

Supermax prisons



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Supermax Prisons and Their Adverse Effects Introduction Due to increasing crime rates and the extensive belief that rehabilitative programs for inmates do not work, a new and harsher method for prisons is being utilized. Instead of scattering the worst criminals, they are being consolidated into Supermax prisons. Supermax prisons are state of the art penitentiaries meant to hold only the worst of the worst criminals and inmates that cannot be trusted in regular prisons. There are strict regulations and policies to control inmates' time for communication, recreation, visiting, religious practices, and education even more than regular prisons. More often than not, " inmates in supermax prisons spend 23 hours of every day locked in a small cell" (Hickey pg.

160). Supermax prisons work upon the premise that the most violent and disorderly inmates can be better controlled " by separation, restricted movement, and limited access to staff and other inmates" (Hickey pg. 167). While supermax prisons are believed to reduce crime and increase safety, there are questions of whether or not this is actually the case.

Compare/Contrast Critique Supermax prisons are considered effective because they consolidate the most violent criminals and allow for other prisons to function more safely and more normally for both staff and inmates. However the inmates cannot just be consolidated and held to the same standards as regular prisons, as was revealed at Marion in 1980 when the " operation began to show clear signs of the underlying stresses of using this quasi-normal system to deal with such aggressive offenders" (Hickey pg. 164). In response, a new and more sophisticated facility was created to cater to the high-security needs of a prison with extremely dangerous inmates.

These newer facilities were created to “ control the inmate’s behavior until they demonstrate that they can be moved back to a traditional open-population penitentiary” (Hickey pg. 165). While incarcerated at supermax prisons, the inmates are handcuffed around staff, eat and exercise alone, and are kept in their cells for most of the day. As prisoners behave well, they are given more and more privileges until they are deemed safe enough to return to regular prisons. Additionally, there is a much higher staff to inmate ratio than at normal prisons. All services that are required are available and “ operations are consistent with constitutional requirements related to conditions and confinement” (Hickey pg. 166). After returning to regular penitentiaries from a supermax prison, 80% of former inmates behave well enough that they do not return to the supermax prison.

Supermax prisons provide a level of safety and security for both staff and inmates that other prisons cannot provide. On the other hand, there is a dark side and harsh reality to supermax prisons besides the obvious high costs of maintaining the prisons that are funded by tax payers. While supermax prisons claim to uphold the prisoner’s constitutional rights, there are many claims that state otherwise ranging from the denial of medical care to illegal censorship of mail—“ prison guards have testified to shackling prisoners to their beds and spraying them with high-pressure fire hoses” (Hickey pg. 169).

The placement of inmates at certain levels of security and confinement based upon behavior is arbitrary. The guards determine what is “ good” and “ bad” behavior, and their reasons could be as menial as “ refusing to make beds or complaining about clogged and overflowing toilets” (Hickey pg. 169).

Additionally, the amount of control that the inmates are placed under (near 24-hour isolation, little to no physical contact between visitors and inmates and highly limited and scheduled outdoor recreation time) creates an environment that is psychologically debilitating and harmful to personal and social identities.

Rehabilitation is set aside and replaced with competition between the inmates for privileges, fostering a hostile environment. The amount of frustration, deprivation, and despair that inmates endure do not create less violent inmates, but something much more dangerous (at the least, more angry). Fighting violence with more violence is not working—supermax prisons are not reducing crime or safety. Critique of the Debate Supermax prisons are a good idea on paper. However, in practice, supermax prisons do not work. In a contrasting example, there are many soldiers returning from war. They are greeted by family, strangers buy food for them out of gratitude for their service, and there are programs and support groups that help them return to normal ways of life.

Still, the transition from the life of a soldier in combat back to the civilian world is not easy. However, these issues are recognized and respected in many forms of support. On the other hand, for the increasingly large amount of criminals who are sent to supermax prisons for breaking the law, the preparation and actual transition from prison life back to regular society is not widely recognized or respected, with little or no support. There are few credible methods or support groups that truly help previous convicts return to normal life, especially in comparison to a soldier returning from war. Additionally, individuals that are accepted members of society greet the

returning convicts with trepidation and suspicion because of the belief “ once a thief, always a thief. Consequently, the convict’s return to society and “ normal” life is nearly impossible and recommitting criminal acts is expected. While the return of a criminal from prison should not be honored the way a soldier is honored when returning from deployment, a criminal should have similar rehabilitative and re-immersion programs and support groups.

With the levels of confinement being dictated by arbitrary rules and expectations set in place by guards, inmates behave well only because they want privileges and rewards rather than to actually improve themselves. Using a reward-punishment system does not develop character or help prisoners in their eventual assimilation back into society. When inmates are released from prison, they need to return better than they were before prison or else they will just end up in prison again. In order for this to be accomplished, “ a more holistic view of crime control” needs to be set in order and there needs to be more of a focus “ on community and restoration and less on imprisonment” (Hickey pg.

174). The United States has been using prisons for centuries now and imprisonment rates have only increased throughout history. Perhaps the answer to reducing crime is not in the traditional idea of fear of punishment, but the United States seems to be stuck on the idea of using prisons and imprisonment to thwart crime nevertheless. In a perfect world, criminals will be sent to prison, spend their time there wisely, and return to society a changed people.

However, in reality, inmates are being released from prison worse off than when they entered the prison. Not seeing or interacting with another human being creates a disconnection from humanity. For the inmate, being kept totally separated and isolated from everyone, there must inevitably be a sense of anger and resentment towards the system that should be helping them and at the very least be showing them how to act properly in society upon their release from prison. Additionally, controlling every aspect of a person's life is not productive or educational. Learning from mistakes is a part of life, but supermax prisons have nothing to offer in terms of learning. Since the inmates have clearly made mistakes (they are in prison after all), they should be educated on how to learn and grow from their mistakes. Instead, they are just put down as failures and expected to continue failing. However, as supermax prisons become more and more popular, rehabilitative programs and the inmate's humanity are being set aside for safer conditions and security.

The idea that you have to sacrifice either the humanity of the inmate or the safety of the staff would imply that the system is severely flawed. There has to be a better way to punish criminals, but also rehabilitate them. Conclusion The current penal system that the United States has is flawed and supermax prisons are simply not as effective as was expected. The traditional use of prisons and imprisonment as a way to deter crime is not (nor has it ever been) actually successful at reducing crime, but for some reason we keep to the same plan and modify it rather than take a whole new approach. A person who goes to prison should not want or need to commit deviance after leaving prison—they should leave a changed person. Society should strive to

help the person returning from prison similar to the way soldiers are aided upon their return to the United States.

Instead, society remains adamant in continuing to punish and then ignore those who commit crimes which in end creates a never ending cycle of deviance. The system for punishing criminals needs to change, but how society views the punishment of criminals needs to change as well. Instead of focusing on revenge and justice, the focus needs to be on rehabilitation and development.

Works Cited Hickey, T. (2012). Taking sides: Clashing views in crime and criminology. (10th ed.).

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