

Does solitary confinement fuel more crime?

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Solitary confinement does not make supermax prison inmates more likely to re-offend once they're released, finds a study on the controversial penitentiaries led by a Michigan State University criminologist.

The study – one of the first to examine recidivism rates among supermax [inmates](#) – refute critics' claims that serving extended time in isolation leads to more crime. Super-maximum security units, known as supermax units or prisons within prisons, are designed to house problematic inmates by keeping them isolated for as long as 23 hours a day.

Jesenia Pizarro, lead author on the study and MSU associate professor of criminal justice, said it wasn't time in isolation that was tied to repeated offenses for supermax inmates. Instead, it was the same factors that led inmates from the general prison population to re-offend – in other words, they tended to be young drug offenders with prior convictions and disciplinary charges while in prison.

Pizarro said corrections officials and policymakers should consider the findings when developing programs to help supermax prisoners re-adjust to society.

"Similar to inmates who served their time in the general prison population, supermax inmates released to parole supervision should receive help for drug and alcohol addictions and younger offenders should be steered back to educational programs," Pizarro said.

Proponents say supermax units keep corrections officers and other prisoners safe, while critics argue that such solitary confinement is cruel and unusual punishment that can lead to [mental health issues](#) among inmates and thus pose a greater threat to society upon their release.

Pizarro and colleagues analyzed the data of more than 800 supermax inmates in New Jersey,

including their criminal histories, prison behavior and whether they re-offended during a five-year period following their release. The findings are published online in the *Prison Journal*.

"Interestingly," the study says, "these findings suggest that placement in supermax does not create unique challenges that result in recidivism."

Because supermax prisons have become a mainstay of the American correctional landscape, Pizarro said more research is needed to better understand the effects of serving extended time in isolation. Except in federal cases, prisoners are not sentenced to supermax units – instead, it is an administrative decision made by a warden or hearing boards.

While many believe that only the "worst of the worst" are housed in supermax units, Pizarro said that's not necessarily the case. Gang members who are serving time for selling drugs, for example, can be sent to supermax even if they don't have violent histories. Critics say assignment to supermax units can be arbitrary and lacking due process.

Provided by Michigan State University

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