

# The Challenges of Conducting Research on Supermax Prisons: Results From a Survey of Scholars Who Conduct Supermax Research

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the challenges that investigators face when conducting scholarly research on supermax prisons. Drawing on existing literature, as well as results of a survey sent to researchers who have published scholarship on supermax prisons, issues and suggestions for enhancing and growing this specialized body of literature are summarized.

## Keywords

supermax prison, correctional facility research, scholarship

## Introduction

Conducting scholarly research on, in, and about correctional facilities is not easy. Why? Numerous reasons can be advanced. First, considerable variability exists across jails, prisons, and juvenile institutions and among the people

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who work and/or are housed there. Second, some types of facilities, correctional workers, and inmates are more amenable to study than others. Third, if one wishes to access these organizations and the individuals who are both housed and work there, certain stringent protocols must be observed. Fourth, the type of research that the investigator desires to perform is dependent on the questions one seeks to ask and to have answered. Although these matters can present challenges for researchers, they are not absolutes and do not have to preclude the conduct of scholarly inquiries.

The purpose of this study is to outline the challenges experienced by investigators conducting research on supermax prisons and what might be done to improve this body of work. Admittedly, although supermax prisons are interesting and important in their own right, fewer than 10% of prisoners are incarcerated in these types of correctional facilities.<sup>1</sup> Why then should we care about this type of confinement? Three explanations are offered. To begin with, supermax facilities engender considerable political, philosophical, and practical controversies because of the conditions of confinement and the resources they consume to build and operate effectively. Additionally, at least in the United States, supermax prisons have been vigorously debated as secure places to transfer enemy combatant detainees from Guantanamo Prison. And, finally, even though they incarcerate “only” 3% of inmates, that still means that more than 25,000 persons are held in such settings. Certainly, this is a population sizable enough to merit attention. Thus, not only should an analysis of the kind presented in this article contribute to our understanding of research on supermax prisons, but it can also add to the sociology of knowledge in the field of criminal justice in general and carceral studies in particular.

To address these issues and advance our understanding, we first review the definition(s) of supermax prisons, briefly summarize the extant literature on conducting research in correctional institutions, and then analyze the findings from a survey administered to researchers who have worked in this area.

## **What Is a Supermax Prison?**

Supermax prisons (also known as administrative control units, control handling units, security or special handling units, and control handling units) are a unique invention in contemporary American correctional practice. Almost every state in the United States has a stand-alone supermax prison.<sup>2</sup> If the structure is not a separate institution, then it may be an annex, wing, or tier in close proximity, and/or as part of an existing prison. However, further complicating matters, there is a considerable degree of variability in the definitions of supermax prisons (Kurki & Morris, 2001). For example, the National

Institute of Corrections, a branch of the United States Department of Justice, defines supermax prisons as

a stand-alone unit or part of another facility and is designated for violent or disruptive inmates. It typically involves up to 23-hour-per-day, single-cell confinement for an indefinite period of time. Inmates in supermax housing have minimal contact with staff and other inmates. (As quoted by Mears, 2006, p. i)

Nevertheless, supermaxes are typified by eight characteristics<sup>3</sup>:

1. Inmates are considered “the worst of the worst” (i.e., they are or may be: perceived or actual ongoing threats to the security of correctional institutions; have engaged in high levels of violence behind bars, including the repeated assault and/or murder of other inmates or correctional workers; have attempted or successfully completed an escape; been gang leaders, heads of organized crime entities, or convicted political criminals, such as terrorists and spies);
2. Conditions of confinement (i.e., a single, small cell with no privacy and minimal amenities—bed made out of concrete, a combined toilet and wash basin, no or minimal natural light, light may be on 24 hr a day. If there is natural light, then it is provided through a small window that may be located in a position where it is difficult for an inmate to see out of the cell. Communication with correctional officers may be limited to intercom contact. (There may not be mattresses, etc.);
3. Regime (i.e., inmates are locked up in their cells up to 23 hr a day, minimal or no contact with other prisoners, and limited interaction with correctional staff, escorted out of cell by a minimum of two correctional officers in handcuffs and leg shackles/restraints, no commissary, cells are searched on a regular basis, etc.);
4. Facility location (i.e., remote location, distant from large urban centers making it difficult for loved ones, friends, news media, and legal representatives to visit);
5. Visitation (minimal to no visitation privileges. If visits are allowed, only no-contact visits are permitted, no conjugal visits; limited visits by lawyers);
6. Effects on prisoners (often creates physical and psychological health problems, weight loss, self-inflicted harm, suicide attempts, psychosis, and delusions);
7. Staffing (higher correctional officer to prisoner ratio than at other correctional facilities); and

8. Cost (because of enhanced security and staffing, supermax prisons typically cost considerably more money to build and operate than maximum security prisons).

Another point worth considering is that, for reasons that are not completely clear, many countries are not willing to call their prisons supermaxes, even though they fit the abovementioned criteria (Ross, 2013). Some countries and American states have high security prisons, but they are called by different names. It is often only after specific questions are asked about conditions at each correctional facility, and/or a researcher has had the opportunity to visit a specific correctional institution, that one knows for sure if a facility is indeed a supermax prison.<sup>4</sup>

### *Literature Review: Conducting Research on/in Correctional Facilities*

Research on correctional facilities is a common form of criminal justice research. One outgrowth of the myriad studies on inmates, correctional staff, facility conditions, programs, structures, management, and outcomes (e.g., recidivism) has been an accompanying body of scholarship addressing how to best conduct research in carceral settings. In addition to Wacquant's (2002) now-dated article, "The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration," numerous pieces have been published on conducting scholarly research in Anglo-American jails and prisons over the past three decades.<sup>5</sup> These articles and chapters focus interchangeably on the difficulties of doing scholarly research in prisons; conducting research on special populations behind bars; co-producing research with inmates; Convict Criminological approaches to research; and the ethics of conducting research in correctional facilities. There is also a blurring across these themes. In other words, the authors in question often focus on more than one of these topics in their discussions.

### *The Challenges of Conducting Research in Prisons*

One of the earliest pieces to examine conducting research behind bars was by Newman (1958-1959). He outlines the difficulties of gaining access and methods to improve interviews conducted with inmates, including how to build rapport, and the ethics of this type of research study. Another classic piece was written by Jacobs (1974). In this study, he documents his efforts to gain entrance to Statesville Penitentiary in Illinois to conduct qualitative research. Jacobs utilizes reflexive accounts to report his initial reactions to

the facility, and how he managed to work and interact with both inmates and correctional officers, dealing with ethical matters as they arose. Similarly, after working as a researcher, Marquart (1986) became a correctional officer (CO) to conduct an ethnographic analysis of a Texas prison. He describes his entrance into the prison setting and the challenges he experienced with other COs and inmates alike. At no time did Marquart attempt to conceal his identity in occupying two roles. Based on numerous experiences he encountered, Marquart outlines both the positive and negative interpretations of this kind of approach to research. Similar research by King and Liebling (2008) outlines the challenges of gaining access based on the researchers' social location (i.e., doctoral student, researcher working for private research organizations, or those working for government agencies). The authors then provide cautionary advice for individuals wishing to conduct research behind bars. Patenaude (2004), a former correctional worker and administrator, reviews both the scholarly research and his personal experience navigating the steps necessary to gain access to prisons to do research with inmates.

Alternatively, Liebling (1999) conducted an intensive study in a handful of maximum security prisons in England, which also involved managing a research team and then having to interview close to 100 inmates within a week's time to complete the project on schedule. She reflects on the stress that she and her team experienced in trying to finish the work on time, and examines the possibility of remaining objective in a setting like this. Liebling further reviews the research protocols and difficulties her team encountered from the prisons in gaining access. In sum, the challenges are not simply confined to negotiating entrance with prison authorities; Liebling highlights the stress and/or emotional burnout that researchers may experience when confronted with these issues. Similar insights are brought forward by Jewkes (2012) in her discussion of autoethnography and emotion as resources when engaging in prison-related research. Some of the scholarship that has followed has been focused on the emotional experiences of prison ethnographers (e.g., Drake & Harvey, 2014). According to the authors, "the finer details of ethnographic practice can be better understood when the emotional dimensions of research experiences are carefully analyzed and processed" (Drake & Harvey, 2014, p. 489).

Apart from these interesting discussions are still other accounts that offer friendly advice to carceral researchers. Wakai, Shelton, Trestman, and Kesten (2009) review a number of steps that investigators considering doing work in correctional facilities should take. They emphasize the necessity of forming collaborations with the National Institute of Corrections, a division of the United States Bureau of Prisons. For them, this contact is especially important for negotiating between the differing cultures of prisons and researchers.

This tactic is perhaps most important when researchers represent disciplines outside of criminal justice, such as health care, psychology, anthropology, and so forth. Instructively, Fox, Zambrana, and Lane (2011), based on their previous research on gangs in jails, present a list of 10 items they found useful when doing research inside prisons—including a considerable number of helpful steps and checklists. Similarly, Apa et al. (2012) enumerate approaches for researchers to follow to gain access and conduct correctional setting research.

### *Conducting Research With Special Populations Behind Bars*

The study of incarcerated special populations, whether they are women, sexual minorities, the physically/developmentally/mentally challenged, or any of the other myriad varieties of “types” of inmates, usually requires special, unique approaches to ensure successful research (e.g., Quraishi, 2008). Although hundreds of studies of special populations have been conducted, what is lacking is a systematic discussion of the unique approaches that are necessary or beneficial in such investigations. Unfortunately, there are but a “handful” of studies that have examined the difficulties of conducting research with special populations behind bars.

The first and most obvious correctional “special population” is women. Just as in free society, studies of women must take into account their unique social, physical, emotional, and relational contexts to gain valuable insights about their experiences. One of the earliest studies focusing on women in prison, including reflective accounts, was provided by Giallombardo (1966), who outlines the challenges she encountered doing yearlong fieldwork in a woman’s facility. Giallombardo’s completion of this study depended on her relationships with both inmates and correctional workers. Key to her success was gaining their confidences and perceptions of her ability to maintain trust. Alternatively, Byrne’s (2005) study of incarcerated pregnant women delineates how to deal with ethical issues and inmate study protocols mandated by federal human subject research bodies. In addition, Ferszt and Chambers (2011) who also studied female inmates, offer helpful approaches, for example, including contacting the chief nursing officer, obtaining institutional review board (IRB) approval, and completing necessary confidentiality paperwork. However, as any experienced institutional researcher will acknowledge, obtaining formal approval is only one of a series of processes that needs to be negotiated and navigated. Others include how to recruit subjects, how to actually conduct interviews/observations or other data collection activities, how to organize everything from data collection to writing the

report, and how to craft a summary of findings that is useful and nonthreatening to institutional authorities.

A second and only recently recognized special correctional population in need of study is transgender inmates. Jenness (2010) examines the data collection methods of her study of transgender inmates in the California Department of Corrections. Calling this method a “soft mixed methods approach,” the researcher used both quantitative and qualitative methods, including ethnography, to develop a portrait of transgender prisoners and the challenges they faced behind bars. Interviews were highly dependent on the establishment of rapport and trust between the researchers and the inmates; it was also necessary to balance the needs, demands, and skepticism of correctional officials.

Somewhat differently, Eldridge, Johnson, Brems, and Corey (2011) explore the implementation of psychiatric and mental health research behind bars. They conducted 87 semistructured interviews with a wide range of scholars who do work on prisons, in addition to the chairs and members of IRBs, prison activists, and practitioners. They address the top ethical concerns expressed by their sample subjects and offer suggestions on how to address these challenges. As well, Eldridge, Robinson, Corey, Brems, and Johnson (2012) apply a similar methodology to determine the unique obstacles experienced by researchers studying inmates with HIV. Chief among these difficulties are problems of maintaining confidentiality, challenges in securing and maintaining prisoners’ informed consent, avoiding coercion of inmates to participate, as well as the general challenges of carceral settings research.

Only three studies were identified that touch upon the methodology of conducting research in supermax prisons. Zwerman and Gardner (1986) review the decisions they made in their efforts to interview female inmates who had been convicted of political crimes and were incarcerated in both state and federal prisons. Although not specifically identified as a supermax or high security prison, the researchers indicated, “The prison received increased status and additional funds for security due to the presence of the respondent and her status as a ‘terrorist’” (p. 296). Reiter (2014), while conducting her dissertation research, failed to gain official access to California supermax prisons or garner support from her university IRB in her efforts to contact prisoners via phone or correspondence. Instead, Reiter resorted to interviews with state politicians about their decisions to pass legislation authorizing the construction of supermax prisons and individuals who designed the supermax facilities. To “flesh out” this research, she also interviewed inmates who had been released from supermaxes, networking with activists and correctional professionals through the state correctional

officers' union. In each case, the researchers were subjected to both increased questions regarding the purpose of their studies and tighter control over their access. Harrington (2015), in conducting research on different types of solitary confinement including administrative segregation, temporary segregation, protective custody, and supermax prisons, argues that among the greatest barriers are access to complete records, the differing definitions across facilities, and the effect of these factors in exacerbating the ability to do quantitative research.

In sum, the majority of scholarship about conducting research on special populations in correctional facilities is based on American institutions and approaches (Ross, 2007). Most of the literature reiterates and reinforces the difficulties that researchers encounter, offering similar suggestions on how to improve the process. Noteworthy is that scholarly studies of supermax prisons are relatively silent with respect to access issues and research methods applicable on or inside these institutions.

One must also keep in mind that very good basic research on correctional facilities, including supermax prisons, can be done without setting foot inside a jail or prison. This includes secondary data analysis, correspondence with inmates, and surveys administered to wardens, staff, and even inmates from afar (or with assistance of someone inside the gates). Although these approaches can be highly informative, they also are limited in terms of the variety of questions that can be investigated. However, those wishing to visit a supermax prison, speak with either inmates or correctional workers in a research capacity, and perhaps conduct ethnographic research need to adopt a number of different strategies.

## Method

To advance the understanding of how scholars may and/or should approach conducting a study inside the walls of a supermax correctional facility, a survey was developed for use with experts in the field of supermax prisons, focusing on challenges experienced in conducting research on this topic in this setting. Once completed, the survey was approved by the IRB of the first author's university. A sampling frame of experts in the field of supermax prisons was identified through a review of American, English-language publications for the period of 1988 to 2013. After obtaining email addresses for all authors of such studies, they were invited to participate in the survey and the web-based questionnaire. In an effort to maximize responses, a reminder email was sent approximately 1 week later.

Although 76 separate authors were identified, surveys were sent to only 66 individuals. Despite the authors' best efforts, email addresses could not be



located for seven authors; two individuals were deceased; and one email address repeatedly bounced. A total of 33 surveys were completed. This translates to a 50% response rate.

## Findings

Two primary questions were asked of those responding to the surveys.

### *Who Does Research on Supermax Prisons?*

At a foundational level, we found that the researchers working in issues related to supermax prisons are both primarily from academic institutions; they are fairly evenly distributed among the traditional ranks found in universities: assistant professors (seven), associate professors (eight), and full professors (11). Other experts identified themselves as researcher (three), attorney (two), doctoral student (one), and an emeritus professor (one). None of the experts identified themselves as working for a government agency and/or department of corrections.

Not surprisingly, most of the researchers indicated that they had conducted research on supermax prisons in the United States (18/46%). Otherwise, some researchers took a global approach to the subject (4/3%), or examined supermaxes in a diverse number of countries that included, among others, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Israel, and Canada.

### *Perceptions of the Experience of Research in Supermax Facilities*

One of the difficulties both identified early in this article and clearly reinforced by the survey data is that there is no clear, widely accepted, standardized definition for what is meant by "supermax." Different terminology and varying criteria for inclusion in studies is reported across the pool of scholars. As a consequence, researchers may be talking past one another, not recognizing similarities (or differences) with other studies, conflating research findings, and simply introducing confusion and misunderstandings to the literature.

Despite definitional differences, there were surprisingly consistent explanations of difficulties and obstacles encountered by these investigators. Primary among the expressed obstacles are a lack of access, a shortage of empirical research to build on and use as guidance, and "research" that, rather than presenting empirically backed facts, trends, and ideas, is essentially commentary. The degree to which obstacles were perceived as impediments ranged between "very significant" to "moderate impediment" (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Impediments to Conducting Research on Supermax Prisons: How Significant Are the Following Items as Impediments?

Possible impediment	Very significant	Moderate impediment	Minor impediment	Not an impediment	Missing/none
Consensus on definition	2	9	13	8	1
Lack of access to supermax facilities	12	9	4	7	1
Lack of personal expertise in the subject matter	1	7	5	17	3
Journal/book editors lack interest in subject matter	1	2	5	23	2
Journal/book reviewers lack interest in the subject matter	1	1	5	24	2
Journal/book reviewers lack expertise in the subject matter	2	2	9	16	4
Lack of empirical studies	7	11	2	12	1
Most scholarship is commentary	12	9	3	8	1
Inability to secure grant funding	8	4	4	15	2

While informative, these findings are preliminary and only touch upon the meaning, scope, and consequences of efforts to study inside supermax prisons. Much more valuable than the quantitative questions are the results obtained from the survey’s open-ended questions. Here, two broad questions were posed in an attempt to determine precisely how and what about the structure, organization, and expectations of such correctional facilities meaningfully influence the possibility, form, and focus of research in supermax prisons. Below, we discuss the issues identified both as obstacles and necessary advances/resources/approaches for furthering these lines of investigation.

First, some of the responses *implicated other researchers who are working on this topic*. Here, respondents attribute much of the difficulties in conceptualization (and hence subsequent approach/entre) to other scholars who are not well versed in the field of institutional corrections and who (inadvertently?) confuse and conflate supermax facilities with other forms of institutional corrections, such as solitary confinement or disciplinary segregation. This issue may be further complicated by what many see as the changing nature (e.g., definition) of supermax prisons. In part, this is an issue of definitional variation and evolution. In the words of one respondent, “Often there is an ahistorical emphasis in the secondary literature, whereas supermax regimes were/are often evolving and changing entities and institutions that have changed over a period of time, some decades in some cases.”

For other respondents, concerns centered on scholars who preferred discussion to empirical studies. In explanation, one respondent suggested that “the area is very politicized and commentaries that have been published do not, by in large, advance an empirical agenda.” A connected issue pertains to quality control issues in the publication process. One respondent claimed, “The knowledge and rigor of the peer reviews is very low and editors are willing to publish content on supermaxes that does not meet high standards of either theory development or empirical analysis.”

A second issue, and one not necessarily restricted to the realm of supermax facilities, centers on a *lack of and/or poor cooperation from departments of corrections (DOC)*. Comments included, “DOC efforts to collect (or make available) enough data that can be used to evaluate policy related to the efficacy of supermax prisons, is for the most part lacking”; “Facilities/states not complying with requests for information.” Or, more direct and pointedly,

The U.S. Government and state governments do not want academic researchers conducting studies. Prison administrators are concerned that prisoners will report neglect, abuse, and torture. The only exception is when prison authorities want a study report to use defending themselves in a lawsuit . . . Staff members are also deeply suspicious due to assumptions that university types are always “pro-inmate.”

In addition to barriers and active resistance from correctional officials and agencies, so, too, do supermax prison scholars report *issues concerning uninformed Institutional Review Boards (IRB)*. In a concise and direct manner, one respondent reported that IRBs “don’t have any realistic concept of prison, much less supermax, conditions, even with a prisoner rep as part of a panel conducting research with people in these settings, and this can cause problems regarding the bioethical issue of justice.” Others also suggested that IRBs can be an especially daunting obstacle for those seeking to conduct research in supermax prisons. Not only do IRBs sometimes fail to distinguish the differences in types or security levels of prisons, but fail as well to understand the day-to-day routines and experiences of inmates (and staff in such facilities, rather imposing demands that may apply appropriately to either lower-level security facilities or very different types of correctional facilities (jails, prisons, juvenile institutions, etc.).

### **What Do We Need to Advance the Scholarly Study of Supermax Prisons?**

Although citing barriers and challenges is useful, identifying means to manage, overcome, or side-step such obstacles is where most scholars prefer to

focus their efforts (and comments). In simple terms, these respondents were quite vocal with respect to what needs to be done to improve our knowledge of supermax prisons. To begin with, a number of respondents were pretty emphatic about the necessity of performing “good empirical, field-based research” with “fewer opinions, more facts.” Building on this comment, another respondent advocated for, “consistent definitions, public concern, investigative research, rather than opinion/policy evaluations.” One wished for “a commitment on the part of editors to not publish commentaries. Reviewers that know something about prison violence and prison management.” In short, there is a need both to conduct scholarship rather than editorialize, and to conduct scholarship that is based on consistent, shared, and known definitions.

A second commonly voiced issue focused on the need for *funding by both government and private institutions in the United States (and elsewhere)*. Due to the challenges of supermax prison locations, their strict schedules (which will limit data collection opportunities), time requirements, and other obstacles, funding is seen as critical. Research funding not only provides opportunities for investigations—Studies that are funded serve as a baseline and launching point for additional research. However, because of what is recognized as a highly politicized realm, there is a perception that governmental funding may be less than fully objective. Hence, it is not only funding itself that is seen as critical, but also more specifically, the call is for, “Private foundation funding with no strings attached.”

Finally, some respondents recommended *more cooperation among researchers*. One urged, “More inter-group cooperative team research across the U.S.; comparative studies based in different regions; finding common ground between prison administrators, scholars, and researchers who represent different constituencies.” Another mentioned, “Scholars in this area need to have a regular meeting; share notes and experiences.” In this way, not only can findings be shared expeditiously, but so too can scholars collaborate in efforts to overcome obstacles and share successes. Or, rather than limiting to only cooperation between and among scholars, so too do some see it important to establish lasting, true partnerships with correctional agencies.” “Finding avenues to partnership with correctional agencies to conduct mutually beneficial research in this area.”

In sum, to advance scholarly work and understandings of supermax prisons, contemporary supermax scholars highlight barriers of access, definitions, resistance from correctional institutions/agencies, flawed guidance from IRBs, and a literature replete with commentaries, editorials, and “think pieces” rather than empirical studies. With these barriers identified, the needs

of the field include a renewed and funded focus on actual research and recognition of the importance of cooperation among all involved, including fellow scholars and institutional gatekeepers.

## **Conclusion**

Although improving definitions and access are important steps in the advancement of supermax research, this study reveals a number of challenges and opportunities. To begin, this area of inquiry requires fewer literature reviews, commentaries, and “think pieces,” and more (and more sophisticated) empirical analyses. To achieve this, scholars conducting research on supermax prisons need to engage in more effective collaborations, not only with departments of corrections, but also with other researchers. The key to promoting these relationships is, undoubtedly, more funding from government sources and private foundations.

No study is without its shortcomings, and this one is no different. First, although 50% is often a coveted response rate, ideally, the response rate for the survey of supermax scholars could have been higher. In addition, the definitional confusion identified in both the existing literature and the responses of surveyed experts may well limit the findings and serve as a foundation for misinterpretation.

Another limitation of this research is that it did not analyze the quality or the impact of the research that is available. This is beyond the scope of the present study, but it is a task that future researchers should address. And, finally, this analysis is further limited in that it focused exclusively on English-language publications and a primarily American experience for researchers.

Furthermore, the understanding of the effects of supermax prisons not only on inmates, but also on correctional workers, must also be increased. Once we accumulate better research on supermax facilities, we will be in a better position to advise departments of corrections, policy makers, and governments on the best way to proceed with supermax prisons.

If we fail to take this kind of approach, we are forced to make important policy decisions primarily based on hunches, morals, and values, and we risk being easily swayed by political pressures. Such an approach is not only antithetical to the academic enterprise, but also promises to introduce ineffective, inefficient, and expensive “solutions” that are misguided and flawed. Considering the relatively recent introduction of the supermax concept, together with the typically slow and long processes of academic research, the study of supermax prisons is, in many respects, in its infancy. In particular, the reason for this may be linked to a lack of access stemming from the necessities of security and custody. But there are also other dynamics at play.

This article has endeavored to explore these factors more deeply and to encourage the movement beyond literature review and commentary type analyses that have dominated the field. In this way, a better understanding of how to conduct research in such carceral environments offers the promise of more and better research, and, in turn, better, more effective, efficient, and humane correctional conditions.

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### **Notes**

1. Accurate data on supermax prisons are hard to obtain. Naday, Freilich, and Mellow (2008) state “that disagreements about definitions, changing policies and court decisions, reporting and recording errors, and different counting procedures have led to a lack of reliable and valid data on supermax issues” (p. 69). Nevertheless, Mears (2006) concluded that in 2004 approximately 25,000 inmates were currently held in supermax prisons. Similarly, Briggs, Sundt and Castellano (2003), citing Camp and Camp (1998, p. 26), stated that “3% of all inmates, or 28,128 prisoners were housed in administrative segregation in 1997” (p. 1342). No other more current statistics are available.
2. According to Briggs et al. (2003), “estimates of the number of supermaxes currently in operation vary ranging from 32 to 42 states operating such facilities in 1997” (p. 1342). Mears and Watson (2006) state that “the country has at least 57 supermax prisons” (p. 232), and based on a survey of state prison wardens, that Mears and Castro (2006) conducted, 44 states now have supermax facilities.
3. This definition is derivative of a number of different ones that exist (e.g., Mears, 2013; Ross, 2013). The researchers realize that this rendering includes aspects that speak to the effects of supermax prisons. This should not preclude the utility of this exercise.
4. In short, although all supermax prisons are high security prisons, not all high-security prisons are supermax prisons. And while solitary confinement is a component of supermax prisons, solitary confinement occurs in all types of prisons.
5. Note that the research is not about conducting research *on* correctional facilities, but about research performed *in* jails and prisons. With the exception of Crighton (2006), this researcher was unable to find generalized treatments on how to conduct research on prisons/prisoners.

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## Author Biographies

**Jeffrey Ian Ross**, PhD, has lectured, researched, and written on corrections, policing, crimes of the powerful, street culture, and crime and justice in American Indian communities. During the early 1980s, he worked for almost 4 years in a correctional institution.

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