

## **Segregation in Prisons, Disciplinary**

Disciplinary segregation—often referred to as solitary confinement—is a type of restricted housing used in many prisons and jails throughout the United States. The practice of segregation involves the housing of an inmate in conditions characterized by substantial isolation from other inmates. Some claim disciplinary segregation is a necessary tool for increasing safety and promoting order throughout the correctional system because it deters criminal activity, while others insist that the practice actually increases institutional misbehavior, thereby making institutions and the individuals inside them less safe. The use of this correctional practice also raises many moral, ethical, and legal concerns. This entry focuses on some of the current issues surrounding the contemporary use of disciplinary segregation in the United States.

### **Disciplinary Segregation**

In practice, correctional institutions segregate inmates for several reasons. For example, segregation provides increased supervision and controls over inmates who represent a threat to themselves (i.e., *protective custody*) or others (i.e., *administrative segregation*), or who have engaged in serious disciplinary misconduct (i.e., *disciplinary segregation*). Protective custody is used when an inmate needs to be separated from the general inmate population due to personal physical safety concerns (e.g., sex offender, gambling debt). Administrative segregation is used for managerial purposes, including as a response to an inmate who has demonstrated a chronic inability to adjust to the general population, or when an inmates' presence in the general population is believed to be likely to seriously disrupt the orderly operation of the institution. Administrative segregation can also be used in some correctional facilities as a temporary

housing assignment for inmates pending transfer to another institution, those awaiting a judicial proceeding, when needed to facilitate a criminal investigation, or when limited bed space options in an institution necessitate the use of an otherwise empty segregation cell.

In contrast to these other forms of restricted housing, disciplinary segregation is used as a form of punishment for inmates who violate the institutions' rules. Whenever an institutional violation occurs, a staff member may write up the perpetrator of the incident for the misconduct and a hearing will be conducted to determine the facts in the case. At the hearing, evidence is presented against the accused and he/she can either accept blame (i.e., plead guilty) or defend himself/herself against the charges (e.g., call witnesses on his/her behalf). If the inmate is found guilty by the rule infraction board, a range of sanctions may be imposed upon the offender. These punishments can include the removal of specific privileges, loss of good time, or a sentence for a specific length of time in disciplinary segregation. The type and severity of the specific sanction for any one case is largely contingent upon the nature of the misconduct and the perpetrators' prior behavioral history in the facility. Departmental regulations often place limits on the amount of time an inmate may be housed in disciplinary segregation depending on the severity of the offense (e.g., 30 days). However, if the offender has been charged with multiple violations, or if he/she occurs new violations while in segregation, their length of stay is often extended.

### **Conditions in Disciplinary Segregation**

The conditions in disciplinary segregation are designed to be unpleasant. These settings provide tight controls over inmates and isolate them from the general population of offenders. The inmates housed in these settings are typically confined to a single cell for 23 hours of the day and are only allowed to be out of their cell for one hour per day, usually for a shower or

exercise. Before leaving their cell for any reason (e.g., medical appointment, disciplinary hearing), inmates are usually hand cuffed, and sometimes even shackled at the waist and placed in leg irons. Food is delivered through a slot in the door, meetings with counselors and mental health providers are often conducted through the cell door, and exercise is taken alone in a small fenced in yard area. These inmates are further afforded very few privileges and they are generally not allowed to participate in any educational, vocational, or other services/programs that are otherwise available to the other inmates living in the general population. Even mental health and medical services are extremely limited for prisoners in segregation. Family visits in disciplinary segregation are often strictly prohibited, and in the rare event that a family visit is allowed, the interactions are usually conducted via a telephone and a thick glass window separates the inmate from his/her family member.

### **Prevalence of Disciplinary Segregation**

It is difficult to determine how prevalent the use of disciplinary segregation is in the United States, particularly because many jails and prisons do not track this information in a way that can easily be accessed. Previous estimates on the number of offenders in restricted housing more broadly have ranged from 20,000 to 100,000. Further, the extent of the use of segregation also appears to vary widely among states. For example, in a 1998 survey of state department of corrections, some organizations (e.g., Pennsylvania) reported incarcerating less than 1% of inmates in such settings, while others (e.g., Mississippi) reported incarcerating up to 12%. Another challenge for determining the extent of the use of disciplinary segregation is that inmates are often subjected to the setting for relatively short durations (e.g., < 30 days). This means that any estimate derived from taking a snapshot of the inmates in segregation at only one point in time is likely to underreport the true number who have experienced disciplinary

segregation because there may be many inmates who occupy a specific segregation cell over a given length of time.

In 2011 and 2012, researchers from the Bureau of Justice Statistics conducted a study that surveyed a national representative sample of prisoners incarcerated across the United States. This study found that approximately 18% of jail and prison inmates surveyed spent time in a restricted confinement setting in the previous year. It should be noted that this estimate includes both inmates in segregation for disciplinary and administrative reasons, so it is still largely unknown how widely disciplinary segregation specifically is used in the United States.

### **The Effects of Disciplinary Segregation**

There is a widely held belief among policy makers and corrections officials that the use of disciplinary segregation increases safety, order, and control in prisons. In contrast, those critical of the practice maintain that the segregation setting itself is responsible for causing serious psychological and other health problems as well as increases criminogenic risk. Remarkably, despite its long history of use and recent increase in public attention, segregation more broadly, and disciplinary segregation specifically, has remained an elusive subject of empirical research.

A review of the segregation literature reveals there are several limitations to understanding what effect disciplinary segregation may have on inmate outcomes. For example, the majority of the research in this area has been qualitative in nature rather than empirical. That is not to say that impressive empirical evaluations do not exist, but rather that they are the exception and not the rule. Therefore, most of what is known about the effects of this practice on inmate outcomes is based on subjective evidence. Qualitative researchers in this area have primarily used information from interviews with inmates and other mental health professionals

working in segregation settings to show that the practice violates prisoners' constitutional rights, contributes to psychological problems, increases criminogenic risk, and is used excessively in the United States. These anecdotal studies have often been found in the popular press and other media outlets and tend to promote the idea that segregation has serious detrimental effects on inmates. It has been these perceived negative effects that have helped make this practice an issue of national attention.

Other scholars, however, have pointed out several methodological limitations from which much of this literature is based (e.g., selection bias, response bias, inadequate or no control groups). These scholars caution that researchers and practitioners should be cautious in drawing firm conclusions from this group of works. Two recent meta-analytic reviews on this topic have found that the magnitude of the effects from the available empirical studies tend to be much smaller than has been predicted by those critical of the practice.

The majority of the research in this area has further been limited to examining the effects on inmates residing in administrative segregation settings—and in particular those in supermax facilities—rather than those who are held in segregation for disciplinary reasons. What is more, most of the research that has examined the behavioral effects of segregation has been limited to post-release (e.g., recidivism) rather than institutional outcomes (e.g., institutional misconduct). There are now a handful of empirical studies that indicate the experience of segregation may increase offender post-release recidivism. One study in particular found that these effects were much worse for those inmates who were released directly into the community from the segregation setting compared to those who were stepped down from segregation to the general prison population before being released.

The limited available empirical research in this area has also been plagued by some serious limitations. For example, it has often been difficult for evaluators to acquire comparable control groups for those inmates housed in segregation (e.g., the modal response to violent behavior in prison is to place inmates in segregation). Therefore, if researchers are not careful in their selection of an appropriate control group they may attribute a cause of placement in segregation for its effect. It is worth noting that for the studies that are of higher methodological quality (i.e., those that are able to match on a wide variety of other known predictors of criminal behavior), the magnitude of the effect sizes have been much smaller and in some studies have been reported as zero, whereas those studies with less rigorous research designs (i.e., do not control for other predictors of criminal behavior) have tended to yield much larger effects. Nonetheless, there is tentative support for the contention that segregation may increase offender post-release recidivism, however, much less is known about how this practice influences inmate adjustment in prison. Two studies in 2015 found that short-term disciplinary segregation had a null effect on measures of subsequent institutional misconduct. However, there is clearly a need for more empirical research on the effect of disciplinary segregation on subsequent institutional behaviors.

### **The Future of Disciplinary Segregation**

The primary purpose reported for the use of disciplinary segregation is that the practice is necessary to ensure reductions in violence and other serious disruptions within the prison system. The use of segregation as a response to inmate misbehavior may be appealing to some correctional authorities because of its simplicity; however, there is little evidence available that supports these settings are an effectively strategy for reducing inmate misconduct and post-release recidivism. Further, disciplinary segregation is only theoretically capable of influencing

inmate behavior, as a specific deterrent, after an initial infraction has been committed. Many argue that if disciplinary segregation does not improve inmate behavior, and it costs considerably more than standard housing, it is perhaps time for policy makers to seriously consider other alternative strategies for dealing with such rule violators. Fortunately, there are several attempts currently underway across the country to develop safe alternatives to segregation that will both ensure institutional safety and improve inmate outcomes.

Ryan M. Labrecque, Ph.D.  
Portland State University

***See also*** Segregation in Prisons; Segregation in Prisons, Administrative; Segregation in Prisons: Best Practices

### **Further Readings**

Beck, A. J. (2015). Use of restrictive housing in U.S. prisons and jails, 2011-12. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

Gendreau, P., & Labrecque, R. M. (in press). The effects of administrative segregation: A lesson in knowledge cumulation. In J. Wooldredge & P. Smith (Eds.), *Oxford handbook on prisons and imprisonment*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

King, R. D. (1999). The rise and rise of supermax. *Punishment and Society*, 1(2), 163-186.

Labrecque, R. M. (2015). The effect of solitary confinement on inmate behavior: A longitudinal evaluation. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

Lovell, D., Johnson, L. C., & Cain, K. C. (2007). Recidivism of supermax prisoners in Washington State. *Crime and Delinquency*, 53(4), 633-656.

Mears, D. P., & Bales, W. D. (2009). Supermax incarceration and recidivism. *Criminology*, 47(4), 1131-1166.

Morgan, R. D., Gendreau, P., Smith, P., Gray, A. L., Labrecque, R. M., MacLean, N., Van

- Horn, S., Bolanos, A. D., Batastini, A. B., & Mills, J. F. (under review). Quantitative synthesis of the effects of administrative segregation on inmates' well-being. Revised and resubmitted to *Psychology, Public Policy, and the Law*.
- Morris, R. G. (2015). Exploring the effect of exposure to short-term solitary confinement among violent prison inmates. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*. Advance on-line publication.
- Shalev, S. (2009). *Supermax: Controlling risk through solitary confinement*. Portland, OR: Willan Publishing.