

Study: Incarcerated people placed in solitary confinement differ significantly from others in prison population

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Concern has grown about prison systems' use of extended solitary confinement as a way to manage violent and disruptive incarcerated

people. A new study identified groups that are more likely to be placed in extended solitary management (ESM). The study found that individuals sent to ESM differed considerably from the rest of the prison population in terms of mental health, education, language, race/ethnicity, and age.

The study, by researchers at Florida State University and the University of Cincinnati, appears in *Justice Quarterly*, a publication of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

"Many states and the federal [prison](#) system rely on long-term solitary confinement as a management tool, so it is important to shed light on the placements and disparities in this form of incarceration," according to Daniel P. Mears, professor of criminology at Florida State University, who led the study.

Prisoners have been placed in solitary confinement for more than 200 years. But in recent decades—especially with the rise of "supermax" prisons in the 1980s—correctional facilities have increased their reliance on the practice, with less focus on rehabilitation and more on control and punishment. Recent decades have also seen the rise of "restrictive housing" of incarcerated people, which includes confinement used for punishment or protection, and can limit privileges significantly.

ESM stands at the center of debates about solitary confinement: Critics argue that it is inhumane, unconstitutional, and harmful, especially to individuals with [mental health](#) disorders, while proponents say it is necessary for prison safety and order. Research on ESM is limited.

In this study, researchers used [administrative records](#) from the Florida Department of Corrections for approximately 192,000 individuals who entered or were released between 2007 and 2015. In this prison system, one of the largest in the United States, ESM typically entails a minimum

stay of six months and up to 23 hours per day in isolation in a separate facility.

The study sought to identify disparities along a broad range of characteristics, including those related to demographics (e.g., age at admission, gender, race/ethnicity), mental health, substance abuse, education, language (i.e., English language proficiency), and prior criminal records (e.g., prior admissions, offense, time served). It also looked at disparities in [placement](#), including multiple, early, and longer-duration placements.

Several patterns emerged from the study:

- The profile of the population sent to ESM differed substantially from that of the rest of the admission-and-release population: Those sent to ESM were much more likely to be adolescents or young adults, males were more likely than females to be sent to ESM, and Blacks comprised 63 percent of the ESM population but just 43 percent of the overall prison population.
- Mental health disparities were also pronounced: Individuals who spent time in a mental health unit or required outpatient care with medication were more likely to be placed in ESM early in their incarceration and have longer stays.
- Other disparities appeared: Education among the ESM population was 1.6 grade levels lower than that for the prison population as a whole. Non-English speakers had a lower likelihood of an ESM stay than English speakers after controlling for age, sex, and other factors. Hispanics were more likely than others to be placed in ESM within six months of admission to prison. And stays of a year or longer in ESM were less likely among Hispanics and more likely among males and individuals with no prior prison admissions.
- Early, repeated, and longer-duration placement in ESM was not

the norm: 11 percent of all ESM incarceration stays entailed two or more ESM placements, 21 percent entailed an ESM placement within six months of admission, and 27 percent spent a year or more in ESM. There were relatively few differences in the profiles of these three groups.

"A focus on disparities in ESM placements is important for advancing research and policy," notes Jennifer M. Brown, a post-doctoral research fellow at Florida State University, who coauthored the study. "We need to understand more about the factors that contribute to placements. For example, some groups may engage in more violent or disruptive behavior, which could create the disparities. It also is possible that prison system practices may disadvantage certain groups or contribute to conditions that increase problematic behavior among those groups. In addition, it is possible that some groups may benefit more or be harmed more by ESM."

The authors point to a few limitations of their study, including that it focused on one state and one time period, so studies of other states and longer time periods might differ. In addition, the study did not include individuals who served more than eight years, which likely excluded inmates serving sentences for extremely violent crimes. Finally, the study relied on administrative records, which are not always accurate in capturing information such as individuals' mental health or organizational factors that might contribute to placements.

More information: Daniel P. Mears et al, Extended Solitary Confinement for Managing Prison Systems: Placement Disparities and Their Implications, *Justice Quarterly* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/07418825.2021.1944286](https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2021.1944286)

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