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Effects of Supermax on Inmate Mental Health: Phenomenological Experiences of Knowledgeable Professionals

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Effects of Supermax on Inmate Mental Health: Phenomenological Experiences of

Knowledgeable Professionals

by

Lea Miller

MA, Walden University, 2018

BS, Cleveland State University, 2016

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

It may or may not be true that the conditions and practices associated with supermax sentencing are both creating and exacerbating psychological harm for the inmates who are exposed to them. To date, there is evidence that both supports and refutes the contention that supermax sentencing is psychologically harmful; thus, the literature necessitates additional research into this phenomenon. This qualitative study was conducted to add to the extant body of knowledge relevant to supermax prisons and populations by exploring the lived experiences of professionals who have worked with them. This research was conceptually based in the current understanding of social isolation as detrimental to mental health, theoretically based in social control theory, and guided by two central questions that aimed to develop a more thorough understanding of whether supermax prison conditions negatively impacted the mental health of supermax inmates. Data were collected from the interviews of two correctional officers and thematic findings suggested that supermax prisons were underresourced, both in terms of staff and funding; nonuniform in applying institutional policy and procedure; environments that created vulnerability from multiple different sources; and misrepresented in the media. Understanding the lived experiences of supermax inmates and the extent to which their mental health is impacted by the conditions of the institutions that house them has important implications for positive social change, namely, that institutional goals are being met in a way that minimizes the psychological harm to the inmates.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The topic of this qualitative study is the mental health of supermax inmates, especially as it is related to the conditions associated with supermax confinement. Because supermaximum-security prisons are to provide additional security measures beyond those provided in maximum security prisons, their most noteworthy condition is isolation. Of particular concern is when isolation is coupled with other conditions of supermax confinement, such as sensory deprivation, limited access to mental health resources, and environments that are physically restrictive (and sometimes totally incapacitating; Ross & Tewksbury, 2018; Rovner, 2018). These collective conditions have been argued to both create and exacerbate symptoms of mental illness in supermax inmates (Butler et al., 2018; Haney, 2017; Luigi et al., 2020), though there is not yet enough empirical support (or too much refuting evidence) to state more definitively whether or not this is the case (Labrecque, 2018). The importance of developing a better understanding of the relationship between supermax prison conditions and inmate mental health and the social implications for doing so cannot be understated. Should evidence suggest that supermax sentencing and related conditions are causing psychological harm to the inmates that are exposed to them, it is a matter of both human moral decency and professional ethics that policy and practice are adjusted such that they, at the very least, serve the penal goals of the institution without subsequently creating harm.

In Chapter 1, I provide an in-depth introduction to this qualitative study. The phenomenon of interest and a brief background of this topic are presented. The purpose of such a summary is to orient the reader to the relevant gaps in professional knowledge

in the field and explain the necessity of relevant research on the topic. The discussion then proceeds to further acclimate the reader to this qualitative study, where I provide an overview of the research problem and the purpose of the study, situating the study in the current state of knowledge on the topic and delineating its relevant philosophical considerations. Finally, before concluding, Chapter 1 contains an explanation of why this qualitative study is significant and how it contributes to positive social change.

Background

It should be noted at the outset (because it will be an important theme to remain cognizant of throughout the following discussion) that there are several factors relevant to supermax prisons and supermax inmates that present a challenge to researchers wishing to study this topic, these facilities, and this population. Ross and Tewksbury (2018) explained that definitional variability and differences in nomenclature make it difficult to empirically define what constitutes a supermax prison and, therefore, operationalizing this term for research purposes is difficult. In surveying supermax researchers, they found that the most common barrier to this type of research, aside from definitional ambiguity, was access to these institutions. These factors collectively make it difficult to conduct research on and with supermax prisons and prisoners, resulting in a general dearth of knowledge about this topic. This dearth itself is another barrier for researchers because it is difficult to find empirical research to build off of and from which to justify further research. Bearing in mind that these and other issues inform the questions that can be asked and answered in regard to supermax prisons and prisoners, in this section I provide a foundation for this study by summarizing the current state of knowledge.

To date, researchers have attempted to circumvent the aforementioned research barriers in an attempt to answer empirical questions and generate scientific knowledge about supermax prisons and the inmates that are housed there. Although these concerns are not new (e.g., see Grassian, 1983), calls for further research have spurred interest in this topic into modern day. The most recent research of this topic (i.e., research that has been published in the last 5 years) has produced several insights that form the foundation of the current understanding of supermax prisons, conditions, and populations (see Chadick et al., 2018; Labrecque, 2018; Labrecque et al., 2021; Reiter & Coutin, 2017; Walthour, 2020).

Allegations of the psychological harm that could result from extended periods in supermax sentencing, characterized most prominently by extended periods of near-total isolation, have prompted researchers to investigate whether this is the case. To date, there have been findings that support (e.g., Luigi et al., 2020) and refute (e.g., Morgan et al., 2016) these contentions. Because research has yet to determine a more definitive answer, researchers have approached this topic from several different angles to gain a better understanding of supermax-related issues. Those who support supermax sentencing often justify its use on the grounds of institutional safety and claim that it fosters a deterrent effect. Research to date has suggested, however, that supermax sentences do not evidence deterrent effects, either when considering postrelease behavior (Butler et al., 2017) or behavior during imprisonment (Morgan et al., 2016).

Other research has aimed to understand supermax-related phenomena through the lens of comparison, attempting to isolate the supermax experience from that of being

incarcerated more generally. Findings have indicated that, although psychological deterioration is present to some extent in most inmates, those who have been exposed to long-term solitary confinement (note that this includes all forms of solitary confinement, not just supermax confinement) are less likely to have the opportunity to recover, and thus, symptom exacerbation is more likely to ensue (Chadick et al., 2018). Similar research, such as that conducted by Labrecque (2018), compared inmates who have and have not been exposed to solitary confinement on several factors to better understand which aspects are more and less related exclusively to supermax sentencing.

Qualitative endeavors into the experience of supermax sentencing have been fewer, though no less impactful in illuminating supermax conditions. Reiter and Coutin (2017) unveiled a rich description of the firsthand experiences of supermax inmates through qualitative interviews with inmates post incarceration, illustrating how supermax inmates perceive the conditions to which they are exposed and the extent to which those conditions impact the mental health of inmates. Findings like these have spurred further interest in the conditions of supermax prisons, inviting commentary, anecdote, and observation (e.g., Haney, 2017) as well as proffering potential solutions and alternative practices to improve supermax-related outcomes (Rovner, 2018).

Despite the aforementioned research, or perhaps because of it, there remains contention over whether supermax conditions cause and/or exacerbate mental health symptoms in inmate populations. One perspective on this issue that may provide valuable insight into the experience of supermax sentencing comes from individuals who work with supermax inmates. While there exists such research in the extent literature (e.g.,

Mears & Castro, 2006), it is considered dated and does not account for institutional, policy, or practice changes that have been implemented or occurred since its publication. A modern analysis of this perspective was thus warranted to fill some of the gaps in the collective knowledge about supermax sentencing, conditions, and inmates. At present, the supermax-related literature is not only scant, but the research that does exist is often found to conflict with other previous research; consequently, research in this area is needed in general. Because the perspectives of supermax-affiliated individuals have been underrepresented in the current literature, this qualitative study was important and adds to the existing understanding of the impact of supermax conditions on inmate mental health.

Problem Statement

The specific research problem addressed through this study was whether the phenomenological experiences of knowledgeable professionals support or refute allegations that supermax prison conditions negatively impact the mental health and well-being of supermax inmates. The literature is fraught with contention regarding the conditions associated with supermax prisons and if sentencing serves to create or exacerbate mental health problems in inmates. To date, definitive evidence that supermax conditions create and/or exacerbate mental illness is lacking; however, several authors have advanced this concern (Haney, 2017; Morgan et al., 2016; Reiter & Coutin, 2017). The need to determine whether supermax conditions create an environment that causes or exacerbates existing mental health issues stems from both human rights and professional ethics perspectives. To allow such practices to persist is to passively accept the fact that egregious harm is being done unto human beings (Rovner, 2018).

In this qualitative study, I investigated the lived experiences of knowledgeable professionals who have worked in supermax prisons. For the purposes of this qualitative study, “knowledgeable professionals” was loosely defined (as described further in Chapter 3) to include individuals who have worked in a supermax prison in a professional capacity. I kept this term intentionally broad so as to remain inclusive of the several potential titles of such individuals (e.g., warden, psychologist, prison staff), though the modifier “professional” was meant to exclude participants who may have worked in the institution but not necessarily with inmates (e.g., janitors or security staff). This study differed from the several anecdotal accounts that predominate the literature in this area (see Ross & Tewksbury, 2018) because rather than opining on one side of the argument or the other or elaborating on one’s own observations, this study offered an empirical investigation into individuals’ lived experiences to gain a better understanding of the impact of supermax conditions on the mental health of inmates. With this study, I aimed to elicit information regarding supermax inmate mental illness from the qualitative interviews of participants who had firsthand professional experience with this population.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of supermax inmates as perceived and reported by those who have previously worked or are currently working with them. The need to better understand the relationship between supermax prison conditions and inmate mental health is informed by moral and ethical imperatives to ensure that all human beings are treated with respect, dignity, and beneficence (see American Psychological Association [APA], 2017).

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of supermax inmates from the perspective of the knowledgeable participants who have worked with them?

RQ2: Do the lived experiences of supermax inmates as told by knowledgeable others support or refute the allegation that supermax prison conditions create an environment that fosters and/or exacerbates the mental health symptoms of inmates?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks for this Study

The conceptual framework for this qualitative study was based in the sociological and psychological literature associated with the detrimental effects of isolation. Ample evidence exists suggesting the detrimental psychological impact of ostracism and isolation in such social contexts as friend groups, families, and society (Coplan & Bowker, 2014; Wang et al., 2017). Using this groundwork on the psychological harm of isolation as a conceptual foundation, in this study I aimed to extend this body of knowledge by examining whether similar effects are found in supermax inmates as a result of supermax conditions. Grounding this study conceptually in this way led to the development of the research questions and guided the interview questions asked of participants.

One specific theory that this study was based on was the social control theory. In this theory, Hirschi (1969) suggested that individuals who perceive a meaningful bond and/or obligation between themselves and another (whether this “other” is a person, such as a child or significant other, or society more broadly) will engage in pro-social,

adaptive behaviors and be discouraged against behaviors otherwise. In this study, I built off the inverse of this theory: If individuals do not perceive this meaningful connection, they will feel less obligated to engage in pro-social behaviors. Thus, for supermax inmates who are isolated and left without meaningful relationships, opportunities, or tasks with which to engage, they will be less likely to initiate behaviors that might be psychologically protective or restorative, exacerbating their thwarted needs as a result of supermax conditions. This discussion is further expanded in both breadth and depth in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The key concept being explored in this qualitative study was the mental health of supermax inmates and the extent to which their mental health symptoms are related to the conditions associated with supermax sentencing. Because I explored the lived experiences of supermax inmates (albeit through secondary informants), the phenomenological methodological approach was used, which served to underscore the epistemological assumption that reality is subjective, rather than objective, and unique to each individual (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data for this qualitative study were collected from qualitative interviews and then transcribed, coded, and analyzed according to a thematic coding procedure, as outlined by Saldaña (2016).

Definitions

In this section I, define and operationalize several key terms and concepts that were germane to this qualitative study to provide clarity and reduce ambiguity. Importantly, the primary key term and concept, supermax sentencing, has been

notoriously ill defined in the literature (see Ross & Tewksbury, 2018). This is one of the oft-cited detriments to generating research about supermax prisons. This definitional ambiguity precluded defining what is meant by supermax in this qualitative study. Because I recruited participants from virtual groups who may have had different understandings of what was meant by “supermax,” leaving this term to be defined as participants saw fit was both a methodological and epistemological decision. Methodologically, leaving the term undefined ensured that participant bias was not introduced by definitionally including or excluding participants. For example, if a definition of a supermax institution described it as a unit in a lesser-security facility, it could have potentially deterred individuals from participating who worked in a standalone supermax institution. Because there is, both presently and historically, such great definitional ambiguity in policy and practice (Labrecque et al., 2021), defining supermax by sentencing characteristics is similarly illusive. For these reasons, I left the term supermax intentionally undefined and unconceptualized, and the definition of supermax was allowed to evolve throughout the study based on the definitions provided by participants. In an epistemological sense, this spoke to the unique realities that are lived out by individuals and respected the belief that widespread experiences are not always neatly defined, conceptualized, or categorized (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

In this qualitative study, I probed for the term supermax early in the qualitative interviews and expected an inclusive, all-encompassing definition to unfold over the course of the interviews. The term “supermax-affiliated” was a self-given label and was

expected to define those individuals who currently work or had previously worked in institutions or units that are referred to as supermax.

Confinement: The physical restriction of inmates to their cells; in this study, this definition accounted for any length of time (though supermax confinement tends to be long term) and included restricted inmate opportunities (such as for education or work placement) and sometimes, but not always, physical restraint (Butler et al., 2017; Cochran et al., 2018; Labrecque, 2018).

Exposure: Having spent time in supermax confinement. Supermax sentencing is the result of an inmate, having already been housed in a lesser-security institution, being deemed as an actual or potential threat of violence, risk, or danger to oneself, others, or the institution (Butler et al., 2017). Offenders are not sentenced to supermax sentences through a judicial process involving a judge or jury but rather by institutional administrative bodies.

Informants: Individuals who report on the experiences of others (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this qualitative study, all participants were considered informants because they spoke about the experiences of supermax inmates.

Isolation: The key concept related to supermax sentencing, in which inmates are kept alone and free from contact with staff, visitors, and other inmates, Isolation is often experienced from the confinement of the inmate's cell but has been noted to be applicable to noncell activity as well, such as with recreation or time given for personal hygiene activities, like showering. (Chadick et al., 2018; Luigi et al., 2020; Ross & Tewksbury, 2018).

Lived experiences: The experiences of individuals as they are perceived and reported by those who lived them or by knowledgeable others (i.e., participants; Peoples, 2021).

Phenomenology: A qualitative research design that is used to explore the lived experiences of participants through in-depth interviews (Hennink et al., 2020).

Assumptions

There are certain assumptions that are relevant to all qualitative research efforts and, as such, should be elaborated so that readers are familiar with those aspects of the study that are believed to be true but cannot be demonstrated definitively as such. In qualitative research, generally, it is assumed that reality is subjective and borne of individuals' experiences (Hennink et al., 2020). It is these experiences that shape people's understanding of the world and how they interact within it and make sense of it (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The qualitative research paradigm assumes that individuals are or can become aware of their realities and the experiences that shape them and, further, that they can then report them. Because the experiences and meaning-making processes of people are so different, it must be assumed that no one account of reality will be universal across individuals. For this reason, I intended to continue data collection until a point of saturation was reached. The emergent approach of qualitative research allows for the continued collection of data that represent a range of experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition to the aforementioned broad assumptions that are relevant to any qualitative research study, in the current study I assumed that the accounts provided by

supermax-affiliated individuals are representative of the experiences of supermax inmates.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Scope of the Study

As noted by Peoples (2021), limitations are best described as methodological shortcomings, whereas delimitations are not necessarily shortcomings, but decisions that were made and justified by the researcher. In this qualitative study, the applicable methodological limitations were mostly related to the limited resources available to student researchers and the doctoral-level status of this research effort, such as time and funding, that limited sample size and the extent to which populations could be accessed while adhering to relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols. According to Peoples, these limitations are especially relevant to student researchers but are additionally applicable to qualitative research more broadly.

Another limitation of this study was the method of data collection used. Although it has been argued elsewhere that face-to-face interviews are a best practice when generating in-depth interview data (Hennink et al., 2020), in-person interviews were not a feasible component of this study. Instead, I conducted the interviews via telephone. Although an outright limitation in the use of telephone interviews is their inability to capture the body language of interviewees, it must be noted that due to the inability to conduct in-person interviews, the only remaining alternative would be to conduct interviews via video conferencing. Because video conferencing interviews necessitate additional layers of security and protections (for the recording of visual as well as audio

data; Paulus & Lester, 2022), I made the decision to collect only audio data through telephone interviews.

In this qualitative study, I conducted interviews to elicit the experiences of supermax inmates as told by supermax-affiliated participants. There was no attempt to elicit inmates' experiences firsthand, and the study did not exclude participants on the basis of an institutional or operational definition. Rather, participants were recruited based on their affiliation with a supermax institutions as they defined it. I did not attempt to elicit the subjective feelings of supermax inmates but rather attempted to elicit only the thoughts and feelings of informant-participants and how things appeared according to them. These decisions were made to minimize selection bias on the basis of ambiguous definitional criteria as well as to maximize transferability such that a wide range of experiences could be accounted for through inclusive definitions of supermax and, perhaps, arrive at a better understanding overall.

Significance

Supermax prison sentencing has been equated to long-term sentences in solitary confinement (Haney, 2017). Confinement is often characterized by extremely small cells with no natural sunlight, housing those inmates who are unfit (though the definitions of unfit is often vague and institution-specific) for maximum security prisons (Labrecque, 2018; Luigi et al., 2020). Unlike other-security prisons, supermax prisons do not allow inmates to partake in employment or education programs during their incarceration, and their access to physical and mental health resources is extremely limited, all of which have been suggested to contribute to exacerbated mental health symptoms (Haney, 2017).

Thus, I conducted this qualitative study to help create an understanding of the lived experiences of supermax inmates by exploring whether the experiences of knowledgeable professionals support or refute concerns related to supermax conditions and inmates' mental health. While previous researchers have attempted to do this by employing quantitative approaches, few research investigations have explored this phenomenon from a qualitative perspective.

Interestingly, the literature related to nonpenal social isolation and ostracism is fraught with similar allegations that are well documented and supported (Wang et al., 2017). To subject inmates to conditions that may contribute to psychological deterioration, pain, and damage is inhumane and ethically inept. As such, in this study I conducted qualitative interviews with professionals associated with supermax facilities to determine if their experiences suggest that such allegations are valid.

In regard to positive social change, this study contributes most notably to supermax inmates on an individual and institutional level. Should this study and future research continue to support the assertion that supermax prisons contribute to psychological harm and deterioration, perhaps these institutions, or at least their policies and conditions, can be reevaluated and less harmful alternatives implemented. As research has shown that supermaximum sentencing does little by way of reducing recidivism rates (Butler et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2016), perhaps more efficient means of inmates' rehabilitation and recidivism can act as a substitute, thereby contributing to society more broadly.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduced this qualitative study by discussing the phenomenon of interest, the influence of supermax prison conditions on the mental health of inmates. The need for this study was justified by describing a demonstrable gap in the literature, and the remaining sections of this chapter contained an overview of the research. Building off of this foundation, in Chapter 2 I will provide further support for the necessity of this qualitative study by synthesizing the extant research on this topic in a literature review.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

I conducted this qualitative study to add to the existing body of knowledge related to the conditions of supermax prisons and their potential impact on inmate mental health. There is a debate in the extant literature, with some authors supporting and others contesting supermax sentencing (e.g., Butler et al., 2017; Chadick et al., 2018; Labrecque, 2018). Those who are in support of supermax sentencing have argued that it is a necessary mechanism through which institutions can exercise control over inmates and, therefore, over the institution. Opponents of supermax sentencing have advanced concerns that the isolating and depriving conditions characteristic of supermax sentences both create and exacerbate symptoms of mental illness and mental health concerns amongst supermax inmates (Haney, 2017).

As it stands, empirical evidence can be found to support both sides of this debate. On the one hand, some evidence has suggested that supermax prison isolation causes and exacerbates psychological symptoms of mental illness (Luigi et al., 2020). Conversely, evidence has also indicated that such conditions have a null and/or negligent effect on the mental health of inmate populations (Chadick et al., 2018). It is clear, then, that research must continue to seek more definitive and less ambiguous answers as to whether and to what extent supermax prison conditions are harmful to those who are housed there (Haney, 2017; Labrecque, 2018). Understanding how supermax conditions affect inmate mental health is a necessary (albeit insufficient) step toward, first, illuminating whether supermax conditions are causing psychological harm and, second, advancing solutions or alternatives that are less harmful and equally effective, should data suggest the need.

In this qualitative study, I explored the lived experiences of supermax inmates through interviews with participants considered to be knowledgeable participants who currently work or had previously worked in supermax institutions. Chapter 2 contains a review of the current state of the literature regarding supermax prisons and a background in which this qualitative study was situated and from which it was informed. In this chapter, I discuss the key variables and concepts associated with research on supermax prisons and the debate that has come to surround its practices as well as synthesize the literature to date that attempts to clarify issues related to supermax prisons. In so doing, this chapter acts as a further justification for the need for further empirical investigation into supermax prisons and how their policies and conditions impact those who are housed there.

Literature Strategy

I maintained a literature review matrix throughout the literature search process to organize and document the searches performed. The following search terms were used in Thoreau, a multisource online database, with results limited to works that were subjected to peer review and published since 2016: *supermax prisons OR supermaximum prisons, inmate mental health, administrative segregation, solitary confinement, and prison pain*. I found further resources by reviewing the works cited for each article, yielding additional material. Although this literature review strategy was not complex, it was believed to have led to a thorough, comprehensive, and fully saturated review of the literature, given the general scarcity of journal articles (and especially those that produce empirical

research) relevant to supermax prisons (see Ross and Tewksbury, 2018, for other challenges related to researching supermax prisons).

Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Framework

As shown by Ross and Tewksbury (2018), a great deal of the extant literature related to supermax facilities, inmates, and sentencing conditions is far less empirically based than one would hope. Though empirical research studies do exist, it should be noted that those that can be described as research (rather than legal reviews or anecdotal observations) are far less numerous than are their nonresearch counterparts. It is with this limitation in mind that the following discussion ensues.

Because inmate mental health, in general, and supermax inmate mental health, more specifically, are multifaceted issues that are influenced by several interrelated factors from the biological, psychological, and social realms (Butler et al., 2018), several different theories have been used in the extant literature to frame empirical investigations to date. Butler et al. (2017) discussed two: deterrence theory and strain theory. According to these authors, supermax-related research can be framed in deterrence theory, such that supermax conditions should result in a deterrent effect and prevent inmate misconduct. Recidivism studies, for example, might appropriately utilize deterrence theory as a mechanism to determine the efficacy of supermax sentencing when measured by recidivism.

While deterrence theory is a useful way to frame empirical investigations into supermax-related research, it is not the only way. Historically, researchers have situated supermax-related research in general strain theory in which it is posited that increases in

actual or perceived strain (e.g., to obtaining resources) leads to pressure to engage in criminal behavior by enticing individuals to obtain resources in illegal ways. Because needs and resources are perceived as easier to obtain illegally than legally when strain is relevant, crime results (e.g., see Listwan et al., 2013; Liu & Visher, 2019). Still other authors have suggested that social control theories are best suited to frame research endeavors dealing with supermax populations and facilities (Liu & Visher, 2019; Reiter & Coutin, 2017).

In the current study, I investigated the experiences of supermax inmates through knowledgeable participants using a theoretical framework built on Hirschi's (1969) social control theory. According to this theory, individuals who perceive meaningful social bonds will engage less in antisocial and/or criminal behaviors and more pro-social behaviors as a mechanism to preserve those social bonds. If these social bonds are taken away or nonexistent, as is often the case in the near total isolation and deprivation conditions that characterize many supermax sentences (Rovner, 2018), the theory's postulates suggest that there is less obligation or motivation for those individuals to behave in productive and pro-social ways (Reiter & Coutin, 2017). When applying this theoretical foundation, supermax inmates who do not perceive meaningful social bonds may not feel obligated to participate in or initiate behaviors that are not only considered pro-social but, setting considered, could also be psychologically protective or restorative.

This qualitative study was further framed by the psychological and sociological literature surrounding the concepts of social isolation and sensory deprivation, both of which have been used to describe and characterize supermax sentences (Haney, 2017;

Rovner, 2018). Research has found not only that the experience of social isolation exacerbates mental health symptoms but also that increasing feelings of social support seem to increase resilience to such mental health issues (Wang et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, such feelings of social support, belonging, and connectedness are often lost over long periods spent under socially isolated circumstances, and there are seldom opportunities to foster the resilience that prevents the exacerbation of mental health symptoms (Reiter & Coutin, 2017). These realizations paint a grim picture when considering the extended periods of social isolation and sensory deprivation that supermax inmates are alleged to experience and their impact on the mental health of those individuals given their inability to promote mechanisms for resilience.

Key Variables and Concepts

To fully understand this qualitative study, several key variables and concepts must be delineated and discussed. Embedded within this discussion, I clarify several caveats related to supermax prisons, supermax inmates, and supermax research. However, the reader must first be acclimated to the contentious debate that both frames and drives research in this area.

As described by many authors prominent in the literature related to supermax this debate has centered around two opposing arguments: one that favors supermax sentencing and one that opposes it. Those in favor have argued that supermax sentencing provides a necessary form of institutional control, incapacitating those considered to be a danger or serious threat of danger to either other inmates or to themselves whereas those in opposition have argued, often vehemently, that the conditions associated with

supermax prisons negatively impact inmate mental health, not only exacerbating existing symptoms of mental illness but creating them as well. (e.g., Butler et al., 2017; Chadick et al., 2018; Haney, 2017; Labrecque, 2018; Labrecque et al., 2021; Luigi et al., 2020; Meyers et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2016), Extant critiques are collectively based in a concern for human rights, especially when it comes to populations that are not only vulnerable but also lacking visibility in the public eye. Additionally, opposing arguments are often supported with evidence suggesting that supermax sentencing does not meet the goals and objectives that are used to justify its means, leading many critics to suggest that supermax prisons are not only harming the inmates who are housed there but are doing so with no demonstrable benefits to either the individual or the institution. This contentious debate framed the key variables and concepts to be discussed in the following subsections, beginning with an overview of research to date regarding supermax prison conditions and mental illness.

Conditions of Supermax Prisons

Upon learning of the conditions that inmates are said to be exposed to during supermax sentencing (see Butler et al., 2018; Haney, 2017; Ross & Tewksbury, 2018; Rovner, 2018), one might reasonably wonder how such egregious violations of what could be considered basic human rights have continued to pervade supermax institutions. Further, with the availability of applicable best practices and codes of conduct (such as those outlined in Chadick et al., 2018 or, more generally, by APA, 2017), one may question how those involved with supermax institutions can seemingly ignore what seems so clearly to be a violation of professional codes of conduct. If its occupants are

suffering, some may question why and how supermax institutions are still in operation. A brief search of the extant literature illuminates a potential answer: Because society is not empirically certain that it does. Although much of what has been written on this subject has been based in observation and anecdote, empirical investigations into the mental health effects of supermax sentences have not conclusively determined whether these conditions create or exacerbate mental illness amongst supermax populations. While several accounts have found evidence that they do (e.g., Butler et al., 2017; Luigi et al., 2020; Walters, 2018), so too have several others found evidence that they do not (Chadick et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2016).

While it is not uncommon for empirical investigations to find conflicting results, this phenomenon seems to be complicated with supermax research largely as a result of the lack of universal definitions employed in this topic of research (Ross & Tewksbury, 2018). Most prominently is the definition of what constitutes a supermax prison in general. While some of these facilities are free standing and independent of the general prison population, such as Marion at Illinois, others are a unit inside of a lesser-security facility, such as Arizona's Secure Housing Unit (SHU; Meyers et al., 2018; Reiter & Coutin, 2017). Notably, not all these facilities are easily identified as supermax institutions because they are referred to instead by names such as "restricted housing" or "secure housing" (Ross & Tewksbury, 2018). Researchers have attempted to overcome this barrier by operationalizing supermax research according to the characteristics of supermax sentencing rather than the physical or linguistic attributes of these facilities.

For example, Chadick et al. (2018) defined supermax sentencing by the isolative conditions that are associated with supermax sentences and that differentiate these sentences from those in the general prison population. Upon review of the literature, one can find descriptions of specific supermax facilities ranging from unfathomable places of deprivation (e.g., Haney, 2017; Reiter & Coutin, 2017) to ones of isolative rehabilitation (Chadick et al., 2018; Walthour, 2020). Reviewing policy related to these institutions results in further ambiguity; some supermax institutions have safeguards in place to promote the safety and well-being of inmates, such as periodic review and assessment and sentence maximums, while others operate from policies that are vaguely defined and often left to the discretion of prison officials (Cochran et al., 2018). Thus, research across institutions is often hindered by difficulty in operationalizing what constitutes a supermax prison in the first place (Ross & Tewksbury, 2018).

Beyond the trouble that lies in determining which facilities are (or should be) considered supermax prisons, further confusion stems from the varying names under which similar practices are encompassed in the literature. While some authors have delineated the conceptual differences between terms, such as supermax sentencing, solitary confinement, administrative segregation, and disciplinary segregation (Butler et al., 2018; Meyers et al., 2018), others have claimed that these terms are essentially synonymous with one another and do not attempt to distinguish among them (Labrecque, 2018; Labrecque et al., 2021; Walters, 2018). This leads to a literature that is fraught with attempts to describe a phenomenon that has historically been defined and operationalized in vastly different ways among various researchers. What is left is an uncertain and

ambiguous understanding of how the conditions of supermax prisons impact the mental health of those who are housed there.

Isolation and Deprivation

Despite the discrepancy across supermax prisons in conditions and policy, the characteristics that universally describe supermax sentencing are the isolation and deprivation to which supermax inmates are subjected (Luigi et al., 2020). Although the extent to which isolating and depriving conditions are experienced is likely different across institutions, the literature has consistently described near total isolation and extreme sensory deprivation (Haney, 2017; Labrecque, 2018; Rovner, 2018; Walthour, 2020). Inmates are confined to small cells for up to 23 hours a day, and sometimes further restricted by physical restraints. While they are permitted to leave their cells for brief periods of recreation and to shower, these opportunities are often not afforded daily, are considered privileges rather than rights, and do not double as opportunities for socialization. A conglomeration of examples from the extant literature collectively describe a prisoner who is released from their cell via a distant control center and allowed to move about a small concrete yard that is slightly twice the size of their cells, highly secure, and void of any opportunity to engage with the outside world.

Due to the extreme safety precautions and security measures in place in supermax prisons, inmates are not permitted to engage with one another or with prison officials (Haney, 2017). It has been argued that the medical and mental health provisions that are afforded to these inmates are severely lacking due to underresourced and understaffed institutions, and the programming that is often seen in lesser-security facilities, such as

prison work, educational and vocational programs, and rehabilitation opportunities, are not offered to inmates housed in supermax prisons (Chadick et al., 2018). Visitation from family and friends is strictly forbidden in many supermax prisons; in those institutions that do allow visitation privileges, visits are monitored, topics of conversation are censored, and physical touch is forbidden (Haney, 2017). Though some supermax facilities have been noted to allow inmates to have personal items like photos and books, this is not the norm and inmates are typically left in their cells without any form of sensory stimulation (Labrecque et al., 2021).

Due to the potential threats to safety and security that are relevant to supermax institutions and inmates, researchers have found accessibility to these populations to be a complex barrier when attempting to conduct research on supermax-related topics (Ross & Tewksbury, 2018). Because these inmates are often housed long term, it is not always practical to wait until their release to try and interview them (Rovner, 2018). Due to these barriers, there is a severe dearth in the extant literature that empirically assesses outcomes related to isolation amongst supermax inmates (Butler et al., 2018). This makes it exceedingly difficult to understand whether, how, and to which extent the isolation and deprivation that is characteristic of supermax sentencing relates to the mental health status and psychological well-being of those housed there long term. One way to better understand these potential effects is to generalize to other, nonprison populations who experience isolation. Fortunately, the psychological and sociological literature related to isolation as it appears in society provide a starting point for better conceptualizing the

effects of conditions of isolation in supermax prisons on populations of supermax inmates.

As it pertains to social isolation, researchers have studied both actual and perceived isolation in order to better understand its effects on the individuals who experience it. Case studies have historically shown that actual isolation, whether that be through neglect or some other form of abuse, can lead to demonstrable functional abnormalities in the brain (Grassian, 1983). Perceived social isolation, as seen as a result of bullying, rejection, and ostracism, for example, has been shown to cause psychological and cognitive impairment, especially in those with mental illnesses like schizophrenia (Reddy et al., 2019). Based on this evidence, one can justifiably suggest that social isolation and sensory deprivation in contexts and environments other than supermax prisons can have a demonstrable impact on the brain and, in turn, on mental health.

Moreover, research has shown that individuals who have existing mental health disorders experience symptom exacerbation when put in situations that foster feelings of social isolation (Wang et al., 2017). These authors also confirmed another aspect of mental illness as it relates to social isolation: that increased feelings of social support foster resilience to symptoms of mental illness. From the perspective of supermax prisons, this research could be speculatively generalized to suggest that supermax inmates, as a function of the isolated and depriving conditions that are innate to the institutions that house them, are not only susceptible to symptoms of mental illness but could be considered to be even more vulnerable due to the absence of those things that

promote resilience to mental health symptoms (e.g., social support, connectedness, belonging).

Mental Health

To this point, mental health symptoms have been discussed in a broad and general sense. It has been noted that much (but not all) of the extent literature speaks of the deteriorating mental state of supermax inmates who endure long periods of isolation. So far, it has been made clear that many scholars are opposed to the isolative practices of supermax prisons because they could contribute to both creating and exacerbating mental health symptoms in supermax populations. This section will more thoroughly explore the extent literature in regard to the mental health of supermax inmates, in particular, and those aspects of mental health that are most relevant to the practice of long-term prison isolation, more specifically.

Despite research that has found null effects of prison isolation on inmate mental health (e.g., Chadick et al., 2018), there are ample accounts in the literature of the psychological deterioration that can result after long term exposure to prison isolation. Described generally by one author as, “profound mental harm,” (Walthour, 2020, p. 161), more specific descriptions of the mental health states of those exposed to prison isolation have been referred to as SHU syndrome. This constellation of symptoms has been observed in inmates exposed to longer term prison isolation; first documented in the literature by Harvard’s Dr. Grassian (1983), SHU syndrome is characterized by delirium and thought disturbances (including ruminative and intrusive thoughts), mood disturbances such as depression, anger, rage, and/or irritability and emotional flatness,

perceptual abnormalities such as hallucinations and hypersensitivity to stimuli, and finally, impairments in impulse control, attention, and/or memory (Rovner, 2018; Walters, 2018). Importantly, research has shown that while those inmates who have an existing mental health diagnosis are more susceptible to developing SHU syndrome, a prior diagnosis is not a necessary prerequisite (Luigi et al., 2020; Walters, 2018).

Outside of those symptoms that are encompassed within the cluster of symptoms known as SHU syndrome are additional, extraneous physical and mental health symptoms that have been associated with supermax isolation in the literature. These symptoms include anxiety and panic, lethargy, appetite and sleep disturbances, social withdrawal, and psychosis (Chadick et al., 2018). These acute symptoms are often associated with short term isolation (Butler et al., 2017), though studies differ on the extent to which they are observed and the extent to which they differ significantly in intensity beyond that of the general prison population (Chadick et al., 2018; Luigi et al., 2020). Long term supermax sentencing, in contrast, has been found to be associated with more pervasive outcomes including adaptation to and reliance on isolated conditions, making reintegration into either the general prison population or society difficult (if not nearly impossible; Butler et al., 2017), and a loss of social identity and shared reality that can lead to a decomposition/deterioration of one's sense of self (Haney, 2017).

As noted here and elsewhere (e.g., Haney, 2017; Houser et al., 2019), mental illness is disproportionately high in the criminal justice system, as compared to the general population. One study claimed that an individual with a serious mental illness is an astounding ten times more likely to be housed in a correctional facility than in a state

psychiatric hospital (Mulay et al., 2017). Mental illness, as previously mentioned, is overrepresented in supermax prisons; further, it has been shown that the conditions associated with supermax prisons may be fostering these conditions (Luigi et al., 2020; Walters, 2018). Suicidal ideation and self-injurious behaviors have been very much associated with prison isolation, which authors speculate could be a result of serious mental illness or an attempt to escape it (Haney, 2017). Several scholars have alluded to the cyclical nature of supermax sentencing, citing self-injurious behavior as especially problematic, though perhaps none as succinctly or as illustratively as Haney, who described a reoccurring behavior chain in which problematic behavior (including acts of self-harm) is punished with solitary confinement, which promotes problematic behavior, which consequentially leads again to solitary confinement (see also Houser et al., 2019).

The significance of this cyclical nature of supermax sentencing alludes to the somewhat chicken-and-egg phenomenon that is relevant to research that has shown a relationship between supermax sentencing and mental health. Despite the difficulties associated with supermax research, authors and scholars have made attempts to estimate the prevalence of mental illness within supermax populations. Although the literature differs widely in the estimates provided (e.g., Luigi et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2016; Walthour, 2020), it can be argued that mental illness is found at higher rates in supermax prisons than in both lesser-security institutions and the general population (Houser et al., 2019). This, in combination with the already noted lack of adequate pre-sentencing screening and/or assessment, makes it difficult to differentiate between those inmates

who suffered from mental illness presentencing and those who developed symptoms of mental illness as a result of sentencing.

Outcomes and Alternatives

It is important to keep in mind that research has not definitively suggested that supermax sentencing is associated with the aforementioned mental health symptoms and conditions. On the contrary, some research has found null effects when examining the impact of supermax sentencing on inmate mental health (Chadick et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2016). It is these findings that are often used to buttress the arguments of those in support of supermax sentencing as an invaluable mechanism of safety and security (Walthour, 2020). By incapacitating these inmates through isolation, the logic suggests, inmates are prevented from participating in behaviors that are threatening to the safety of the institution, such as riots, gang-affiliated behavior, and/or escape attempts (Butler et al., 2017; Reiter, 2016).

In addition to incapacitation, several other goals of supermax sentencing have been delineated and used for the purposes of justifying periods of extended isolation, despite the potential for such practices to cause mental harm. One such goal is deterrence, where it is expected that the harsh conditions associated with supermax sentences will deter inmates from misbehaving in ways that result in such punishment (Butler et al., 2017; Walthour, 2020). Unfortunately, research has found that supermax sentences do little to deter future misconduct (Luigi et al., 2020; Meyers et al., 2018). Similarly, supermax sentencing has been shown to be an ineffective means to reducing recidivism (Butler et al., 2017). Collectively, the literature seems to suggest that despite its purported

objective to deter future crime, both during time served and postrelease, supermax sentencing is not meeting this objective.

Finally, the use of supermax sentencing has been advanced as a means of protection both for those who are in danger of harm from other inmates as well as those who are in danger of harm to themselves (Chadick et al., 2018). The argument that supermax sentencing acts as an effective means of preventing harm to inmates is used to justify the isolative practices of supermax sentencing (Cochran et al., 2018). However, when one considers the psychological harm that has been alleged to result in supermax sentences, this objective of protection may not be as straightforward as expected. While supermax sentencing may indeed serve as a legitimate form of physical protection, it may be simultaneously causing psychological harm, making the overall argument that it serves as a protective mechanism a dubious one. While it may be technically true that supermax sentencing provides protection from physical harm, it does not protect against (and may even cause) psychological harm.

Collectively, then, the goals of supermax sentencing and the isolation that ensues can be succinctly described as punishment, protection, and incapacitation, all of which are said to be justifiable, even at the legislative level, in the name of institutional safety (Chadick et al., 2018; Cochran et al., 2018; Labrecque, 2018; Labrecque et al., 2021; Luigi et al., 2020; Walters, 2018; Walthour, 2020). As has been demonstrated here, it is questionable whether these objectives are being met. Although there are systematic limitations to outcome research in supermax prisons and with supermax inmates that make studies of this kind challenging to conduct (Butler et al., 2017; Butler et al., 2018;

Ross & Tewksbury, 2018), there is ample evidence to suspect that supermax sentencing not only fails to accomplish the goals and objectives that are used to justify its practice, but so too could such sentencing be creating undue harm to those that are housed there. It is for this reason that authors and scholars have discussed alternatives and reforms applicable to current supermax practices and ways to address the concerns that have been advanced in the literature to date.

It should be noted that, because the conditions and outcomes associated with supermax prisons are so multifaceted, nuanced, and complex, several points of intervention exist along the trajectory of a supermax inmate. Strategies for improving supermax sentencing and reducing the opportunity for harm are thus numerous and varied; while some scholars have opined that supermax sentencing should be replaced altogether, others have noted that modifications to current practice would be sufficient to reduce the potential for harm while still upholding the interests of the institution. Though a comprehensive exploration of proposed improvements and alternatives is beyond the scope of the current discussion, several are noted here to illustrate the wide variety of options that could be exercised in an effort to improve the current practices in supermax prisons.

Some authors, such as Walthour (2020) argued that alternatives to supermax sentencing in its entirety are not new; rather, he suggested that alternatives have existed since the original rise of supermax prisons and further, that alternative means existed to supermax prisons at all critical junctures but were ignored. Other authors suggested that supermax outcomes could be achieved in a less harmful way by allocating resources

more exclusively toward mental health (Haney, 2017; Houser et al., 2019; Luigi et al., 2020) while still others recommended a broader range of programming, spanning from educational and vocational programs to those that provide mechanisms for both individual and group support (Chadick et al., 2018). Some have argued for more targeted programming efforts, such as those that are focused specifically on reintegration into general prison populations (Nieminen, 2019; Walters, 2018), as well as those that aim to decrease problematic behavior and foster pro-social behavior (Meyers et al., 2018). Some programming initiatives operated with an ultimate outcome of returning supermax inmates to the general prison population (Walters, 2018) while others focused on increasing the quality of life experienced by inmates serving supermax sentences (Labrecque, 2018).

Two themes were clear throughout the literature related to potential improvements to supermax practices. First, despite the known difficulties associated with conducting outcome studies in supermax prisons and with supermax inmate populations, there seems to be a majority consensus in the literature regarding the important (if not essential) focus on the principles of risk, needs, and responsivity in programming for supermax inmates (Butler et al., 2018; Labrecque et al., 2020; Meyers et al., 2018). Secondly, despite the several potential areas of intervention and the myriad options available for doing so, most authors seem to agree that increased initiative at intake, in the form of mental health screens and inventories and periodic monitoring thereafter would be helpful in effectively managing and mitigating mental illness in supermax prisons (Haney, 2017; Houser et al., 2019; Labrecque, 2018; Labrecque et al., 2020; Okoro et al., 2018).

Summary and Conclusions

Based on the literature to date, there is a clear and urgent need to determine if and to which extent the conditions associated with supermax prisons and supermax sentencing induce or exacerbate mental health issues among inmates. A synthesis of the literature presented here provides a basis for this exploration, in that: (a) social isolation, in general, is a known determinant of psychological harm and adverse psychological reactions, (b) there is potential that the aforementioned findings are applicable across settings and populations, making it a relevant possibility that such reactions are experienced by supermax inmates who, as a consequence of their sentences are exposed to long term isolation, (c) to sentence inmates to such conditions despite research supporting its deleterious psychological effects is an egregious violation of human rights and professional ethics, especially considering: (1) these concerns have been well addressed for quite some time yet the implementation of less harmful alternatives has been slow to progress and, (2) despite the aforementioned concerns, there has been no evidence to suggest that supermax sentencing serves its objectives, in terms of punishment, protection, or institutional safety, or is superior to other, less restrictive, more effective means of incarceration or rehabilitation. Thus, my research aimed to support or refute the assertion that supermax prisons cause or exacerbate mental illness by probing the experiences of knowledgeable others to gain insight into the effects of such conditions on inmate mental health. . In Chapter 3, I will discuss the methodological details of this study and procedures followed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of supermax inmates. Because this population is considered vulnerable and is generally difficult to access for a variety of reasons (Ross & Tewksbury, 2018), I interviewed knowledgeable participants instead. In Chapter 3, I present the methodological details of this study by first describing the research design and rationale for conducting the research as stated. The discussion then shifts toward the role of the researcher, where I delineate how researcher bias was addressed and how other applicable ethical issues were navigated. Next, the details of the methodology of this qualitative study are defined in depth to the extent that the current study can be replicated in the future. Topics covered in this section include information pertaining to participants, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter also includes a discussion of indicators of quality, such as how this qualitative study meets standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reliability, before ending with an overview of relevant ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

The following two research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of supermax inmates from the perspective of the knowledgeable participants who have worked with them?

RQ2: Do the lived experiences of supermax inmates as told by knowledgeable others support or refute the allegation that supermax prison conditions create an

environment that fosters and/or exacerbates the mental health symptoms of inmates?

Phenomenon of Interest

The phenomenon of interest in this qualitative study was the impact of the conditions of supermax sentencing on the mental health of supermax inmates. Research related to this phenomenon is important because it contributes to the larger body of knowledge that remains empirically uncertain regarding whether the conditions associated with supermax sentencing significantly impact inmate mental health (Labrecque, 2018; Meyers et al., 2018). Extending this body of knowledge is essential to ensuring that supermax inmates are not being subjected to undue psychological harm as a consequence of the penal environment. Should research suggest that the penal environment is negatively impacting inmate mental health, action must be taken to ameliorate such harms and create conditions that are (at the least) neutral on inmate mental health. Thus, the goal of this qualitative study was to add the extant body of knowledge about supermax prisons and supermax inmates such that the impacts of the conditions of supermax sentencing on inmates' mental health can be clarified, understood, and acted upon (if necessary).

Research Tradition

Because I explored the lived experiences of supermax inmates (albeit through knowledgeable secondary participants) in this qualitative study, it was based in the phenomenological research tradition (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The phenomenological research tradition is underscored by the epistemological assumption

that reality is subjective and, as such, is unique to each individual because it is embedded in their understanding of the world (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this qualitative study, I used semistructured interviews to elicit information regarding the lived experiences of supermax inmates as understood by the knowledgeable participants who currently work or had previously worked with them.

Further rationale for exploring the phenomenon of interest using a phenomenological approach comes from the relative lack of qualitative research, broadly, and a dearth of phenomenological research, specifically, on this topic. While both the phenomenological approach and the use of knowledgeable professionals as secondary participants of inmates' experiences have been used in exploring this phenomenon qualitatively before, findings from these studies are not well replicated, dated, and worth reexamining (e.g., Mears & Castro, 2006; Reiter & Coutin, 2017). This qualitative study is, to my knowledge, the first to use the phenomenological research tradition to explore the lived experiences of supermax inmates through knowledgeable secondary participants. As such, it fills a gap in the literature by presenting a novel methodological perspective from which to view the experiences of supermax inmates. In a broader sense, it advances the extant supermax literature, contributing to the overall understanding of supermax inmates, supermax conditions, and potential relationships between the two.

Role of the Researcher

Because the researching phase of this qualitative study was carried out by only myself, the onus was mine to ensure that professional and academic standards of research quality were adhered to. As the sole individual responsible for this qualitative study, my

role included the planning and execution of data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation; thus, my role in this study could be described succinctly as both interviewer and data analyst.

Though it may be tempting to assume that researcher bias is exponential and would be limited in situations utilizing a one-researcher approach, one must understand the bias inherent in all living beings, researchers included, and note the necessity of controlling for such bias regardless of the size of the research team (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I followed recommendations for actionable strategies for controlling bias several sources (i.e., Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hennink et al., 2020; Paulus & Lester, 2022; Peoples, 2021; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Triangulating recommendations from several authors in this way helped to ensure that bias management was approached comprehensively. I took several steps before the commencement of data collection to ensure that researcher bias was well managed and minimized in the preparation, participant recruitment, and participant selection stages. I was not related to or affiliated with participants in any way, personal or professional, to minimize selection bias. While issues related to power imbalance between me and participants would typically be applicable to studies involving inmates, my use of noninmate participants circumvented this concern as well as others that are relevant to vulnerable populations (see Ross & Tewksbury, 2018).

Throughout the data collection process, I controlled for researcher bias by asking neutral questions from a curious stance to illicit genuine responses. In the data analysis stage, researcher bias was controlled for by allowing the data to speak for itself and guide

interpretation rather than allowing interpretations to be based in preconceptions of what should be found. Because I did not offer incentives for participation and the participants would not directly benefit from the results of this study, ethical issues related to coercion were not relevant.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The participants for this qualitative study were adult men and women who currently or had previously worked in a supermax facility. As previously discussed, definitional criteria for characterizing supermax institutions are vast and vary widely throughout the literature (Labrecque et al., 2021; Ross & Tewksbury, 2018). While some accounts have used harsh and powerful language to describe these facilities as torturous and gruesome (Haney, 2017; Reiter & Coutin, 2017), other accounts have portrayed institutions that revolve around physical isolation but that still centralize inmate well-being and rehabilitation (Chadick et al., 2018). Thus, even defining these institutions by what characterizes their practices is a tricky endeavor.

For this reason, I did not use definitional criteria to delineate what constitutes supermax prison for the selection of participants. Instead, participants were asked to describe the facility in which they worked, so that there was no selection bias insofar as how this study defined supermax sentencing and conditions and such that bias was minimized through the inclusion of institutions that may not be defined by the same (or even similar) criteria. To account for the range of lived experiences that may be present in the data, participants self-identified as eligible to participate based only on being

recruited as those having worked in a supermax facility. They were not included or excluded on the basis of demographic variables, work history, experience, etc. The only exclusionary criteria asked of participants was that (a) their relevant work experience had to have occurred in the last 5 years to ensure that experiences are representative of the current time period and zeitgeist and to maximize the possibility that experiences were recalled correctly and (b) their job title was screened to ensure that their experience is relevant on a professional level (rather than a more general level that may be gleaned from interviews with individuals who work in supermax facilities in a nonprofessional capacity; e.g., janitorial staff).

I purposively sampled the participants and recruited them electronically via advertisement. It was anticipated that the participant recruitment and data collection stages would overlap temporally, allowing for participant referrals (in the form of social media “shares” and “likes”) to be utilized until the data were fully saturated. As described in the qualitative methodology literature, researchers and scholars tend to agree that data are considered saturated when the addition of participant experience no longer provides data that indicate novelty of experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hennink et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Because I collected data until a point of saturation occurred, a finite number of the participants expected could not be given. I estimated that data would reach saturation with between 10 and 20 participants, which was well aligned with published estimates (see Peoples, 2021). However, a more precise estimation was futile given the end goal of saturation (see Hennink et al., 2020).

Instrumentation and Procedures

I derived the data collected in this qualitative study from in-depth, one-on-one telephone interviews conducted by me, the sole researcher of this qualitative study. Interviews were semistructured and followed an interview protocol that I developed. Questions used to guide these interviews were based on a comprehensive review of the literature. Interviews were intended to elicit participants' experiences in their work with supermax inmates and in supermax institutions. Grounding interview questions in the literature in this way was expected to ensure content validity because it ensured that questions and prompts were probing experiences relevant to the phenomenon of interest.

Utilizing a semistructured interview format allowed for participant responses to be elaborated on and clarified and provided the leeway for the interview to be guided (through topical probing) according to participant responses. I expected follow-up interviews to occur following initial data analysis because the qualitative coding and meaning-making processes oftentimes necessitate clarification or expansion (see Hennink et al., 2020), however there was no need for follow up interviews following the initial data gathering interview. To ensure accuracy, all interviews were audio recorded.

Participant recruitment began after receiving Walden University IRB approval. Once being granted approval, I recruited participants online through a supermax-institution affiliated listserv. Upon initial recruitment, participants received an email describing the nature and intent of the study, participant expectations, and informing them of confidentiality considerations and their right to withdraw their participation at any time. After signing to acknowledge receipt and confirm their understanding,

participants were asked to set up an interview time. Interviews were expected to take anywhere from 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted via telephone, and proceeded as described above. Following the initial interview, I permitted participants to ask questions, instructed them to remain cognizant of the potential need for clarification and elaboration, and verified contact information for this purpose. This cycle of recruitment and data collection continued until a point of saturation was achieved.

Data Analysis Plan

Following the initial interviews, I transcribed the audio recorded interview data. Transcripts were then coded according to a thematic coding procedure (see Saldaña, 2016). I divided interview transcripts into sections, grouped data according to similarities across participant responses, and coded with representative titles or phrases. Codes from this initial coding procedure were combined to form categories of overarching ideas; these ideas were analyzed further for emergent themes that were illustrative of participants' lived experiences. Although coding data by hand is a time-consuming and labor-intensive process, it has been argued that it is contraindicated to use computer software to code phenomenological data because such procedures do not facilitate data analysis in the phenomenological tradition (Peoples, 2021). Because there are no right or wrong answers when it comes to describing one's own experiences, there was no data that were considered discrepant. Thought of rather as conflicting accounts, I considered all data and reported all themes to produce a well-rounded understanding of the varying experience of supermax-affiliated individuals.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In this qualitative study, I paid careful attention to issues of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, because each domain acts as an indicator of research quality. Similar to the quantitative concepts of reliability and validity, these indicators of quality align with the epistemological beliefs and assumptions of the qualitative research (Peoples, 2021). Research that is said to be valid and reliable is believed to be scientifically sound; however, because the qualitative research paradigm places emphasis on the unique and individual experiences of research participants and because no two participants can have the same social reality, indicators of quality are thought of more as mitigators of threat rather than mechanisms that prove or disprove scientific rigor (Hennink et al., 2020).

In this qualitative study, I considered issues of trustworthiness continuously throughout all stages of the research endeavor. As noted by Ravitch and Carl (2016), the primary and most foundational way a researcher can ensure trustworthiness in their work is to ask appropriate questions and answer them using appropriate methods. The first way that I addressed trustworthiness in this study was in its design, wherein great precaution was taken to ensure that each facet of this study was well aligned and conducive to appropriately answering the research questions at hand. Beyond the appropriateness and alignment of the research design, several additional actions were taken throughout the study to ensure trustworthiness and qualitative rigor. For example, I established credibility both during and after data analysis; during analysis, credibility was ensured by considering and analyzing all of the data collected, even that which may have seemed

disconfirming or discrepant from other data collected. After data interpretation, I conducted member checking to ensure that participants' interview transcripts were accurate and portrayed the experience as the participants intended.

Finally, credibility was established through data saturation, which was the ultimate outcome of the interviews conducted in this study. I established transferability, or the extent to which results can be generalized across situations or individuals (Lincoln & Guba 1985), through thick description and direct quotations, such that experiences were described with thorough and illustrative detail and in the language and verbiage used by the individual to whom the experience belongs. As suggested by both Peoples (2021) and Ravitch and Carl (2016), dependability was established through triangulation. According to these authors, data triangulation involves juxtaposing the data collected through different sources or methods with one another so that they can be analyzed and interpreted as a collective whole. I established confirmability in this study through reflexive journaling and analytic memos, wherein biases were made explicitly known, reactions to and about the data were documented, and extraneous thoughts and influences were recorded. This process not only helped to suspend researcher bias and judgement by bringing them to my awareness, but it further allowed for reflection and debriefing as well as provided documentation of the social aspects of engagement that may be unique to the reciprocal nature of data collection through interviews (see Peoples, 2021; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2016).

Ethical Procedures

This qualitative research study did not commence until its proposal was accepted by Walden University's IRB; once all submitted materials were verified, this study was granted approval, number 05-05-22-0724990. To achieve approval, several ethical considerations were taken into account and a plan put in place for how they were to be navigated. This included issues related to participant recruitment and treatment of data.

The primary ethical issue relevant to this qualitative study was that the population of interest, supermax inmates, are considered a vulnerable population (Ross & Tewksbury, 2018). While this in itself does not make this research impossible, it should be additionally noted that beyond being vulnerable, this population is infamously difficult to gain access to (Ross & Tewksbury, 2018). For these reasons and to circumvent potential red flags throughout the IRB process, this study utilized secondary participants who have worked with supermax inmates rather than utilizing inmates themselves. Using secondary participants additionally provided a useful strategy for mitigating potential issues of power that may have been relevant in a researcher-inmate dynamic. Having done so, the only issue of power that remained relevant to this qualitative study was in the data interpretation stage, given that it is considered an act of power to interpret the data that are the experiences of others (see Hennink et al., 2020). While this aspect of power cannot be eliminated (as data interpretation is an outright necessity to qualitative research), it was controlled through member checks (to ensure that transcripts accurately represented what was intended by the participant), and interpretation was kept to that

which could be justified by the data, rather than extrapolated from it (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Social science research, generally, and psychological research, more particularly, are guided by several sources that delineate the standards for ethical procedures. Above all else, researchers aim to do no harm (APA, 2017); while this standard originated in the medical realm and was initially meant to refer to physical harm, it has since evolved to include psychological and social harm as well (Hennink et al., 2020). Because the topic of interest to this qualitative study was of a sensitive nature (as it dealt with mental health, a vulnerable target population, and could have been considered threatening to an institution) potential social harm was mitigated in the recruiting stage through the use of public social media platforms, namely Facebook and LinkedIn, rather than recruiting through supermax institutions themselves. This workaround was additionally intended to ensure confidentiality.

Once recruited, participants provided informed consent to move forward with participation. It was provided both electronically, upon agreeing to participate in the study, and verbally, in the interview prior to data collection. In addition to having received a detailed overview of the extent of the research conducted and the anticipated roles of both participant and researcher, the informed consent form included an explanation of the risks and benefits of participation, a statement of confidentiality, an overview of procedures, and a reminder that participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Confidentiality was ensured by removing identifiers from all data upon transcription and assigning participant codes to each transcript. Only I had access to participant information and transcripts and I was responsible for data collection, transcription, and analysis. The only dissemination of the data was the written results of this qualitative study; when direct quotations were used, they were anonymized.

Other potential ethical concerns such as conflicts of interest and use of incentives were mitigated by design: conflicts of interest were avoided by recruiting participants online and with no relation (neither personal nor professional) to me and participation was not incentivized in any way.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter 3 was to present to the reader an in-depth illustration of the methodology driving this qualitative study. The qualitative research paradigm was expected to produce data that would appropriately and adequately answer the research questions posed. As such, the details of this study as they pertain to participants, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis were described in sufficient detail that, first, this qualitative study achieved IRB approval and, secondly, that it can be replicated in the future. Issues of trustworthiness and indicators of quality were discussed as they pertain to this qualitative study and a discussion of ethical considerations evidenced the methodological rigor and scientific integrity that were included in the planning stages. Having delineated the methodological details of this qualitative study, the results are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of knowledgeable participants of supermax inmates to better understand the impact of supermax sentencing and supermax prison conditions on inmate mental health. The study was guided by two research questions:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of supermax inmates from the perspective of the knowledgeable participants who have worked with them?

RQ2: What are the lived experiences of supermax inmates that create an environment that fosters and/or exacerbates the mental health symptoms of inmates?

Qualitative research can prove useful for answering research questions that aim to explore the human experience (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). While there are several reasons that a researcher might explore a phenomenon from the qualitative research perspective (see Hennink et al., 2020), a few were especially relevant to answering the research questions in the current study. I deemed the qualitative research method most appropriate for this study because it allowed me to probe the experiences of individuals from their own perspectives, uncover the meaning that those individuals attributed to those experiences, and search for patterns and collective truths amongst the experiences probed. The use of a qualitative research method was chosen to reflect the underlying assumption that realities differ across individuals based on how each individual perceives them. Exploring participant experiences from a phenomenological perspective allowed

for similarities and differences in these realities to come to light and for me to attempt to make sense of the phenomenon of interest.

In this chapter, I discuss the qualitative pursuit that attempted to answer these questions and the resultant findings. Specifically, this chapter contained a description of the data collection and data analysis procedures used to explore the aforementioned phenomenon, relevant findings, and strengths and shortcomings of this study that are applicable to issues of trustworthiness in qualitative research.

Setting

In this qualitative study, I collected data in the form of participant interviews that were conducted via a recorded telephone call. These telephone interviews were initiated from my home office during business hours to ensure that the interview was conducted in complete privacy, with no chance of being overheard. Participants were reminded at the start of the interview that their responses would be kept anonymous and all identifiable information would be removed from the interview transcript. They were asked to situate themselves during the interview somewhere in their home or in another environment that allowed them to feel comfortable sharing their experiences with honesty and transparency. There were no known personal or organizational conditions affecting participants at the time of the study that influenced the interpretation of the data collected.

Data Collection

Recruiting and Informed Consent

Following Walden University IRB approval, I posted the approved research flyer on social media websites. To generate participant interest within the target population, I joined various social media groups with which knowledgeable participants could be reasonably expected to be affiliated. Examples include groups for Forensic Psychologists and Corrections Officers on Facebook and LinkedIn. The study was also posted on Walden University's Participant Pool, an online forum that advertises various research opportunities for Walden University students and faculty. Additionally, purposeful sampling was completed by sending the recruiting flyer via email to individuals known to be affiliated with supermax research, as identified from the extant literature. This resulted in a total of 50 emails. Altogether, the recruiting process lasted several months, from June 2022 to November 2022.

Interested participants were directed (via the approved research flyer) to email me, and I then initiated the informed consent process. To do so, I emailed the Informed Consent Form, created specifically for this study, outlining applicable procedures, risks, and benefits related to participation. Participants were instructed to respond, "I consent," indicating that they read and understood the information provided and wished to move forward with participation.

Procedures

Having established informed consent, the participant and myself then corresponded via email to schedule the qualitative interview. At the time of the telephone

interview, I called the participant, reminded them briefly of the purpose of the interview and that it would be recorded and requested that they situate themselves in a location that provided a comfortable level of privacy for them. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions before the interview began. As outlined in Chapter 3, the semistructured interviews followed a preapproved sequence of questions (which can be found in the Appendix) and contained additional follow-up questions and clarification probes when applicable. Participants were told to expect the interview to take anywhere from 30–90 minutes, and all interviews fell into this estimated duration.

Following its completion, I transcribed the interview. The transcripts were then returned to each participant via email so that they could be checked for accuracy; participants were instructed to make any changes or to clarify anything that read back in any way other than what they intended. Participants were given 2 weeks (i.e., 14 calendar days) to review their transcript and return edited material to me via email. They were also made aware in my closing remarks of their interviews that no response within the given timeframe would be treated as an accurate transcript not in need of changes.

Demographics

The purposeful sampling technique did not return any interest from potential participants and Walden University's Participant Pool resulted in one inquiry. The most effective recruiting strategy was posting the recruitment flyer on social media, which generated more interest and yielded two participants who were interested in moving forward and then completed the informed consent process and attended the qualitative interview.

Both participants were male correctional officers who had experience working with supermax inmates in the past 5 years and worked in supermax facilities that were part of larger, lesser-security facilities. Participant 1 worked in a multisecurity prison with a supermax unit, while Participant 2 worked in a maximum-security prison that contained a supermax unit. Interestingly, both individuals also had experience working in lesser-security institutions and with lesser-security inmate populations, including medium security and general populations, for example. While this did enable participants to compare and contrast supermax populations and conditions with lesser-security populations and conditions, it also introduced the necessity for me to clarify often which population was being discussed. The extent to which this is thought to have impacted the study is minimal.

Unusual Circumstances and Procedural Modifications

Due to issues with recruiting, procedural modifications were deemed necessary to keep the study moving forward and aligned with IRB standards for research approval. The recruiting strategies outlined in Chapter 3 of this qualitative study described a recruiting process wherein potential participants would be found via listservs kept by professional organizations, such as the APA and the International Association for Correctional and Forensic Psychology. This recruiting strategy was not possible because listservs were not available. Instead, the study was advertised as previously described on social media. Additionally, snowball sampling was not approved as a recruiting strategy for this study, so it was removed from the research plan entirely.

Regarding the data collection process more specifically, in Chapter 3 of this qualitative study, I discussed the plan for data to be collected until a point of saturation, which I estimated would take between 10 and 20 participant interviews to achieve. Because there was a lack of genuine interest to move forward with participation overall, data could only be obtained from two participants. While the consequences of this outcome are discussed in more depth in a later section, Limitations of the Study, it is worth noting here that as a result, data collection did not continue until the saturation point as proposed, and the total number of research participants fell far short of earlier estimation. Lastly, although follow-up interviews were an approved part of the research proposal, they were not necessary because post interview follow up was minimal and conducted via email.

Data Analysis

As proposed, the data analysis process used in this qualitative study followed the thematic coding procedure delineated by Saldaña (2016). Following the data collection and data organization stages previously described, I thoroughly reviewed each transcript by reading it through completely as a narrative, refraining from making any notes, comments, or connections to refamiliarize and immerse myself in the data to be analyzed. The second time I read through each transcript, I created stanzas of text to differentiate between each question-and-answer pair. The first round of coding then commenced, wherein each transcript was reviewed line by line and codes were given to concepts that could be pulled from the transcript verbatim and labeled with one or a few words. An example of this can be found in one participant's response regarding whose responsibility

it could be to send an inmate into segregation. The participant responded, “Back then basically your first-line supervisor, if you were an officer or a sergeant, if they were an immediate security risk, basically anybody.” In this first round of coding, the codes of first-line supervisor, officer, sergeant, and immediate security risk were assigned to the text.

Next, I reviewed each transcript line by line again, this time coding for concepts that were expressed using phrases or those that could not easily be translated into one-word codes. For example, when a participant responded to an interview question with, “no,” a meaningful code could not be pulled verbatim from the transcript. Instead, the code was given based on the overall idea that was represented in the response. In one case, I probed by saying, “a lot of the literature that I’ve been reading describes supermax sentencing conditions as inhumane, dehumanizing, violations of, you know, human rights, constitutional rights, would you say that that’s an accurate portrayal?” The response of no was coded as an inaccurate portrayal to represent the respondent’s opinion that the description provided was inaccurate. Once I had gone through all the data coding for individual words and phrases, I created a master code list that listed each code for the data set.

To keep the data set organized and manageable, duplicate codes were noted and removed. For example, the code mental health appeared in the data set eight separate times, so it was represented as mental health (7) on the condensed code list to represent the original code as well as the seven additional times the code emerged throughout all transcripts. I then condensed the data set further by combining codes that expressed the

same idea using different words. The codes of always cuffed and never without cuffs, for example, were combined and given one code. Similar codes were then combined into categories. One category that emerged, for example, was labeled characteristics of the facility and included codes, such as crowded, limited resources, warzone, and dangerous. Another category, different types of segregation included codes, such as protective custody, administrative seg, disciplinary seg, and segregation versus supermax.

Once categories of data had emerged, I uncovered themes by analyzing the relationships between the categories. Once a potential theme was uncovered, it then became a lens through which to filter data to find relevant trends, patterns, and relationships amongst the collective participant experience. One theme that emerged from the data, for example, was the experience of feeling vulnerable. Both participants expressed sentiments related to their safety, reflected in statements, such as “You go home every day just because [the inmates] permit you to,” and “I’m just walkin’ down the [prison] block, doing my normal thing and wondering, ya know, if this is going to be the moment where it happens.”

Because this study collected data that enabled the comparison of only two cases, there was no basis from which to conclude that any data were discrepant. For this reason, all data were considered in the analysis stages of this study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility has long been defined as the extent to which a study accurately reflects the reality of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I addressed credibility in this study

in two key ways. First, all data were considered in the data analysis to eliminate researcher bias in deciding what was important and/or relevant. This effort was continued in the initial coding procedures where codes were assigned from participant responses (rather than generated by me) to ensure fidelity to the participants' experiences by coding them with their own verbatim language. Secondly, I used member checking to ensure the validity of the data wherein participants' transcripts were returned to them to ensure that their written responses were translated from their oral interview responses accurately and as intended.

In the proposal of this study prior to any attempt at data collection, I wrote that I expected that credibility would also be ensured through the process of data saturation. Data saturation is defined as the point at which enough data has been collected that additional interviews no longer produce novel data (Saldaña, 2016). Due to the aforementioned challenges related to recruiting and the fact that data were collected from only two participants, a point of data saturation cannot be claimed. Thus, I can be said to have taken measures that make the current study credible; however, future research can enhance credibility by collecting data until a point of saturation is reached.

Transferability and Dependability

The extent to which a study can be replicated and its results generalized to other situations are what is referred to as dependability and transferability, respectively, in qualitative research (Peoples, 2021). I took care to ensure that all the research methods, decisions, and practices employed in the study were documented in a detailed manner such that this study could be reproduced, thus enhancing its dependability. Since the

findings of this study are well aligned with the extant literature and research on the topics explored here, the study's findings can be considered generalizable on a surface level because they coincide with previous descriptions of the phenomenon being explored and constructs that are closely relevant and related. However, because the number of participant experiences included in this data set are few, the extent to which the experiences explored here generalize to other individuals under similar circumstances and in similar settings cannot be determined without future research to collect additional experiences with which to compare. The insights that are provided in this study may be applicable to other populations and/or in similar settings, informing potential future research.

Another marker of transferability is the extent to which readers can make their own judgements about a study's findings so that they can determine for themselves the extent to which they appropriately describe the research phenomena in other settings, situations, or with other populations (Burkholder et al., 2016). Toward this aim, the results of this qualitative study (to be presented in the next section) are provided with direct participant quotations to elaborate on, support, and enhance the findings herein and ensure fidelity to the experiences that make up the data set.

Confirmability

As proposed in Chapter 3 of this manuscript, confirmability was established in this qualitative study through reflexive journaling and analytic memos (as suggested by Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Peoples, 2021; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). In so doing, I was able to identify my reactions to and about the data and bring to awareness

(as well as document) any potential for bias that I was introducing. Making it known allowed me to suspend those judgments during the data analysis process to ensure that findings were emerging exclusively from the data, rather than generated by researcher bias.

Results

Based on the data collected for this qualitative study, the lived experiences of supermax inmates take place in environments that are consistently under resourced and nonuniform in policy and procedure. This environment fosters feelings of vulnerability and is an experience that is described as significantly misrepresented in media portrayals.

Theme 1: Under Resourced

The theme of supermax institutions being significantly under resourced manifested in two different ways. As described by both participants, the institutions are plagued by problems related to being short staffed and underfunded. The lack of these resources seems to perpetuate challenges for those employees who remain, both in practical terms such as what can realistically be accomplished day to day, but also in terms of employee psychological protection, such that overworked employees tend to experience higher levels of burnout.

Subtheme 1.1: Understaffed

Both participants alluded to their respective institutions being understaffed, noting that this staff shortage has direct consequences for inmates as well as existing employees. Participant 1 said:

“In some of the other houses, the mental health people might not be nearly as visible and some basically stayed in their office all the time.”

“When stuff starts happening, like you know, chow is 45-minutes late or the light in their cell went out because maintenance is so far behind because of the poor handling of the prison...that makes the inmates mad.”

“Like taking their rec time because we don’t have enough staff.”

Participant 2 said:

“I mean that prison is, right now that prison is at, like 65% vacancy rate...for the staff.”

I’m gonna say subpar because I feel like there’s so much of a population and not enough mental health staff that it’s not...it’s just not feasible for them to, you know, develop an actual case plan that’s effective for each inmate.

And I think if we’re talking about like a normal, regular routine medical...eh...I guess, I guess subpar because I mean you’re gonna be waiting. You’re gonna be waiting longer than like, if I was to call the doctor and get into the doctor.”

“In fact, there’s even times where we’d be so busy, it’s like, you almost have to violate a policy. And maybe not always necessarily somebody’s constitutional rights but eventually it’s gonna happen because, I mean, there’s just too much going on, too short on staff.

“They did a thing where, because they were so short staffed, they went from three meals a day to two meals, but the second meal was enhanced it was...by the calorie count it was enough to be two meals.”

“They’re leaving faster and faster and the state’s not doing anything to remedy it and that in turn is making things worse and worse.”

Subtheme 1.2: Underfunded

In addition to be understaffed, both participants alluded to their respective institutions being underfunded, elaborating on the consequences for both inmates and employees.

Participant 1 said:

“You have some that’s gonna be ran right, you have others when the people in the supermax start cuttin’ corners and getting sloppy, that’s when officers die.”

Participant 2 said:

“So now you’re getting inmates in who have less and less to lose. Because they’re getting more and more time...I want to say it crowded the prisons a little more.”

“I think the state pulled a lot of the funding for [programming], we saw less and less of that. I don’t know if it’s because they were hard for money or not, but...”

In fact, there’s even times where we’d be so busy, it’s like, you almost have to violate a policy. And maybe not always necessarily somebody’s constitutional rights but eventually it’s gonna happen because, I mean, there’s just too much going on, too short on staff.

Yeah, so violence definitely correlates with how well the prison is ran. If it’s ran sloppy, not a lot of staff...they’re always going on lockdown because it’s ran sloppy, violence definitely goes up ‘cause inmates just want their routine. They want the same thing every day for the most part.

Theme 2: Policies and Procedures are Nonuniform

The second theme to have emerged from the data is a lack of uniformity in policies and procedures. In addition to variations in expectations due to a general lack of resources, participants were in agreement that policies and procedures tend to be followed and applied in nonuniform ways.

Participant 1 said:

“So basically, some of these rules that the groups come up with and demands that these groups come up with contradict each other.”

“It all depends.”

“It all depends on the COs.”

Participant 2 said:

“It’s just not feasible to develop an actual case plan that’s effective for each inmate because, I mean, it’s just too many of them and not enough time.”

“So, then the state’s reacting by changing policies and changing how they do stuff...It usually ends up in them locking people down more or, you know, everything’s delayed, everything slows down.”

I know I look at like other countries, I wanna say it’s like the Netherlands or something like that, I know their prisons it doesn’t even look like a prison, it’s like a vocation school with an apartment. And if they have those incentives of course they’re not gonna cause problems. But ours is just...load ‘em in and put ‘em in their cells and if they cause problems, they cause problems.”

“I mean, yeah, people do get their rights violated, I mean, there’s too much stuff that goes on in prison that even a person that’s well-versed with the law or understands, you know, the policies and procedures can’t always adhere.

Theme 3: Multiple Sources of Vulnerability

The third theme to have emerged from the data was that the conditions and practices in the supermax institutions where the participants in this study were employed led participants to feel like they were vulnerable from multiple perspectives. In addition to the vulnerability produced by pressure of Internal Affairs, participants expressed feeling vulnerable in regard to their safety, as well.

Participant 1 said:

“I’m great as long as I’m on my feet but if by chance [the inmates] were able to get me off my feet, I’m done.”

You had to be able to think differently. Like in the supermax, it is your own job to be on guard because they like to throw-they call it funning them down, gunning down an officer-there they’d throw, you know, a cup full of urine or feces on the officer.

“The opportunity for them to do something stupid was very minimal. Pretty much, if anything were to happen it'd have to be because somebody messed up.”

“Now, there’s always a surprise when you’re dealing with a prisoner.”

“You’re not working at McDonald’s, you’re working at a place where 150 felons, everything from a chomo to somebody who killed their parents and then ate their brains. So, you’ve got to remember where you’re at.”

There's cameras everywhere and I can assure you that as soon as things go bad, you have IA going through that footage frame by frame to make sure you did everything right, and in some ways looking for something that went wrong.

"You have periodically the officer who gets killed. Or gets beaten or gets shanked. And uh, you are constantly on guard."

When you're in supermax, even though necessarily you may not be getting gunned down, you are saturated in a negative environment. And that's wearing on the officers. While at the same time knowing that if you do have to, uh, become physical with anybody, be it hand-to-hand or using mace, every step that you did is going to be scrutinized by IA and administration.

"That's weighing on the self because you have, it's kinda like, you know, the enemy within and the enemy without."

"You don't really know who the enemy is. Very much when working in prisons, that is psychologically devastating. It's one of the reasons why prison guards are a unique animal."

"You go home every day just because [the inmates] permit you to."

"If they wanted to, you're dead. There's nothing you can do about it. Period."

Participant 2 said:

"it's just the constant feeling of always being, you know, a step away from like a life-threatening situation."

"Over time I guess it just affects you, like it's a switch you can't turn off."

"I mean, we get these threats all of the time."

“It definitely plays a huge mental game on you. You can’t show that you’re weak, ‘cause that’ll be even worse for you.”

“They’re gonna take it out directly on you. And there’s been instances where they’ve assaulted staff. Luckily, I’ve never gotten that end of that deal, but I’ve been close hundreds of times.”

“They just don’t feel safe anymore which is mainly what I hear from almost every staff.”

There was a time I remember I came into work and my Captain said, ‘you know [this gang] put a hit out on you?’ which means probably either bring stabbed or, could be anything, but. It was literally only, just over me doing my job. Like I shook them down too much and found contraband.

Theme 4: Misrepresentation of Experience

A final theme to have emerged in this study was the idea that the representation of supermax prisons, conditions, and inmates provided by the media is vastly inaccurate when compared to the lived experiences of participants. When asked directly, both participants agreed that the way supermax institutions and conditions are portrayed in the media and literature in a way that is misaligned with the realities they have personally experienced.

Participant 1 said:

“Some of these people that make up these objections [about constitutional rights] have never been in a prison.”

“Society looks at us as just babysitters.”

“Society looks at us as overpriced babysitters and we look at ourselves wondering if today I get to come home.”

“The first thing that comes to my mind is ‘bullshit’.

Participant 2 said:

“Yeah, so I don’t think, like, the whole rehabilitation thing, I don’t think they’re trying as hard as they can be. I think it’s just more making money.”

“No, not magnified the way that- I think people see it on paper or in the news and one instance [of inhumane treatment, dehumanization, violation of constitutional rights] becomes a hundred.”

Summary

In addition to presenting the results of this qualitative study, an overview of the data collection and data analysis procedures used to reach those findings was provided in Chapter 4. Relevant shortcomings and limitations were addressed through a discussion of each of the qualitative markers of trustworthiness so that results were presented with them in mind. The aim of this chapter was to explain this study to the extent that it could be replicated in the future; results were presented using direct quotes from each of the participants in order to illustrate and support the findings. In the next and final chapter, this manuscript will conclude with an interpretation of these findings and a discussion of the implications of this study in terms of positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of supermax inmates. Because this population is considered vulnerable and is difficult to access, I aimed to understand their experiences through the lens of knowledgeable participants (defined broadly as individuals who currently or recently worked in a supermax setting with supermax inmates) in this study. The key concept explored herein was the extent to which the mental health of supermax inmates is related to the conditions associated with supermax sentencing and supermax facilities.

Four themes emerged from data analysis, one of which was further deconstructed into two subthemes. As described in Chapter 4, the following key themes represented this study's findings: supermax prisons are underresourced, in terms of being understaffed and underfunded; policies and procedures in supermax institutions are nonuniform; supermax conditions foster feelings of vulnerability from multiple different sources; and supermax experiences, including the institutions themselves, the conditions under which they operate, and the inmates who inhabit them, are significantly misrepresented in the media.

In this chapter, I interpret the key study findings in relation to the extent literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and in terms of the theoretical framework upon which this study was based. Relevant limitations to the current study are discussed and recommendations for future research are put forth. Finally, I provide the implications of this study for positive social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this qualitative study both confirm and extend knowledge related to supermax prisons, inmates, and conditions in the existing peer-reviewed literature. As discussed in Chapter 2, several variables have been found to be associated with the psychological impact of social isolation and deprivation in general (i.e., in nonsupermax populations). In social control theory, Hirschi (1969) postulated that individuals who perceive a meaningful social bond to another will engage in pro-social activities and behaviors. The naturally derived inverse of this theory would then suggest that those who do not perceive such social bonds will be less likely to engage in pro-social behaviors. Wang et al. (2017) reported that social isolation can increase feelings of loneliness and alienation, causing an increase in symptoms related to mental illness. Observations published by Haney (2017) suggested that these same symptom profiles, including depressive symptomatology, suicidal ideation, self-harm, and psychoses, are relevant to the psychological devastation experienced by supermax inmates. The extant literature has further suggested that limited opportunities to heal and recover from psychological trauma tend to increase the likelihood of symptom exacerbation (Chadick et al., 2018) and that thwarted access to protective factors, such as social support, employment, and education, can act further to exacerbate mental health symptoms (Haney, 2017). Research on long-term sentencing in particular has shown that individuals will adaptively develop a reliance on isolated conditions, making reintegration into a social setting difficult and sometimes impossible (Butler et al., 2017).

While these exacerbating factors were not queried directly (e.g., participants were not asked, “Do inmates perceive meaningful bonds with others?”), adequate data emerged in the current study to suggest that some conditions in the supermax prisons where participants of this study were employed are consistent with those thought to exacerbate mental health symptoms. Several data suggested, for example, that supermax inmates likely perceive a lack of meaningful social bonds. Described as a “warzone” and portrayed as a place where people have less and less to lose the more time that they spend there, one participant seemed to agree that meaningful bonds do not thrive in supermax institutions. While both participants mentioned that inmates had face-to-face contact with prison staff on a regular basis (e.g., for medical appointments or to be transported), it should be noted that such interactions may not qualify as “meaningful” in a way that is psychologically protective. Participants’ attitudes toward inmates, for example, can be illustrated by the adjectives they use to describe themselves and their colleagues while on the job and as a direct result of it: “hypervigilant,” “burnt out,” “unsafe,” “always on guard,” and “ready to kill.”

Both participants alluded to the mental health struggles of supermax inmates, so it seems logical to assume that they are at least present. One participant seemed to suggest that there was little to be done by way of symptom resolution, saying, “I hear ‘em complaining about it all the time, but, I mean, what can you do when they’re causing problems outside of seg?” Participant 2 alluded to some of the mental health symptoms that are described in the literature, noting that inmates have claimed to have acted in accordance with the voices that told them to do things. It is clear that, at least on some

level, symptoms of serious mental health diagnoses are relevant. As has been long known, social isolation can produce demonstrable functional abnormalities in the human brain (Grassian, 1983), especially for those who have a preexisting mental health disorder (Wang et al., 2017).

Where existing mental health diagnoses are relevant, research has found that limited opportunities to heal and recover from trauma can lead to symptom exacerbation and retraumatization over time (Chadick et al., 2018). Several pieces of data in the current study suggest that, at least in the institutions in which participants in this study were employed, supermax inmates are not afforded much opportunity for rehabilitation or mental health care. Participant 2 alluded multiple times to staff shortages and limited resources. He described a process in which inmates could file grievances; however, he noted that they very rarely make it past even the filing stage. Thus, aside from limited opportunities for healing in the traditional sense via mental health treatment, inmates looking to heal from past trauma through administrative due process procedures may not be able to do so. Participant 1 described being in a supermax prison as feeling “saturated in a negative environment,” from which can be inferred that it is not a place that fosters optimism in term of rehabilitation or growth. Similarly, the extant literature suggested that access to social support and opportunities can be psychologically protective; however, both participants in the current study made it clear that such opportunities are limited, if not nonexistent, for supermax inmates. One participant described it by saying, “They just go from their cell to another concrete room.”

Finally, the literature suggested that long-term prison sentences lead to an adaptive response wherein an isolated individual will learn to rely on isolative conditions that make reintegration to nonisolated conditions difficult, if not impossible (Butler et al., 2017). The sentiments of the participants in the current study seemed well-aligned with this phenomenon. Terms, such as “can’t get it figured out,” and statements, such as “Course he’s going to find himself in seg...then he keeps doing it over and over and over again. He keeps going to seg over and over and over again” illustrate the potential truth in such findings.

Thus, although the findings of this qualitative study are limited in some ways (as discussed in the following section), the data collected and analyzed herein describe the lived experiences of supermax inmates from the perspective of the knowledgeable participants who have worked with them. The data suggest that these experiences support the allegation that supermax prison conditions create an environment that is consistent with the factors that foster and/or exacerbate the mental health symptoms of inmates.

Limitations of the Study

I identified two limitations that are especially relevant to the generalizability of this study’s findings. First, it is paramount to recall that the findings were obtained from a sample of only two participants, and for this reason, the claim cannot be made that data were collected to a point of saturation. While participant responses did overlap somewhat, it is extremely likely that continuing to collect data from additional participants would have revealed novel experiences and, therefore, novel data.

The second limitation to generalizing the findings presented here is that data were (albeit unintentionally) collected from participants who both identified professionally as correctional officers. It is extremely possible that novel data could be attained from gathering the perspectives of additional titles (e.g., psychologists or counselors who have worked with supermax populations or wardens of the facilities themselves). Because data were only obtained from participants who identified as correctional officers, it cannot be assumed that the phenomenon of interest has been thoroughly explored, considering the differences in perspective that may be applicable across disciplines.

Recommendations

In accordance with the aforementioned limitations, future research may benefit by studying this phenomenon with a broader sample. To ensure that enough data has been collected to adequately represent the experiences of supermax inmates, future researchers should collect data from a sample with more participants and until a point of data saturation can be claimed. To ensure a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of interest, data should also be collected from knowledgeable participants from a wider breadth of professional experiences. To do so, future researchers must ensure a research sample that is more varied such that data can be obtained from multiple professional perspectives.

Implications for Positive Social Change

Most prominently, this study has the potential to generate positive social change because it contributes to an admittedly sparse literature on a topic that is traditionally difficult to research (see Ross & Tewksbury, 2018). Despite the aforementioned

limitations, this study's findings help to bring awareness to the lived experiences of supermax inmates and enable a more thorough understanding of how those experiences intersect with the conditions of supermax prisons and the mental health of supermax inmates.

While the findings of this study certainly do not constitute a final, definitive answer to the debate described herein, they contribute a novel perspective to the growing body of knowledge. Though similar research (e.g., qualitative endeavors and research using secondary participants) does exist, such studies are considered out of date (e.g., Mears & Castro, 2006) and do not fill the specific gap in the literature that has been identified within the current study.

On a larger social scale, this study and others like it help to promote positive social change by exploring a phenomenon that is not only historically under researched but also one that may have serious consequences for the mental health status and psychological health of supermax inmates. By continuing to expand the extant literature on the topic of supermax conditions, sentences, and inmate populations, society is better positioned to understand how these variables intersect and interact so that the aims of supermax sentencing can be achieved without damaging the psychological well-being of those who incur it. Respecting individuals by minimizing harm in this way is not only aligned with professional ethics and standards but sets a moral standard for human decency in the way that society's invisible populations are treated.

Conclusion

While no single study can definitively answer the question of whether supermax prison conditions create or exacerbate mental health symptoms in supermax populations, the qualitative findings of this study do help to illuminate one facet of this larger phenomenon. While these findings are, of course, only a subset of what needs to be understood in relation to supermax prison conditions, they bridge an identified gap in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of supermax inmates from the perspective of knowledgeable participants. Future research should continue to build from this foundation to ensure that all persons, even those who are considered the “worst of the worst” are treated humanely and with dignity and respect.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about the supermax institution you work/worked for and about your role there.
 - a. Did your work ever involve direct contact with inmates?
 - b. If so, please describe the experience.
 - c. Which positions in your establishment have face-to-face contact with inmates?
 - d. Which positions in your establishment have verbal contact with inmates?
 - e. Are there any additional forms of contact with inmates that we haven't discussed?
2. How would you describe and define a supermax prison, from the perspective of a non-inmate employee?
3. How would you describe a supermax sentence, from the perspective of a non-inmate employee?
4. Some of the literature related to supermax sentencing describes supermax conditions as inhumane, dehumanizing, and in violation of both constitutional and human rights. Would you say that this portrayal is accurate, in your experience?
How so?
5. Can you tell me about the role of violence in your institution?
6. Can you tell me about the role of mental health, in terms of how it relates to both employees and inmates?

7. How would you describe the medical and mental health care offered to supermax inmates?
8. The recent and relevant literature often delineates a great debate in this field, the extent to which supermax prisons are harmful versus helpful. In your experience and opinion, do the conditions of supermax prisons impact the mental health of the inmates housed there? If so, how?
 - a. Can you provide an example?
9. Would you say that, in general, the usefulness of supermax prison outweighs any potential for harm that they may introduce?
10. In your work experience, did you either witness or know of an inmate whose mental health seemed to have significantly deteriorated during their time in supermax sentencing?
11. In your opinion, would you say that the use of supermax sentencing in your institution is well-regulated?
 - a. Please explain?
12. In your opinion, would you say that prison practice in your institution is well-aligned with policy and protocol?
 - a. In what ways?
13. Would you say that sentencing decisions are made in a consistent and uniform manner across situations?

14. Is there anything else about your experience or knowledge of supermax prisons, conditions, or inmates, that you feel could be important that we've not yet discussed?
15. This qualitative study is aiming for data saturation, which means that interviews will continue until no novel information is being reported. In the case that initial recruiting efforts do not produce a large enough sample to reach a point of saturation, a snowball sampling technique will be employed. Are you able to provide any referrals for research volunteers that can be contacted, if needed, for participation in this study?