new crimes, we need to help them develop skills that they don't currently have.

This happens much better when staff have more time and capacity to build relationships and engage with youth individually to meet their developmental and cultural needs, while sustaining safe environments.

Data shows that as the population of youth in our facilities has been decreasing, the average hours of positive youth engagement they receive is going up.



Healthier Youth and Better Pandemic Response

Having smaller numbers of youth living together has direct benefits in controlling the spread of communicable diseases or infections, such as during flu season or the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, OYA decreased the density in each living unit so that disease was less likely to spread. This was accomplished by spreading out youth more evenly across all our facilities. This response, among other precautions, helped us maintain relatively low numbers of positive cases of COVID-19 among our youth.

**COVID-19 at OYA:
March 2020 —
May 7, 2021**

Positive cases among youth in OYA facilities: 42

Hospitalizations of youth in facilities: Zero