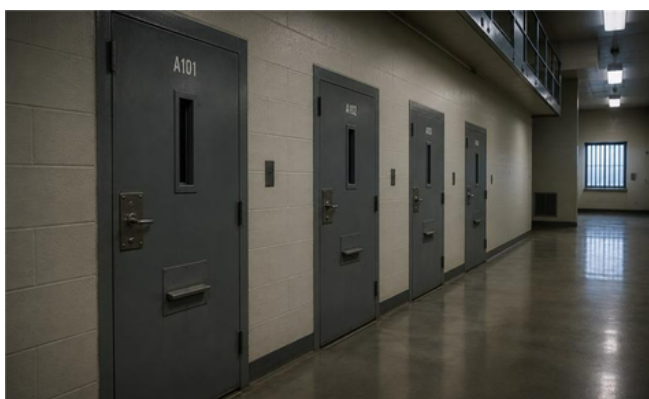




Restricted Housing Units (RHU)

Background

The PA Department of Corrections (DOC) houses approximately 39,000 inmates, including individuals who pose elevated safety and security risk within prison facilities. To maintain safety and orderly operations, the DOC uses **Restricted Housing Units (RHUs)** – highly structured housing units that separate certain inmates from the general population under either **Administrative Custody (AC)** or **Disciplinary Custody (DC) status**. RHUs are primarily used to manage inmates who pose an immediate threat to staff or other inmates, or who have committed serious misconduct requiring a restrictive sanction.

This evaluation examines the costs and benefits of operating RHUs across the DOC. RHU costs include staff salaries/benefits and training, medical and pharmacy services, treatment and education services, food and clothing, utilities, equipment, and litigation-related expenses.

RHUs may also generate public safety benefits by reducing violence through **incapacitation** (physically limiting opportunities for violence by removing inmates from the general population) and **deterrence** (discouraging/preventing future violence by using RHU placement as a meaningful sanction).

Study Design

This evaluation used multiple data sources and analytical strategies to estimate (1) RHU operating costs and (2) RHU benefits related to incapacitation and deterrence.

Cost estimates were produced using two complementary methods:

- A **“bottom-up” approach**, using detailed expenditure data gathered from one prison (SCI Fayette) and from DOC central offices (Administration, HR, Healthcare, and Legal) to calculate RHU-specific staffing, healthcare, operational, and facility costs.

- A **“top-down” approach**, in which each SCI reported the estimated percentage of its annual budget attributable to RHU operations. Facility-level estimates were converted into per-inmate costs.

Incapacitation effects were estimated using 2024 institutional incident data. Violent incident rates were calculated for each custody level (CL2–CL4). For each RHU admission, it is assumed the inmate would have continued to commit violence at the average rate of their prior custody level had they not been placed in the RHU. The analysis then compared that expected rate to the observed CL5 violent incident rate during RHU placement. The difference, summed across all RHU admissions, produced an estimate of violent incidents prevented through incapacitation.

Deterrence effects were evaluated in partnership with external university researchers from Boston University and Florida State University, using advanced statistical methods such as instrumental variable (IV) estimation and interrupted time series (ITS) analysis, to test whether RHU sanctions measurably reduced future violent incidents.

Results

Estimated Costs:

- The **“bottom-up” RHU cost estimate** was **\$378 per inmate per day**, and the **“top-down” estimate** was **\$475**, an average of **\$427 per RHU inmate per day**.
- Adding estimated RHU-specific **legal and litigation costs of \$104 per day** results in a **total RHU cost of \$531 per inmate per day**.
- The RHU cost per day is thus **more than two and a half times higher than the average DOC cost per day of \$195**.
- With an average daily RHU population of **1,917 inmates**, the estimated annual cost of RHU operations is **\$371.5 million**, representing approximately **12% of the DOC’s \$3.2 billion budget** in 2024.

Cost Component	Per RHU Inmate/Day
Bottom-Up Estimate	\$378
Top-Down Estimate	\$475
Average (Bottom-Up + Top-Down)	\$427
Legal/Litigation Cost Estimate	\$104
Total Estimated RHU Cost	\$531
Total Annual RHU Cost	\$371.5 Million
Total Annual Percent of Budget	12%

Estimated Benefits:

- Incapacitation:** RHU placement was estimated to prevent **88 violent incidents per year**.
- Deterrence:** All deterrence analyses produced null results, indicating no measurable deterrent effect on future institutional violence associated with RHU placement.

Conclusion

The DOC spends approximately **\$371.5 million annually** to operate RHUs. Based on the incapacitation analysis, RHU placement is estimated to prevent **88 violent incidents per year**. This means that the estimated benefit of the RHU system would outweigh the estimated cost if **each prevented violent incident was valued at approximately \$4.2 million**.

For context, estimates from economic research on the societal impacts of violence indicate that preventing a single violent crime can be valued in the millions of dollars.

The key policy question raised by this evaluation is clear: **Is preventing one violent incident in prison worth \$4.2 million?**