A small study of administrative segregation surprised researchers with findings that were inconsistent with those from previous studies.

A study of the psychological effects of solitary confinement in Colorado prisons showed the mental health of most inmates did not decline over the course of the one-year study.

The NIJ-funded study assessed the effects of solitary confinement, known as administrative segregation or AS in the corrections field. Researchers evaluated 247 men in the Colorado prison system. The sample included inmates in AS at Colorado State Penitentiary, a “supermax” facility, and two other groups for comparison: the general prison population and residents of San Carlos Correctional Facility, a psychiatric care prison. The sample of inmates was divided into those with mental illness and those with no mental illness. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 59. The ethnic breakdown was 40 percent white, 36 percent Hispanic, 19 percent African-American, 4 percent Native American and 1 percent Asian.

The researchers tested three hypotheses:

- Offenders in AS would develop an array of psychological symptoms consistent with the “security housing unit syndrome,” which is characterized by free-floating anxiety, hallucinations, excitability and outbursts.
Study Raises Questions About Psychological Effects of Solitary Confinement

Offenders with and without mental illness would worsen over time in AS, but mentally ill inmates would decline more rapidly and have more serious illnesses.

Inmates in AS would experience greater psychological decline over time than the comparison groups in the general prison population and the psychiatric care prison.

Inmates and staff completed standardized tests at three-month intervals over the course of the one-year study. To participate in the study, inmates had to read and write at a proficient level because the assessments were done using standardized self-administered pencil and paper materials; no clinical psychologist interviewed the inmates. The researchers used 14 tests measuring states such as anxiety, depression and psychosis to collect data. Clinical staff completed the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale; correctional staff completed the Prison Behavior Rating Scale; and prisoners completed 12 self-report instruments such as the Beck Hopelessness Scale.

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None of the hypotheses were borne out by the results of the study. In fact, the results showed initial improvements in psychological well-being in all three groups of inmates. Most of the improvement occurred between the first and second testing periods followed by relative stability. Overall, the researchers found that 20 percent of the study sample improved and 7 percent worsened during the study period.

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Previous studies of AS and its psychological effects have produced mixed results. Some characterize

What Is Administrative Segregation?

Prisoners are placed in solitary confinement, or administrative segregation, for violent or disruptive behavior. AS typically involves single-cell confinement for 23 hours daily; inmates are allowed one hour out of the cell for exercise and showers. Facilities for AS are expensive to build and maintain.

In the Colorado study, the cells were 80 square feet and had 35 square feet of unencumbered floor space. Each cell contained a bunk, toilet, sink, desk and stool. These items were made of metal and mounted on the floor or wall for security.

Each cell had an exterior window through which the prisoner could see the outside and a window that gave a view of the inside of the prison. Neither window opened, so the prisoner could not control airflow.

Prisoners were permitted at least one hour five times a week for recreation, as well as 15-minute showers three times a week. Prisoners were placed in full restraints before being escorted to the “recreation room,” a 90-square-foot cell that contained a pull-up bar mounted to the wall but no other equipment.

Inmates received most services at their cell doors, including meals. Mental health clinicians visited at least once a month, and a librarian delivered books and magazines once a week.

At the beginning of their confinement, prisoners were allowed to have one 20-minute phone call and one non-contact visit each month. Privileges could be expanded if prisoners successfully completed behavior modification and cognitive programs.
Challenges of Conducting Research in Prisons

Rese...
name stems from a study of factory workers at Western Electric’s Hawthorne plant in Illinois in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Researchers set out to see what effect, if any, changes in lighting would have on the workers’ productivity. They found that regardless of the changes made, productivity increased. They decided that the productivity increased because the workers saw themselves as special participants in an experiment.

Recent examinations of the Hawthorne data question the original conclusions and suggest there was either no effect or a placebo effect. Perhaps the Hawthorne effect was present in the Colorado study of administrative segregation. If such an effect were present, the prisoners might be expected to have a more positive view of their situation by virtue of being study participants. Additionally, people in isolation might be more inclined to participate in a study simply because it would involve receiving attention from an interviewer.

On the other hand, inmates may be wary of researchers. Establishing trust in order to collect accurate information is a prime concern for researchers, who know that inmates may withhold information or tell researchers only what they think the researchers want to hear.

Notes

1. Some experts believe that prisoners can never give true informed consent because they live in an environment in which they have little or no freedom to make an informed decision.

2. Steven D. Levitt and John A. List, for example, point out that statistical methods available at the time did not account for the impact of a number of other variables — such as the day of the week on which the light bulbs were changed. Levitt and List conclude that there was no “Hawthorne effect” and that the changes in productivity can be attributed to other factors. Levitt, Steven D., and John A. List, Was There Really a Hawthorne Effect at the Hawthorne Plant? An Analysis of the Original Illumination Experiments, The National Bureau of Economic Research, NBER Working Paper no. 15016, May 2009, http://www.nber.org/papers/w15016. See also a summary of the research in The Economist, “Questioning the Hawthorne Effect: Light Work” (June 2009), at http://www.economist.com/node/13788427.

Notes

1. Placement into AS or general prison conditions occurred as a function of routine prison operations. General population comparison participants included those at risk of AS placement due to their institutional behavior.


For more information:


- For more discussion of the Colorado study and some of the challenges involved in prison research, see the June 21, 2011, issue of Corrections & Mental Health: An Update of the National Institute of Corrections at http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/mentalhealth/archive/tags/Colorado+Supermax+Study/default.aspx. The issue includes nine commentaries about the study, including a response by the study authors.