

Transcript: “A Message from the Inspector General: Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Use of Restrictive Housing for Inmates with Mental Illness,” July 2017

Hello, I’m Michael Horowitz, Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Justice.

Today, our office released a report on the Department’s Bureau of Prisons, or BOP’s, policies and procedures on the screening, treatment, and monitoring of federal inmates with mental illness in its restrictive housing units.

Today’s report concludes that while the BOP has taken a number of steps to address mental health concerns for inmates in restrictive housing, there are still significant issues regarding the adequacy and implementation of BOP policies in this critical area. Three examples are:

- First, although the BOP has stated that it does not practice solitary confinement, we found inmates, including those with mental illness, who were housed in single-cell confinement for long periods of time, isolated from other inmates, with limited human contact. For example, we found instances where inmates were confined to their cells alone for over 22 hours a day and were not permitted to engage in recreation with other inmates.
- Second, BOP policy does not limit the length of time inmates spend in restrictive housing, and the BOP does not track inmates’ single-cell confinement or assess inmates’ cumulative time spent in restrictive housing. This was particularly concerning given that the BOP recognizes that inmates’ mental health can deteriorate while in restrictive housing.
- Third, the BOP cannot accurately determine the number of inmates who have mental illness because institution staff doesn’t always document inmates’ mental disorders. For example, BOP data showed that, as of 2015, only 3 percent of the BOP’s sentenced inmate population was being treated regularly for mental illness. Yet, a 2006 Bureau of Justice Statistics report concluded that 45 percent of federal inmates had symptoms or a recent history of mental illness. Without an accurate count of all inmates with mental illness, the BOP is unable to ensure that it is providing appropriate mental health care for its inmates.

In 2014, the BOP adopted a new mental health policy with the goal of increasing the standards of care for inmates with mental illness. Our review found that the new policy has had the opposite result for many inmates. Faced with inadequate staffing resources to meet these increased treatment standards, we found there actually was a 30 percent reduction in the total number of inmates who received regular mental health treatment following implementation of the new standards.

These are just a few of the findings in today’s report, which makes 15 recommendations to the BOP for improvement. To learn more, please visit our website, oig.justice.gov, where you can read the full report and listen to a podcast where members of our review team discuss the report’s findings in greater depth. Thank you for joining us.