ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TIME SPENT IN RESTRICTIVE HOUSING CONFINEMENT ON SUBSEQUENT MEASURES OF INSTITUTIONAL ADJUSTMENT AMONG MEN IN PRISON

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Proponents of restrictive housing argue that its use is an effective deterrent of antisocial behavior, while its critics maintain that the setting causes serious psychological damage and increases noncompliance with institutional rules and expectations. Unfortunately, few studies exist that examine the influence of restrictive housing on behavioral outcomes. This investigation adds to this gap in knowledge by assessing the impact of time spent in restrictive housing confinement on subsequent measures of institutional adjustment among men in prison.

The research and policy implications of these results are discussed.

Keywords: restrictive housing; administrative segregation; solitary confinement; prison; inmate

INTRODUCTION

Correctional administrators are responsible for ensuring safety and order in prison. These authorities, therefore, seek to enact policies and practices that can reduce inmate engagement in violence and other forms of antisocial behavior. One strategy that prison officials employ to achieve this goal is to isolate dangerous and disruptive inmates in restrictive housing (Frost & Monteiro, 2016; Labrecque, 2016). In general, this type of confinement involves placement in a single cell for the majority of the day with increases in cell restrictions and security procedures (Cochran, Toman, Mears, & Bales, 2018; Mears, 2016). Authorities often justify the use of this practice on the presumption that it improves institutional safety; however, its critics maintain that the setting actually causes serious

psychological damage and further increases noncompliance with institutional rules and expectations (see Labrecque & Mears, 2019).

Despite this ongoing debate regarding the utility of this correctional policy, there is a notable lack of research on the impact of restrictive housing on behavioral outcomes in prison (Labrecque & Smith, 2013; Morgan et al., 2016). It is possible that placement in this type of environment leads to improvements in one's actions, but it is also possible that this experience increases noncompliance or has no effect on one's institutional behavior as well (Mears, 2013; Morris, 2016). The current study addresses this gap in knowledge by evaluating the influence of time spent in restrictive housing on subsequent measures of institutional adjustment among men in prison. This investigation also helps advance the theoretical understanding of the behavioral effects of restrictive housing and provides recommendations for improving offender outcomes and making prisons safer and more orderly environments.

THE IMPACT OF RESTRICTIVE HOUSING ON INMATE BEHAVIOR

Restrictive housing—what correctional officials and scholars also refer to as solitary confinement, administrative segregation, and supermax confinement—involves the isolation of an inmate in a single cell for 20 or more hours per day with little to no opportunity for meaningful contact with staff or other inmates (Cochran et al., 2018; Mears, 2016). Prison authorities can place inmates in restrictive housing for many reasons, including responding to institutional rule violations (i.e., disciplinary segregation), ensuring the well order of the facility (i.e., administrative segregation), protecting one from harm (i.e., protective custody), and meeting other institutional needs (i.e., temporary housing) (Butler, Griffin, & Johnson, 2013; Frost & Monteiro, 2016). In this way, restrictive housing represents the correctional systems' solution for dealing with violent and disruptive inmates in prison, just as incarceration is society's answer for dealing with dangerous and troublesome criminals in the community (Browne, Cambier, & Agha, 2011).

There are three competing perspectives on the behavioral impact of restrictive housing found in the literature (see also Gendreau & Goggin, 2018; Labrecque & Smith, 2018; Steiner & Cain, 2016). The first holds that the judicious use of restrictive housing is responsible for increasing safety, order, and control in prison. This position aligns with the philosophy of deterrence and rests on the assumption that the unpleasant nature of restrictive housing is the antidote for unwanted behavior in prison (see generally Nagin, 2013; Paternoster, 2010; Zimring & Hawkins, 1973). From this view, the negative experience in this type of housing teaches inmates that noncompliance with institutional rules and expectations will result in placement into this aversive environment (see also Lucas & Jones, 2017; Morris, 2016). Accordingly, inmates returning to lower security units from restrictive housing settings will be less likely to engage in antisocial behavior out of a fear for returning to the undesirable restrictive housing setting. This position also suggests that the more time one spends in restrictive housing, the more likely he will be to comply with the institutional demands in the general inmate population.

In contrast, a second school of thought argues that restrictive housing not only causes serious mental health problems but also increases one's criminogenic risk. This view aligns with several criminological theories, including deprivation (Clemmer, 1940), social bonds (Hirschi, 1969), labeling (Braithwaite, 1989), strain (Agnew, 1992), social learning (Akers, 1973), and defiance (Sherman, 1993). According to this perspective, the harsh conditions

and idleness in restrictive housing serve to intensify the pains of imprisonment, weaken social bonds, bestow a negative label, reduce the availability of coping resources, worsen perceptions of fairness and respect, isolate individuals from social networks that might promote prosocial behavior, and provide few, if any, opportunities for rehabilitation. From this viewpoint, inmates who experience a stay in restrictive housing will be more likely to violate institutional rules and expectations when returned to the general inmate population. This position also maintains that this effect will be more pronounced among inmates serving longer durations in this setting.

Finally, a third perspective contends that restrictive housing has no appreciable effect on inmate behavior. This position aligns with the importation and behavioral deep freeze theories, which describe institutional adjustment as an extension of one's previously held values and motivations (see Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Thomas & Foster, 1973; Zamble & Porporino, 1990). From this view, one's behavior in prison is largely determined by preexisting socialization factors, such as attitudes, relationships, and expectations, and is not influenced by the experience of restrictive housing. As such, this perspective suggests that placement in restrictive housing, regardless of time served, will have a null effect on one's institutional behavior upon return to the general inmate population.

RESEARCH ON RESTRICTIVE HOUSING

Restrictive housing scholarship largely focuses on psychological outcomes. Despite the popular contention that this setting causes serious psychological damage (Haney, 2003; Kupers, 2008; Lovell, 2008), the empirical literature suggests that restrictive housing produces a null to weak detrimental effect on many measures of mental health functioning (see Gendreau & Labrecque, 2018; Kapoor & Trestman, 2016; Morgan et al., 2016). There are, however, far fewer investigations on the impact of restrictive housing on institutional behavior outcomes. From this limited empirical research base, there is inconclusive support for the three perspectives described above (see also Gendreau & Goggin, 2018; Labrecque & Smith, 2018; Steiner & Cain, 2016).

Some aggregate-level studies indicate that locking down gang inmates in restrictive housing units reduces violence and other disobedience outcomes within state prison systems (e.g., assaults, stabbings, and homicides; Austin, Repko, Harris, McGinnis, & Plant, 1998; Bidna, 1975; Crouch & Marquart, 1989; Fischer, 2002; Ralph & Marquart, 1991). Other investigations report mixed findings on system-wide measures of institutional violence and disorder (e.g., inmate assaults, staff assaults, collective violence, and nonviolent misconduct; Briggs, Sundt, & Castellano, 2003; Huebner, 2003; Steiner, 2009; Sundt, Castellano, & Briggs, 2008; Wooldredge & Steiner, 2015). While informative, this type of research only provides information on the macro-level impact of restrictive housing. And regardless of whether restrictive housing is or is not an effective deterrent of misbehavior at the prison level (i.e., a general deterrent effect), it does not mean that this setting necessarily produces the same effect on the individual behavior of its inhabitants (i.e., a specific deterrent effect).

The individual-level research examining in-prison outcomes indicates that restrictive housing has a null to slight negative effect on measures of violent and nonviolent institutional misconduct (Labrecque, 2015; Lucas & Jones, 2017; Morris, 2016). Although these findings seemingly support the behavioral deep freeze position, it is important to keep in mind that these evaluations involve only one type of restrictive housing—short-term disciplinary

segregation. It is possible that a stay in restrictive housing of 15 or fewer days may not be enough to meaningfully influence one's long-term behavioral trajectory. According to the tenets of the deterrence and criminogenic positions, longer durations in this setting may be necessary to achieve improvements or detriments in one's behavior, respectively.

Given the status of this research base, there remain many more questions than answers regarding the impact of restrictive housing on inmate behavior. Similarly, there have been many calls for more empirical evaluations of restrictive housing using criminal behavior outcomes (see Garcia, 2016).What effect the length of time spent in restrictive housing has on the institutional adjustment of inmates in prison remains an open and important empirical question. Without the availability of such research, corrections administrators and policy makers must rely on their personal judgment to determine if and how long to place inmates in restrictive housing. It remains possible that restrictive housing improves inmate behavior, but it is also possible that this setting is detrimental to prosocial conduct or has no influence on one's actions. It is also possible that the effects of restrictive housing are more nuanced and that more than one of these perspectives are correct. For instance, some inmates may experience an improvement in behavior as a result of a stay in restrictive housing, others may suffer an increase in criminal behavior, and others still may be unaffected by the experience. Scholarship must explore these possibilities to advance knowledge in this neglected research area and provide corrections authorities with scientific evidence necessary for implementing more effective policies and practices related to the management of inmates in prison.

CURRENT STUDY

The current study examines what impact the length of time spent in restrictive housing has on subsequent measures of institutional adjustment among a sample of men in prison. According to the theoretical perspectives articulated above, if the deterrent position is correct, longer durations in restrictive housing should improve behavior upon return to the general prison population. If the criminogenic position is correct, longer durations in restrictive housing should worsen behavior, and if the behavioral deep freeze position is correct, the length of time spent in restrictive housing should have no meaningful effect on behavior.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants for this study come from an admission cohort of inmates entering a large adult state prison system between July 1, 2007, and December 31, 2010. From this population, the sample is restricted to only men who spent at least 1 day in restrictive housing confinement during their first year of incarceration and who also remained in prison for at least 1 year after being returned to a lower security setting ($N = 9,016$). Women were excluded in this investigation because there were only 26 identified who spent 90 or more days in restrictive housing during their first year in custody.

TABLE 1:   Descriptive Statistics of the RH Sample (N = 9,016)

Variable	M (SD)	Range
Independent variables		
No. of days spent in RH	16.75 (25.29)	1 to 294
Age at intake	28.14 (9.58)	15 to 76
Black	0.54 (0.50)	0 to 1
Mental illness	0.35 (0.48)	0 to 1
Gang affiliation	0.33 (0.47)	0 to 1
No. of prior commitments	0.94 (1.41)	0 to 13
Current violent conviction	0.73 (0.45)	0 to 1
Initial custody rating		
Minimum	0.12 (0.33)	0 to 1
Medium	0.56 (0.50)	0 to 1
Close	0.32 (0.46)	0 to 1
Maximum	0.01 (0.07)	0 to 1
Recidivism risk score	1.93 (2.13)	−1 to 8
No. prior misconducts	1.10 (1.12)	0 to 17
Any prior violent misconduct	0.30 (0.46)	0 to 1
Dependent variables		
Any misconduct	0.61 (0.49)	0 to 1
Violent misconduct	0.31 (0.46)	0 to 1
Nonviolent misconduct	0.54 (0.50)	0 to 1
RH placement	0.50 (0.50)	0 to 1

Note. RH = restrictive housing; M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

DATA AND MEASURES

The data for this study were acquired from a Department of Corrections in a Midwestern state. According to the departmental policy in this jurisdiction, correctional authorities can place inmates in restrictive housing for several reasons, including for violating institutional rules, failing to adjust in the general prison population, or believing that one's presence in the general population will be disruptive to the orderly operation of the facility. For practical and theoretical reasons, this study analyzed all forms as one construct. One may argue from an academic standpoint the need for evaluating these subtypes separately; however, in many real-world settings, inmates can experience multiple types of this housing during a single placement. For example, an inmate initially placed in restrictive housing for a punitive purpose may remain in this setting even after serving his discipline time for an administrative reason, and vice versa. This makes it difficult to disentangle the impact that any one type of restrictive housing may have on behavior. The conditions and preclusions within these subtypes are also similar, which support the use of a broad measure of restrictive housing.

All of the measures included in the analyses are presented in Table 1. The independent variable of focus in this investigation is the number of days spent in restrictive housing during one's first placement. To ensure an adequate follow-up time period following a return to the general prison population, this study examined only placements that occurred within one's first year of incarceration. The analyses in this study also contained several theoretically relevant demographic, criminal history, and institutional behavior variables, including age at intake (measured in years), race (1 = black, 0 = other), mental illness (any recorded

Axis I or Axis II diagnosis: 1 = yes, 0 = no), gang affiliation (any known association with a gang from a security threat group list: 1 = yes, 0 = no), incarceration history (number of prior incarcerations in the state prison system), sentence type (any violent conviction: 1 = yes, 0 = no), initial custody level (dummy variables for minimum, medium, close, and maximum), recidivism risk score (static risk scale ranging from −1 [*lowest risk*] to 8 [*highest risk*] of engaging in postrelease recidivism), prior misconduct history (measured as the number of guilty rule violations prior to one's first placement in restrictive housing), and prior misconduct type (any documented violent rule violation prior to one's first placement in restrictive housing: 1 = yes, 0 = no).

Institutional adjustment is the outcome of interest in this investigation, which included measures of inmate misbehavior and housing assignment following a return to the general inmate population from a stay in restrictive housing. More specifically, institutional misconduct is defined as any documented rule violation during a year in custody follow-up period (1 = had a rule violation, 0 = had no rule violation). This outcome is further separated into two separate dichotomous subcategories: violent (e.g., assault, 1 = yes, 0 = no) and nonviolent offenses (e.g., damage to property, theft, drug use; 1 = yes, 0 = no). Return to restrictive housing is also operationalized as any subsequent placement during the 1-year follow-up period (1 = had a restrictive housing placement, 0 = had no restrictive housing placement).

ANALYSES

To assess the influence of time spent in restrictive housing on measures of institutional adjustment, multivariate logistic regression analyses were performed. The use of logistic regression was advantageous for the present purposes because it provided the opportunity to assess the influence of the number of days spent in restrictive housing on the odds of each of the four dichotomous institutional adjustment outcomes (i.e., any subsequent institutional misconduct, violent misconduct, nonviolent misconduct, and restrictive housing placement) while controlling for the other theoretically relevant covariates of inmate misbehavior. Prior to estimating the final regression models, variance inflation factors were examined for each independent variable. None of the values exceeded 3, indicating that multicollinearity does not appear to be a problem here.

RESULTS

TABLE 2:   Logistic Regression Predicting Institutional Adjustment Outcomes

Variable	Any misconduct	Violent misconduct	Nonviolent misconduct	RH placement
No. of days spent in RH	0.998	0.998	0.999	0.994***
Age at intake	0.950***	0.943***	0.952***	0.958***
Black	1.178***	1.461***	1.068	1.182***
Mental illness	1.745***	1.701***	1.638***	1.808***
Gang affiliation	1.674***	1.580***	1.542***	1.539***
No. of prior commitments	1.025	1.063*	1.028	1.011
Current violent conviction	1.104	1.187**	1.055	1.122*
Initial custody rating[a]				
Medium	1.050	1.249*	1.000	1.213**
Close	1.147	1.133	1.115	1.225*
Maximum	1.203	1.838	.838	1.557
Recidivism risk score	1.040*	0.990	1.039*	1.035*
No. prior misconducts	1.237***	1.099***	1.260***	1.075***
Any prior violent misconduct	0.999	1.541***	0.836***	0.934
Constant	2.84***	0.730*	2.286***	1.642***
Model chi-square (*df*)	918.20 (13)	937.19 (13)	796.49 (13)	698.05 (13)
−2 Log likelihood	11,086.67	10,232.58	11,616.19	11,761.18
Nagelkerke R^2	.132	.139	.113	.100

Note. Reported values are odds ratios. RH = restrictive housing.
[a]Reference category is minimum custody.
*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.