

Criminologist challenges the effectiveness of solitary confinement

March 31 2015, by Kim Horner

A new study by a UT Dallas criminologist finds that solitary confinement does not deter inmates from committing further violence in prison.

Dr. Robert Morris, associate professor of criminology and director of the Center for Crime and Justice Studies in the School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences, tracked the behavior of 3,808 male inmates in 70 Texas prisons. He compared general population inmates who received solitary confinement for acts of violent misconduct with those who did not receive the punishment for the same type of offense. Solitary confinement typically restricts inmates to their cells for 23 hours a day.

In January, the study was published online in the *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*.

The prisoners in the study who received solitary confinement were no more—or less—violent behind bars after the punishment, according to the study. Solitary confinement also did not affect how soon an inmate committed further [violent acts](#) while incarcerated.

Morris said he hopes the findings generate discussion about the effectiveness of solitary confinement in regular prison settings. The research did not focus on higher security prisons that use solitary confinement more extensively .

"You're not getting a reward one way or the other for exposing inmates to solitary, so you have to question its utility," Morris said. "It's costing money, it's costing time and there are potentially harmful side effects."

The study cites previous research that has found that solitary confinement can cause serious health and psychological problems for [inmates](#), many of whom are vulnerable because of existing [mental health conditions](#) and/or addictions.

Reducing the use of solitary confinement also may save taxpayer funds, Morris said. Solitary confinement may be necessary for temporary periods to break up violent situations, but, based on the research, it should be used with caution, he said. Texas law prohibits solitary confinement for more than 15 consecutive days.

"A lot of people may argue that it's a necessary tool in the prison," Morris said. "Its administration could probably be improved because there's so much discretion involved, and there's so little known about what exposure can lead to."

Morris said more research is needed on how solitary confinement affects prisoners once they are released.

"The vast majority of these folks will return to society, so you don't want to aggravate their prison experience any more than you have to. If you're aggravating circumstances inside, then it could be that you're aggravating circumstances when they come out," he said. "Then, you're raising the chance you might see them again, and at that point, you're just wasting tax dollars."

More information: "Exploring the Effect of Exposure to Short-Term Solitary Confinement Among Violent Prison Inmates" *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* [DOI: 10.1007/s10940-015-9250-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-015-9250-0)

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