The Effects of Solitary Confinement on Prisoners in Custodial Settings: A Meta-Analysis

Ryan M. Labrecque, M.S.
Paula Smith, Ph.D.
Paul Gendreau, O.C., Ph.D.

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Solitary Confinement

- Lack of universal definition
- Little agreement regarding who should be placed in such settings (Riveland, 1999)
- Several distinctive features in common to warrant analysis
- *Solitary confinement (SC)* refers to the general practice of segregation in restricted environmental settings

The Solitary Confinement Setting

- Typical features:
  - Restriction to a single-bunk cell for 23 hours a day
  - One hour of out of cell for hygiene and exercise
  - 6 to 8 feet wide, 10 feet long, with 8-foot ceiling
  - Inmates eat in cell
  - No access to educational or recreational activities
  - Family visits are non-contact

(Lanes, 2011)

Types of Solitary Confinement

- Punitive Segregation
  - Response to a disciplinary infraction and a finding of guilt
- Administrative Segregation (ADSEG)
  - Voluntary (e.g., protective custody)
  - Involuntary (e.g., security safety reasons: security threat group affiliation, serious instant offense, suspicion of future crime)

Summary of Research

- Experimental Studies of Volunteers
  - Sensory deprivation
  - Primarily college student and military samples
- Qualitative Studies
  - One-on-one interviews with offenders
  - Incorporate case law and human rights litigation
- Quasi-Experimental Studies

The Solitary Confinement Debate

- There has been a longstanding debate with respect to whether or not SC produces any harmful effects
  - SC is psychologically damaging (Grassian, Haney, Jackson)
  - SC produces little, if any, negative effects (Gendreau, Bonta, Suedfeld, Zinger, O'Keefe)
  - SC deters future behavior (conventional wisdom)

The Need for Meta-Analysis

- Lack of replication in SC research
- Knowledge cumulation and identification of gaps in research
- Impact of moderators
- Important policy implications

Current Study

- The purpose of this study is to conduct a preliminary meta-analysis of the existing literature on the effects of SC in correctional settings.

Method

- Conducted literature search with use of computerized databases
- Ancestry approach to identify additional studies from reference lists

Eligibility Criteria

- Independent variable was placement in SC
- Must use randomized or comparison control group design
- Must contain enough data to calculate an effect size (i.e., Pearson *r* or phi coefficient) between the independent variable and criterion
- The longest follow-up period was used

Dependent Measures

- Physiological Indices
  - Lowered sensory arousal (e.g., EEG); lower stress levels (e.g., plasma cortisol levels); physical health (e.g., raised blood pressure)
- Psychological Indices
  - Cognitive functioning; personality (e.g., feelings of discomfort); mood (e.g., depression); psychological instrument (e.g., hostility; reparatory grid, etc.); suicide
- Behavioral Indicators
  - Institutional misconduct; post-release recidivism

Description of Studies

- Total reviewed = 149
- Total included = 18 (88% rejection rate)
- Year (38% post 2000)
- 74% conducted in the U.S.
- 86% male samples

Preliminary Findings

	k	N	r (sd)	CI	z+
Physiological Indices	7	92	.38 (.32)	.32 to .44	.36
Psychological Indices	44	2,226	.12 (.23)	.09 to .15	.07
Behavioral Measures	5	7,230	.00 (.08)	-.04 to .04	-.02
Total	56	9,548	.14 (.24)	.10 to .18	.10

Potential Moderators

- There does appear to be some disparity in which inmates are placed in SC settings
- Namely, younger males with severe mental illness and more extensive criminal histories are overrepresented
- This potentially important moderator information is largely missing from the current empirical literature base

Within SC Group Comparison by MH Status (O'Keefe et al., 2010)

Psychological Indices	r (N = 84)
Activity	.00
Anxious-depressed	-.19
Hostility-suspiciousness	-.06
Thinking disorder	.01
Withdrawal	-.08
Total	-.06

Conclusion

- Preliminary results indicate:
  - Physiological indices had the strongest relationship with outcome
  - Psychological indices have been the most widely investigated in the SC literature, and were found to be moderately related to outcome
  - Behavioral measures have not been extensively evaluated, and the available research does not suggest that these variables are related to outcome

Conclusion

- Gaps in knowledge
  - Missing information on moderators
  - Too few studies
  - Weak designs
  - Open-ended interviews
  - No use of comparison group
  - Non-standardized assessments

Discussion

- Prisons use SC for two purposes: safety and punishment
- Unfortunately, neither purpose has been explored extensively
- Most studies are too narrowly focused on whether or not SC is harmful
  - Disproportionately targeting certain offenders
  - Producing adverse physical or psychological effects on offenders

Advancing the Study of Solitary Confinement

- Future studies should move beyond the debate over the fairness (or constitutionality) of SC to include tests of its underlying theory
  - Does SC increase safety or have a deterrent effect?
  - Evaluate the impact of SC on subsequent antisocial behaviors (i.e., institutional misconduct and post-release recidivism)
  - Need to include potential influential moderators (i.e., mental health, risk, age, etc.)

Recommendations

- Many recommendations have been criticized for being based merely on “personal revulsion, unsupportable generalizations, or far-fetched arguments by analogy” (Suedfeld et al., 1982)
- Some argue for abolition of SC
- Others argue for improving assessment and services in these settings

Final Thoughts

- More empirical research is needed before we can make the determination that solitary confinement is – or is not – an effective administrative policy

Contact Information

Ryan M. Labrecque, M.S.
Research Assistant, Corrections Institute
Graduate Student, School of Criminal Justice
University of Cincinnati
P.O. Box 210389
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0389
E-mail: ryan.labrecque@uc.edu

UNIVERSITY OF Cincinnati