



Our Title: Alternatives to Isolating Prisoners with Severe Mental Illness

Author's Title: Beyond Supermax Administrative Segregation: Mississippi's Experience Rethinking Prison Classification and Creating Alternative Mental Health Programs

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Design Issue:

Purpose: A study was conducted at the Mississippi State Penitentiary to determine the effect of the use of a court-ordered, step-down treatment unit for prisoners with serious mental illness (SMI) and implementation of a new prisoner classification system. The intent of the two changes was to reduce the number of prisoners placed in administrative segregation (isolation) versus the general population.

Rationale:

- Conditions evident by use of administrative segregation have been legally challenged in Mississippi and elsewhere based on the negative psychiatric impacts of prisoner isolation, including high suicide rates and repeat incarceration (recidivism).
- The cost of administrative segregation is high due to staffing and facility costs and anticipated benefits of increased safety have not been substantiated.
- Prisoners with SMI are less violent and show better behavior when receiving mental health services than when housed in administrative segregation.
- Historically, it has been believed that the tighter the facility security and more isolated the prisoners, the safer they and staff will be. However, new evidence illustrates that mental health treatment and appropriate levels of restriction with incentives to engage in therapy and reduce misconduct yield more positive outcomes.

Design Criteria:

InformeDesign identified the following design criteria:

- Provide program and recreation areas to accommodate activities engaged in by the general prison population when prisoners are outside their cells, several hours per day.
- Provide space to accommodate educational and mental health programming and services.
- Consider the inclusion of step-down units to house prisoners with SMI; provide one segment that accommodates segregation for some of the prisoners, and another segment that is an open layout for prisoners who are moving towards housing in the general population.
- Consider providing space to accommodate activities such as writing and drawing and storage of and access to media equipment and educational materials (library) to accommodate prisoners in incentive-based, step-down units that allow increasing amounts of unrestricted time.
- Provide space to accommodate mental health group treatment and/or educational



meetings of small groups of prisoners that include safety or restraint equipment such as bolts in the floor to receive ankle restraints, should they be required.

Key Concepts:

- Supermax (super-maximum security) prisons emerged in the early 1990s as a way to house prisoners in facilities that provided administrative segregation, which is defined as nearly complete isolation or with a cell-mate nearly 24 hours per day, with the exception of a few hours per week of solitary exercise and limited, non-contact visitation privileges.
- It has been found that administrative segregation generally yields a negative cycle of behavior by prisoners and retaliatory responses by prison security staff on prisoners.
- Along with the rapidly growing prison population and overcrowding of prisons, the overall percentage of prisoners with SMI has risen greatly.
- Prisoners with SMI are routinely placed in administrative segregation, with the absence of mental health treatment commonly contributing to the deterioration of their psychiatric health.
- Identification of prisoners with SMI was integral to the reform of the classification system of over 80% of Parchman's Unit 32's prisoners out of administrative segregation and into the general prison population. It was found that the previous classification system routinely placed prisoners into administrative segregation who did not pose an elevated risk of violence.
- Prisoners with SMI are also sometimes diagnosed as having post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), generalized anxiety disorder, or exhibit self-harming behaviors. An intermediate-level mental health treatment program contained within a step-down unit in the Unit 32 prison was found to be successful in moving these prisoners to better mental health, and back into the general prison population within 3 to 6 months.
- Before the classification system in Unit 32 in Parchman was revised to a more objective approach that allowed for periodic re-evaluations, the prison population (approximately 1,000 prisoners) were nearly all in administrative segregation cells, including those who had been diagnosed with SMI. Afterward, only 150 remained in administrative segregation, in addition to those on death row.
- Serious incidents and use of force dropped substantially, though during a time when the prison population declined from 990 to less than 600 prisoners.
- Rule violation reports regarding prisoners with SMI in the step-down program indicated a substantial drop in the number of serious disciplinary incidents while in the step-down unit (50) from the previous six months (203), as compared to the number of incidents six months after completing the program in the step-down unit (27).

Research Method:

- Field research was conducted to document the changes in Unit 32 of the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman. The research was instigated by litigation initially brought by death row prisoners (2002) and subsequently by the general prison population (2005). The second suit was broader in nature and also asked the court to address system-wide



classification policies and procedural issues.

- The history of litigation and existing prison conditions in Unit 32 was described as well as prison conditions and administrative rules and treatment of prisoners with SMI as they evolved from 2002 through 2009.
- Decisions made by Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) administrators, the advice of a classification expert, Dr. James Austin, and enhancements in prison security staff training relative to treatment of the general prison population and prisoners with SMI were described.
- Descriptive statistics about serious incidents and use of force were compiled for the period of August 2006 through October 2008.
- Content analysis of rule violation reports relative to prisoners (43) with SMI who participated in the step-down unit was conducted.

Limitations of the Study:

The author identified the following limitations:

- This report is preliminary and conditions continue to evolve.
- The prisoner population at Unit 32 declined during the period under study, perhaps suppressing the beneficial outcomes of the revised classification system.

Commentary: The experts who participated in this study have become consultants for the MDOC. Since this study, the penal system in Mississippi has seen an increase in the collaboration among mental health and security staff for the betterment of the prisoners with SMI. Authors surmise that findings from this study will impact the use of administrative segregation in other states as well as in the classification of women in supermax facilities in Mississippi. Also, they warn of behavior by some states to meet court sanctioned segregation limits for prisoners by moving prisoners from one facility to another rather than addressing the issue of isolating prisoners.

Adapted From:

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