



## Single-User vs Multi-User Toilet Rooms

### Public Hygiene Lets Us Stay Human (PHLUSH)

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#### Terminology:

When talking about public restrooms, the term **single user toilet room** refers to a small room with floor to ceiling walls which contains a toilet and is designed for use by a single individual. It is also designed for a single function: toileting. Handwashing, hand drying, and in some cases light grooming would be done in an adjacent communal area. A single user toilet room is always paired with a larger family restroom or “handicapped restroom” specified under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

**PHLUSH Restroom Design Principles** call for single user toilet rooms using the following language.

- Protect users, especially children, from inappropriate contact with strangers in “gang toilets” by providing individual direct entry stalls.
- Design doors to ensure privacy with safety: full length with a 1.5”-2” gap at the bottom and a lock that authorities can open from the outside in emergency.

A **multi-user toilet room**, or a “gang toilet”, is any restroom shared by strangers out of public view. Usually there are rows of toilets and/or urinals. Between urinals are at most small partitions. Toilet stalls have short walls and doors with gaps of 1 to 2.5 feet at the bottom. Noises and odors carry from stall to stall and users are only partially out of sight. Multi-user toilet rooms are almost always sex-segregated. While behaviors among men differ widely from those of women, both men’s and women’s rooms are frequently sites of bullying and harassment. Their size allows them to be used for acting out, dangerous horseplay, or overnight camping.

#### Advantages of Single-User Restrooms

**They offer privacy medically necessary to many users.** Single user restrooms offer the privacy and safety to which people are accustomed at home. They are the only type of facilities which accommodates the estimated 7% of the U.S. population who suffer from paruresis, a social anxiety disorder also known as “Shy Bladder Syndrome”. These people find it difficult or impossible to urinate in the presence of others who might observe or hear them.<sup>1</sup>

**International visitors expect them.** Here’s a quote that a foreign visitor posted on the site of the American Restroom Association. *I just got back from a two week-vacation in the US and what a difference there is between Europe and the US considering restrooms!! Your stalls are just so...OPEN!! Here, stalls are completely closed rooms just like your bathroom at home. If there was someone in the next stall in your country. I couldn’t go...I could see his feet while he was sitting in the toilet!! Have your authorities ever heard of PRIVACY?!?! Is it some kind of cutting of costs not to build respectable bathrooms or something??*<sup>2</sup>

**Parents of small children appreciate them.** Fathers, especially, are grateful that they can ensure the safety of their daughters by standing just outside the stall and that their sons are protected from negative influences, with possibly lasting effect, of behavior observed in the men’s room.<sup>3</sup>

**They do not blur the boundary between public and private as much as “gang restrooms” do.** Here’s an excerpt from author Dave Praeger, who has detailed the complex interaction of historical and psychological factors. *There is no ambiguity in the rule that pooping must take place in private, out of sight, smell and hearing of others. And if all toilets fulfilled this condition. there would be no problems. But a significant portion of the 350 million toilets in America are in schools, offices, churches, theaters, and other places of public accommodation, where the boundary between public and private is blurred and pooping occurs in a room sequestered from public space, but nevertheless within the sight, smell and hearing of others. Because of the contradiction of these public bathrooms, people observing the behavior of [others] are unsure about whether they are reinforcing social norms or violating them.*<sup>4</sup>

**Bad behavior is made more difficult and is not broadcast** Single users stalls are too small to allow comfortable sleeping or sexual activity. Drug use may occur but it’s out of sight.<sup>5</sup>

**Opposite sex users in an adjacent single user toilet rooms is probably no longer strange.** Fifty years ago men and women did not mix at the same hairdresser/barber or gym. Today they do.

<sup>1</sup> International Paruresis Association [www.paruresis.org](http://www.paruresis.org) ; Shy Bladder Center [www.shybladder.org](http://www.shybladder.org) )

<sup>2</sup> American Restroom Association, [http://www.americanrestroom.org/design/ipa\\_rd.htm](http://www.americanrestroom.org/design/ipa_rd.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Restroom design consultant Mary Coakley, personal communication.

<sup>4</sup> *Poop Culture: How America is Shaped by its Grossest National Product*, p52.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Coakley, personal communication.