



BEHIND LOCKED DOORS: Inside North Carolina's Juvenile Detention Centers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IMAGE
A CELL AT PERQUIMANS JDC



801 CORPORATE CENTER DRIVE, SUITE 118
RALEIGH, NC 27607

919-856-2195 EXT 294 • 877-235-4210 • 919-856-2244 FAX • TTY USERS, DIAL 711



| DISABILITY RIGHTS NORTH CAROLINA

Disability Rights North Carolina (DRNC) is the only organization dedicated to advancing and defending the rights of people with all types of disabilities, of all ages, across the state of North Carolina. We advocate using a wide array of legal and other strategies, from providing information and referral to engaging in systemic litigation. We work to challenge and change policies, practices, or structures that result in widespread injustices or inequalities for disabled people. We also offer resources and guidance to empower individuals to advocate for themselves or their loved ones.

DRNC's areas of practice include education, housing, health and mental health care, community access and supports and voting rights. We monitor facilities throughout NC including psychiatric hospitals, developmental centers, prisons, jails and schools. We speak with residents and patients to make sure they are safe and know their rights. Where we have significant concerns, we investigate.

As North Carolina's Protection and Advocacy agency, we safeguard the rights and lives of nearly 3 million North Carolinians with disabilities.

Youth in NC's Juvenile Detention Centers receive dramatically different treatment, education services, and other rehabilitative opportunities depending on the facility in which they are detained – and most of the facilities violate state policies regarding their operations, including the use of solitary confinement in some of the facilities.

[Disability Rights North Carolina's \(DRNC\) latest public report, "Behind Locked Doors: Inside North Carolina's Juvenile Detention Centers,"](#) follows a 13-month monitoring initiative from July 2024 through August 2025 that included multiple visits to the state's then 14 existing [Juvenile Detention Centers](#) (JDCs) and nearly 400 in-person interviews with youth confined in the facilities.

DRNC staff initiated this project to assess conditions in these facilities based on concerning reports about conditions in particular JDCs. DRNC's project uncovered shocking conditions in some JDCs, including heavy reliance on solitary confinement-like conditions, little to no educational services, and descriptions of being treated like animals.

DRNC's project also discovered facilities that engaged in best practices allowing kids to feel safe and supported with educational services and other opportunities for rehabilitation to promote community safety and youth well-being. For kids in the facilities between those two bookends of experiences, the services and treatment vary widely.

The State swiftly closed one facility – a detention center operated by the Madison County Sheriff's Office and contracted by the State – after [DRNC staff reported](#), and child protection authorities investigated and substantiated, dangerous and abusive practices against the 21 youth who were living there.

The state Division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (DJJDP) contracts with three other county-operated JDCs in Brunswick, Durham, and Guilford counties.

The State's juvenile justice system currently operates through the [NC Department of Public Safety](#). The juvenile justice system was created with the understanding that young people require rehabilitative support and services because their brains are still developing, and they are more acutely vulnerable in a carceral setting. JDCs were built to house youth who are awaiting a resolution of their charge(s). This includes youth who have been adjudicated and are awaiting placement in another setting, such as a [Youth Development Center](#), group home, or psychiatric residential treatment center.

While JDCs were originally developed to be temporary settings, youth now stay much longer. This creates complex issues for facility leaders and state juvenile justice administrators.

Each of DRNC's monitoring visits concluded with reports to facility and state leadership about the conditions our staff learned about and witnessed. In some instances, such as the Madison County facility, the response was immediate. Others resulted in some improvements in conditions. Still, as the report details, much work remains to improve the conditions in JDCs.

Nationally, up to 70 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system have a disability. In NC, [97.7% of youth in Youth Development Centers have at least one mental health diagnosis](#). How NC treats these youth has tremendous impact on what their futures will look like.

Key Findings in the report include:

- The majority of DJJDP JDCs and the county-operated JDCs violate DJJDP policies regarding conditions of confinement, discipline, education, and/or recreation, significantly reducing opportunities for young people to engage in services that will enable them to be successful in their lives and communities.
- There are significant special education identification and implementation problems at multiple JDCs that require intensive investigation, training, and resourcing by DJJDP and the NC Department of Public Instruction (DPI).
- A county-operated JDC in Durham County uses a room youth called “the Hole,” a draconian and dehumanizing small room where kids reported they are given only a mattress and are constrained to urinating and defecating through a hole in the floor.
- The JDCs, both state and county-operated, vary widely in providing a rehabilitative environment, ranging from those that stand out positively to those with highly concerning practices detrimental to youth well-being and outcomes.

The report includes detailed recommendations for improvement. Among those are:

- DJJDP must ensure all state and county-operated JDCs uniformly follow its policies by developing an accountability process that will monitor compliance.
- DJJDP must eliminate the use of solitary confinement in all state and county-operated facilities.
- DJJDP and DPI must ensure state and federal laws and DJJDP policies regarding educational services are implemented and practiced in all state and county operated JDCs.
- DJJDP and Durham County must prohibit Durham County Youth Home’s use of the

Hole under any circumstances.

If we want our justice-involved youth to return to their communities healthier and with improved life skills, we must ensure that all JDCs operate as intended to provide a real education in a safe, trauma-informed environment. Currently, some JDCs are doing a good job, but many are not.

Heavy reliance on solitary confinement is especially concerning because the practice denies or severely limits children’s access to education, recreation, and interaction with their peers. There is no question about the short and long-term [psychological and physical harm that happens to youth](#), whose brains will continue to develop well into their 20s, when they are subjected to isolation.

The Durham and Guilford facilities are among the ones kids reported with the worst solitary confinement-like conditions in the state.

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), in its [Resolution on Limiting the Use of Prolonged Solitary Confinement](#), calls for alternatives to solitary confinement for “special populations,” such as youth, people with mental health disabilities, people with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and pregnant people.

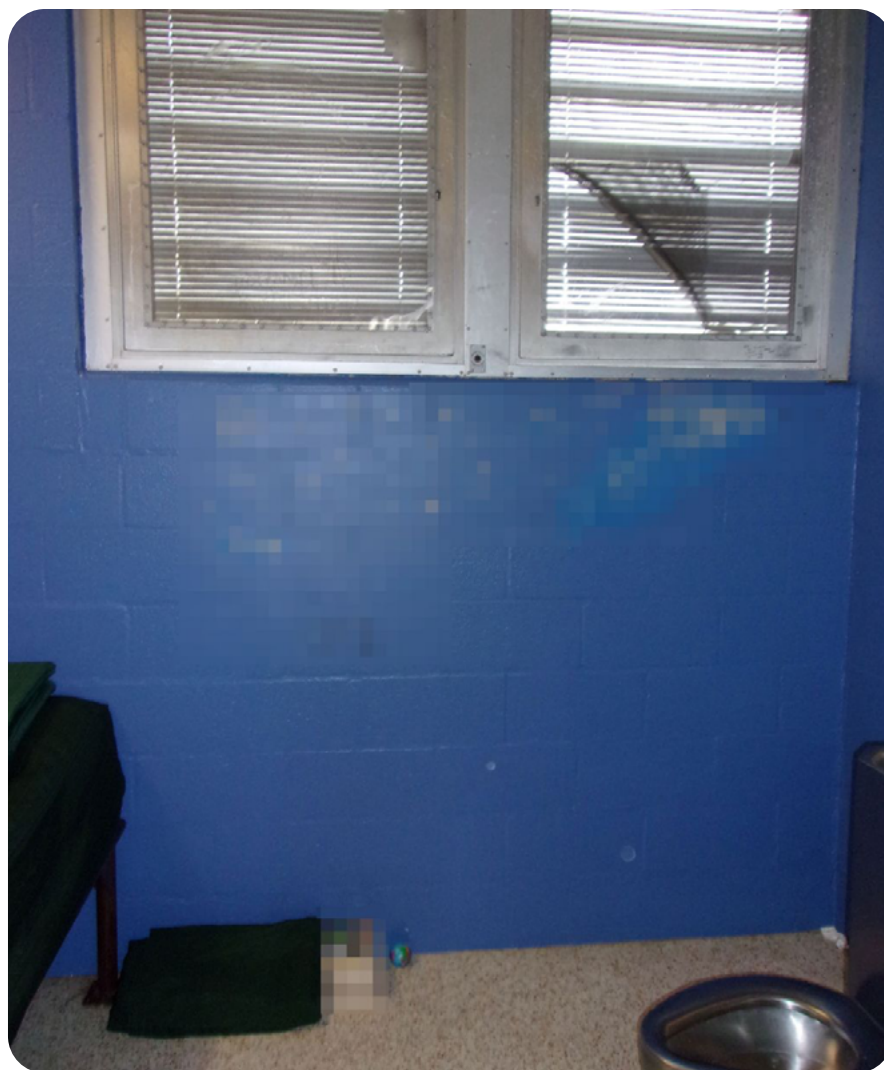
Disciplinary cell confinement as used in North Carolina’s JDCs is not aligned with best practices or DJJDP’s own policies. Instead, [best practices guidance](#) from the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative suggests that cell confinement be limited only to that amount of time necessary for the youth to demonstrate safe behaviors, never as discipline or punishment, and for not more than two hours.

In addition, most of the facilities, state and county-operated, failed to adhere to state and federal educational requirements, including the provision of critical special education protections and requirements.

Despite these disturbing findings, three state-operated facilities stood out as providing best practices in at least several areas of their operations: the JDC units in the Rockingham Youth Development Center (Reidsville, in Rockingham County); Richmond-Jenkins JDC (Hoffman, in Richmond County); and Alexander JDC (Taylorsville, in Alexander County).

These facilities demonstrate that young people can be provided rehabilitative care that sets up youth for success when they return to their communities. Providing care for youth in this way helps young people complete education, gain employment, and lead healthy lives, greatly reducing the chance for recidivism.

North Carolina needs resilient and strong children who are prepared to mature into resilient and strong adults who can contribute to their communities and live flourishing lives. North Carolina's youth should return to their communities healthier and with better skills than they had when they entered our JDCs. North Carolina leaders must demand consistently high-quality care among all JDCs so that our most at-risk youth can succeed. We all benefit when our youth have foundations for success.



A cell at Cumberland JDC