

# Small and Safe Living Units

## AT A GLANCE

Oregon Youth Authority | January 2023



### 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: 18**  
(national best practice is no more than 12 to 14)

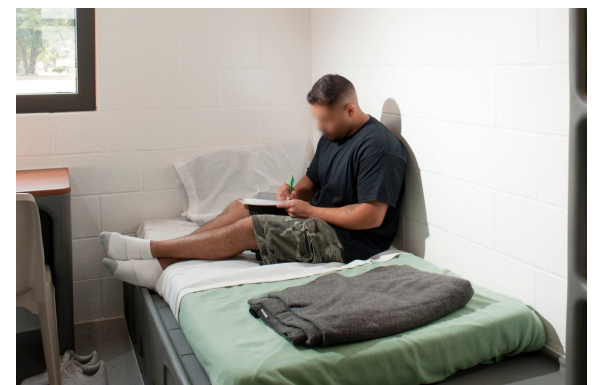
**Among the highest national averages of youth per living unit**, compared to all facilities participating in the Performance-based Standards (PbS) model.

**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**;
- are associated with **fewer instances of victimization**, including theft and abuse, in juvenile facilities; and
- contribute to youth generally expressing **fewer feelings of fear**.



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.



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#### 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

Smaller unit sizes and improved staff ratios allow staff to give more individual time to youth who may be struggling with emotion regulation, problem solving, or conflict. Giving staff more options to remove a youth from an audience of their peers and cool off in a safe, calming place (that is not isolation), improves safety in the moment, while teaching and practicing alternatives to aggressive behavior.

Incidents of isolation use at OYA have been declining since September 2017. Aggressive incidents have been declining or flat over the last few years, with recent increases due to a COVID pandemic staffing crisis.

### More equitable services

Research shows that youth of color have better outcomes when the services they receive are appropriate to their culture. This individualization can happen more easily in smaller living units, where staff have additional time to work one-on-one with youth and support their unique needs.

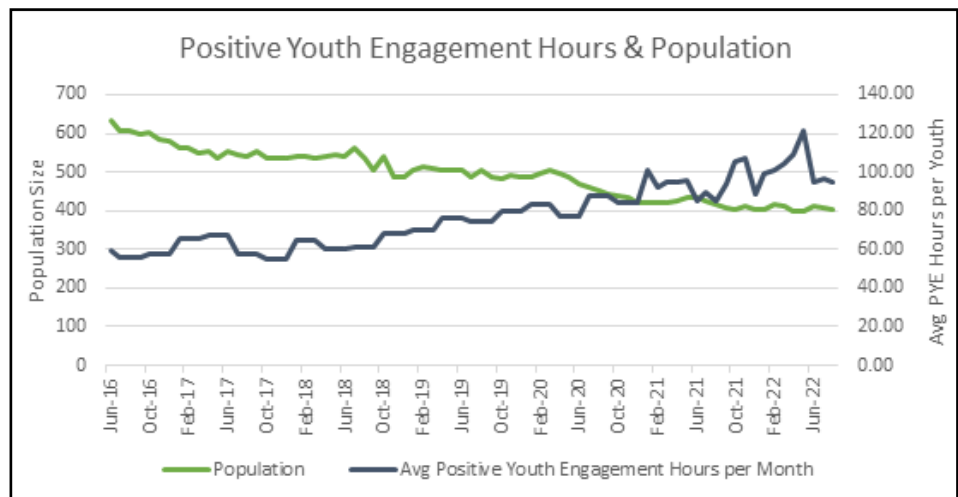
OYA already is engaging in multiple efforts to improve services to marginalized youth, including updating our youth case plans to include culturally responsive services, assessing youths' experiences with discrimination, and expanding our definition of trauma to include racial-related trauma.

### More positive staff engagement with youth

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 engagement with staff they receive is going up.



### Increase in youth skill acquisition

Research suggests that youth who report greater levels of psychosocial maturity, or healthy youth development, are less likely to continue with criminal activity. Smaller living units with improved staff ratios help to create a culture of development where youth have more opportunities to learn healthy youth development skills.

OYA recently started a new curriculum to teach and measure youths' competencies in these skills. Results have been positive.

#### Since starting our healthy youth development curriculum:

Participants have increased their competency in multiple areas:

- **Handling frustration** in appropriate, non-aggressive ways: 19.1% increase
- **Using skills appropriately** to resolve conflicts: 13.7% increase
- **Accepting and reflecting** the importance of others' needs and feelings: 28% increase