

# Unpacking the ‘Black Box’ of Solitary Confinement: A Five-Year Longitudinal Study of Inmates in Ohio

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This project was supported by 2014-IJ-CX-0003, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this presentation are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

# Solitary Confinement (SC)



# Solitary Confinement Debate

1. Suppresses criminal behavior (Angelone, 1999; Gavora, 1996)
2. Causes undue psychological distress and increases criminal behavior
  - Even short periods spent in isolation (e.g., from 3-90 days) result in long-term emotional damage, dysfunctional disability, and psychosis (Kupers, 2008; Chowdhry, 2014).
3. Produces much less intense negative effects
  - Other factors in prison environment have more consequence

(Gendreau & Labrecque, in press)

# The 'Black Box' of Solitary Confinement

- There is a void of even basic statistics on SC (O'Keefe, 2008)
- Problems in evaluating the policy of SC (Mears, 2013)
  - No agreement on goals or definitions
  - No documented needs assessments or how SC is implemented
- Overcoming these challenges
  - The “elusive data set” (Naday et al., 2008)
  - Control group and methodological quality issues

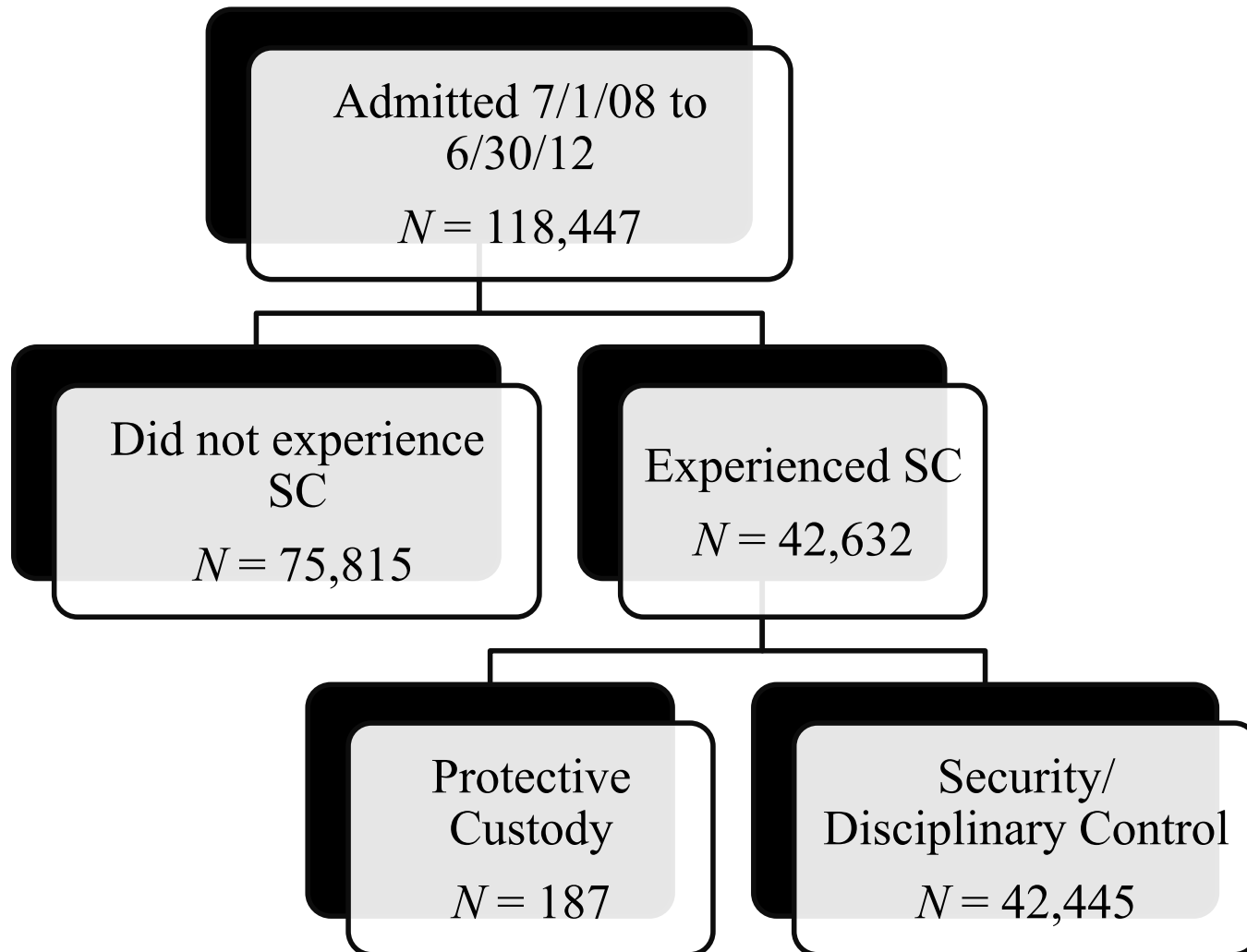
# Empirical Status of Solitary Confinement

- SC has been an elusive subject of empirical investigation
- Most of what is known about the effects of SC is based on subjective evidence and has focused on psychological outcomes (see Labrecque, Smith, & Gendreau, 2013)
- Within the limited behavioral outcome literature:
  - Recidivism studies tend to indicate criminogenic effect (ES = .06)
  - Misconduct studies suggest no effect (see Morris, 2015)
- These are contradictory findings as prison misconducts predict post-release recidivism (Cochran et al., 2014)

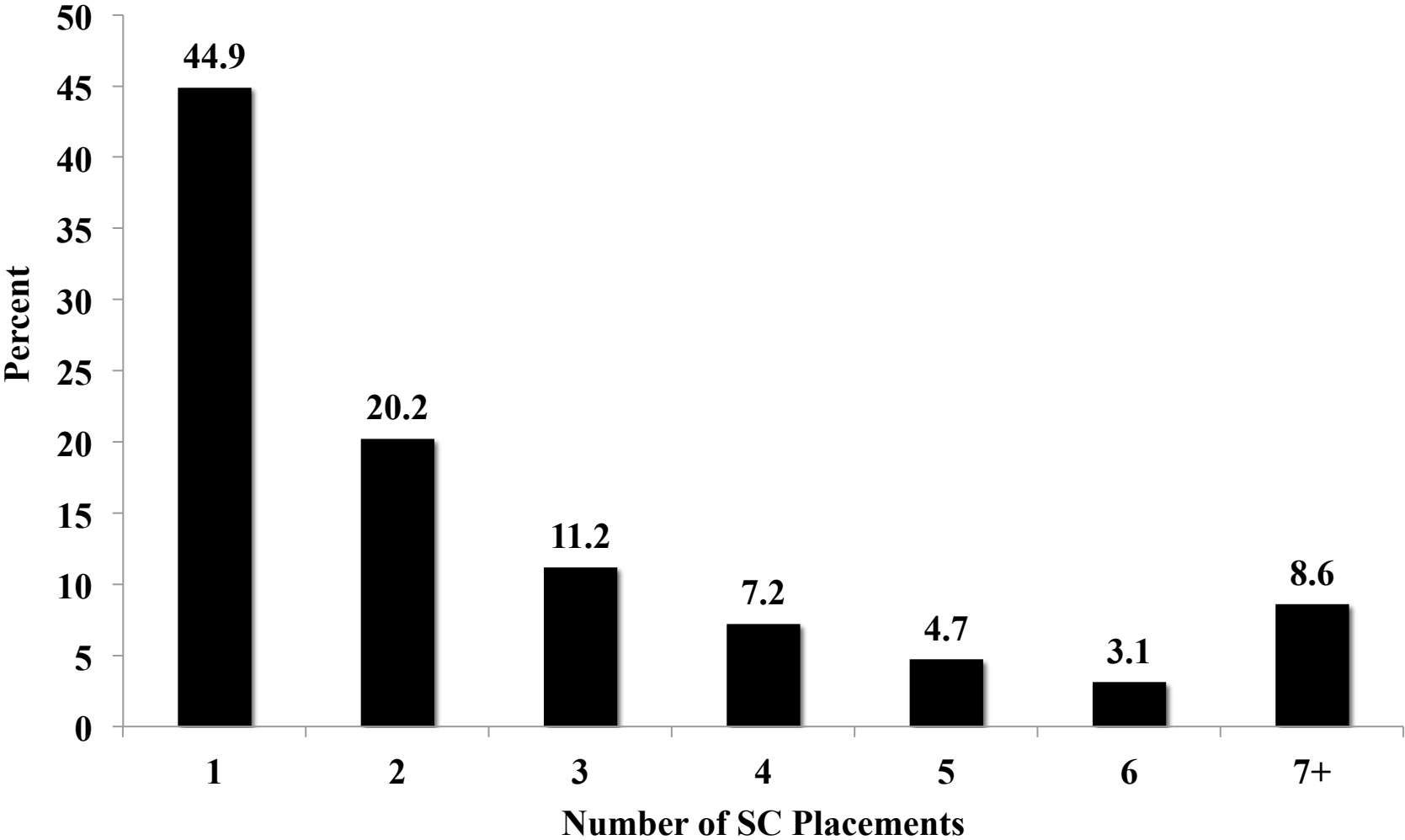
# Study Objectives

1. To examine how SC is used in the Ohio state prison system on a population of inmates admitted during a five-year period
2. To explore the effect that duration of exposure to SC has on subsequent inmate institutional misconduct

# Flow Chart of Ohio DRC Admissions

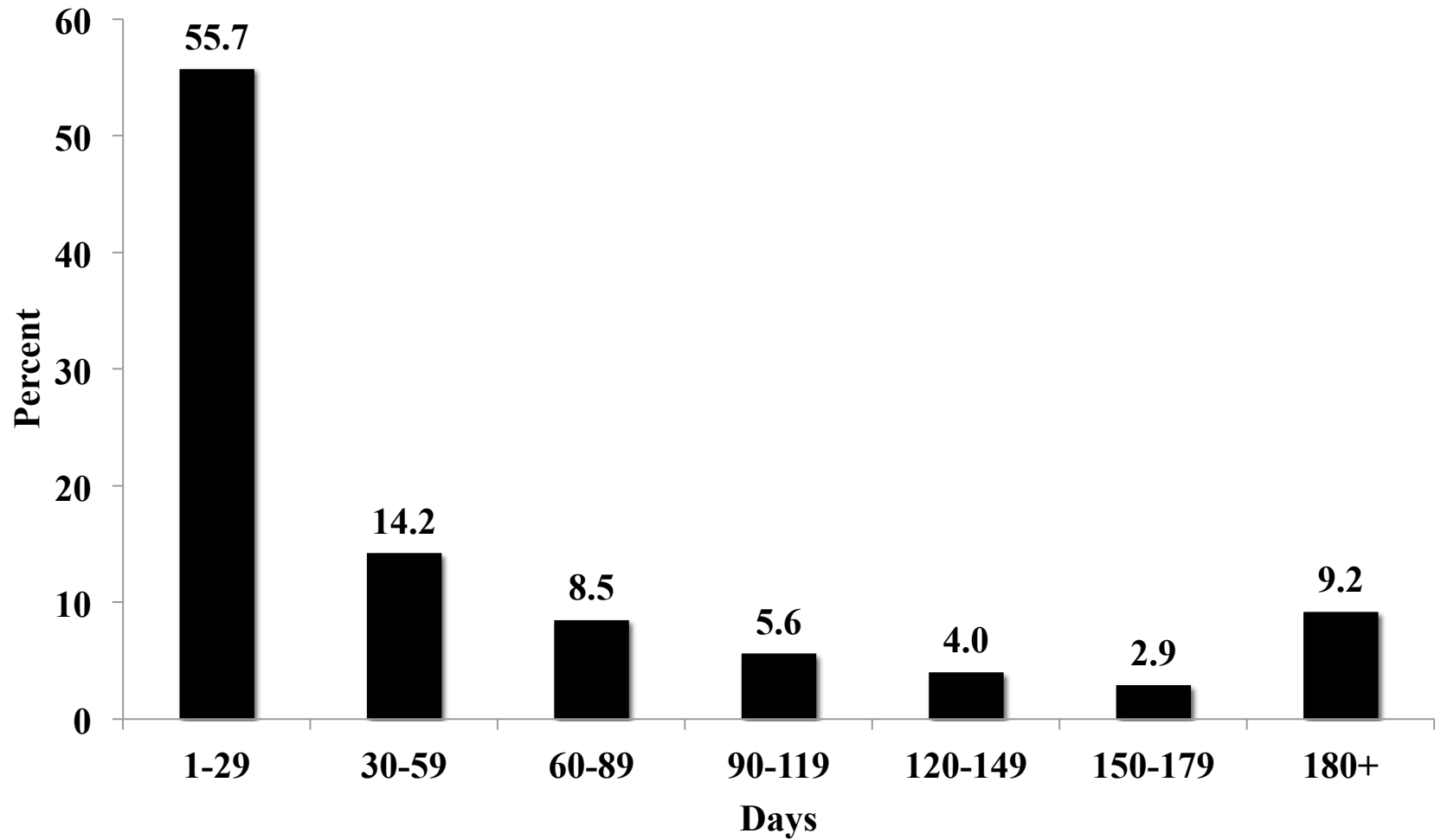


# Frequency of SC Placements ( $N = 45,445$ )





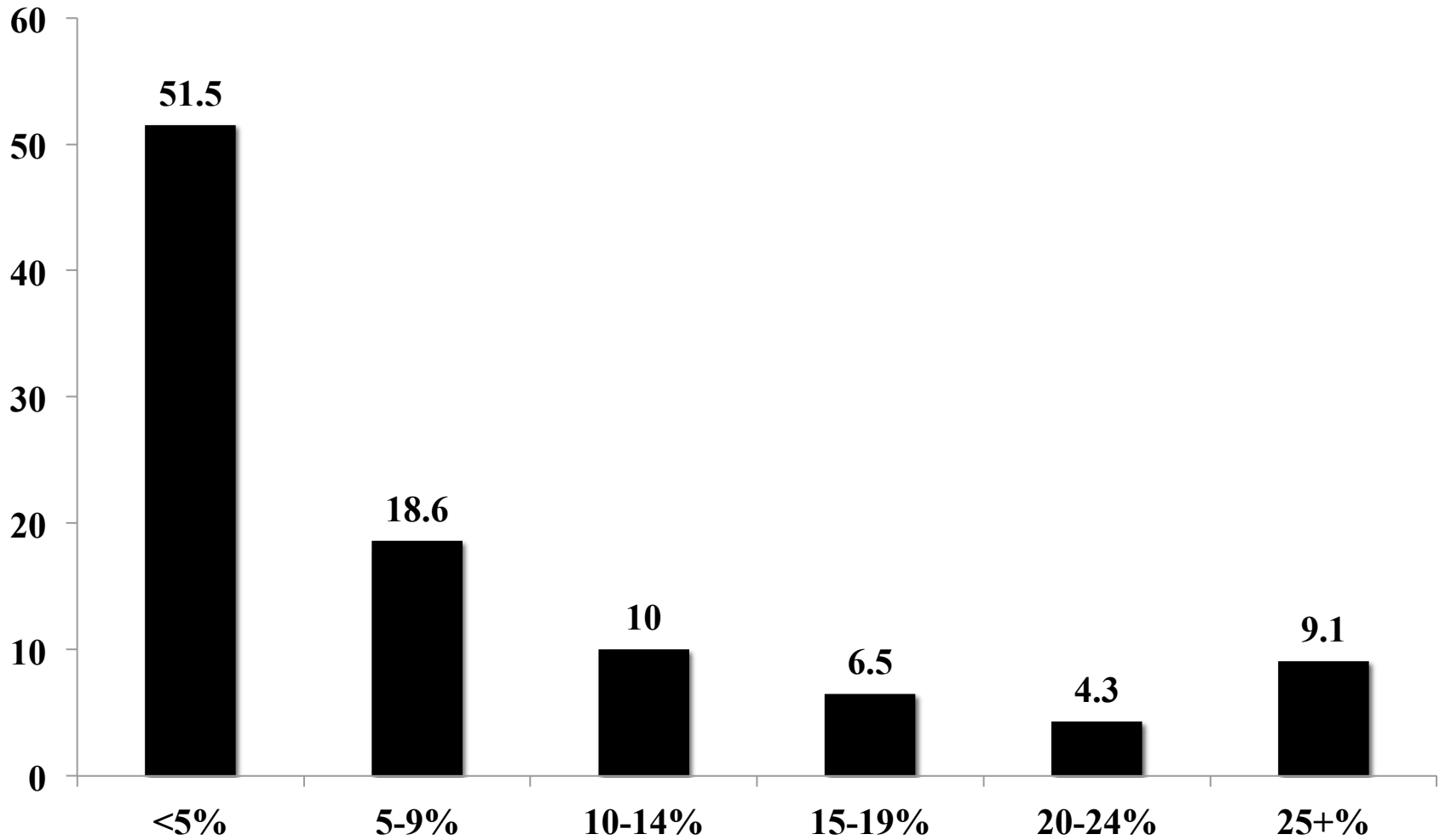
# Total Time Spent in SC



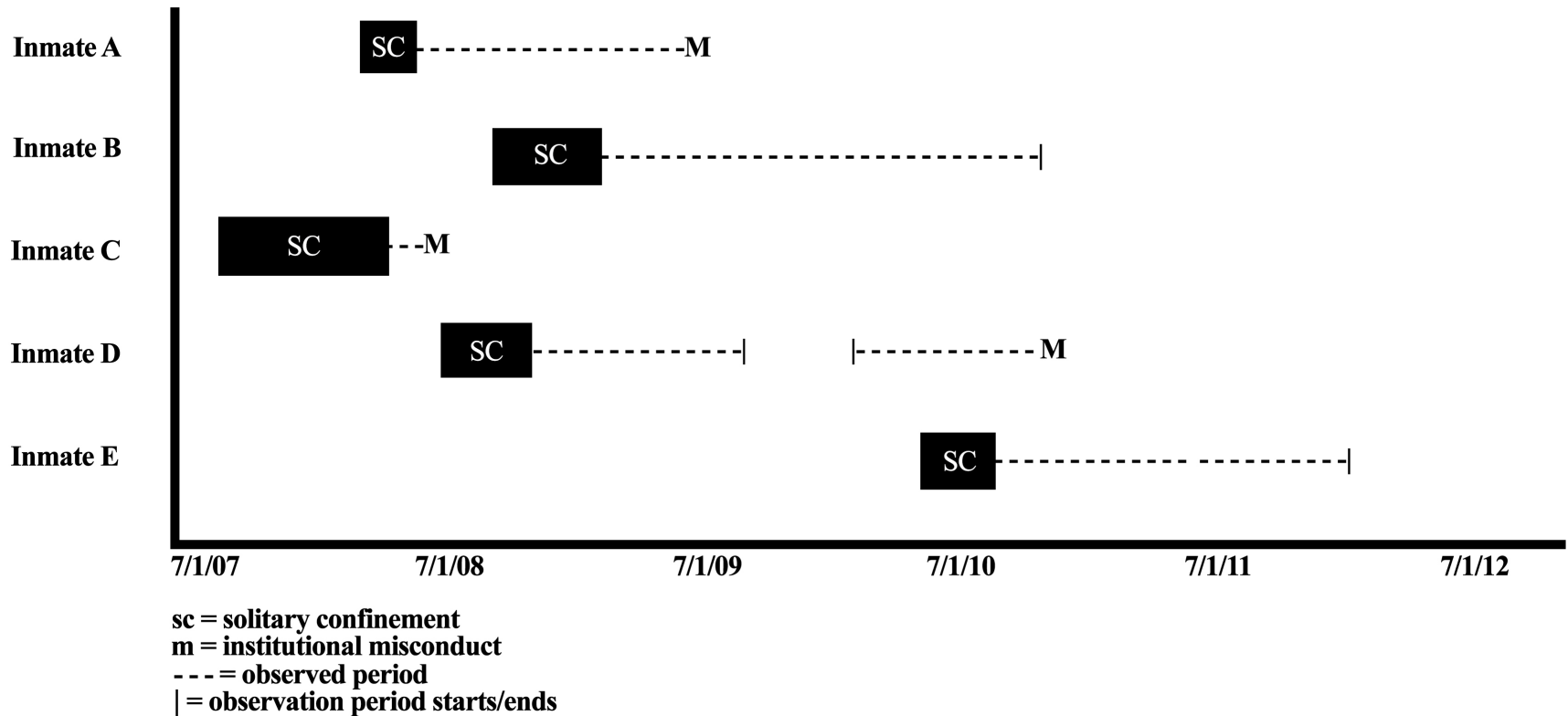
# Average Duration of Stay by SC Number

SC #	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	Median
1	42,445	17.45	28.08	8.00
2	23,394	21.49	33.67	9.00
3	14,812	24.40	36.21	10.00
4	10,041	26.36	38.82	11.00
5	6,981	27.82	40.06	12.00
6	4,981	28.00	41.20	12.00
7	3,655	28.01	40.36	12.00
8	2,736	29.19	43.27	12.00

# Percent of Total Prison Sentence in SC



# Scenario for Five Hypothetical Inmates



# Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	(SD)
Post-SC violent misconduct	.29	(.45)
Post-SC non-violent misconduct	.46	(.50)
Post-SC drug/alcohol misconduct	.16	(.37)

# Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	(SD)
1 <sup>st</sup> SC duration > 14 days	.28	(.45)
Age (in years)	29.49	(9.58)
Female	.09	(.28)
Black	.49	(.50)
Recidivist	.47	(.50)
Felony level (1 to 5)	3.01	(1.31)
Risk level (-1 to 8)	2.08	(2.10)
Mental health diagnosis	.33	(.47)
Natural log of time at risk (in days)	6.23	(.78)
Prior violent misconduct	.28	(.45)
Prior non-violent misconduct	.43	(.50)
Prior drug/alcohol misconduct	.09	(.28)
SC institution <sup>a</sup>	—	—

# Effect of 15+ Days in SC on Subsequent Misconduct (*no controls*)

	<b>Violent misconduct</b>	<b>Non-violent misconduct</b>	<b>Drug/alcohol misconduct</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> SC duration $\geq$ 15 days	.90*	1.00	1.16*

*Note:* Reported values are  $\text{Exp}(b)$  values. \*  $p \leq .01$ .

# Effect of SC on Misconduct (*with controls*)

	<b>Violent Misconduct</b>	<b>Non-Violent Misconduct</b>	<b>Drug/Alcohol Misconduct</b>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> SC duration ≥ 15 days</b>	<b>.98</b>	<b>1.04</b>	<b>1.09</b>
Age (in years)	.94*	.94*	.93*
Female	.53*	.37*	.12*
Black	1.41*	1.15*	.73*
Recidivist	.98	1.09*	1.34*
Felony level	.94	.98	.93*
Risk level	1.08*	1.07*	1.09*
Mental health diagnosis	1.75*	1.82*	1.51*
Natural log of time at risk	1.98*	2.03*	2.39*
Prior violent misconduct	1.50*	1.06	1.11*
Prior non-violent	1.13*	1.42*	1.15*
Prior drug/alcohol misconduct	.73*	.80*	1.54*



# Discussion

- This study fills an important gap in the SC empirical literature
- This study has the benefit of including
  - A population of inmates admitted into a state prison system ( $N = 118,447$ )
  - Longitudinal data (5-years)
  - Rich dataset (duration, risk, mental health, institutional behavior, female prisoners, prison information)
  - Three outcomes of misconduct
- First to examine institutional outcomes other than violence
  - Briggs et al. (2003)—aggregate-level inmate/staff assaults
  - Morris (2015)—violent infractions

# Discussion

- 36% of inmates admitted to ODRC between 7/1/08 and 6/30/12 experienced SC during the same time period ( $N = 42,632$ )
- About half of inmates ( $N \approx 21,000$ )
  - Spent less than 30 days in SC during one stay
  - SC comprised less than 5% of their total prison sentence
- The length of time spent in SC increases on subsequent stays
- Approximately 9% of inmates ( $N \approx 4,000$ )
  - Sent to SC for 7 or more different stays
  - Spent more than 180 total days in SC
  - Served 25% or more of their total prison sentence in SC

# Discussion

- Preliminary evidence suggests there is *no statistically significant difference* in the probability of subsequent institutional misconduct (violent, non-violent, or drug) between inmates who serve more or less than two weeks in SC
- Stresses the need for researchers to account for other known predictors of criminal behavior when assessing the effect on SC

# Conclusion

- From a policy standpoint these results call into question the utility of keeping inmates in SC for more than two weeks
- These findings suggest that limiting SC stays to two weeks may not increase misconduct (see also Gendreau & Bonta, 1984)
- SC is more expensive to run (Lawrence & Mears, 2004)
  - This money could be redirected toward other evidence-based treatment services (see Andrews & Bonta, 2010)
- We hope this study adds to the SC debate and helps inform future policy decisions

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