

Segregation in Prisons, Administrative

Administrative segregation—also known as solitary confinement—involves the housing of an inmate in conditions characterized by substantial isolation from other inmates. The use of administrative segregation in the United States has risen precipitously since the 1980s, as have concerns about its effects and utility. Some claim that administrative segregation is a necessary tool for managing correctional populations, while others insist it is an overused management strategy that produces many damaging effects on inmates and staff. The use of this correctional practice not only raises empirical questions, but also moral, ethical, and legal concerns. This entry focuses on some of the current issues surrounding the contemporary use of administrative segregation in the United States.

Administrative Segregation

The historical origins of administrative segregation can be traced to the silent penitentiaries in early nineteenth century, where inmates were subjected to very extreme forms of social isolation and sensory deprivation. The original purpose of the practice was to reform inmates by affording them the opportunity to repent for their sins and to learn the value of hard work through the steady routine of labor. However, crowded living conditions and officer corruption ultimately led to the inability of prisons to ensure that these restrictive conditions were met. By the late nineteenth century, prisoners were no longer universally placed in solitary living cells, rather such settings were reserved for those inmates for whom other methods of discipline (e.g., corporal punishments) proved ineffective.

In the 1980s, several “get tough” penal policies were enacted in the United States that led to an increase in the number of incarcerated offenders (e.g., mandatory minimum sentencing laws, three-strikes laws, War on Drugs). During this time, overcrowded living conditions and increased institutional violence led to growing concerns for staff and inmate safety in prison. In response, many correctional officials across the United States increased their reliance on segregated confinement as a means to ensure reductions in violence and other serious disruptions within the prison system.

The modern use of administrative segregation includes the removal of inmates who are suspected of posing a threat to the well order of the institution from the general prison population. This includes those inmates who have demonstrated an inability to adjust to the general population or for those whose presence in the general population is believed to be likely to seriously disrupt the orderly operation of the institution. The purpose of administrative segregation is different than disciplinary segregation, which is used as a response to offenders who have engaged in serious institutional misconduct, and protective custody, which is used to prevent vulnerable inmates from being victimized by other inmates. There is a widely held belief among policy makers and corrections officials that the use of administrative segregation is an effective risk management strategy for increasing safety and promoting order throughout the prison system. However, those critical of the practice contend that the use of administrative segregation raises constitutional and humanitarian concerns, and charge the practice constitutes cruel and unusual punishment, is inhumane, and violates the minimum standards of decency.

Conditions in Administrative Segregation

The conditions in administrative segregation have often been characterized by intense isolation and absolute control. Prisoners housed in these settings are typically confined to a

single cell for 23 hours of the day and are further subjected to increased cell restrictions and heightened security procedures. These prisoners are granted limited access to education, vocation, visitation, recreation, and other services that are available to the general prison population. Prisoners in segregation are often taken out of their cells for only one hour per day, usually for a shower or exercise. Recreation in many administrative segregation units takes place in a small fenced in area that is exposed to the weather. Likewise, prisoners must choose whether to go into these exercise areas during extreme weather conditions or remain in their cells and take no out-of-cell exercise for the day. Before leaving their cell for any reason, inmates are usually hand cuffed, and sometimes they are even shackled at the waist and placed in leg irons.

Except when overcrowded conditions require double bunking, virtually all forms of social interaction with staff and other inmates are eliminated. Inmates eat, sleep, and go to the bathroom in their cells. 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. Visits for inmates in segregation are often restricted and can be prohibited for a certain period of time when the inmate first arrives in the administrative segregation unit. When family visits are allowed, the interactions are generally conducted via a telephone and the visitor and the inmate sit on separate sides of a thick glass window. Finally, even mental health and medical services are extremely limited for prisoners in segregation, which further reduces their opportunity for human contact.

The Use of Administrative Segregation

Administrative segregation is often enforced for indeterminate periods of time. In some systems, inmates are not told the reason for their transfer to administrative segregation, and options for reevaluation or release back to the general prison population may be few. For those

inmates considered to be a continued threat to safety and security of the facility, segregation may be imposed for very long periods of time. Several studies in the 2010s reported that inmates are placed in such settings for durations ranging from less than one month to several years. In some cases, inmates are held in segregation until they are discharged to the community at the expiration of their sentence.

It has been difficult to obtain reliable prevalence estimates of the use of administrative segregation in the United States, particularly because many jails and prisons do not track this information in a way that can easily be accessed. Likewise, previous estimates have varied widely, from 20,000 to 100,000. The extent of the use of segregation also appears to vary widely among states. 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%. However, as definitional and reporting issues have been well documented, in all likelihood these estimates are low. In a 2015 report conducted by researchers from the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, it was estimated that approximately 18% of jail and prison inmates in the United States spent time in a restricted confinement setting in the previous year. However, it should be cautioned that this estimate includes both inmates in segregation for administrative and disciplinary reasons.

Inmates in Administrative Segregation

Administrative segregation is often described as targeting those inmates deemed to be the “worst of the worst,” which includes those belonging to certain groups such as escape risks, gang members, predators, and high profile or notorious inmates. This practice has also been highly criticized for segregating a higher proportion of mentally ill inmates and those with developmental disabilities. A review of the available literature reveals that inmates who are

placed in administrative segregation settings tend to be younger, more likely to be an ethnic minority, have a mental disorder, be a member of a gang, as well as be rated as high-risk to recidivate when compared to the inmates from the general prison population. Administrative segregation inmates are also found to be more likely to have a violent criminal history, have prior juvenile justice involvement, and be rated higher risk on their initial institutional classification rating. Finally, inmates in administrative segregation are also more likely to have been found guilty of an institutional misconduct and have previously served time in segregation.

The Effects of Administrative Segregation

There are three schools of thought on the effects of administrative segregation. The first position—which appears to be the conventional wisdom amongst prison wardens—suggests the use of administrative segregation increases safety, order, and control in prisons. In contrast, a second school of thought insists that administrative segregation causes serious psychological and other health problems as well as increases criminogenic risk. Finally, a third perspective contends that under conditions where segregated confinement meets the standards of humane care, relatively few inmates will be adversely affected. This position maintains that there are other factors (e.g., how inmates are treated) in the prison environment—beyond simply being confined in a segregation setting—that have more dire consequences. Remarkably, despite its long history of use and increase in attention, administrative segregation has remained an elusive subject of empirical research. Within the available administrative segregation literature the most contentious debates have been around the psychological effects of the setting, although more recently an increased amount of attention has been given to what effect the setting may have on behavioral outcomes (e.g., institutional behavior, post-release recidivism).

The belief that segregated confinement causes psychological damage is not new. In fact, after visiting some of the early United States penitentiaries in the nineteenth century, several notable European contemporaries condemned the practice, suggesting that the setting caused its inhabitants undue psychological distress. Beginning in the mid-1980s, there has been an increased amount of scholarly attention given toward the study of administrative segregation. The majority of the available research conducted to date has been qualitative in nature and has generally involved interviews with inmates and mental health professionals in segregation settings. As a group, these anecdotal reports have tended to use powerful excerpts from these interviews in order to suggest that administrative segregation violates prisoners' constitutional rights, contributes to psychological problems, increases criminogenic risk, and is used excessively in the United States. Subsequently, there has become a strong consensus in the literature, as well as a growing public sentiment, that administrative segregation is responsible for producing these devastating effects.

Other scholars, however, have pointed out that much of the literature from which this conclusion is based suffers from many serious methodological limitations (e.g., selection bias, response bias, inadequate or no control groups), which in their estimation should limit the types of conclusions that should be drawn from this research. Two recent meta-analytic reviews on this topic have found that not only has administrative segregation been an elusive subject of empirical research, but also that the effects found from the available studies tend to be "small" to "moderate," rather than "large" as has been predicted by those critical of the practice. Despite these disagreements in the interpretation of the available literature, there is clearly a need for more empirical research in this area.

The Future of Administrative Segregation

The primary purpose reported for the use of administrative segregation is that the practice increases system wide order, safety, and control. However, there is little evidence available that supports these settings are effectively achieving these goals. Recently, there has become a strong consensus in the literature, as well as a growing public sentiment, that the experience of administrative segregation, especially in long durations, is responsible for producing serious psychological problems. It has been these perceived negative effects that have helped make this practice an issue of national attention. Many have argued that given the substantially greater costs associated with administrative segregation that the onus ought to be on those that continue to advocate its use to produce evidence of its benefits. Several efforts have been made recently to reduce the number of offenders in administrative segregation, particularly for those subpopulations of the mentally ill, juveniles, and women offenders. One of the challenges for ensuring such reductions will occur is to develop safe alternatives to segregation. Fortunately, there are several attempts currently underway across the country.

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See also Segregation in Prisons; Segregation in Prisons, Disciplinary; Segregation in Prisons: Best Practices

Further Readings

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