States are sending fewer and fewer children to juvenile correctional facilities, partly in response to research showing that locking up young people increases the risk that they will eventually drop out of school and become permanently entangled with the justice system.

This is all to the good. But dealing with low-risk children through community-guidance programs leaves behind a population of severely troubled children who often wind up in solitary confinement instead of receiving the special help they need.

The Justice Department, which has already required several jurisdictions to improve the care of children in custody, underscored that point last month when it settled a long-running lawsuit against the State of Ohio. Under the new agreement, Ohio will sharply reduce and eventually end solitary confinement. It will also ensure that young people receive individual mental health treatment and educational services with the aim of preventing the disruptive behaviors that led to the confinement in the first place.

Solitary confinement, which can lead to mental problems for adults, is especially damaging for children, who are more fragile emotionally. A 2002 Justice Department investigation showed that young people experience symptoms of paranoia, anxiety and depression even after very short periods of isolation. Extended isolation can lead to suicide.

According to one national study, half the suicides reported in juvenile facilities were committed by young people in isolation, and in nearly two-thirds of the cases there was some history of solitary confinement.

The conditions of mentally ill or disabled children, who have poor impulse control to begin with, are made far worse when they spend 23 hours in isolation without therapeutic services. Not surprisingly, they emerge angrier and more troubled than when they entered, which means they act out and are shut away yet again.

The Justice Department’s settlement with Ohio puts states on notice that solitary policies need to change. If adopted nationally, the
principles in that settlement would go a long way toward humanizing juvenile detention.

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