

12-2015

# Methodological Challenges to the Study and Understanding of Solitary Confinement

Michael P. Harrington  
*Northern Michigan University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://commons.nmu.edu/facwork\\_journalarticles](http://commons.nmu.edu/facwork_journalarticles)



Part of the [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Harrington, Michael P, "Methodological Challenges to the Study and Understanding of Solitary Confinement" (2015). *Journal Articles*. 321.

[http://commons.nmu.edu/facwork\\_journalarticles/321](http://commons.nmu.edu/facwork_journalarticles/321)

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal Articles by an authorized administrator of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact [kmcdonou@nmu.edu](mailto:kmcdonou@nmu.edu), [bsarjean@nmu.edu](mailto:bsarjean@nmu.edu).

# Methodological Challenges to the Study and Understanding of Solitary Confinement

Michael P. Harrington  
Northern Michigan University

**ON ANY GIVEN DAY** as many as 80,000 inmates are in isolated confinement in state and federal prisons. This figure does not include those isolated in local jails and detention centers or juvenile facilities (Shames, Wilcox, & Subramanian, 2015). The frequency and length of the isolation experienced by inmates has been criticized by many (Lovett, 2013; Baker & Goode, 2015; Goode, 2015) and has been the topic of special interest groups (Baker & Goode, 2015). In the summer of 2013, inmates in the California prison system embarked on a hunger strike in hopes of drawing attention to and potentially reforming the state's use of solitary confinement. At its peak, over 33,000 inmates throughout the California system were refusing meals (Lovett, 2013). Such action has drawn national and international attention to the use of solitary confinement as a strategy for prison management in the United States. Despite the widespread use of isolation, empirical examinations about its use are limited. Those studies that have examined the practice have focused primarily on supermax units (Haney, 2003; Haney & Lynch, 1997; King, 2005; Mears & Reisig, 2006; Mears & Watson, 2006; Toch, 2001).

Despite this increased awareness and criticism of the use of solitary confinement, little research has been done examining the phenomenon. What research has been conducted has generally focused on the effects of extreme isolation on individuals (Haney, 2003; Haney, 2008; Haney & Lynch, 1997; King, 2005). Despite this research there remains a void in the quantitative examination of inmate isolation. Shames, Wilcox, and Subramanian (2015) note that less than one-third of inmates that are isolated are in a supermax setting. This

points to an important need for an empirical examination of the more day-to-day use of isolation as a strategy for managing inmates.

One explanation for the absence of such research may be the methodological challenges inherent in attempting to examine the use of isolation in prisons. This article defines some of the methodological challenges that may contribute to the research void. By identifying such challenges, researchers and prison administrators may have a mutual understanding of these challenges and collaborate in the future. Collaborative research outcomes may influence correctional policy and offer guidance to "best practices" and evidence-based inmate management strategies.

Defining solitary confinement, on its face, appears rather basic. Adult correctional facilities rely primarily on three different types of solitary confinement. These types are commonly called temporary segregation, disciplinary segregation, and administrative segregation. Each of these carries with it varying restrictions on inmate movement and inmate privileges. Browne, Cambier, and Agah (2011) and Shalev (2008) describe the types of solitary confinement used by adult correctional facilities. I summarize them below.

## Temporary Segregation

Temporary Segregation is the immediate isolation of an inmate from the general prison population. Most often the decision to do so is made by supervisory personnel using limited information. Often these decisions are made as a result of a crisis (Browne, Cambier, & Agah, 2011; Shalev, 2008), such as a physical altercation, possession of major contraband, behavior that is thought to disrupt the general

order of the institution, or information that, if true, would threaten the safety and security of the institution. Temporary Segregation can be used during the investigation of rule infractions or verification of information of potential threats to order by individual inmates. Temporary Segregation generally precedes the other forms of segregation and is usually for a brief time (72 hours or less). Extensions often occur following administrative review and approval. Such extensions are generally tied to pending classification decisions or due process hearings. Because Temporary Segregation is not punitive in nature, limitations on inmate privileges should be based on a "least restrictive" approach. The restrictive nature of Temporary Segregation often excludes these inmates from participation in prison programs and work details.

## Disciplinary Segregation

Disciplinary Segregation is the punitive isolation of an inmate for the violation of prison rules. Disciplinary Segregation follows a due process hearing consistent with conditions prescribed in *Wolff v. McDonnell* (1974). Disciplinary Segregation is determinate in nature and does not require further administrative review for release from Disciplinary Segregation to the general prison population. Disciplinary Segregation generally carries with it a broad set of restrictions on inmate movement and privileges that are applied to all inmates in that status regardless of the severity of the rule violation, length of disciplinary term, or the threat to institutional order. Moreover, these restrictions are not necessarily related to the rule violation(s) that resulted in the punishment. The limits on the length of disciplinary