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# Correctional Officers' Perceptions of Punitive Force in Solitary Confinement

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Abstract

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by

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BS, Fort Lewis College, 2007

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Solitary confinement in United States prisons is a common practice influenced by legal and human rights discussions. Physical conditions of the prison environment can cause somatic and psychological distress among correctional officers. The research problem is how lived experiences of solitary confinement correctional officers may influence punitive force perceptions. A positive outcome for inmates may be influenced by correctional officers who are unbiased in confinement, interventions, and treatment management. Positive inmate outcomes also rely on institutional functions. The purpose was to explore correctional officers' lived experiences and perspectives. The supporting theoretical framework is Weiner's attribution theory. The research question involved impacts of prison environments within solitary confinement on correctional officers' punitive force perceptions. A qualitative paradigm was used with a phenomenological approach. Semistructured interviews were conducted with four correctional officers who had experience working in solitary confinement units. Interviews were transcribed verbatim for hand coding and thematic analysis using NVivo software. Correctional officers' punitive force perceptions were associated with poor impulse control, lack of training, management control, ineffective programs, overlooked profession, and use of force decisions. Positive social change can be supported by increasing awareness of correctional officers' experiences in solitary confinement. The study results can be used to inform prison policies regarding restrictive housing and behavioral change outcomes.

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Dedication

Most importantly, I would like to thank my family, my greatest accomplishment. To my husband, David Oberholtzer, who continues to support my decisions to maintain growth and development. He shares the belief and conviction of a growth mindset, allowing us the opportunity to evolve as a family. His unwavering love and patience are unmatched, and for that I am humbled and grateful. To my children, Porter and Piper, who granted me the motivation to persist, and who constantly asked "Mom, when are you going to be a Doctor?" To my Mom, who exemplifies the ultimate Goddess and unknowingly inspires me to never settle or quit. From you, Mom, my persistence, perseverance, and work-ethic was born. Success does not happen on accident; it is a combination of hard work, perseverance, learning, studying, sacrifice, and most importantly, a love of what you are doing. I have my entire family to thank, for I could not have reached this point without their support, commitment, sacrifice, and never-ending love.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

**Introduction**

High-risk situations against *correctional officers* are common in *solitary confinement* settings (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2020). Correctional officers have continuous contact with inmates and directly influence the prison environment (Peterman et al., 2021). Frontline correctional officers are first-contact personnel responsible for supervising and meeting the needs of inmates. Correctional officers are at an increased risk of experiencing violence, injury, or death events. Risk perception and sense of security can be influenced by institutional characteristics that lead to differences in prison environments. Correctional officers' views of punishment can influence how authority is exercised (Peterman et al., 2021). Punitive treatment and increased institutional violations are often issued by correctional officers who have negative views of inmates.

Information about organizational constructs that relate to correctional officers' behavior and views toward inmates is lacking (Peterman et al., 2021). Atmospheres in correctional institutions are characterized by a general state of tension (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2020). Violence observed by correctional staff can result in indirect victimization. Reduced security and violence can be predictors of psychological well-being among correctional officers. Exposure to violence can result in lower perceptions of workplace safety. The mediating constructs of institutional characteristics on correctional officers' *punitive force* perceptions have not previously been researched. The impact of correctional officers' punitive force perceptions on coercive decisions are not well researched (Peterman et al., 2021).

Organizational structure and social climate within correctional institutions are important constructs in employment satisfaction (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2020). Potential for rehabilitation is influenced by correctional officers' attitudes of inmates (Peterman et al., 2021). Exploration of organizational constructs is necessary to inform effective correctional environments. Prison officials tend to support the use of solitary confinement for reductions in institutional disorder and violence (LaBranche & Labrecque, 2021). Solitary confinement can be associated with increased institutional rule violations and critical psychological damage. Little systematic research is available regarding the impact of solitary confinement on prison staff and operational structures (Mears et al., 2021b). Psychological and physical harm risks to prison staff within solitary confinement units can help inform prison policy.

Solitary confinement, correctional officers, and punitive force research in prisons are introduced throughout the remainder of Chapter 1. Punishment decisions are influenced by correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force in solitary confinement. The lived experiences of correctional officers working in solitary confinement are informed by punitive force perceptions. The limited outcomes of mental health and recidivism have been researched without focus (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force in solitary confinement are not well researched. New information about correctional officers' perceptions influence use of force decisions in solitary confinement. Human emotion and motivation as explained by *Weiner's attribution theory* (1974) is further explored in relation to correctional officers' punitive force decisions.

**Background**

Correctional officers' perceptions of inmates can be stigmatizing and inaccurate (Canada et al., 2021). Exposure to *guard subculture* can cause an influx in group loyalty, solidarity against inmates, and a code of silence (Worley et al., 2019). Prison staff play a significant role in the prevention of violent behavior among inmates. Inmates face challenges identifying and communicating emotions (Hemming et al., 2020). Decreased emotional expression awareness is a significant predictor of violent behavior in solitary confinement. Inmates can identify and overcome difficult emotions through changes in prison culture. Perceptions of inmates can be negatively influenced when correctional officers have difficulties with emotional expression (Canada et al., 2021).

Correctional officers deal with challenges related to organizational constructs such as limited autonomy and exclusion from decision-making processes (Evers et al., 2020). Individual-level constructs also impact officer stress such as perception of danger or violence from inmates. Workplace stress experienced by correctional officers can lead to unsafe practices within the prison facility. Correctional officers use a certain level of physical force to control inmates across all prison units (Ferentz, 2020). The use of force by correctional officers is synonymous with violence. Correctional officers' attitudes and behaviors influence inmates coping mechanisms including transitions back into the community at large (Boateng & Hsieh, 2019). Inmates can spend decades in solitary confinement despite limited evidence for positive impacts on disruptive and dangerous behaviors (Batastini et al., 2021).

Correctional officers must maintain an awareness of how responses to misconduct could influence long-term relationships with inmates (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020). Responses are *forward-looking* to consider how other inmates will perceive discretionary decision-making actions. Correctional officers have unique patterns of rule enforcement contributing to dispositional differences. Correctional institutions across the United States are impacted by significant challenges associated with understaffing (Mears et al., 2021b). Understaffing has become a misunderstood factor impacting restrictive housing operations. Solitary confinement is a highly complex policy requiring proper staff training and monitoring to be appropriately implemented (Mears et al., 2021a). Little is known about the full magnitude of solitary confinement impacts on correctional staff personnel (Salerno & Zgoba, 2020).

Correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force within solitary confinement have not previously been studied in-depth (Mears et al., 2021b). Psychological effects from confinement can negatively impact correctional officers' perceptions of inmates (Salerno & Zgoba, 2020). External conflicts experienced by correctional officers can lead to the use of physical force on inmates (May et al., 2020). Prison staff behaviors can impact the effectiveness of inmate outcomes (Mears et al., 2021b). Correctional officers use of force decisions can result from guard subculture or altered inmate perceptions (Worley et al., 2019). Maltreatment of inmates can result from guard subculture in solitary confinement. The influence of correctional officers' punitive force perceptions in solitary confinement have not previously been researched (Mears et al., 2021b).

The implementation of limits on prison system controls can improve contemporary penal practices (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Effective correctional environment designs require consideration of individual and organizational constructs (Peterman et al., 2021). Correctional officers' attitudes can serve as the focus of rehabilitation or punishment decisions in solitary confinement. The potential for rehabilitation depends on correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force. Correctional officers use of force in solitary confinement can result from insufficient training and high-stress work environments (Canada et al., 2021). Prison environments can be altered to promote pro-inmate attitudes by targeting correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force (Wade-Olson, 2019). Improved attitudes can serve as the groundwork for alternatives to incarceration and solitary confinement.

## Problem Statement

The impact of solitary confinement environments on correctional officers' lived experiences in Colorado correctional facilities is unknown. The research problem is significant from a psychological standpoint because correctional officers' perceptions of inmates may influence response tactics and prison policy concerns (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021; Mears et al., 2021b). The question of how work environment is experienced by correctional officers has not been qualitatively explored (Canada et al., 2021). Solitary confinement consists of an isolation component to punish inmates (Mears et al., 2021b). Inmates' perceptions of solitary confinement as punitive rather than alternative punishment can influence policy on restrictive housing (Mears et al., 2021a). Limited outcomes of mental health and recidivism have been researched (Aranda-Hughes et al.,

2021). Correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force in solitary confinement fills a gap in the research (Canada et al., 2021).

The goal of the study was to gain insight into how correctional officers' lived experiences working in solitary confinement influence punitive force perceptions. Disciplinary segregation is used in the United States to reduce problem behavior among inmates (Laws, 2021). Inmates' outcomes can be complicated by poor treatment within the prison system (Wildeman & Andersen, 2020). Correctional officers working in rehabilitation-focused units have more positive attitudes toward inmates (Peterman et al., 2020). Officer misconduct and compliance in prisons have not been sufficiently studied (Wildeman & Andersen, 2020). Correctional officer perceptions have been explored in limited terms and contexts (Mears et al., 2021b). The impact of solitary confinement environments on correctional officers' punitive force perceptions are not well researched. Future prison policy initiatives can be more accurately informed by addressing the gap in research.

Correctional officers remain one of the least studied professions across criminal justice systems (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). More qualitative research is needed regarding prison staff experiences (Dennard et al., 2021). Direct and indirect trauma experienced by prison staff can have a negative impact on mental well-being. Officers can assert selective nonenforcement to ascertain long-term advantages (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Correctional officers make certain enforcement decisions to avoid inflamed tensions across inmate subsets to maintain some order. Enforcement decisions are interaction-based, often anticipating possible downstream interpersonal and

organizational impacts. Correctional officers' discretional use requires forward-looking thinking based on considerations of the effects to immediate occupational environments.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how correctional officers' lived experiences working in solitary confinement influence punitive force perceptions. A phenomenological method was used to explore relevant phenomena, including internal and external constructs that influence perceived work environment. A phenomenological approach was used as encouragement for participants to present individual experiences. Phenomenological approaches can be used to separate events as experienced by an individual from a conventional understanding of the occurrence. Phenomenology is based on a philosophical theory designed to explore the way humans experience consciousness (Vilanova et al., 2021). The implementation of an inductive approach was used to better understand phenomenon or an event. Phenomenology is a methodological approach to understanding lived experiences.

Workplace conditions influence the perception of stress in prison environments (Paleksić, 2020). Organizational and operative stressors occur at higher rates in closed-type prison facilities. Closed-type facilities are characterized by increased security and higher levels of physical surveillance. Prison staff in higher security facilities experience heightened intensities of stress. Safety of prison staff and other inmates is foundational to prison policies (Winters, 2019). Correctional policies of solitary confinement are closely aligned with a punitive culture, rooted in concern for prison staff and inmate safety.

Decision-making processes are limited by punitive systems as it relates to restricted housing placement by correctional staff prompting possible ethical dilemmas.

## Research Question

Research Question (RQ): How does the prison environment in solitary confinement impact correctional officer perceptions of punitive force?

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study was guided by Weiner's attribution theory (Weiner, 2010). Human emotion and motivation are central tenets of Weiner's attribution theory (Pekrun & Marsh, 2018). Within-subject psychological functioning is assessed together with causal attributions. Causal attributions are necessary for the arousal of emotions such as anger and guilt. Changes in causal beliefs alter achievement-related performance (Weiner, 2010). Causal attributions are a necessary component in the arousal of various specific emotions (Pekrun & Marsh, 2018). A correlation between behaviors and perceptions depends on environment and knowledge (Talpade et al., 2012).

Changes in causal beliefs are related to achievement-related performance (Weiner, 2010). Misguided inmate stigma can perpetuate excessive force by correctional officers in solitary confinement. Motivation and achievement are key constructs of Weiner's attribution theory (Pekrun & Marsh, 2018). Weiner's attribution theory was used to better understand causal attributions and correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force. Inmate motivation can be positively influenced by shifting the knowledge and attitudes of correctional officers (Talpade et al., 2012). Attribution is partially characterized by the assumption that there are causal dimensions of behavior. Chapter 2

includes connections between causal attributions and correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force.

Motivational aspects of Weiner's attribution theory include interrelated constructs such as emotions, cognitions, and behaviors (Weiner, 2019). A qualitative approach was used to examine perceptions of punitive force in solitary confinement among correctional officers. Officer stress is complicated by added pressures of the prison setting itself (Evers et al., 2020). Risk of violence is a significant occupational threat emphasized by daily exposure to tense interactions with inmates. Prison culture is psychologically draining because of institutional characteristics such as regimentation and a need for hypervigilance (Evers et al., 2020). Interviews and follow-up questions of the study were guided by Weiner's attribution theory. Thematic analysis was used to explain a relationship between correctional officers' perceptions and the use of punitive force.

**Nature of the Study**

The study involves an exploration of correctional officers' lived experiences in solitary confinement environments. Qualitative exploration is necessary to gain insight into the complex nature of work environment constructs influencing correctional officers' punitive force perceptions. Correctional officers' exposure, knowledge, and training with punitive force in solitary confinement was explored. Correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force were identified using a phenomenological approach through semistructured interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A phenomenological approach helps to identify how the work environment in solitary confinement impacts punitive decision-making processes. Correctional officers' experience involves perception and emotion. A

phenomenological approach was used to collect unique perspectives and a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Smith et al., 2019).

The phenomenon evaluated was correctional officer use of punitive force in solitary confinement. *Deterrence* has been identified as the main goal of solitary confinement (Mears et al., 2021b). Violence is a hallmark of modern United States prison in which punishment is favored over rehabilitation (Ferentz, 2020). Policies on use of force are governed by each unique jurisdiction and facility (Ferentz, 2020). There is a continuous increase in use of force among correctional officers (Canada et al., 2021). Staff misconduct includes unnecessary escort tactics, hyper-confrontational staff behaviors, and improper use of chemical spray. Excessive correctional officer use of force has been experienced daily in jails across the United States (Ferentz, 2020).

Study participants were correctional officers currently or previously assigned to solitary confinement units in Colorado prisons. Informed consent forms were used with all participants. Semistructured interviews of participants were audio-recorded. Verbatim transcripts were generated through an online transcription service. NVivo qualitative software was used to organize and store data. Observations and interactions were integrated with the interview data. Thematic analysis was completed following hand coding.

<div align="center">**Definitions**</div>

*Code of the Street:* Codes which have evolved through oppositional culture in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Mitchell et al., 2021). The code centers on the use of violence and never backing down from fights.

*Convict Code:* A code or systematic rules that guide behaviors, beliefs, and interactions of inmates (Mitchell et al., 2021). The convict code encourages inmates to never back down, mind their own business, and avoid close relationships with correctional officers.

*Correctional Officer:* A correctional officer is an employee of the prison who is tasked with maintaining order, professional practice, and is responsible for enforcing institutionalized rules prescribed by individualized states (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020). A strict power relation exists between correctional officers and inmates.

*Deterrence:* The deterrent effect relates to unwanted behavior in a correctional institutional setting (LaBranche & Labrecque, 2021). Recidivism avoidance is promoted through deterrent effects of disciplinary confinement (Polinsky & Shavell, 2021).

*Department of Corrections:* The department of local government responsible for managing convicted offenders, overseen by individual state entities (Holland et al., 2020). Federal prisons are operated by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP), presenting possible discrepancies between state DOC and BOP policies.

*Forward-looking:* Discretion used by correctional officers requires considering the direct effect of actions on prison environments (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Forward-looking decisions directly correlate with the nature of officers-inmate relationships and immediate prison environments.

*Guard Subculture:* Guard subculture refers to the internal forces within a correctional institution that promote group loyalty, solidarity against outsiders, and a code of silence (Worley et al., 2021). Guard subculture regards offenders as the enemy.

*Participant:* A correctional officer working in or previously employed in a Colorado prison solitary confinement unit (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020).

*Prison Climate:* Prison environment characteristics that can influence behavioral aspects of inmates during and after confinement (Bosma et al., 2020). Also referred to as prison environment.

*Punitive Force:* The use of violence or punishment against an inmate for alleged misconduct committed within prison systems (Muhammad, 2022). Punitive force is also referred to as punitive sanctioning within the criminal justice system (Brown, 2020).

*Solitary confinement:* Solitary confinement is confinement to a cell for no less than 22 consecutive hours each day (Winters, 2019). Confinement is characterized by limited interaction with other inmates, limited programming opportunities, and reduced privileges. Known also as administrative isolation, closed type prison facilities, punitive segregation, and disciplinary segregation (Anderson, 2021). Solitary confinement can be applied to different types of prison housing assignments including administrative segregation, disciplinary segregation, and restrictive housing (Cloud et al., 2021).

*Subculture:* Subculture is a term originating from the intersection between sociology and ethnography (Lapshin & Galich, 2021). Prison subculture refers to spiritual and moral values regulating inmates living in a state of deprivation. Prison subculture reflects the moral norms and values of inmates.

*Tough on crime:* Strict criminal penalties imposed in response to violent criminal behavior or actions (Ferentz, 2020).

*Weiner's Attribution Theory:* Weiner's attribution theory was developed by Bernard Weiner. The original Attribution Theory was established by Fritz Heider and explains how people draw causal inferences for behavior (Weiner, 2010). Weiner's attribution theory is differentiated by sequential arrangement of behavior determinants and guided by grand views.

## Assumptions

Assumptions in qualitative research can negatively impact research (Durkin et al., 2020). Some assumptions may be necessary when using an exploratory approach such as qualitative interviewing. Any preconceived ideas held by the researcher were identified prior to conducting the study. A primary assumption was participants would answer all questions truthfully. A second assumption was that saturation would be reached. An ideal sample size in a phenomenological study is between four and six participants to reach saturation (Bartholomew et al., 2021). Saturation must take into consideration varying aspects of research design (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020).

The third assumption was qualitative interviews can elicit trustworthy data from participants (Fornaro et al., 2021). Qualitative interviewing is one way to explore participant truths across various contexts (Kekeya, 2021). A fourth assumption was that qualitative analysis was an appropriate approach to obtain data addressing the research question. The fifth assumption was correctional officers would be hesitant to participate. Some correctional officers consider the prison subculture as a necessary mechanism of social interaction within correctional institutions (Lapshin & Galich, 2021). Prison staff

can integrate into prison subculture to maintain a sense of authority. The final assumption was most Colorado correctional institutions maintain a solitary confinement unit.

## Scope and Delimitations

Standards for officer use of force in solitary confinement are minimal and lack oversight (Ferentz, 2020). Excessive correctional officer use of force is experienced by inmates daily. A gap exists in the scholarly research about constructs of work environment experiences related to punitive force decisions (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2020). The primary goal was to explore participants' punitive force perceptions in solitary confinement using a qualitative design and phenomenological method. Prisons are complex institutions operating under a hierarchy of power which necessitates a social research approach (Baldwin et al., 2021). Prison work can be a demanding experience increasing stress rates among correctional officers (Lambert et al., 2021). Exposure, knowledge, and training was explored in association with punitive use of force decisions (Canada et al., 2021).

The study was conducted with correctional officers currently or previously employed within Colorado prisons with solitary confinement units, more recently known as restrictive housing. Participants were limited to correctional officers currently or previously assigned restrictive housing oversight. Inmates' perceived experiences are impacted by contemporary penal practices (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Correctional officers' perceptions of isolation are complex and extend beyond current research. Weiner's attribution theory was used as a guide for behavior change with use of force decisions (Canada et al., 2021). Correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force were

evaluated through a systematic analysis guided by Weiner's attribution theory. Individual and organizational constructs were considered as factors influencing attitudes toward punitive force in solitary confinement environments.

This study included participant data across multiple Colorado correctional facilities. Results can transfer to other prisons systems in Colorado depending on individual facility policies and procedures. Transferability is the degree to which results of qualitative research can be transferred across other settings, contexts, or different respondents (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). The extent of similarity between two contexts suggests a transferability likelihood. Transferability is the ability to generalize findings across larger populations. Results of a qualitative study are transferable when the findings apply to other populations and contexts (Levitt, 2021). Triangulation was used to overcome intrinsic biases through the use of multiple data sources including interview transcripts, field notes, and a reflective journal.

## Limitations

The Hawthorne Effect was a potential challenge to the research study. The Hawthorne Effect refers to a change in behavior as a result of being observed (Rezk et al., 2021). Correctional officers are at higher risk for burnout due to emotional exhaustion, a sense of low personal accomplishment, and depersonalization (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Correctional officers have multi-faceted roles, including heighted exposure to violence leading to increased stress rates (Page & Robertson, 2021). Correctional officers are more vulnerable to experiencing work-related distress which can limit professional abilities. Correctional officers may not have fully disclosed individual actions or

behaviors toward inmates due to fear of disciplinary action. Consent from potential participants was denied for protection of anonymity during the recruiting process.

Participant mortality was one assumed limitation of the study. Participant mortality relates to the risk of participant drop out before research is complete. Correctional officers were hesitant to provide information to outside authorities. Correctional officers have a high rate of turnover (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Correctional officers experience high physiological, mental, and cognitive requirements leading to strain or burnout. Correctional officers must cope with various situations under a high level of stress. The chance of participant dropout increases due to high burnout rates (Mitchell et al., 2021).

Access to participants was restricted to online forms of communication. The code of silence was a significant challenge in recruiting participants. Prison facilities require advance approval to conduct interviews with any correctional staff. Bureaucratic restrictions within *Department of Corrections* (DOC) restricted on-site access to participants. Participants were instead recruited and interviewed off-site to maintain confidentiality and encourage authentic responses. Correctional officers working night shifts had limited availability to meet for an interview. Interviews were conducted through a video conferencing platform at the request of participants.

Self-reporting and researcher bias was one limitation of the research study. Biases can impact the accuracy of findings and trustworthy responses (Johnson et al., 2020). Personal bias such as a strong belief in prison reform can limit the ability to complete impartial research. Qualitative researchers are a research instrument themselves,

requiring transparency in the connection with a phenomenon (Peterson, 2019). The malleable nature of qualitative research involves inherent researcher biases on some level. Research bias may affect interactions with participants, follow-up questions, and data analysis.

Researcher bias was mitigated through a clear and focused research question that promoted trustworthiness (Johnson et al., 2020). Empathic neutrality assisted with researcher bias through the incorporation of self-monitoring and a reflective journal (Peterson, 2019). Verbal informed consent was necessary prior to engaging in interviews with participants. Participant confidentiality was maintained by assigning participant numbers in place of names. Appropriate permissions were obtained from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Establishment of early contacts at prisons levels to develop a collaborative research relationship were not necessary. Positive rapport with prison staff was achieved by building a positive relationship and maintaining open, respectful communication.

## Significance

Excessive use of force by correctional officers against inmates is an ongoing concern in prisons across the United States (Worley et al., 2021). Correctional officers participate in nonviolent abusive behaviors against inmates. Nonviolent abusive behaviors consist of more psychological as opposed to physical behaviors. Correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force in solitary confinement are addressed. Prison culture characteristics can lead to *staff-on-inmate victimization* (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2020). A better understanding of correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force can

lead to a reduction in punitive practices (Salerno & Zgoba, 2020). Little is known about the influence of facility-level constructs on violence and misconduct within correctional institutions (Randol & Campbell, 2017).

The effects of punitive force in prison is a continual issue that requires further research (Mears et al., 2021b). A better understanding of punitive force policies within solitary confinement help to fill a gap in the research. Punitive force by correctional officers remains an issue in prison systems. Effects of punitive force in prison systems are a continual issue requiring further research (Mears et al., 2021a). Correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force in solitary confinement were evaluated in this study. Prison culture characteristics can lead to staff-on-inmate victimization (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2020). Correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force can be targeted to move from punitive toward rehabilitation practices (Salerno & Zgoba, 2020).

Positive social change is achieved by expanding knowledge of officer perceptions on punitive force in solitary confinement. The impacts of punitive force decisions on correctional work environments advance existing understanding within professional psychology disciplines. Correctional officers' perceptions can be influenced by exposure, knowledge, and training. Findings are used to advance understanding of work-environment stressors that result in punitive force against inmates. Correctional officer training and education can improve inmate treatment outcomes. Improved inmate treatment and increased correctional officer well-being can influence positive social changes. Qualitative exploration of correctional officers' lived experiences can lead to improvements in future prison policy initiatives.

**Summary**

Contemporary use of solitary confinement in North American correctional institutions is overused and controversial (Batastini et al., 2021). Psychological distress is experienced among correctional officers as a direct result of the prison environment (Evers et al., 2020). Correctional officers' lived experiences working in solitary confinement influence perceptions of inmates and subsequent punitive force. A qualitative exploration of how work environment is experienced by correctional officers fills a gap in knowledge (Canada et al., 2021). Increased exposure to assaults experienced by correctional officers complicates the balancing act between humane care and protection from harm (Batastini et al., 2021). Solitary confinement uses isolation as a punishment tactic (Mears et al., 2021b). Correctional officers' perceptions of barriers are needed to better understand previous studies (Batastini et al., 2021; Mears et al., 2021b).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how correctional officers' lived experiences working in solitary confinement influence punitive force perceptions. Relevant phenomenon was explored using a phenomenological approach. Internal and external constructs were examined to better understand the impact on perceived work environment. Perception of stress in solitary confinement environments are influenced by workplace conditions (Paleksić, 2020). Closed type prison facilities can induce increased organizational and operative stressors. Prison environments inherently affect prison staff and prisoners leading to repressed communication of emotions (Hemming et al., 2020). Phenomenological data collection processes from interviews can be used to encourage rehabilitative policy initiatives within the penal system.

Connections between correctional officers' use of force decisions and guard subculture factors have been identified by researchers (Worley et al., 2019). Negative implications of guard subculture relate to solitary confinement where maltreatment is experienced by some inmates. An exploration into how correctional officers' solitary confinement perceptions influence punitive force decisions was previously lacking (Mears et al., 2021b). Staff-on-inmate victimization is one result of prison culture pressures (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2020). Prison policy initiatives can benefit from an enhanced understanding of correctional officers' punitive force perceptions in restrictive housing facilities (Salerno & Zgoba, 2020). Authoritative responses and interactions with inmates are influenced by correctional officers' views of punishment (Peterman et al., 2021). Chapter 2 conceptualizes current research regarding correctional officers' perceptions, discrimination, variability in punishment decisions, prison policy concerns, correctional work environment impacts, misconduct, and deprivation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore how correctional officers' lived experiences in solitary confinement may influence punitive force decisions. A phenomenological approach was used to encourage participant presentation of individual experiences and perceptions in an open format. Individual and organizational factors within prisons influence correctional officers' punitive perceptions (Peterman et al., 2021). Employment within carceral settings can be overtly stressful (Mears et al., 2021b). Correctional officers' experiences working in solitary confinement can offer insights not readily available from administrative records (Mears et al., 2021a). Perceptions about inmate behavior are influenced by job stress, power dynamics, and personal beliefs (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Correctional officers' perceptions were explored through qualitative analysis using a comprehensive approach to gain a better understanding of individual experiences.

United States federal and state correctional administrators have relied on restrictive housing for decades (Mears et al., 2021a). Little research is available on the perspectives of correctional officers regarding solitary confinement (Mears et al., 2021b). Limited resources and lack of training are institutional setbacks experienced by correctional officers outnumbered by inmates (Wade-Olson, 2019). A culture of harm among correctional officers is common in solitary confinement units (Luigi et al., 2020). Physical force is sometimes used to control or disengage problem behavior by correctional officers who have negative views of inmates (Peterman et al., 2021). A

relationship between individual and organizational factors relating to correctional officer attitudes toward inmates has been found in previous research. More research is needed on correctional officers' attitudes toward inmate treatment.

The iterative research search strategy utilized is included in Chapter 2. Justification is provided for key terms selected, library databases used, and the iterative search processes conducted. A synthesis of research on Weiner's attribution theory is also included in Chapter 2 as it relates to the study phenomenon. Current peer-reviewed research on key concepts related to the study are thoroughly reviewed. Studies related to key constructs including prison environment, misconduct, deprivation, solitary confinement, variability in punishment decisions, and prison policy concerns are summarized. Existing research on the study phenomenon is analyzed, synthesized, and interpreted to identify a research gap. Prisons can be stressful, violent, and traumatic work environments (Taylor & Swartz, 2021). A phenomenological approach was used to facilitate an understanding of how restrictive housing is experienced and influences punitive decisions by correctional officers.

**Literature Search Strategy**

Several online databases were used to explore scholarly articles on the phenomenon of interest. Online library databases from Walden University were searched, including ERIC, PsycARTICLES, PsycINDEX, SAGE, and the Thoreau Multi-Database Search. The Google Scholar search engine was also used to explore peer-reviewed journal articles. Boolean phrases and independent terms were used to narrow research results. Thoreau Multi-Database was used to find research on correctional officers'

perceptions of punitive force, solitary confinement work environment constructs, and Weiner's attribution theory. Search parameters were applied to the search process limiting results to peer-reviewed articles published from 2019 through 2022. Publication dates were not limited when searching Weiner's attribution theory.

The key search terms *solitary confinement, correction officer, punitive,* and *attribution theory* were searched in Thoreau Multi-Database and Google Scholar to ascertain applicable keywords for additional searches (*administrative segregation, hostility, isolation, prison employee, prison guard, prison personnel, prison staff, punishment, restrictive housing,* and *Weiner's attribution theory).* The keyword selection process was refined based on common subject terms generated in each search. Various combinations of identified keywords were used within the Thoreau Multi-Database to narrow search results. Boolean operators (and, not) were combined with key search terms and enhancers (*) to optimize the search results. Key terms were searched individually and combined in various arrangements across all databases to confirm a thorough exploration. Google Scholar searches produced research articles that were accessed through the Walden University Thoreau Multi-Database. The search process revealed overt deficiencies regarding a lack of understanding relating to correctional officers' punitive force perceptions in solitary confinement.

A reoccurring theme that emerged in searches was the lack of qualitative considerations examining correctional officers' perceptions within solitary confinement settings. Various peer-reviewed, empirical articles pointed out a need for additional research on the topic (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2020; Mears et al., 2021b; Salerno &

Zgoba, 2020). Research parameters were broadened to explore the primary topic and

collect more in-depth information on phenomenon in question. A thorough search of

correctional officers' perceptions in solitary confinement was conducted to identify

relevant studies published within the past four years. A search for peer-reviewed journals

published between 2019 to 2022 produced an abundance of articles relating to solitary

confinement and inmate perceptions. Current research published between 2020 and 2022

lacks correctional officers' perceptions in solitary confinement units specifically.

Relevant scholarship on the topic was identified through careful consideration of all

research containing applicable information relating to correctional officers' punitive force

perceptions.

## Theoretical Foundation

Attribution theory originated in 1958 following the publication of Fritz Heider's

book, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (Weiner, 2019). The theoretical

underpinnings of attribution theory began to expand in the mid-1960s, inspired by

Edward E. Jones and Harold Kelley (1967). The concept of achievement was later

factored into attribution theory by Bernard Weiner in 1974 (Weiner, 2018). Weiner's

attribution theory incorporated motivational aspects into the existing theoretical structure

(Weiner, 2019). Motivational concepts integrate a need for achievement (Weiner, 2010).

Weiner's attribution-based theory of personal motivation applies across motivational

domains (Weiner, 2010). Causal properties are a vital component of Weiner's attribution

theory.

A fundamental assumption of Weiner's attribution theory is that thinking escalates feelings and guides action (Weiner, 2010). Feelings are experienced as opposed to being anticipated, causing stimulated action. Motivational sequences are initiated by unexpected and negative events involving causal beliefs (Weiner, 2018). Properties of causes elicit emotions that intersect the motivational sequence. Motivational sequences are linked by thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Causal thinking is an integral factor of motivated behavior. Weiner's attribution theory is grounded in the idea that causal beliefs reside within or outside an individual (Weiner, 2019).

Attribution-based theories are applicable to various domains of psychology (Weiner, 2018). Causality is a foundational aspect of most attribution approaches. Causal dimensions maintain some level of independence, such as aptitude, effort, luck, and task difficulty (Weiner, 2018). Cognitions, emotions, and behaviors are interrelated constructs involved in attribution theory (Weiner, 2019). Behavior involves causal search and beliefs that filter into motivated action (Weiner, 2018). Human causality is subsidized by complexities including causes that elicit emotions. Emotions are linked to action with motivational progressing from causal beliefs to emotions then behavior.

Intrapersonal effects can be impacted by cognitive, behavioral, and emotional consequences of causal attributions (Brun et al., 2021). A failure to help others can occur when intentional harm influences inferred responsibility, causing negative emotions (Caprara et al., 1997). Outcomes perceived as unexpected, important, or negative can initiate the attribution process (Brun et al., 2021). Consequential factors of prison work environments on correctional officers' mental health and subsequent burnout rates have

been identified in subsequent studies (Mitchell et al., 2021; Wade-Olson, 2019). Sense of security can lead to burnout in correctional officer samples (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2020). Help-seeking within prison systems is often avoided because correctional officers lack trust in employee service providers (Wills et al., 2021). Feelings of insecurity among correctional officers can cause stress which factors into burnout (Isenhardt & Hostettler, 2020).

Moral self-effect refers to a qualitative transformation of identity (Gomez-Lavin & Prinz, 2019). Personal identity plays a role in attributions of moral responsibility. Perceived identity change can influence reduced responsibility. Moral self-effect in a prison setting can lead to reduced responsibility for past behavior. A positive relationship was found between punishment motivation and moral change in criminal samples. Reduced desire to punish criminals followed changes in moral self (Gomez-Lavin & Prinz, 2019). Attributions of responsibility are influenced by character which impacts moral rehabilitation (Gomez-Lavin & Prinz, 2019).

The role of causal dimensions in achievement contexts are included within Weiner's attribution theory across various studies (Brun et al., 2021). Cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions have been linked with controllability causal dimensions. Attribution perspectives suggest that sympathy and anger influence prosocial versus antisocial responses (Caprara et al., 1997). Sympathetic feelings toward group members not responsible for personal, physical, or psychological dilemmas have been documented. Anger is perpetuated following responsibility for an unfavorable outcome or action. *Locus of cause* refers to internal or external factors that impact a person (Hareli &

Weiner, 2000). Causes are considered stable over time and uncontrollable by the individual.

Weiner's attribution theory was a prevalent theory within educational psychology and has since expanded to a wider range of applications (Brun et al., 2021). Various fields of psychology have applied Weiner's attribution theory to study motivation. Weiner's attribution theory is used to explain cause as an external factor which is controllable by others (Weiner, 2010). Feelings are directed by thoughts and emotions elicited through achievement contexts. Strong emotions are influenced by beliefs regarding causal controllability linked to behaviors of others. Thinking activates feelings which influence action. Correctional officers have reported despondent feelings as a result of being devalued and misrepresented by the media (Baldwin et al., 2021).

Motivation can be understood through individuals' reactions to positive or negative reinforcements (Brun et al., 2021). Weiner argued that people attempt to understand the environment by adapting behavior in accordance with outcomes. Intrapersonal processes are influenced by attributional mechanisms. Self-directed emotional reactions are produced within a controllability dimension which influence motivation and future behavior. Prison environments which lead to misconduct are caused by painful experiences (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force are influenced by motivational factors impacted through the prison environment. Correctional officer well-being has been excluded from academic research and absent from policy discussions (Hayden & Huth, 2020).

The research question in this study is related to impacts of solitary confinement environment on correctional officers' punitive force perceptions. Weiner's attribution theory is one way to understand how self-doubt and stable beliefs about failure inhibit motivation (Weiner, 2010). Risks posed by inmates with persistent delinquent behavior can be minimized in solitary confinement (Howard et al., 2020). Segregation has been used to support an environment of motivated offenders. Correctional officers assigned challenging tasks in solitary confinement can lead to increased effort levels (Weiner, 2010). Prison climates involve high-expectancy tasks which risk external rewards. A better understanding of motivational factors involved in punitive force decisions adds to existing theory.

## Literature Review Key Concepts

Correctional officers face conflictive interactions with inmates in daily work responsibilities (Martinez-Inigo, 2021). Job stress, power dynamics, and personal beliefs can influence correctional officers' perceptions (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Prison violence against correctional officers can have significant consequences including post-traumatic stress and burnout (Sydes et al., 2020). Solitary confinement has been used as a substitute or last resort to motivate inmate compliance with rules (Mears et al., 2021a). Inmate demographics appear to be racially disproportionate in solitary confinement (Lovell et al., 2020). Conditions and restrictions are similar across prison facilities despite the differences in solitary confinement purposes (Pullen-Blasnik et al., 2021). Prison misconduct charges are subjectively decided upon at correctional officers' discretion (Pullen-Blasnik et al., 2021).

**Prison Environment**

Inmate protection from physical and other harm is a central priority of correctional officers (Howard et al., 2020). Correctional officers are disproportionately exposed to a range of risks, dangers, and stressors that cause poor mental health outcomes (Smith, 2021). Scholars created categories to group common features of potential risk factors. Violence exposures, overcrowding, limited organizational support, long shifts, and exhaustion all heighten levels of stress for correctional officers (Wills et al., 2021). Lack of access to services and little perceived support within prison environments discourage correctional officers from addressing psychological distress. Enhanced relationships with colleagues, training courses, and multidisciplinary work can improve organizational climates (Testoni et al., 2021). Empathy toward inmates is one strategy used by some correctional officers to move toward improved overall well-being.

Dilapidation, noise levels, limited access to natural lighting, and privacy are physical conditions which can cause psychological distress among correctional officers (Evers et al., 2020). Deprivations of solitary confinement have been identified by correctional officers as an explicit harm to inmates (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Inmates are subjected to painful experiences in solitary confinement. Inmates are hesitant to communicate mental health needs to correctional staff (Augustine et al., 2021). Mistrust between inmates and correctional officers, combined with limitations of the physical environment, can undercut mental healthcare efforts. Structural aspects of solitary confinement can reduce prison environment efficacy. Physical conditions of prisons can cause harm to correctional officers' mental health and well-being (Fusco et al., 2021).

Prison environments are perceived differently across individual correctional officers (Antonio & Price, 2021). Diversity in prison populations should be considered when studying issues related to solitary confinement (Laws, 2021). Correctional officers are responsible for managing many aspects of the prison environment (Smith et al., 2019). Distress caused by role ambivalence is common among correctional officers tasked with organizational challenges and environmental conditions (Testoni et al., 2021). Daily contact with inmates is highest among correctional officers (Antonio & Price, 2021). Prison environment structures can prevent effective communication of emotions among inmates and correctional officers (Hemming et al., 2020). Inadequate communication between inmates and correctional officers can lead to harassment and stigma (Azemi, 2020).

Correctional officers are considered protective service personnel who are employed to protect specific populations (Wills et al., 2021). Continuous exposure to high-stress environments can increase the likelihood of psychological distress for those working in protective services. The institutional culture of prison underlines an environment marked by emotion suppression. Denial of stress is common among correctional officers who seek to maintain a hypermasculine image (Evers et al., 2020). Anger and violent responses are more acceptable or better understood in prion (Hemming et al., 2020). Objective markers indicate that stress can negatively impact correctional officers' health (Evers et al., 2020). Cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal problems, and diabetes have all been implicated as stress-related health problems among correctional officers (Evers et al., 2020).

Staff shortages can cause excessive job demands and unreasonable workloads (Ellison & Caudill, 2020). Correctional staff turnover averages roughly 35% per year (Smith et al., 2019). Staff turnover leads to a reliance on inexperienced correctional officers in an environment that requires specialized training and work experience (Mears et al., 2021b). Work stress among correctional officers has been linked to support, control, and safety related perceptions on the job (Ellison & Caudill, 2020). Correctional officers are at increased risk of exposure to violence and trauma compared with other prison staff personnel (Taylor & Swartz, 2021). Correctional staff shortages in federal and state prisons have also been linked with insurmountable role expectations. Correctional officers are unable to maintain safety and security with unreasonable workload expectations (Ellison & Caudill, 2020).

Inmate interactions are a significant source of stress for correctional officers (Martinez-Inigo, 2021). Job dissatisfaction has been positively associated with unfavorable appraisals of inmates (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Punitive attitudes and lack of empathy toward inmates are common among correctional officers (Antonio & Price, 2021). Inmate relationships with staff are influenced by moral and emotional dimensions (Auty & Liebling, 2020). Negative manifestations of inmate-officer relationships can be exhibited through frustration and violence. Contempt for women can motivate male inmates to engage in aggressive behavior toward female correctional officers (Jones et al., 2020). Confinement conditions cause psychological and environmental deprivations that lead to perceived lack of control (Mitchell et al., 2021).

Inmates are categorized by legal labels received prior to being booked into prison which encourages a lack of empathy among correctional staff (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021). Categorization is often guided by violent history and risk of future misconduct (Howard et al., 2020). Intensity of controls in solitary confinement differ from general population. Increased levels of administrative control and higher victimization rates in segregation are consistent assault predictors. Frustrations communicated by inmates toward correctional officers often leads to punishment including solitary confinement sanctions (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021). Inmates perceive punishment as the main objective of prison (Azemi, 2020). Distrust of the system is reinforced when inmates lack a safe environment to express their feelings (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021).

Inmate perceived injustice and sheer malice by correctional officers leads to hostility (Tayer et al., 2021). Perceptions that correctional officers have ill intentions can lead inmates to act violently. Punishment can lead to a culture of deception and resourceful misbehavior (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021). Learned helplessness and depression can result from a feeling of disconnection. Depression, tension, and fear are common behaviors experienced by inmates in relation to the prison environment (Azemi, 2020). Prison is perceived negatively by most inmates. Inmates housed in solitary confinement are more likely to be victimized when compared with prison general populations (Howard et al., 2020).

Interactions with correctional officers and prison experience have influenced inmates' formation of the *convict code* (Mitchell et al., 2021). The convict code is a set of inmate-defined and inmate-regulated guidelines that govern interactions with correctional

staff. Pervasive convict codes are influenced by the *code of the street*. The code of the

street and convict codes exist in opposition to correctional officers. The code of the street

relates to informal rules that govern behavior and social interactions. Correctional

officers adhere to a separate set of codes which govern their actions on the job (Higgins

et al., 2022). Prison staff rely on a set of codes to guide how they treat one another and

complete work tasks.

Direct oversight of inmates is hindered by increasing prison populations and can

lead to social disorganization (Howard et al., 2020). Staff-inmate relationships have been

correlated with prisoner misconduct (Bosma et al., 2020). Language proficiency is one

example of a barrier between productive staff-inmate relationships (Mears, Brown, et al.,

2021). Higher security facilities are linked with greater risk of misconduct (Daquin &

Daigle, 2021). Inmate violence can be associated with efforts to maintain control in the

prison environment (Howard et al., 2020). Higher staff-inmate ratios relate to lower self-

reported misconduct (Bosma et al., 2020). Existing resources for special housing units

become strained with increased prison populations (Howard et al., 2020).

Emphasis placed on aggression, toughness, and dangerousness within prisons

influences hypermasculinity development in correctional environments (Wills et al.,

2021). Hypermasculinity is a tool used by correctional officers for protection and

survival. Correctional officers are expected to be authoritative, courageous, and fearless.

Toxic masculine values and expectations of prison environments negatively influence

correctional officers' ability to communicate feelings (Hemming et al., 2020).

Correctional officers' reluctance to request psychological help can motivate avoidance

tactics such as dehumanization behavior toward inmates (Testoni et al., 2021).

Correctional officers' lack of self-confidence in their own competencies can be caused by

unclear role identities. Emotion suppression or any appearance of weakness is suggested

upon employment to establish an independent and tough presence (Wills et al., 2021).

      The rate of violent assaults against correctional officers has been increasing

across various countries (Sydes et al., 2020). Nonfatal occupational injuries requiring

time off was exponentially higher in 2015 for correctional officers compared to U.S.

workers overall (Haynes et al., 2020). Correctional officers experience increased risk of

victimization for psychological aggression and patterned spontaneous attacks (Isenhardt

& Hostettler, 2020). Injuries and illnesses experienced by correctional officers are mainly

the result of violence (Haynes et al., 2020). Victimization occurs when inmates

undermine prison order (Howard et al., 2020). Prison order is maintained by limiting

misconduct (Campbell et al., 2020). Prison order can successfully be maintained through

improved relationships between correctional officers and inmates.

      Correctional officers die earlier when compared to the general public evidenced

by a low mortality rate averaging 59 years of age (Smith, 2021). Lower rates of mental

health have been reported for correctional officers when compared to first responders,

security occupations, and counterparts in the criminal justice field. The United States

Department of Justice administration reported mental and physical health risks as a

potential danger for correctional work (Fusco et al., 2021). Approximately one-third of

correctional officers suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from

exposure to violence on the job (Taylor & Swartz, 2021). Inmate-related stressors impact

correctional officers most profoundly. Symptoms of PTSD can impact correctional

officers' personal relationships and job performance. Half of prison populations suffer

from mental illness which commonly manifests into self-harm.

**Misconduct and Deprivation**

Correctional officers' ability to maintain order is challenged by misconduct of

disruptive inmates (Daquin & Daigle, 2021). Inmates with tendencies toward misconduct

are often isolated in restrictive settings (Howard et al., 2020). Segregation is intended to

moderate risks posed by misbehaved inmates. Behavior is influenced by human social

interactions (Reidy & Sorensen, 2020). Prison incarceration involves deprivations which

disrupt social connections and outside support. Deprivation and time served is linked

with increased likelihood for engagement in misconduct (Daquin & Daigle, 2021).

Behavior in prison may be associated with total hours spent in isolation.

Extended periods in solitary confinement lead to deprivation of relationships,

liberty, and autonomy (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Increased deprivations experienced

in isolation can be painful for inmates. Inmates develop feelings of inadequacy and

assume particular social roles. Solitary confinement punishments have been tolerated by

some courts despite the profound sensory deprivations experienced in isolation (Sakoda

& Simes, 2021). Inmates in solitary confinement are deprived basic human needs such as

human contact. Long-term isolation has been linked with escalating misconduct upon

release (Picon et al., 2022). The placement of high-rate offenders in solitary confinement

increases less serious misconduct violations.

Prison subculture has been adapted from the code of the streets and is centered on violence (Daquin & Daigle, 2021). Perceived transgressions necessitate retaliatory responses by inmates. Adherence to prison subculture increases the likelihood of engagement in misconduct. Subcultural demands and an attitude of violence are emphasized by career criminal mindsets (Reidy & Sorensen, 2020). Most inmates in restrictive housing units were previously disruptive in general population or have been charged with violent crimes. Solitary confinement may also be preferred by some inmates who are seeking more control over their own environment (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Gang members have less control over non-gang members in solitary confinement.

Isolation panic is experienced by inmates who perceive their confinement as unjust (Tayer et al., 2021). Effects and experiences of solitary confinement can be better understood through Sykes (1958) deprivation theory (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Prisoner adaptation is associated with oppressive conditions of confinement (Bosma et al., 2020). Moral rejection by society is replicated in solitary confinement and can be more challenging than physical imprisonment (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Prison practices originally designed to manage dangerous inmates are excessively punitive (Tayer et al., 2021). Inmates often feel heightened frustration, anger, and hatred levels toward representatives of the criminal justice system which gets taken out on correctional officers. Violence toward prison staff can result from isolation panic.

The importation model challenges Sykes deprivation theory which postulates that prisoner behavior manifests from inmates' pre-arrest beliefs, experiences, and attitudes (Bosma et al., 2020). Misconduct has been directly related to gender, age, and ethnicity in

studies focused on physical deprivations. Engagement in misconduct is more likely from Black inmates, individuals with aggressive personalities, males, younger prisoners, and those without children (Abderhalden et al., 2020). Security level and sentence length may increase the likelihood of misconduct. Gang members coerce non-gang members to engage in misconduct (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Inmates are more likely to experience victimization in prison when engaged in misconduct (Daquin & Daigle, 2021). Less is known about the influence of social deprivations such as staff-inmate relationships on prisoner misconduct (Bosma et al., 2020).

**Solitary Confinement**

Solitary confinement is the act of isolating an inmate to a cell for no less than 22 hours a day (Sakoda & Simes, 2021). Highly restricted access is the underlying factor to solitary confinement. Meaningful social interaction, visitation, and programming are reduced in segregation units (Labrecque et al., 2021). Solitary confinement has historically housed the most criminogenic offenders across prison populations. Prison administrators in the United States have historically sought to contain unruly inmates. Roughly 66,000 inmates are placed in solitary confinement settings each year in the United States alone. Solitary confinement is one of the most severe punishments imposed in prison (Labrecque et al., 2021).

Mandated policies within solitary confinement units require gender-specificity (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Correctional officers assigned to solitary confinement units must be the same gender as those inmates they oversee. Segregation units are comprised of inmates already marginalized based on race, gender, or class (Prevost & Kilty, 2020).

Inmates placed in solitary confinement are often categorized as an increased threat to institutional order (Labrecque, 2022). Solitary confinement has led to important ethical and legal considerations. A few weeks in solitary confinement can lead to adverse mental and physical health outcomes including increased self-harm rates (Barragan et al., 2022). Restrictive housing does not make prisons safer or more secure (Labrecque, 2022).

Separation from the general population is done to prevent harm, discipline inmates, or for protection (Salerno & Zgoba, 2020). Colorado correctional administrators have reported the lowest proportion of inmates isolated when compared to other state prison systems. Variations have been reported in how inmates adapt to solitary confinement conditions (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). The intended effects of separating inmates in solitary confinement are not well understood (Salerno & Zgoba, 2020). A range of inmate experiences can be better understood through solitary confinement correctional officers' insights (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Little is known about how individual correctional officers are affected by solitary confinement.

Seven percent of inmates in the United States are placed in restrictive housing at any time (Luigi et al., 2020). Little evidence is available supporting claims that solitary confinement improves behavior of disruptive and violent inmates. Evidence alternatively suggests solitary confinement can increase misconduct and subsequent recidivism. Immediate security concerns take priority over providing treatment to inmates placed in restrictive housing (Strong et al., 2020). Disruption in care follows removal from general population. Treatment requests and subsequent progression get stalled by placement in

isolation. Disruption and other bureaucratic barriers can discourage inmates from seeking medical or mental health care.

Segregation units have evolved to house inmates based on identity as opposed to behavioral interventions (Labrecque et al., 2021). Correctional officers utilize solitary confinement to punish inmates and separate those deemed at risk of harm from the general prison population (Pforte, 2020). Confinement to restrictive housing is considered a traumatic experience. Confinement in restrictive housing remains controversial due to ethical and legal concerns (LaBranche & Labrecque, 2021). Solitary confinement critics describe it as a form of torture that is considered cruel and unusual punishment. Inmates can suffer significant psychological damage, in-turn impeding adherence to prison rules. Solitary confinement separation practices can increase inmate feelings of anger and hatred toward correctional officers (Tayer et al., 2021).

Prison capacity expansion has contributed to increased use of solitary confinement in United States correctional institutions (Sakoda & Simes, 2021). Inmates exposed to solitary confinement represent an extreme element of mass incarceration (Reiter et al., 2020). Total prison capacity can cause shifts in administrative powers and the experience of punishment (Sakoda & Simes, 2021). Social disorganization becomes more likely with larger prison populations (Howard et al., 2020). Existing resources that endorse good behavior become strained as prison populations increase. Social contact with inmates and correctional officers is nearly eliminated in solitary confinement (Luigi et al., 2020). Limited communication abilities complicate access to education, vocational training, and other services otherwise available in general population.

Solitary confinement is preferred by inmates who hope to create a tough personification that will remain with them in general population units (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Rule enforcement is often based on correctional officers' interpretation of an inmate's reputation for violence and adherence to prison code (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Decreased risks of infractions in solitary confinement have been reported more recently (Picon et al., 2022). Inmates who are more deeply rooted in criminal subculture often receive more discretion and less vigorous responses from correctional officers (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Solitary confinement can lead to a culture of harm among correctional officers (Luigi et al., 2020). Physical abuse, mistreatment of mentally ill inmates, and excessive constraint use have been documented in solitary confinement. Negative staff attitudes toward inmates can be more harmful than social isolation alone.

Disciplinary segregation is synonymous with solitary confinement which is intended to punish inmates who violate prison rules (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2020). Administrative segregation refers to restrictive housing for inmates who pose a threat to the institution. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Treatment of Prisoners prohibit solitary confinement for more than 15 days (Pullen-Blasnik et al., 2021). Similar standards were adopted in Colorado. The Colorado state correctional system enacted a 15-day restriction on solitary confinement in October of 2017 (Sakoda & Simes, 2021). Federal court administrators have emphasized the harms resulting from solitary confinement. Prolonged confinement of inmates with mental illnesses has been ruled unconstitutional by federal courts. Research is needed to better understand how

overhauling practices and policies in Colorado state prisons will impact institutional

corrections (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2020).

**Stigma, Bias, and Discriminatory Beliefs**

Stigma can lead to inequality which is increasingly evident among incarcerated

populations (Harney et al., 2022). Correctional officers often view inmates as

discreditable if related to an invisible attribute such as a stigma (Ricciardelli et al., 2021).

Stigmatized inmates are often perceived as being dangerous or of lesser value. Solitary

confinement is a form of structural racism that was originally used to oppress Black

prison populations (Pforte, 2020). Structural racism targets groups disadvantaged by

political, economic, and social threads. Structural racism existing in solitary confinement

reflects the broader system of incarceration. Variations in penal culture across the United

States have caused substantial incarceration rate heterogeneity (Campbell et al., 2020a).

Racial disparities in solitary confinement placement vary across state prisons

(Pullen-Blasnik et al., 2021). Racial bias plays a significant role in the criminal justice

system (Peterman et al., 2021). High rates of racial disparities are documented across

various solitary confinement units in the United States (Pullen-Blasnik et al., 2021).

Correctional officers' racial bias can impact interactions with inmates (Peterman et al.,

2021). Previous scholars have provided evidence that White officers tend to support

punitive and invasive enforcement policies. Racial minority group members are often

viewed as a physical threat and associated with images of aggression. Prolonged solitary

confinement discrepancy can be associated with racial/ethnic differences as opposed to

disparities in treatment within the prison (Pullen-Blasknik, 2021).

Carceral populations are divided across racial lines (Mitchell et al., 2021). Black men are eight times more likely to spend time in solitary confinement when compared with White inmates (Pullen-Blasnik, 2021). Incarcerated women are less likely to be confined in restrictive housing when compared with men. Black women have a higher cumulative risk of solitary confinement. Gang affiliates across various races are disproportionately placed in restrictive housing (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2020). Correctional officers contend that high rates of gang affiliates in restrictive housing are due to protection, discipline, or threat. Justification for disproportionality is argued as consequential to behavior instead of correctional officer bias.

Racial bias can develop from social and structural social contexts (Peterman et al., 2021). Historical disadvantages that have developed from racial segregation continue to permeate prison environments (Gonzales et al., 2021). Correctional officers' racial bias and how it influences their perception of punishment is underexplored in the research (Peterman et al., 2021). Documented associations between negative beliefs about inmates and racial bias may suggest a similar connection with punishment-oriented attitudes. Compound hardships may be misperceived by correctional staff as an irreversible limitation unworthy of reprieve (Gonzales et al., 2021). Concentrated disadvantages have been linked with increased prison admission rates due to differential patterns of enforcement practiced by the criminal justice system (Campbell et al., 2020a). Correctional officers may have unconscious biases that can lead to fatalistic worldview beliefs regarding inmates (Gonzales et al., 2021).

Stigma is associated with work in solitary confinement units (Mears et al., 2021a).
Media portrayals of inhumane treatment within restrictive housing units causes some
correctional officers to feel judged (Mears et al., 2021b). Higher levels of work-family
strain were reported by correctional officers when compared with other prison staff
personnel (May et al., 2020). Institutional structures and culture can inhibit correctional
officers' willingness to seek help for mental health concerns (Wills et al., 2021). Punitive
responses by correctional officers can be prompted by institutional culture and structures.
Attitudes about solitary confinement are shaped by internal and external factors
(LaBranche & Labrecque, 2021). Personality traits, racial bias, and organizational factors
influence correctional officers' attitudes toward inmates (Peterman et al., 2021).

Solitary confinement placement may be more likely for inmates who are fluent in
a language other than English (Mears et al., 2021a). Continual violent behavior may
increase the chances of inmate placement in solitary confinement (Mears, Brown, et al.,
2021). Black inmates are more likely to be punished by White correctional officers
because of implicit racial bias and unclear disciplinary measures (Pforte, 2020). Black
inmates are overrepresented in solitary confinement units. Demographic characteristics of
prison populations influence treatment decisions and prison social climate (Gonzales et
al., 2021). Correctional officers who share an identity with inmates are less likely to use
punitive measures. Prisons with high numbers of White correctional officers and
predominantly Black inmates are more likely to use solitary confinement as a retributive
control measure.

A deeper understanding of segregation through correctional staffs' lived experiences may bring meaning to social order complexities in prison environments (Prevost & Kilty, 2020). Social bonds created in prison are often relied upon by inmates to survive incarceration (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Placement in solitary confinement leads to few opportunities to form social bonds. Inmates in solitary confinement units deal with a different form of stigma. Some correctional officers view inmates in solitary confinement as fundamentally different and unable to follow rules. Racism, sexism, and colonialism have intersected through segregation frameworks to form race and gender inequities (Prevost & Kilty, 2020). Power dynamics and job stress may influence correctional officers' perceptions about inmate behavior (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021).

Stigmatized inmates are often perceived by correctional officers as more deviant and of lesser value than their peers (Ricciardelli et al., 2021). Gender is informed by Societal interpretations influence gender understandings and self-stigma experiences. Correctional officers' attitudes impact female and male inmates differently (Antonio & Price, 2021). Competency and capability among female correctional officers are established through a dissolution of femininity (Wills et al., 2021). Female jail officers reported being threatened less often than their male counterparts (Ellison & Gainer, 2020). Female correctional officers experience exposure to harassment by male inmates through more sexually suggestive behaviors (Jones et al., 2020). Female correctional officers fear victimization despite lower assault risks (Ellison & Gainey, 2020).

**Correctional Staff Support**

Lack of support from other correctional staff can lead to increased work stress (Walters, 2022). Staff support is a more important correlate of correctional officer stress when compared with inmate-related stressors. Enriched internal communication and procedures have been suggested by various correctional staff members to improve the mental health of prison employees (Testoni et al., 2021). Lack of support from prison administration officials has been noted by correctional officers in previous studies. Low levels of work support combined with high stressors affect how correctional officers view inmates and the overall prison social environment (Gonzales et al., 2021). Severed communication between correctional institutions and the external community negatively influence prison population well-being (Testoni et al., 2021). Correctional officer stress can be buffered by increased perceived support from coworkers (Walters, 2022).

Expanded social support systems within prison contexts can reduce correctional officer turnover rates (Harney & Lerman, 2021). Correctional peer support programs can offer an alternative for prison staff opposed to conventional therapy. Supervisors who provide meaningful leadership can help develop broader collaborative and supportive environments. Officer well-being is an important target for intervention (Evers et al., 2020). Social well-being refers to meaningful connections and perceptions of equality within the workplace. Well-being within the workplace is correlated with job performance and satisfaction. Perceived lack of support and inconsistent leadership are notable operational stressors experienced by correctional officers (Stelnicki et al., 2021).

**Variability in Punishment Decisions**

Variations in punishment between correctional institutions can exist across different prison facilities within the same state (Wade-Olson, 2019). State legislators establish disciplinary processes for prisons and correctional officers decide whether an inmate is sanctioned. Solitary confinement policies and practices are inconsistent across prisons (Laws, 2021). Prolonged isolation is the hallmark of solitary confinement which serves different purposes including prison management and punishment (Pullen-Blasnik et al., 2021). Prison procedures are established to meet uniform goals (Urbanek, 2021). Resistance to unique needs of culturally different inmates is common among correctional officers. Correctional officers' perceptions of an incident can influence punitive force decisions (Dodd et al., 2020).

Correctional officers exercise discretion based on perceptions of their peers (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Poor communication, disrespect, bias, and inconsistency can undercut procedural justice efforts (Peterman et al., 2021). Characteristic profiles of rule enforcement can be developed through correctional staff collective engagement (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Perceptions of procedurally just prison climates encourage correctional officers to follow organizational rules and treat others fairly (Peterman et al., 2021). Lack of training can result in poor professional competence and negatively impact self-perception (Testoni et al., 2021). Poor self-confidence can cause correctional officers to engage in dehumanizing behavior toward inmates. Excessive use of punishment can lead to a retaliatory mindset among inmates (Campbell et al., 2020).

Punishment-based prison culture can lead to secondary trauma which prompts distrust of authority (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021). Inmate criminal histories are often considered by correctional officers when making rule enforcement decisions (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Correctional officers express more punitive attitudes toward inmates compared to other prison staff (Antonio & Price, 2021). Assumptions are made by correctional officers about various types of inmates housed in solitary confinement (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Discretion is used based on inferences about inmates' potential for confrontation or violence. Continued use of solitary confinement to maintain institutional order is concerning for overall inmate and prison staff outcomes (Mears et al., 2021a). Lack of support for prison programming was identified as one concern relating to correctional officers' attitudes toward inmates (Antonio & Price, 2021).

Nontraditional work shifts of correctional officers have been linked with reduced sleep quality and poor health (Lavender & Todak, 2021). Dangerous prison environments can cause mental health issues for correctional officers. Emotion suppression is encouraged and help seeking can be considered a weakness in paramilitary structures such as prisons (Smith, 2021). Attack and withdraw are the most common responses to work stress experienced by correctional officers. Extensive workloads reduce the available time correctional officers can attend to individual inmates' needs (Antonio & Price, 2021). Attack responses are one of the most common reactions among correctional officers exposed to heightened work conflict levels (Smith, 2021). Mental health problems among correctional officers have consistently been linked with violence in the workplace (Jaegers et al., 2021).

Gang members are overrepresented in solitary confinement when compared with the general prison population (Lovell et al., 2020). Inmates who affiliate with gangs have elevated levels of misconduct and an increased need for protection (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2020). Correctional officers often view restrictive housing as a highly effective approach to managing gangs in prison. Gang affiliates are often overrepresented in restrictive housing because they are considered a threat which requires protective placement. Gang members keep volatile inmates in line if rapport has been established with correctional officers (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Enforcement of rules in restrictive housing units tend to be more laid-back for gang members. Gang members are sometimes given unique punitive considerations and concessions when placed in restrictive housing.

Correctional officers' personality traits are significant predictors of attitudes toward inmates (Peterman et al., 2021). Personality characteristics considered to be more sensitive or caring are harmful for officers in correctional institutions (Wills et al., 2021). Agreeableness among correctional officers corresponded with a more flexible, trusting, sympathetic, and generous nature (Peterman et al., 2021). Correctional officers with these characteristics were more likely to treat inmates with less punitive recourse. Toxic masculine cultural aspects of prison institutions impact the way correctional officers communicate their feelings (Hemming et al., 2020). Hypermasculine culture in prion impacts the way correctional staff respond to inmates. Response to work stress is sometimes exhibited through attack or withdraw behaviors (Smith, 2021). Correctional officers may antagonize or provoke inmates regardless of intent based on certain attributes (Ellison & Gainey, 2020).

Punishment can be an ineffective tool for behavior change in any population (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021). Effective control of inmate populations requires meticulous negotiation between strong boundary maintenance and empathy. Correctional officers' demeanor can be a clear indicator of their true feelings for inmates and any rehabilitation process (Antonio & Price, 2021). Personality traits influence attitudes toward inmates (Peterman et al., 2021). Punishment-oriented attitudes play a significant role in the overall prison environment. The agreeableness of correctional officers has been linked with less punitive inmate treatment. Authoritarian personality styles are more likely to maintain positive beliefs about punishment.

**Correctional Officers' Perceptions**

Correctional officers are one of the leading occupations most exposed to violence each year (Ellison & Gainey, 2020). Job dissatisfaction has been directly linked with unfavorable judgements of inmates (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Correctional officers' attitudes toward prison populations can have a negative impact on inmates (Antonio & Price, 2021). Stereotypes, unwritten rules, and beliefs each play a role in determining decisions by correctional officers (Urbanek, 2021). Unconscious bias among correctional officers can lead to implicit bias and inhumane treatment of inmates (Gonzales et al., 2021). Trust within correctional institutions is critical for maintaining a safe and controlled environment (Haynes et al., 2020). Inmates treated with a reduced sense of humanity lose little trust in the system and cope by violently lashing out at correctional officers (Antonio & Price, 2021).

Straining situations are created when use of force is initiated by correctional officers to ensure compliance (May et al., 2020). Hypervigilance is a necessary component of the prison workplace for prison staff to protect themselves from assaults (Wills et al., 2021). Correctional work is perceived by prison staff as a direct threat to their health (Smith, 2021). Burnout can present as cynicism, emotional exhaustion, dehumanization, reduced coping skills, and emotional hardening (Jaegers et al., 2021). Adverse effects of burnout can influence negative inmate interactions. Prolonged stress experienced by correctional officers can result in depersonalization (Kowalski, 2020). Depersonalization is linked with cynicism and detachment from inmates.

Job stress, power dynamics, and personal beliefs impact correctional officers' perceptions about inmate behavior (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Correctional officers have varying perceptions about solitary confinement. Inmates housed in solitary confinement are considered the most chronic offenders of institutional rules (Labrecque, 2021). Correctional officers perceive inmates in restrictive housing to be the greatest threat toward institutional safety. Job stress experienced by correctional officers is associated with negative perceptions of inmates (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Correctional officer perceptions about possible benefits and harms of solitary confinement can help answer questions regarding punitive force decisions.

Rule enforcement in restrictive housing is guided by forward-looking considerations about sustainable inmate-officer relationships (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Punishment decisions must be made quickly by correctional officers based on reasoning or intuition (Wade-Olson, 2019). Solitary confinement is decided upon at the

discretion of correctional officers with no external oversight and limited alternative responses (Reiter et al., 2020). Correctional officers in solitary confinement units rarely use internal disciplinary charges due to a lack of confidence in the disciplinary system (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Informal disincentives prevent correctional officers from enforcing rules to avoid creating more work for coworkers. In-group solidarity and camaraderie among correctional officers is held to a high standard and governed by a set of codes (Higgins et al., 2022).

Preferred informal and negotiated social control measures influence how correctional officers view one another (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Correctional officers who initiate more disciplinary measures are believed to have little control over their unit. Infractions are sometimes overlooked by correctional officers to maintain order in maximum-security units such as solitary confinement (Picon et al., 2022). Correctional officers can be in violation of their duties if they fail to enforce rules (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Correctional officers' perceptions and capacity to exercise authority are associated with prison environments (Fusco et al., 2021). Correctional officers often perceive their work environment as unpredictable and threatening. The effectiveness of correctional officer work has been linked with staff well-being and rapport building.

Correctional personnel perceptions of inmates' experiences with solitary confinement deprivations have been evaluated through Skyke's deprivation theory (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Physical deprivation as experienced in solitary confinement is related to inmate misconduct (Bosma et al., 2020). Perceived prison climate is associated with prisoner misconduct. Negative perceptions of inmates can be

positively associated with correctional officer job stress (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021).

Correctional officers trained in forensic assessment curricula learn that inmates have

criminological thinking patterns (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021). Misinformed perceptions of

inmates by correctional officers leads to punishment that is traumatizing. Sanctions to

isolation can result from an inmates' distrust of the system. Characteristics such as

inmates' age and gender can significantly influence solitary confinement placement

decisions (Mears et al., 2021a).

Correctional officer and inmate demographics significantly influence punishment

decisions (Wade-Olson, 2019). New inmates arriving at prison are immediately

categorized by correctional staff according to their offense (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021).

Poor treatment by correctional staff may lead to the initial labeling of inmates as bad

when placed in solitary confinement (Wildeman & Andersen, 2020). Racial bias also

impacts correctional officers' perceptions of inmates (Peterman et al., 2021). Racial

minority group members are often perceived by correctional staff as physically

threatening and aggressive. Black men are significantly more likely to experience solitary

confinement when compared with other demographic groups (Pullen-Blasnik et al.,

2021). Procedural justice within prison environments is associated with correctional

officers' attitudes which impacts inmate interactions (Peterman et al., 2021).

**Training and Experience**

Unique approaches to interactions with inmates are impacted by individual and

organizational factors (Peterman et al., 2021). Institutional and administrative difficulties

can be damaging for correctional officers who have limited training (Lavender & Todak,

2021). Lack of training among correctional officers has been identified as one concern (Kowalski, 2020). Correctional officers have historically been insufficiently trained. Different levels of professionalism are apparent among correctional officers due to variations in training across states. Sufficient training offered to correctional officers may reduce job stress and decrease the chance of developing mental disorders (Kois et al., 2020). Job training may potentially increase the safety of prison staff and inmates.

Correctional officers report that preparedness is most often derived from years of experience as opposed to formal training (Lavrič et al., 2022). Sufficient training should raise awareness of possible psychological consequences experienced by correctional officers. Less experienced correctional officers have more difficulty dealing with problem behaviors of inmates. Correctional officers who have less training or experience are more likely to develop burnout (Kowalski, 2020). Positive perceptions of formal training can lead to decreased occupational stress (Kowalski, 2020). Formal training motivates prison staff (Kowalski, 2020). Specific training techniques can target correctional officers' mental health and crisis interventions (Harney & Lerman, 2021).

Psychosocial work environments within prisons can be improved by providing communication skills training to correctional officers (Norman et al., 2020). Structured training in communication skills may also reduce work-related stress among correctional officers. Access to training can mitigate anxiety, depression, and distressing PTSD symptoms (Taylor & Swartz, 2021). Training in trauma informed care can be a tool to help correctional officers teach growth-mindset values among inmates (Zarling & Scheffert, 2021). Difficult relationships with inmates can be addressed through improved

training exercises to encourage a more caring approach instead of punitive and harsh treatment. Negative attitudes and beliefs toward inmates can be reduced by offering psychological flexibility training to correctional officers.

**Prison Policy Concerns**

Prevailing prison philosophy is based on punishment (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021). Punishment-based prison culture initiates violence and hostility which extends to the greater community upon release. Correctional institutions are based on zero tolerance policies which support punitive consequences for any instance of misbehavior. Solitary confinement is a pervasive human rights and public health concern (Cloud et al., 2021). Social isolation, exclusion, and loneliness cause overwhelmingly debilitating effects on psychological functioning. Reliance on solitary confinement as punishment can cause unwanted, adverse effects. Little research is available on the type of policies states have adopted to eliminate or reduce solitary confinement.

Correctional officers can be selective in which rules are enforced and selection of sanctions (Picon et al., 2022). Discretion in prison staff punishment decisions may derail rehabilitation efforts (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Prison life across United States correctional institutions is rooted in discretionary rule enforcement. A combination of discretion and sentencing guideline recommendations can compound punishment effects (Hickert et al., 2022). Informal discretion can lead to cumulative disadvantage behind prison walls. Amplified surveillance in solitary confinement could account for increased recorded infractions (Picon et al., 2022). Officer decision-making and discretion in relation to sanctioning outcomes requires further analysis.

Prison administration, supervisors, and coworkers influence correctional officer stress (Walters, 2022). Traditional paramilitary emphasis placed on correctional officers may require revisions by policy makers. Leadership principles may be more effective in developing work relationships. Supportive mentoring, healthy coworker relationships, and shared goals between correctional staff can effectively reduce stress related outcomes. Communication skills training may be an effective stress management tool for correctional officers. Empathy toward inmates is encouraged among correctional officers through the implementation of strategic communication (Testoni et al., 2021). Empathic listening is one strategy that can assist correctional officers intercept inmate discomfort and regard them as people.

The psychological well-being of correctional officers is compromised by inmate violent behaviors directed at prison staff (Martinez-Inigo, 2021). Prison violence against correctional officers can lead to decreased staff detention and increased rates of absenteeism (Sydes et al., 2020). Abusive behaviors directed toward correctional staff by inmates reveal outstanding policy and training needs (Jones et al., 2020). Reliance on solitary confinement as a management tool can lead to ineffective order and safety (Mears, Brown, et al., 2021). The cost of solitary confinement is exponentially more than incarceration in a regular prison unit (Wade-Olson, 2019). Supportive and competent relationships across prison environments encourage progressive trajectories (Auty & Liebling, 2020). Prison culture supporting fair treatment of inmates tend to focus more on rehabilitation as opposed to punitive policy.

Correctional officers can create positive change through informed workplace decision-making policies and practices (Baldwin et al., 2021). Lack of empathy for inmates among correctional staff perpetuates a prison culture based on punishment (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021). A shift in corrections culture can be achieved by improving correctional organization outcomes through employee retention, misbehavior reports, and post-release incidents (Jones et al., 2020). Humane prison experiences require a stimulating and safe *prison climate* (Bosma et al., 2020). Positive prison environments can be achieved through improved inmate-staff relationships and procedurally just treatment by correctional officers. Improved communications between the prison and external communities have been suggested to help build a relationship of trust (Testoni et al., 2021). Organizational cultures of prison systems and policies significantly impact restrictive decisions made by correctional officers (Urbanek, 2021). Disconnected communication, ridged bureaucratic systems, and misinformation can obscure efforts to connect prison operations with surrounding communities (Testoni et al., 2021).

**Summary**

Harsh practices of solitary confinement delay institutional logics regarding deprivation and control (Augustine et al., 2021). Pervasive mistrust between inmates and correctional officers can complicate the prison environment. Harassment directed at correctional officers by inmates is an ongoing issue (Jones et al., 2020). Prisons are designed to control all aspects of life and separate inmates from the larger society (Mitchell et al., 2021). Punitive sentencing policies enacted in the 1980s were systemized by race which led to dramatic levels of incarceration (Sakoda & Simes, 2021). Solitary

confinement is one of the harshest punishments enforced in prisons (Wade-Olson, 2019).

Harsh treatment can impact recidivism, future wages, criminal activity, and political

activity. Violence increases when rehabilitation efforts are undermined by prison staff

culture rooted in punishment and prisoner objectification (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021).

Correctional staff have expressed concerns that time spent in solitary confinement fails to

address inmates' needs (Mears et al., 2021b).

      Conflict between inmates and correctional officers is intensified by prison culture

(Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021). Workplace environment, inmate-staff dynamics, and

institutional procedures increase stress among correctional officers (Cloud et al., 2021).

Lack of training is a critical consideration to ensure correctional officers are successful in

their duties (Kowalski, 2020). Correctional officers who have received adequate training

report decreased occupational stress. Positive perceptions of training led to increased job

satisfaction levels and prevented burnout. Improved perceptions and treatment of inmates

can result from reduced correctional officer burnout (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021;

Kowalski, 2020). Institutional mandates, informal structures, rules, regulations, and

procedures each play a role in shaping prison environments which require a more in-

depth analysis (Ricciardelli et al., 2021).

      Policy is a useful tool for delineating what types of behaviors will be tolerated by

correctional staff (Jones et al., 2020). Contradictory prison rules are ineffectively

enforced by correctional officers due to lack of rapport and empathy (Bloom &

Bradshaw, 2021). Emphasis on punishment within prison staff culture can cause a lack of

empathy for inmates. Many correctional officers have indicated that working in

restrictive housing units is stressful (Mears et al., 2021b). Correctional officers perceive work in prion as a direct threat to their own health and well-being (Smith, 2021). Exposure to violence and trauma within prison environments is inevitable for correctional officers (Taylor & Swartz, 2021). Denial as a coping mechanism serves only to increase PTSD symptoms.

Solitary confinement research is limited to potential adverse effects on misconduct and mental health (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Correctional officers feel wrongfully judged because of stigmas attached to work in restrictive housing units (Mears et al., 2021b; Taylor & Swartz, 2021). Correctional officer thinking errors and iatrogenic emotional responses to inmates are important process variables (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2021). Carceral environments can lead to increased rates of stress-related disease and mortality among correctional officers (Cloud et al., 2021). Little research is available examining potential system failures from the perspective of correctional officers (Mears et al., 2021a). Solitary confinement punishment varies depending on race and ethnicity (Sakoda & Simes, 2021). Personal views of correctional officers vary depending on work contexts and individual characteristics (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021).

Research is scarce regarding placements and disparities in solitary confinement settings (Mears, Brown, et al., 2021). Mental well-being of many vulnerable populations in the United States are impacted by solitary confinement on a macro-scale (Pforte, 2020). Corrective policy ineffectively deals with problematic inmates (Tayer et al., 2021). Inmates with mental illness are harassed and stigmatized in solitary confinement which follows them into lower custody units (Augustine et al., 2021). Increased violent

behaviors in confinement can occur when inmates experience more extreme feelings against correctional officers (Tayer et al., 2021). Systematic accounts are lacking of punitive treatment perceptions in restrictive housing from a correctional officers' perspective (Mears et al., 2021b).

A gap in the research was filled by exploring correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force within solitary confinement. Systematic accounts of restrictive housing help to better understand experiences and correctional officers' insights (Mears et al., 2021b). Institutional policies and procedures are a lived experience of correctional officers that can be better understood through qualitative feedback (Baldwin et al., 2021). A qualitative study led to increased insight into the perceptions of correctional officers by expounding on potential outcomes that may exist (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Practitioners employed in prison facilities have expressed a need for more information or tools to better support the resiliency of correctional staff (Smith, 2021). Improved experiences for inmates can also be generated through positive change in prison policies and practices (Baldwin et al., 2021). Correctional officers are among the most misunderstood, invisible, and criticized working populations in the United States (Smith, 2021). Empirical data exploring authoritative power dynamics coupled with a study of aggression and role ambiguity can influence policy solutions.

Complexities of institutional correctional services include occupational nuances experienced by prison staff (Ricciardelli et al., 2021). Correctional officers are often perceived as maintaining a paramilitary mentality (Walters, 2022). Discrepancies exist between public interpretations and occupational experiences of correctional officers

(Ricciardelli et al., 2021). The lack of research on correctional officers' punitive

perceptions in restrictive housing units has been noted across various studies (Mears et

al., 2021b). A gap exists in the research regarding correctional officers' punitive force

perspectives in solitary confinement (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021; Isenhardt & Hostettler,

2020; Mears et al., 2021b). An evidence-based approach to restrictive housing requires

focused investigations exploring correctional officers' perceptions of solitary

confinement (Mears et al., 2021b). The qualitative research design and phenomenological

method used for this study is further discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Method

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore how correctional officers' lived experiences working in solitary confinement influence their punitive force perceptions. The influence of internal and external constructs on punitive force perceptions in solitary confinement were explored through a phenomenological approach. Weiner's attribution theory was used to explore how correctional officers' experiences in solitary confinement might impact their use of force decisions. Events experienced by individuals can be separated from conventional understandings through a phenomenological approach (Smith et al., 2019). Correctional officers' perceptions of stress in prison environments are influenced by workplace conditions (Paleksić, 2020). Increased rates of operative and organizational stress are experienced in solitary confinement units. A qualitative methodology was used to better understand unique human experiences in solitary confinement.

The phenomenological approach used is described in Chapter 3 with applicable rationale. The role of the researcher is discussed in detail with a focus on researcher bias and objectivism. Participant selection processes are outlined in-depth including criteria used to ensure sufficient sampling strategies. Thematic inferences are discussed under the purview of purposive sampling and data saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Trustworthiness issues are explained including strategies to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Permissions needed from Walden

University IRB for access to participants are discussed. Various ethical procedures are explored such as treatment of human participants and data dissemination.

## Research Design and Rationale

Improved understanding about the impact correctional officers' punitive force perceptions have on use of force decisions was achieved through qualitative analysis (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Correctional officers' perceptions of work environment constructs were examined using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological methodology is directed toward revealing deeper meaning of individual lived experiences (Urcia, 2021). The research question was intended to explore how lived experiences of correctional officers in solitary confinement settings impact their perspectives on inmate treatment decisions. Semistructured interview questions provided participants with an opportunity to expand on individual distinctive experiences. Multiple data sources including field notes, interview transcripts, and a reflective journal were used to mitigate intrinsic biases as part of the triangulation process. Trustworthiness was established through strategies targeted at transferability, credibility, and dependability.

### Research Question

RQ: How does the prison environment in solitary confinement impact correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force?

### Qualitative Design and Phenomenological Method

Correctional officers' punitive force perceptions in solitary confinement settings was the concept of interest studied. Punitive attitudes toward inmates can be due to a lack of empathy among correctional officers (Antonio & Price, 2021). The central

phenomenon of punitive force perceptions include constructs related to correctional officers' punitive force perceptions. Prison environment, misconduct, management controls, and training played a role in correctional officers' perceptions. The impact of the work environment in solitary confinement on correctional officers' punitive perceptions was not well understood (Mears et al., 2021b). Exploration of correctional officers' punitive force perceptions in solitary confinement is influenced by work environment concepts (Canada et al., 2021). Constructs related to guard subculture, forward-looking thinking, and deterrence influence work environment concepts.

Qualitative research is a theoretical framework applied to systematic inquiries into social phenomena across natural settings (Urcia, 2021). Lived experiences are evaluated through authentic social constructions (Grant & Lincoln, 2021). Comparisons cannot be made between individual accepted realities within phenomenological research (Grant & Lincoln, 2021). Phenomenology is one qualitative approach that can be used to record an account of time, space, and the world as experienced by human consciousness (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). Social constructs are developed by social interactions and influenced by values, attitudes, beliefs, biases, and prejudices (Grant & Lincoln, 2021). Interviews and observations were used to gather descriptive data of participant lived experiences (Kekeya, 2021). Participants' direct actions associated with experiences can help enhance an understanding of the study phenomenon (Kekeya, 2021).

Phenomenological approaches are applied in research to understand the fundamental dimensions of a social phenomenon (Urcia, 2021). Participants' lived experiences are the basis for phenomenological approaches (Urcia, 2021). Direct

descriptions were created through the phenomenological data collection process (van

Manen & van Manen, 2021). Rich data collection is foundational to phenomenology

(Urcia, 2021). Interviews are foundational to qualitative data collection (Fornaro et al.,

2021). Participants were invited to share their stories with the researcher (Siedlecki,

2022). Semistructured interviews were used to help the researcher explore reasoning

behind answers to complex questions (Rainford, 2020).

More in-depth insight was gained into the lived experiences of a phenomenon

through a phenomenological approach (Urcia, 2021). Interviews were used to explore

participants' interpretations and meanings of situations and events (Kekeya, 2021).

Semistructured interview questions were uncategorized to help guide the researcher in

conversation with participants (Kekeya, 2021). Live in-person interview methods were

beneficial to establishing relationships in this study. Verbal and nonverbal

communication is also more evident with live in-person interviews. Phenomenological

approaches are used to search for meaning which is reflected in dimensional aspects of

lived experiences (Urcia, 2021). Researchers work together with participants to identify

meanings and contextual elements of phenomenon.

## Role of the Researcher

Observation is used as one research tool in qualitative analysis (Fornaro et al.,

2021). Researchers must be transparent about how beliefs and bias may impact the

research process. Effective interactions during data collection processes require

researchers to immerse themselves within the experience (Halling et al., 2020).

Transparency with participants can assist in the facilitation of the interview and

transcription processes (Fornaro et al., 2021). The observer-participant uses a more participatory approach immersing and extracting themselves in study experiences (Halling et al., 2020). Deeper connections established in observer-participant models can help interviewees reconnect with the phenomenon they are describing. Deception was limited to ensure ethical research practices (Gillani, 2021).

Reflexivity and positionality are important considerations when conducting qualitative research. Social researchers must be reflective about the implications of their biases, values, and methods (Gillani, 2021). Personal bias, beliefs, and worldviews related to the phenomenon were continually examined. Absolute value-neutrality cannot be realistically obtained when researching sensitive topics (Gillani, 2021). Qualitative research approaches can be used with a certain level of objectivity taking into consideration value laden principles. Self-reflection was used as one technique of reflexivity. The researcher's role in qualitative analysis is integrated with complex knowledge construction (Gillani, 2021).

The researcher's previous work with inmates as a criminal defense paralegal could be considered a professional relationship. Professional duties of a paralegal include inmate visits at the jail. Interactions with correctional staff were limited when visiting inmates. Communication with each defendant was solely directed toward legal implications of their case. Inmate perceptions of correctional officers were not discussed. An interest in exploring the lived experiences of correctional officers developed after concluding work as a paralegal. Personal interest in punitive force perceptions developed independently from any direct contact with correctional officers.

The identification and management of personal biases is critical in qualitative research. Positionality of participants must be considered regarding race, gender, and cultural traits as they may differ from the researchers (Joseph et al., 2021). Researcher positionality also plays an important role along with the multi-faceted positions of participants (Joseph et al., 2021). Unique cross-cultural dynamics between the researcher and participants can impact outcomes of qualitative research (Joseph et al., 2021). The data collection process involved an established interview protocol involving bias mitigation techniques. Bias was managed by taking any necessary steps to ensure no prior relationships exist between the researcher and participants. All participants were treated with fairness and respect, further enforced through confidentiality agreements.

Participant positionalities define their engagement with researchers (Joseph et al., 2021). Actions and events can have little relevance to the researcher but might be highly important for participants (Joseph et al., 2021). The subjective nature of qualitative methods can cause unpredictability in participants' responses (Joseph et al., 2021). Objectivism can be achieved through bracketing, or the suspension of preconceived biases, perceptions, and assumptions about a phenomenon (Urcia, 2021). A researcher can decenter personal perspectives through a written record of any prior knowledge, biases, or preconceptions about the phenomenon (Urcia, 2021). Positionality was clarified to reduce any negative implications of researcher bias. Negative reactions or sympathy responses did not occur despite previous connections with inmates.

Unpredictable factors in qualitative research can complicate anticipation of ethical dilemmas. Participants' unique views of the study implications did not lead to perceived

power differentials. Candidness in participants' responses was influenced by power

dynamics within the prison hierarchical system. Participants were offered necessary

support services in anticipation of potential emotional dysregulation that could have

occurred. A local crisis hotline number was provided in the event a participant

experienced distress. Participants were offered a $20 gift card at the conclusion of their

interview. The gift card amount was small enough that it would not be misconstrued as

attempted financial enticement.

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore correctional officers' punitive force

perceptions in solitary confinement. The population consisted of four correctional

officers who are currently employed or were previously employed within 24 months.

Previous employment refers to retirement, health related termination of employment,

change in life events, or terminated employment for another job. All participants had the

shared characteristic of current or previous employment as correctional officers in a

Colorado prison. Participant samples can be better matched with research objectives

through purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020). More precise participant samples

can lead to improved rigor and trustworthiness of data and results. Participant selection

was integrated into logical considerations of the study (Campbell et al., 2020).

### Participant Selection Logic

Purposive sampling is a qualitative sampling method also referred to as selective

sampling (Gill, 2020). Participants were selected based on their knowledge about the

phenomenon. Nonprobability sampling methods are used in qualitative research with all

samples being nonrandom (Gill, 2020). Participants who were more likely to yield appropriate and useful information were selected (Campbell et al., 2020). The sampling approach was refined as data collection progressed (Gill, 2020). Theoretical sampling is a form of purpose sampling used to reshape the sample under new criteria after analysis (Campbell et al., 2020). The relevance of research can be more clearly understood through theoretical sampling methods.

The identified population for this inquiry was currently or previously employed correctional officers who met all criteria and had experience working in solitary confinement within a Colorado prison. A flyer was posted to various social media sites for recruitment purposes. Purposive and snowball sampling was also used to recruit participants. Qualitative information was gathered from one-on-one interviews with the selected participants. Participants were selected based on direct and personal knowledge of the study topic. Sampling processes changed over time due to the iterative nature of qualitative research.

Participants were known to meet criteria for participation through verbal consent provided in an email reply. Employment with Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC) implies the minimum age requirement of 18 years or older has been met. Participants were interviewed in a private setting to ensure confidentiality. Consent to participate was received from participants before interviews began. Interviews were set-up with individual participants based on their availability and work schedule. Demographic information was collected within the semistructured interview process. Participants were offered a gift card for participating upon completion of the interview.

Sample size is based on data quality, scope and design of study, and the topic itself (Campbell et al., 2020). Smaller sample sizes are often preferred in phenomenological studies to ensure participants' voices do not get suppressed (Bartholomew et al., 2021). The average sample size with phenomenological studies is between four and 12 participants. A small enough sample should be collected to adequately center participants' voices. The variable nature of participant sample size across various qualitative studies indicates a need for individualized considerations. Phenomenological studies can be adequately conducted with samples smaller than the averages (Bartholomew et al., 2021). The goal to conduct interviews with at least four correctional officers was reached.

Purposive sampling can provide adequate data saturation for thematic inferences (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Participant selection was limited to adult populations 21 years of age or older. Participants were currently or previously employed within 24 months of the interview in a Colorado correctional facility. Participants who were previously employed met the identified criteria for termination. All participant volunteers satisfied these requirements. Participant culture and gender encompassed correctional officers from diverse cultural backgrounds with solitary confinement work experience. Participants all verbally agreed to an informed consent document. COVID-19 safety restrictions were moot as all interviews were conducted through a video conferencing platform.

Qualitative researchers often use smaller samples to examine a phenomenon in depth (Gill, 2020). Sample size can refer to the number of participants, interviews, or

events sampled (Gill, 2020). Enough participants should be recruited to provide a rich

understanding of the phenomenon studied or topic related experiences (Gill, 2020). An

adequate sample size in qualitative research is influenced by judgment, the research

method, and intended outcomes (Gill, 2020). Sample size is often justified by data

saturation principles (Gill, 2020). The most common guiding principle for determining

adequacy of purposive samples is saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Data saturation

was achieved when information from participant interviews reached data satisfaction

(Gill, 2020). Extended recruitment did not take place across different CDOC facilities as

a sufficient sample size was achieved through snowball sampling.

**Data Collection Instrumentation**

Previously published instruments were not used. Data were collected from

interviews and observations. Interviews are a form of communication that take place

between research participants and the researcher (Kekeya, 2021). The researcher's main

role was to facilitate discussions with participants and ask probing questions (Kekeya,

2021). Interviews were digitally recorded as the conversations proceeded naturally.

Participants were notified in advance that the interview would be recorded to ensure

precise data collection. The semistructured nature of interview processes was explained

to participants.

The most common qualitative method of data collection is interviewing (Cairns-

Lee et al., 2022). Interviews are complex social situations that involve meaning-making

(Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). The researcher can unduly influence participant responses

through unique wording of interview questions. Trustworthiness of findings can be

negatively influenced by poorly crafted interview questions. Enhanced researcher

reflexivity can lead to a reduction in biased responses. The interviewer's style of

questioning can impact participant responses. Attention was directed toward eliciting

relevant and interesting data by remaining objective during the interview process.

Semistructured interviewing techniques are commonly used for one-on-one

interviews (Kekeya, 2021). One-on-one interviews are discussions between the

researcher and a single participant to collect data (Kekeya, 2021). A semistructured

interview method was used to create deeper discussions of complex issues (Rainford,

2020). Reflective discussions and shared engagement in the interview process were

achieved through semistructured interviews. Interviews are a flexible strategy to collect

qualitative data (Kekeya, 2021). Participants are provided an opportunity to verbally

express their feelings, thoughts, views, opinions, and experiences (Kekeya, 2021). Basic

demographic and background information was collected during the interview process.

Qualitative information about human behaviors and actions can be collected

through observations (Kekeya, 2021). Observations can be used to supplement interview

data and thematic analysis. Non-participant observation techniques involve a more distant

approach to collecting data (Kekeya, 2021). The researcher does not get involved in

activities with participants. Observation was used to assist with triangulation.

Triangulation of method is when two or more strategies are used to collect data on the

same topic (Kekeya, 2021). The findings must be triangulated to achieve credibility.

Interviews were scheduled with correctional officers based on their availability

through email communications. All interviews were completed through a video

conferencing platform. Informed consent was discussed before beginning the interviews, along with an explanation of applicable expectations and procedures. Interviews lasted anywhere between 31 to 58 minutes. The interview questions were semistructured, open-ended, and had some demographic information incorporated within (see Appendix C). Interviews were audio-recorded at the consent of each participant using a secure recording device. Verbatim transcripts were prepared of each individual interview using NVivo software.

Interviews concluded after the interview questions had been discussed with clarity. Participants were debriefed on next steps including scheduling a follow-up interview or email. A gift-card was provided as token of appreciation for participation. Participants were advised not to discuss interview questions with anyone until the study was complete. Contact information was provided to each participant for questions, concerns, or additional information. Participants were reminded of the study's purpose and thanked for their time and effort. Participants were asked to confirm their email address for purposes of receiving the transcript.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with participants after verbatim transcripts were prepared. Data collected from the initial interview were reviewed and validated during follow-up interviews with participants. Participants were asked to confirm their voice on the initial recording and validate all information transcribed. Confirmation was requested from each participant regarding any incentives offered and receipt of same. Accuracy of information was reviewed by the participants and any supplemental information received was noted in writing. Participants were informed that they can

request a copy of the final report. The follow-up interview concluded with a final gesture of gratitude for participants' time and effort.

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness can be established through strategies that assure findings are valid (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Criteria must be developed to ensure rigor and credibility in qualitative research. Confirmability is achieved when study results are based on the research purpose and not altered by researcher bias (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). The role of the interviewer in qualitative research methods can be a risk to trustworthiness (Campbell et al., 2020). A purposive sampling design was used to improve the trustworthiness and rigor of findings. Self-selection for participation in research can lead to an increased level of interest and investment in the study. A transparent approach about self to the audience can improve research rigor, unbiases, and trustworthiness (Shufutinsky, 2020).

### Credibility

Use-of-self as the main instrument of research is vital to validity and credibility in qualitative research (Shufutinsky, 2020). Confirmation and other biases were minimized using collective instruments including bracketing and member checking. Member checking was used as a validity check and to achieve rigorous qualitative research (Motulsky, 2021). Member checking can increase the credibility of research findings (Campbell et al., 2020). Bracketing can lead to mitigation of negative effects from preconceptions that taint the research (Shufutinsky, 2020). Strategies such as self-transparency, prevention, mindfulness, self-reflection, purposeful self-exclusion, and reflexivity were used to bolster credibility (Shufutinsky, 2020). Careful and transparent

explanation of the logic used in participant sample selection was used to improve credibility (Campbell et al., 2020).

**Transferability**

Transferability is the degree to which results of a qualitative study can be transferred across other settings among different respondents (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Findings applicable to other population groups and situations meet the standard for transferability (Campbell et al., 2020). Transferability is more likely when two settings have increased similarities. The study results can be applied to new settings by meeting standards of generalizability. Transferability of the study was improved by establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria (Campbell et al., 2020). Inclusion criteria included employment as a correctional officer within a Colorado correctional facility meeting in alignment with all hiring requirements of the state. Exclusion criteria included refusal to give informed consent or abide by COVID-19 safety restrictions. Demographic information was requested from participants and used to enhance transferability.

**Dependability**

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the stability of findings over time (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Qualitative research must be transparent and traceable even if it is not replicable (Grant & Lincoln, 2021). Variability in findings is the norm in qualitative research which means consistency cannot be expected (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Dependability can be achieved by using process logs to track variability. Findings could be used by future researchers if they follow the decision trail detailed in process logs. Process logs and triangulation were used to enrich dependability of results.

Conscientious documentation of all data collection and analysis procedures was used to increase dependability.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is the degree to which findings can be confirmed by other researchers (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Constructs and the meaning of research findings are directly related to confirmability (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). Interpretation of the findings must be clearly derived from data. Values are influenced by theoretical positions adopted by qualitative researchers (Grant & Lincoln 2021). Reflexivity can be used as introspection with close examination of how personal beliefs and assumptions affect interactions within the study (Shufutinsky, 2020). Mindfulness and self-reflection techniques were used to assess for bias from personal experience. Self-reflection methods were used prior and post data collection and analysis (Shufutinsky, 2020).

**Intracoder and Intercoder Reliability**

Intercoder reliability assessment can lead to improved communicability and transparency of the coding process (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Haphazard coding in earlier coding phases can compromise the findings trustworthiness. Intercoder reliability is determined in the coding phase of qualitative analysis to assess for robustness. Intercoder reliability measures can be used as evidence of conscientious and consistent analysis (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Feedback and recommendations were received from dissertation committee members to assist with reliable research outcomes. High coding standards were maintained. Transcripts were coded at two separate times and cross-checked with NVivo software.

**Ethical Procedures**

Institutional review board approval was required for this study. Approval was requested from the Walden University IRB prior to conducting interviews with participants. Research must comply with Walden University's ethical standards and United States federal regulations. The IRB's ethics review and approval were received prior to participant recruitment or data collection. An ethics review process was initiated after the Description of Data Sources and Partner Sites form was completed. A Human Subjects Training course was completed through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI; see Appendix A). This satisfies the Walden University IRB requirement for researchers.

Approval was not requested from CDOC as a sufficient sample size was achieved through social media recruitment and snowball sampling. The CDOC permits external research by university students following a review process. External research requests are allowed in accordance with CDOC Administration Regulation (AR) 1400-03 which establishes guidelines that govern the use and dissemination of research findings. Permission to conduct external research with correctional officers is required from Office of Planning and Analysis. Any person conducting research within a CDOC institution must conform to applicable policies with an emphasis placed on confidentiality of information. Mandatory reports are required at each phase to be reviewed by the Office of Planning and Analysis personnel. Participant search strategies were limited to social media recruitment and snowball sampling.

Walden University IRB protects participants from human rights violations. IRB approval was first received prior to conducting any interviews. The IRB processes also help to ensure studies are free from potential legal, mental, and financial risks. Potential ethical dilemmas were avoided by providing all participants with informed consent. Participant numbers were assigned to each interviewee to maintain confidentiality. Participants were informed of the interview process through email communication prior to meeting on video. Cancellation options were discussed with each participant prior to the interview.

Incentives for participation were offered in the form of a gift card to potential participants. Participants were provided information on data collection and the potential for positive social change. Interviews were conducted through a zoom video call. The confidentiality practices related to storage and disposal of interview recordings was communicated with all participants. Anonymity was guaranteed for all participants as outlined in the informed consent form. Participant numbers were used for each interviewee for purposes of anonymity. Participants were given the opportunity to review transcribed interview data and suggest edits or remove sensitive information.

Open communication with correctional officers invited to participate was important in obtaining informed consent. Informed consent can only be received after participants are adequately advised about the research and participation roles. Participants must be able to make voluntary, informed choices about participation. Participants were required to read and provide verbal consent about interview engagement and how the data would be used (see Appendix B). Accurate reporting of participant statements is

necessary to minimize potential risk. Interview audio recordings were saved in a secure location with password protection and encryption. All research data and records will be destroyed after five years.

Confidentiality is a critical ethical issue in qualitative research. Participants may have hesitations to share in-depth information out of concern for confidentiality (VandeVusse & Karcher, 2022). Appropriate safeguards of confidential information included encryption and password protections on any digitally saved files. Written or printed records including interview transcripts and notes are being stored in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's house. The role of the researcher as a data collection instrument in qualitative studies must also be considered. A relationship of trust was established between the researcher and participants (VandeVusse & Karcher, 2022). The consent process was fully integrated into the study to respect autonomy of participants.

Participants may be reluctant to give consent regarding open data sharing (VandeVusse & Karcher, 2022). Data sharing was limited to Walden University research committee members for the sole purpose of review. Data sharing procedures were explained in depth to participants (VandeVusse & Karcher, 2022). Participants were advised of the option to revoke consent for any reason. Cancellation options such as termination of participation was clearly and overtly explained prior to each interview. Sensitive information shared during interviews has been kept confidential and de-identified. Hard copies of all documents pertaining to the study are held in a locked file cabinet.

Significant ethical dilemmas can come up in confinement research settings (Gomes & Duarte, 2020). Constant vigilance is needed when conducting research in confinement settings to abide by principles of trust. Regulatory and normative instruments are socially constructed within prison settings. Correctional institutions are settings with like-situated individuals living in meticulously and explicitly regulated environments cut-off from the wider society (Gomes & Duarte, 2020). Interviews were conducted in private settings for purposes of confidentiality. Participants were informed that participation in the study would not lead to employment or legal risks. Interviews would have promptly concluded if participants began exhibiting signs of distress had any issues arose.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

A phenomenological methodology was implemented to gather correctional officers' perspectives from one-on-one interviews. The lived experiences of correctional officers in solitary confinement were explored to better understand impacts on inmate treatment decisions. Semistructured interviews took place with currently or previously employed correctional officers assigned to solitary confinement units. Semistructured interview questions were used to expand on distinguishing experiences. The researcher's role was that of observer-participant using a more participatory approach. Observer-participant models can lead to deeper connections between the researcher and participant (Halling et al., 2020). Research objectives can more easily be achieved through purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020).

Participants were selected for participation based on their current or previous employment status as a solitary confinement correctional officer. Direct and personal knowledge of the study topic was required for participation. Participants were all required to read and provide verbal agreement of informed consent before data collection began. The target sample size was four to six correctional officers. The sample size was based on saturation effects. Adequate data saturation for thematic inferences can be derived through purposive sampling (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Qualitative methodological approaches use small sample sizes to examine a phenomenon (Gill, 2020).

The data collection process included established interview protocols and bias mitigation strategies. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and hand coded to generate themes and explore meanings. Strategies to establish trustworthiness of findings included triangulation, self-reflection, and process logs. Ethical procedures were included to address confidentiality, informed consent, and principles of trust. Walden University IRB approvals were received prior to beginning the data collection process. Personal biases were identified with a focus on researcher positionality and objectivism. Study results, data collection processes, and evidence of trustworthiness are comprehensively presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

**Introduction**

The purpose of the study was to better understand how correctional officers' lived experiences in solitary confinement influence their punitive force perceptions. Correctional officers' lived experiences in solitary confinement environments were explored through semistructured interview questions. A phenomenological approach was used to distinguish events as experienced by correctional officers from a conventional understanding. Constructs of work environment experiences related to punitive force decisions are not well understood (Evers et al., 2020). The influence of exposure, knowledge, and training on punitive force decisions was explored in-depth. Participants were asked to share their experiences through semistructured interviews. Participants had an opportunity to expand on personal experiences in their own words through the use of a phenomenological approach.

The research question was designed to better understand how the prison environment in solitary confinement impacts correctional officer perceptions of punitive force. A qualitative study was conducted to address the research question. A self-designed eight-question semistructured interview protocol was used with participants contacted through social media and snowball sampling. Interview questions were designed to address factors in relation with the research question.

This chapter includes the study setting, demographics, and data collection methods and procedures. Issues of trustworthiness discussed in Chapter 3 are evaluated

in-depth. Study results are presented with a detailed analysis of collected data in relation to the research question.

## Setting

### Social Media Flyers

Two members on different social media group pages responded to the flyer explaining that correctional officers are fearful of speaking with outsiders. Fear of reprimand and retaliation discouraged participation among correctional officers. Reluctance to participate was evidenced by one individual who did not follow through with interviewing once scheduled. The individual failed to appear for his scheduled interview. Contact with this individual was limited to email during the recruiting phase with no further communication attempted. An email was received from one individual posing as a correctional officer attempting to collect the gift card. The participant search process was significantly complicated by fear of sharing personal experiences.

### Snowball Sampling

Potential participants were contacted through snowball sampling or the approved recruitment flyer posted on various social media sites. Participants voluntarily responded to the social media recruitment flyer and snowball sampling efforts through email. Each interview was scheduled at a time convenient for the participant. All interviews were conducted through the video conferencing platform Zoom at the participants' request. The goal was to complete at least four interviews with qualified participants. All four participants were from various correctional facilities across the state of Colorado. Minimal private information was revealed by participants in data collection.

**Open-ended Interviews**

An open-ended interview format was used to conduct this basic qualitative research study. All participants were correctional officers currently or previously employed in Colorado correctional facilities. Exclusion criteria did not extend to positional rank for purposes of collecting varied data. Social media and snowballing sampling methods were used to recruit all participants. Interested participants reached out through email to express their interest in the study. Two participants were recruited on social media and two participants were contacted through snowball sampling. One initial point of contact contacted potential participants within their personal network who were currently employed as a correctional officer in Colorado or previously employed within 24 months of the interview date, had experience working in solitary confinement settings, and were at least 18 years of age.

## Demographics

Four individuals contacted me with interest in participating and followed through with an interview. The demographics of the participant pool varied. Relevant demographics included participant age, gender identity, ethnicity, tenure, and employment status (see Table 1). Participants were 32 to 57 years old and currently or previously employed as correctional officers in Colorado. Interviewees who participated identified as male or female and were from various ethnic backgrounds. Each participant confirmed their age prior to participating in the interview. Participant numbers were used instead of names to avoid the potential for perceived breaches in confidentiality.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Data: Participant Pool*

| Participant | Age | Gender | Ethnicity | Tenure | Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 001 | 32 | M | Caucasian | 10 years | Employed |
| 002 | 57 | M | Caucasian | 21 years | Retired |
| 003 | 39 | F | Hispanic | 2 years | Prev. Employed |
| 004 | 34 | M | Pacific Islander | 8 months | Employed |

## Data Collection

Approval to begin data collection was granted by the Walden University IRB on June 9, 2022 (IRB approval # 612-312-1210). Data collection strategies were modified in response to challenges faced reaching interested participants. Two Change in Procedure forms were submitted to the IRB on June 15, 2022 and July 12, 2022. The IRB approved both Change in Procedure requests on June 28, 2022 and July 19, 2022. Approvals expanded the participant search efforts to snowball sampling and correctional officers previously employed within 24 months of interviewing. A recruitment announcement was circulated on various social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Participant identifiable information was concealed for confidentiality purposes.
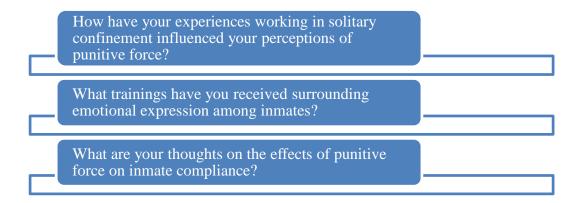
The four participants who elected to participate consisted of three men and one woman. Participants were either currently or previously employed as correctional officers in Colorado correctional facilities. Two participants were currently employed at the time

of the interview and two were previously employed as correctional officers. The ages

represented by those interviewed were 32, 33, 39, and 57 years old. The average age of

the sample was 40 with a 25-year gap between the oldest and youngest participant. The

average tenure of the sample was 8.5 years. Participant ethnic backgrounds were varied

and included Caucasian, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander. Participant rank was not

requested in the interviews.

   Data collection began by posting a recruitment flyer on various social media sites.

Potential participants emailed the researcher to express their interest in the study. A

consent form was provided through email. Participants were advised of the interview

structure and study purpose prior to conducting interviews. Verbal consent was received

through email from participants prior to scheduling an interview. Participant permission

was obtained to use an audio recorder for the duration of the interview. Participants were

asked to provide any final comments at the conclusion of the interview.

   Each interview consisted of five demographic questions and eight open-ended

questions directly related to the research question. Interviews took place through a web

conferencing platform in response to individual participant preference. A semistructured

format for interview questions was used to encourage elaboration of individual

experiences. Participants were selected based on purposeful sampling allowing for a

comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon. Each interview question was designed to

address correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force in solitary confinement. Three

sample questions asked during each interview are provided for reference (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Sample Interview Questions*

How have your experiences working in solitary confinement influenced your perceptions of punitive force?

What trainings have you received surrounding emotional expression among inmates?

What are your thoughts on the effects of punitive force on inmate compliance?

Follow-up questioning was used when appropriate to collect a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Each participant received a transcribed copy of their interview to ensure accuracy along with a $20.00 Visa gift card for participating.

Semistructured interviews were conducted with each participant to encourage engagement and elicit comprehensive responses. Individual interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder and the Zoom recording function as back-up. Audio recorded files of each interview were uploaded to Nvivo software for verbatim transcription. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy then emailed to participants as a final review. All transcripts were uploaded to Nvivo for hand coding. The coding process involved inductive and line-by-line coding to develop themes. The codes were reviewed on several different occasions before generating themes and saving to a spreadsheet for analysis.

Interviews were conducted through a video conferencing platform as preferred by participants. Data collection techniques described in Chapter 3 were modified as needed to reach additional participants. Participant criteria were expanded to include previously employed correctional officers. Permissions were provided by Walden University IRB to expand participant criteria and repost a revised flyer on various social media sites. The data collected were composed of voluntary participation with no incentive other than an opportunity to participate in advocacy research. Every interview was conducted as originally arranged with participants. Participants were emailed a copy of the transcript for review following interviews.

Two potential participants provided verbal consent, scheduled an interview, then failed to appear and participate. Several individuals expressed hesitation to participate because they feared reprimand. Two individuals initially agreed to participate in an interview but were unresponsive after receiving the consent form. One individual on a social media group page described administrative regulations persuading correctional officers to refrain from speaking with outsiders. Several disparaging comments were received in response to the recruitment flyer posted on various social media sites. Several emails were received from one individual posing as a correctional officer in an attempt to receive the participation gift card. Attempts at recruiting were met with overwhelming resistance and hesitation by correctional officers.

**Data Analysis**

Data were collected through semistructured interviews conducted at various times over a 3-month period. Each audio recorded interview was individually uploaded into

Nvivo for transcription. A rough transcription of each interview was generated and reviewed against the recordings for accuracy. Final transcripts were reviewed in-depth before beginning the coding process. Observational reflective notes were included in data analysis to minimize intrinsic bias. Interview transcripts were coded line-by-line prior to thematic analysis. Credible interpretations of data in qualitative analysis can be achieved through active categorization (Grodal et al., 2021).

Themes relevant to the research question were identified after all data were collected and analyzed. A list of prefatory codes, categories, and themes was compiled following line-by-line coding. Detailed descriptions were used to clearly identify common themes and provide a reflective analysis of individual lived experiences. The process of hand coding was used to identify themes and subthemes. Nvivo was used to organize, code, and analyze the data. Common words and themes were identified using a word frequency query in Nvivo. The resulting word frequency list was saved as a node.

Separate nodes were created in Nvivo for each participant interview transcript. Interviews were coded as Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 3, and Interview 4. Line-by-line coding led to an emergence of themes and patterns across the data. A word frequency query was run to identify commonly used words across the data. A visual representation of identified themes was generated using the word cloud feature in Nvivo. The case classifications feature in Nvivo was used to integrate demographic information including gender and employment status. Demographic attributes were added to allow for comparisons across data based on gender and employment status.

Nodes were created based on dialogue repetitiveness, commonly referenced perceptions, and significant thematic phrases. A detailed descriptive code list was developed and organized based on relevance to the study purpose. The data were then organized categorically leading to overarching themes. Participant experiences were grouped throughout the data analysis process using an inductive approach to enhance validity and reliability. The data were categorized based on code frequency and relevance. Thematic findings were deduced from rigorously selected data categories and consolidated across all participant interviews to establish the final themes. The emergent categories derived from the Nvivo analysis included poor impulse control, lack of training, management control, ineffective programs, overlooked profession, and use of force decisions.

Participant experiences and perceptions were initially coded under four categories before being reorganized into subthemes. Themes and subthemes were also aligned with participant gender and employment status. Several predominant subthemes across participant data were identified. Subthemes including *self sought*, *we don't have enough*, and *training wasn't a priority* were all prevalent across each interview within the lack of training theme. Categorized words and phrases were color coded in relation to each interview question. A bar graph was created using the Hierarchy Chart tab in Nvivo to better understand similarities and differences between responses. The data were interpreted in relation to the research question after completing coding.

**Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is evaluated by assessing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Adler, 2022). The term trustworthiness can be interchanged with the word rigor. Transparency is a critical component of trustworthiness in qualitative research. Triangulation can be used to cross-check research and increase credibility. Member checking is one form of triangulation that involves participant feedback about the results to ensure accurate findings. Reflexivity can also be used to achieve trustworthiness through transparency of researcher effects on research participants. Researcher biases can be minimized through self-assessment during all stages of research (Adler, 2022).

**Credibility**

Use of self by the researcher is a critical way to establish credibility in qualitative research (Shufutinsky, 2020). Potential biases were mitigated through the process of bracketing previous knowledge identified during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Pre-supposed understandings were suspended using reflective analysis to cultivate curiosity (Shufutinsky, 2020). Direct interview quotes were used when developing categorical data to augment accurate interpretation of results. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for increased accuracy and to ensure credibility. Field notes were used to record non-verbal communication exhibited by participants. Member checking was used to assist in establishing accuracy of participant interview responses against their intended message.

**Transferability**

Transferability is achieved when study results can be transferred across other contexts and situations (Maxwell, 2021). Detailed documentation was used throughout the data collection process to ensure transferability. The recruiting and selection process was described in detail. Rich descriptions of participants' experiences in solitary confinement settings were maintained through field notes and semistructured interview responses. A procedural checklist was used throughout the data collection process to promote transferability. The transferability of the study is limited by a relatively small sample size. Improved access to correctional officers would increase duplication feasibility applying the same interview protocol utilized in this study.

**Dependability**

Dependability refers to whether a study repeated in the same context with similar methods and participants would produce similar results (Janis, 2022). All research steps conducted throughout the study were transparently described providing an audit trail. Participant interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim followed by a verification process with individual participants. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times for accuracy. Validation of participant quotes properly implemented and methodically categorized led to dependable findings. Line-by-line coding was utilized to organize all participant responses with detailed descriptors. Data collection was based on participant experiences in solitary confinement within Colorado correctional facilities.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is considered the degree to which study results are based on a research purpose and not altered by research bias (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). Confirmability in qualitative research is addressed when researchers report on the relative proportion of leading questions. All of the interview questions were designed to maintain attention on participant experiences and encourage elaboration (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). Participant responses were elucidated through careful consideration of the relationship between categories and thematic findings. A reflective journal was used for recording nuanced data during the research process and to minimize personal bias. An audit trail was also used to reduce researcher bias and establish confirmability. Reflexivity was utilized as self-refection to continually assess and maintain an awareness of personal bias.

## Results

Four Colorado correctional officers agreed to participate in the study and share their lived experiences within solitary confinement. Semistructured interviews were conducted through Zoom with individual participants over a three-month period. All eight interview questions related directly to the research question. Participant responses were carefully transcribed and reviewed for accuracy before being uploaded to Nvivo software for hand coding. Themes were identified based on common words, phrases, or ideas that were repeatedly referenced across all interviews. The identified themes represent unique aspects of correctional officers' punitive force perceptions in solitary confinement. A thematic analysis relating to the research question is provided in detail.

**Research Question**

How does the prison environment in solitary confinement impact correctional officer perceptions of punitive force?

This research question was designed to explore the impact of solitary confinement environments on correctional officers' punitive force perceptions. The research question was deliberately broad to address all aspects of correctional officers' punitive force perceptions in solitary confinement. Each interview question was created to address the research question and explore participants' lived experiences working in solitary confinement. Each of the eight interview questions were answered by all four participants. Participant responses and resulting descriptions of their lived experiences were categorized into five primary themes. Primary themes of the data analysis are exhibited alongside direct participant quotes (see Table 2). Direct quotations are included with each theme for participant statements that best capture the thematic inference.

**Table 1**

*Themes Related to Participants' Perceptions of Punitive Force in Solitary*

| Themes | Participant Quotes |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Poor Impulse Control | Participant 2: "…I started looking at the reasoning why people were going to the hole…it seemed random because the numbers fluctuated…nothing you can ever predict." |
| 2. Lack of Training | Participant 4: "I wish that facilities targeted their officers more with mental health training because that's a |

| Themes | Participant Quotes |
|---|---|
| | huge part of what we deal with on a daily basis." |
| 3. Management Control | Participant 3: "…I think that some of the higher-ups have an agenda to look better to the society as a whole than to actually care even about these inmates." |
| 4. Ineffective Programs | Participant 4: "I think changing the way that jailing has been done for so long is where we start." |
| 5. Overlooked Profession | Participant 2: "…it feels like that when you're working in a prison, it feels like nobody gives a crap about you at all, ever." |
| 6. Use of Force Decisions | Participant 1: "So I think physical force is necessary in certain situations." |

**Theme 1: Poor Impulse Control**

All four participants expressed some form of communication complications due to poor impulse control within the correctional system. Each participant expressed feelings of inmate unpredictability related to behaviors within solitary confinement. Communication and rapport were discussed by all participants as factors impacting solitary confinement environments. Some participants felt that despite building rapport with inmates, behavioral outbursts were still inevitable. One of the participants was brutally attacked by an inmate and explained, "I have no issue with that inmate. I think of it as they are lions in the zoo, so why would I get mad at him, he is just doing what he normally does?". References to poor impulse control can help elucidate individual participant experiences (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Participant Open-Ended Responses Regarding Poor Impulse Control*

| Participant | Participant Quote |
|---|---|
| 1 | "You know, we communicate with them, we have good rapport with them, but at the same time, they can change in a minute because they're unstable and some of those guys are just very violent, like the guy that assaulted me, so I had good rapport with him but it was just more of an opportunity for him…" |
| 2 | "…when I was younger doing this, it was easier for inmates to get under my skin and you get mad and stuff like that, and then once they start pushing your buttons, they would just play that card on you all the time, and they're bored and it's something to do." |
| 3 | "I'm not going to sit here and argue with somebody that I know doesn't even have a solid grasp on, like a real reality or even a real world." |
| 4 | "…this is a very hard job. You deal with mental and verbal abuse constantly." |

**Theme 2: Lack of Training**

Participants were asked if they received any trainings surrounding emotional expression among inmates. All four participants referenced concerns regarding the lack of training required as correctional officers. Individual responses help exemplify the issues identified by participants surrounding training deficits (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Participant Open-Ended Responses Regarding Training Deficits*

| Participant | Participant Quote |
|---|---|
| 1 | "…training yearly as an officer you get very minimal training in communication, it's just your basic training and then you got to seek out those extra classes…So I have taken the extra strep to seek out this training as an officer, you don't get those unless you actually look for them." |
| 2 | "They don't teach us in the academy how to talk to inmates or do any of that. It's when you come out of the academy, everything's black and white, right or wrong, and you write everybody up for everything." |
| 3 | "The lack of resources, the lack of understanding, I even think like even as officers, we don't even remotely have the training to deal with mental health." |
| 4 | "Previously at the facility, training wasn't necessarily a priority when it comes to inmate to personnel relationship, so de-escalation is very big" and "…one thing that officers need to understand that isn't really kind of coached in academies and other types of trainings is it's not an us versus them type of mentality." |

**Theme 3: Management Control**

Barriers associated with management controls were referenced by all four participants. Two of the participants explained that the prison environment is marked by a distrust in officers by administration. One participant explained the fear of management as a deterring factor among officers to share their experiences. Another participant

explained that the prison administration keeps tabs on officers' social media pages.

Several participants discussed the challenges of prison culture within solitary

confinement as being pervasive. One participant explained management control as being

on a spectrum with no middle ground. Participant quotations help expand upon the theme

of management control (see Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Participant Open-Ended Responses Regarding Management Control*

| Participant | Participant Quote |
|---|---|
| 1 | "They say it's productive and it's part of the rehabilitation program. And I said, that's horrible. I don't believe it is. Like I said, this is a business so personally, I'm not going to like voice my pain to them. But, that's not productive or anything." |
| 2 | "…I was going to change the system from within. And not much of that happens because the system is consolidated and it conforms you." |
| 3 | "I think there's always going to be times where I won't always agree with it. But I also understand the bigger picture of the safety and security...I've seen it be excessive, where I've questioned, and I've gotten in trouble for questioning" |
| 4 | "I think the one thing that has really upset me in my career when I had first started was, why do we do this? Well, that's how we've always done it. And I don't think that's an adequate answer." |

**Theme 4: Ineffective Programs**

The effectiveness of solitary confinement as a means to achieve institutional order

and safety have been debated for decades (Mears et al., 2021). Prison system staff

members have argued that solitary confinement in some form is necessary and effective

(Mears et al., 2021). All four participants explained the necessity of solitary confinement

with a caveat that one shoe doesn't fit all. All four participants provided suggestions to

improve current policies based on their lived experience working in solitary confinement.

One participant suggested that out of cell time in recreation yards would be more

effective for mental health reasons. Two participants explained that inmates attempt

suicide in solitary confinement commonly as a cry for help. The ineffectiveness of prison

programs was discussed by each participant (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Participant Open-Ended Responses Regarding Ineffective Programs*

| Participant | Participant Quote |
|---|---|
| 1 | "…restrictive housing and MCC is bad for some people, but others it's necessary." |
| 2 | "…you can't completely do away with solitary and have things work, unless you have an alternative to solitary because some guys need to be in solitary." |
| 3 | "So I think with the proper introduction into solitary confinement, the constant oversight for mental health availability, I think it can be done correctly." |
| 4 | "I really do think it's a necessity in a facility…segregation wings aren't necessarily built for punishment, sometimes they are for protection." |

**Theme 5: Overlooked Profession**

Three participants discussed their intentions to make a positive change when beginning a career in corrections. All four participants explained feeling overlooked in their profession by either society or their administration. One participant discussed challenges trying to effectively and humanly communicate with inmates who hate law enforcement. Another participant discussed negative implications related to stigma and being the "bad guy". Recruiting correctional officers was explained by one participant as a recurrent concern due to the work risks involved coupled with low pay. The feeling of being overlooked was common among all participants (see Table 7).

**Table 7**

*Participant Open-Ended Responses Regarding Overlooked Profession*

| Participant | Participant Quote |
|:---:|:---:|
| 1 | "You just gotta be on your guard. Always watching out, being vigilant." |
| 2 | "There's an old saying, you're not worth a damn to the department for your first five years. After that five years, you're not worth a damn to anybody else." |
| 3 | "…then you go home and it takes a toll." |
| 4 | "…the public doesn't want to hear about that side of life. It's not going to go away, and you can't sweep it under the rug." |

**Theme 6: Use of Force Decisions**

Punitive use of force refers to violence or punishment used against an inmate for alleged misconduct (Muhammad, 2022). One participant explained the necessity of using force against inmates in potentially lethal situations. One participant discussed using force very minimally as it was rarely needed to maintain control. Participants similarly commented that the climate within solitary confinement changes you. All participants explained that they remain vigilant but generally don't have bad experiences with inmates. Punitive force experiences within solitary confinement varied in frequency among participants (see Table 8).

**Table 8**

*Participant Open-Ended Responses Regarding Use of Force Decisions*

| Participant | Participant Quote |
|---|---|
| 1 | "I tell my staff I'd rather you use force and me reprimand you for what you did, than for you to hesitate and then that inmate assaults you, so that's my view on force, especially back there, is you can't wait." |
| 2 | "If an inmate is fighting another inmate, the effects are they get stopped and whether that's through pepper spray or something like that, you've got to interrupt the train of thought one way or another, and I'd rather use an intermediate use of force like pepper spray, which is temporary for the most part." |
| 3 | "So, times like that, it's extremely necessary for their own safety as well. So I don't like it, but it is probably the least favorite of my job. But it's absolutely necessary in times when your safety as an officer is jeopardized or, you know, the inmate themselves are being jeopardized as well." |

| Participant | Participant Quote |
|---|---|
| 4 | "…training is key with understanding that every single person is individual and every single situation calls for its own certain way to handle it." |

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how solitary confinement environments influence punitive force perceptions among correctional officers. The results of this research study highlight correctional officers' lived experiences working in solitary confinement across various Colorado correctional facilities. The themes that emerged were *poor impulse control*, *lack of training*, *management control*, *ineffective programs*, *overlooked profession*, and *use of force decisions*. Fifty percent of the participants were employed as a correctional officer within a Colorado correctional facility. The other 50% of participants were previously employed as a correctional officer. Majority (75%) of participants were men and only one female correctional officer participated. All four participants (100%) view inmates in solitary confinement the same as all other offenders.

Fear of reprimand by DOC administration proved to be a significant challenge to recruiting participants. Revised recruitment measures were requested and approved to reach additional participants. Initial participant recruitment efforts on social media were met with resistance. Snowball sampling was incorporated to reach potential participants. Four participants were willing to share their experiences working in solitary confinement. Interviews were conducted using a video conferencing platform. Participant numbers were assigned to maintain confidentiality. The underlying thematic data representing participant experiences demonstrate a need for solitary confinement for some offenders.

Substantial information relating to the research question was obtained following four semistructured interviews. Lack of training and poor impulse control are prison environment factors that influence punitive force perceptions. Poor impulse control among inmates and inexperienced correctional officers contribute to escalation of force. Data collection and analysis followed all procedures as described in Chapter 3 to answer the research question. An overall consensus of the need for solitary confinement was reflected in participant responses. A comprehensive overview of the study and in-depth interpretations regarding data findings are presented in Chapter 5. Study limitations, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion are comprehensively outlined in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

## Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore lived experiences of correctional officers' working in solitary confinement settings. A clear understanding of solitary confinement impacts on correctional officers' perceptions was missing in the research (Salerno & Zgoba, 2020). Participants were provided an opportunity to describe their perceptions of punitive force in restrictive housing environments. Correctional officers' experiences can help inform prison policy initiatives regarding prison reform. Their experiences also lead to a better understanding of the impacts facility-level constructs have on punitive force decisions within correctional institutions. The findings of this study can help fill a gap in research by exploring correctional officers' punitive force perceptions within solitary confinement. Correctional officers' perceptions about inmate behavior are influenced by power dynamics, job stress, and poor impulse control.

Key findings that resulted from this phenomenological study include six overarching themes in relation to the research question. The six themes identified following semistructured interviews were poor impulse control, lack of training, management control, ineffective programs, overlooked profession, and use of force decisions. All four correctional officers emphasized a need for additional trainings within the department. All participants also discussed the necessity of solitary confinement for some inmates. Three participants agreed that inmates should be viewed as unique individuals with varying needs. All participants agreed that punitive force in solitary

confinement should only be used when the safety of inmates and staff is at stake. Each participant offered suggestions to improve the effectiveness of solitary confinement on inmate compliance.

## Interpretation of the Findings

The six primary themes that emerged from participant interviews were poor impulse control, lack of training, management control, ineffective programs, overlooked profession, and use of force decisions. The findings closely align with previous research regarding negative effects of limited training among correctional officers (Kowalski, 2020). The study outcomes also align with previous research findings that correctional officer preparedness is a result of experience as opposed to formal training (Lavrič et al., 2022). Participants confirmed that discretion is warranted in use of force decisions (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). The current findings confirm that prison administrations have a profound influence on correctional officer stress (Walters, 2022). Participants affirmed that punitive force decisions are influenced by their perceptions of an incident, consistent with the Dodd et al. (2020) study outcomes. An overall consistency is reflected between previous research findings and the results of this study.

Racial bias among correctional officers did not have an influence on perceptions of punitive force. Little was previously known about the influence of correctional officers' racial bias on punitive force perceptions (Peterman et al., 2021). The current findings reflect an absence of inmate race considerations in punitive force decisions. Participants view inmates in solitary confinement the same regardless of race or ethnicity. Participants reported the necessity of always being on guard due to unpredictable

behavior among inmates in solitary confinement. Different attitudes regarding the impacts of punitive force on inmate compliance were expressed among participants. Participants explained that rehabilitation efforts were undermined by a lack of resources available for inmates in solitary confinement.

Correctional officer safety was a crucial component in punitive force perceptions. Two participants reported a high rate of exposure to violence in solitary confinement. Existing research identified trust as a critical factor in maintaining a safe and controlled prison environment (Haynes et al., 2020). Vigilance was identified by three participants as necessary to maintain order in solitary confinement. All participants discussed the importance of building rapport with inmates. Trust and safety are contributing factors in punitive force decisions. One participant stated,

> It's hard to not have a rapport, to not have some type of bond or a relationship
> with these individuals, where if something goes south, you're the officer that
> they're asking for because they know that you can either talk them off the ledge
> or you understand what they're going through.

Necessary safety precautions are better understood through correctional officers' punitive force perceptions in solitary confinement. Competent and supportive relationships within solitary confinement can improve inmate outcomes (Auty & Liebling, 2020). Participants reported a disconnect in the public's understanding of solitary confinement experiences. Disconnected communication and misinformation have led to lack of understanding between prison operations and surrounding communities (Testoni et al., 2021). One participant explained, "when I talk to people in the public,

they are like MCC or segregation are so inhumane. I say, no, it's not. They choose to be

back there…. They choose that." Improved communications between the public and

prisons can help build a level of trust and transparency that is currently missing (Testoni

et al., 2021). Participants expressed feeling underappreciated, misunderstood, and

forgotten in their profession by the general public.

Correctional officer turnover rates were discussed by all participants as a

significant factor in unreasonable workloads. Current findings are consistent with

outcomes of the Ellison and Caudill (2020) study that linked staff shortages to

overwhelming role expectations. One participant stated, "unfortunately, in law

enforcement across the nation, we are so understaffed, it's not even funny, I think we

have eight vacancies right now. And you know, I'm essentially running on a skeleton

crew." Participants agreed that staff shortages are on the rise with many correctional

officers leaving the field. One participant described heightened levels of stress from

workload obligations leading to his request for early retirement. Inexperienced

correctional officers are placed in environments that require specialized work experience

(Mears et al., 2021b). This is best illustrated by one participant who stated, "it takes, I

think, a special person to really do what we do and to understand what we do."

Correctional officers follow a set of codes that help guide decision making

processes within solitary confinement (Higgins et al., 2022). Each participant discussed

subjective rules they follow to maintain order while also building rapport with inmates.

Two participants discussed the importance of maintaining a level head and not taking

things personal with inmate behaviors. Rapport building was identified as an important

factor in effective treatment of inmates. Three participants described the restrictive nature of administrative policies that lack foresight. The expectation to be a robot was explained by a participant who said, "You're not supposed to care why somebody is in the hole, it doesn't matter, that's irrelevant." Empathy was regarded as a critical factor in corrections work that is overlooked or dismissed by administrative personnel.

The study outcomes closely align with previous research findings that effective maintenance of solitary confinement environments is directly impacted by inmate violence (Howard et al., 2020). Isolation panic often results in violence toward correctional officers (Tayer et al., 2021). Little was previously known about the influence of staff-inmate relationships on prisoner misconduct (Bosma et al., 2020). Equal treatment of inmates was described by all participants as a mitigating factor in prisoner misconduct. A participant with 10 years of experience working in a Colorado correctional facility indicated,

> You kind of treat them all the same, because if you don't, then you will forget and be like, oh, this guy is really nice to me today, and then you remember he stabbed an officer last week. So you kind of treat them all the same, like violent inmates, but that doesn't mean you gotta be mean to them or anything. You just gotta be on your guard. Always watching out, being vigilant.

Inmates consist of individuals that are high risk, have violent tendencies, and often suffer from mental illness. All participants agreed that effective and ethical use of decisions within solitary confinement differs depending on the situation.

The impacts of solitary confinement on individual correctional officers was previously not well known (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Insight into correctional officer experiences have been expanded. Feelings of being overlooked, misunderstood, and forgotten were salient points identified by all four participants. One participant was violently attacked by an inmate in solitary confinement causing permanent damage to his hearing. Other participants explained the challenges of bringing work home with them whether they want to or not. Continual exposure to violence and inmate emotional dysregulation notably changed each participant. Participants expressed feeling misrepresented by media outlets and other members of the public who don't understand their responsibilities and lived experiences.

Study participants expressed slight variance in their punitive force perceptions which can be delineated by years of experience. The two correctional officers who served more time working in corrections expressed a lack of insight by prison administrators. The two participants with less experience working as correctional officers similarly explained that current standards of practice are short sided. Other variations in responses related to use of force decisions centered around restrictions imposed within solitary confinement settings. Each participant agreed punitive force is influenced by officer training and followed up with a review by supervisors. Inmates are viewed by participants as requiring additional vigilance. All of the participants believed that the environment of solitary confinement influences punitive force decisions.

Many of the participants stated that a lack of experience among younger correctional officers can be detrimental to inmate safety. Poor impulse control was

explained by most participants as a significant indicator of punitive force escalation. A tendency to react emotionally is more common among new or younger correctional officers. All participants explained the importance of training new officers how to keep their emotions in check while on duty. Only one participant had limited experience with punitive force despite his long tenure in corrections. The participants felt that use of force was at times necessary to maintain control in the prison environment. Correctional officers are outnumbered by inmates at a staggering rate which requires increased control tactics that can amount to punitive force.

The study findings are slightly out of alignment with previous research findings indicating that inmates' age and gender impact solitary confinement placement decisions (Mears et al., 2021a). All participants explained that placement in solitary confinement is based on inmate behavior or for protective purposes. Solitary confinement is not limited to violent offenders. Inmates can be sent to solitary for committing violations, as a protective mechanism from threats in general population, and for violent offenders. Inmates will commit violations to get themselves placed in solitary for safety reasons. All participants view inmates as people that have the same needs as anyone else. Age and gender are not considered when placing inmates in solitary confinement.

Weiner's attribution theory was the supporting theoretical foundation for this study. The way people interpret events is related to their thinking and behavior (Weiner, 2010). Human motivation and emotion are evaluated in conjunction with causal beliefs to explain behaviors (Pekrun & Marsh, 2018; Talpade et al., 2012). The environment in solitary confinement can influence correctional officers' behaviors and perceptions

(Talpade et al., 2012). A key concept of Weiner's attribution theory relates to the idea that personal and environmental factors affect individual attributions (Weiner, 2010). Correctional officers' knowledge and attitudes can positively influence inmate behavior change (Talpade et al., 2012). The necessity of punitive force to maintain safety was confirmed by all participants.

Human emotion is a central tenant of Weiner's attribution theory (Pekrun & Marsh, 2018). Psychological functioning can be understood in connection with causal attributions. Correctional officers with limited experience working in prison settings are prone to higher rates of emotional distress. Perceptions of punitive force are influenced by solitary confinement environments, training, and knowledge (Talpade et al., 2012). Attributions are assumed to have a relation to causal dimensions of behaviors (Talpade et al., 2012). This was most evident in all participating officers' responses regarding the correlation between emotional responses and lack of experience. A connection between correctional officer emotional responses and misguided inmate stigma was evidenced throughout each individual interview.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study was a qualitative phenomenological study conducted with participants currently or previously employed as correctional officers in the state of Colorado. The study findings may not be applicable to other correctional facilities outside of Colorado depending on state specific facility protocols. Semistructured interview questions were used as one strategy to reduce potential issues with transferability (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). The final study outcomes were ultimately influenced by constraints regarding

correctional officers' reluctance to participate. A replication of the study with correctional officers employed within various state corrections departments may yield different thematic results. Participant direct quotes were used for purposes of validating the findings. An opportunity for exploration has been uncovered to better understand the experiences of correctional officers employed in different states.

All participants were recruited from a similar geographical area impacting the study generalizability. The results of this study are limited to Colorado correctional officers' experiences in solitary confinement. The study cannot be generalized across all correctional officers due to the small sample size and restricted geographical area. An emphasis on rich data collection can be achieved through smaller sample sizes to examine a phenomenon (Gill, 2020). A smaller than anticipated sample size was used for this study because of a reluctance to share personal experiences. Limited access to potential participants is a significant challenge that must be considered for future studies. Predictions based on the current study results are limited in generalizability due to restricted participant access.

The sample size was limited by correctional officers' hesitance to participate for fear of being reprimanded. The final sample size of four participants was less than anticipated. Small sample sizes are used in qualitative approaches to explore lived experiences (Gill, 2020). A target sample size of four to six correctional officers was based on findings from the Bartholomew et al. (2021) study. Individualized considerations must be taken in phenomenological studies to determine the adequate participant sample size. Several correctional officers expressed an initial interest in

participating before declining consent. Only one individual who participated in an interview offered to share my contact information with prospective participants.

The data collected from four participants were adequate for deducing thematic conclusions. Sample size is a significant factor of saturation in qualitative studies (Gill, 2020). The adequacy of purposive samples is based on saturation principles (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The four participant interviews reached data saturation when no new information was discovered during thematic analysis (Gill, 2020). Response consistency among participants reached credibility as they were not homogenous in rank, age, gender, tenure, and ethnicity. The findings were consistent across all participant interviews with an exception of one discrepancy regarding high rates of punitive force exposures. Additional data collection could help extend this study and provide added confirmation.

Guard subculture encourages solidarity against outsiders (Worley et al., 2021). The recruitment process was complicated by guard subculture and a code of silence among correctional officers. A reluctance to participate was readily apparent from comments received on a Facebook group page. One participant openly discussed efforts made by administrators to discourage correctional staff from sharing information with outsiders. Other potential participants received similar misinformation dissuading them from participating in an interview. An inference can be made that other correctional officers experienced similar reluctance to participate as a result of guard subculture. Sample sizes are not likely to increase by recruiting through CDOC administrators because of participant deception and favorable reporting.

Researcher bias can negatively impact the accuracy of findings (Johnson et al., 2020). Qualitative methodological approaches can involve a certain level of subjective data interpretation. Interview questions were designed to minimize the chance of inadvertently including bias. Self-monitoring and a reflective journal were also used as preventative measures against researcher bias. Detailed and careful documentation was also used to mitigate researcher bias. Bias in thematic conclusions were addressed by comparing interview transcripts with final codes generated using Nvivo. Data findings were further validated through the use of direct quotes to ensure accuracy in descriptive meanings.

## Recommendations

The study findings were used to guide significant recommendations for future research. Correctional officer reluctance to share sensitive information with outsiders is noteworthy and should be considered in future recruitment processes. Open-ended questionnaires distributed online may help reduce fear of reprimand or retaliation concerns and increase participant sample sizes. The inclusion of multiple states to expand target populations may increase participation interest. An expansion in relevant data could lead to enriched generalizability and bolster relevancy of current findings. Future studies might expand the scope of research to better understand correctional officers' perceptions across general prison population settings. Correctional officers' punitive force perceptions within various state prison systems would help determine specific systematic issues.

Future research might explore correctional officers' perceptions on the effectiveness of prison administration policies. The current study delineated a difference between correctional officer training expectations and treatment of inmates. Effective interventions can be created based on additional qualitative investigations. Correctional officers working closely with diverse inmate populations can offer insightful recommendations for effective prison policy adjustments. Additional data on effective training courses would be beneficial for successful response tactic efforts. An investigation into the lack of mental health training required by prison administrations is needed. Further exploration can expand limited knowledge of the impact prison administration policies have on correctional officers' decision making processes.

The results of this study can be used to validate challenges faced by correctional officers' working in solitary confinement. Correctional officers are faced with unrealistic role expectations, understaffing, and ruptured communication between administrative personnel. An extension of the participant pool to correctional officers in other states would help elucidate data findings and improve generalizability. A more in-depth analysis of individual factors impacting participant sentiments can help elucidate effective and ineffective prison system functions. Future research is needed to better understand divergent components of prison work impacting correctional officers' perceptions. Prison policy initiatives developed by department of corrections administrative staff are limited in scope. Prison programs guided by correctional staff insight and lived experiences can be further advanced (Harney & Lerman, 2021).

The current study can be reproduced with other correctional officers to increase validity and reliability. Discrepancies in punitive force decisions can be further explored across specific demographics. Distinctions in restrictive housing guidelines between state and federal facilities can help provide further considerations for future studies. Variations in correctional climates may contribute to role ambiguity perceptions. High correctional officer turnover rates could be further explored to determine impacts on prison administrative safety policies. Future research should focus on the code of silence barriers among correctional officers and resulting safety concerns (Worley et al., 2021). Future investigative efforts should help elucidate discerning perspectives of correctional officers working in correctional facilities across various states.

Correctional systems have oscillated between tough on crime approaches and rehabilitative efforts (Ferentz, 2020). The unequivocal issue of mass incarceration was a byproduct of tough on crime approaches (Reiter et al., 2020). The more recent transition into a smart on crime approach was designed to filter low level offenders onto treatment instead of jail. Mental health counseling and evaluations are rarely ordered by the Court. Alcohol and domestic violence classes are often required while mental health referrals are seemingly ignored. Inmates placed in the restrictive environment of solitary confinement are at odds with rehabilitation efforts. Smart on crime approaches could be improved by implementing mental health evaluations with inmates at high risk for violence, depression, and suicide.

**Implications**

**Positive Social Change**

Correctional officers across the U.S. are tasked with many cognitive and physical challenges within prison environments (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Prison administrative personnel lack certain exposure and experience within correctional environments compared to corrections officers (Testoni et al., 2021). This study can advance knowledge concerning correctional officers' punitive force perceptions in solitary confinement settings across Colorado corrections facilities. Thematic findings from this study can better inform public understanding of correctional officers' lived experiences. The code of silence has been a significant deterrent for correctional officers wanting to share their experiences up until now. Prison administrative officials could use the data collected to more constructively address failed programs. Improvements in training protocols including an integration of mental health initiatives could improve inmate and correctional staff outcomes.

The discovery of new information that has been thoroughly evaluated can help promote positive social change (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2021). Use of force decisions are influenced by correctional officers' perceptions. Correctional officers are continuously exposed to mental and verbal abuse when dealing with inmates. Information regarding potential system failures from the perspective of correctional officers was previously limited (Mears et al., 2021a). Improved communication between prison administrators and correctional staff can be implemented to improve transparency. Correctional officers are often required to enforce policy changes handed down from administrators that might

lack direct insight on interpersonal complexities within solitary confinement. The data collected will advance administrative awareness of failed programs and insight from prison staff working directly with inmates.

**Methodological and Theoretical**

Motivation and emotion as they relate to punitive force decisions can be understood through Weiner's attribution theory (Weiner, 2010). Weiner's attribution theory was used in the current study to explore how solitary confinement environments influence correctional officers punitive force perceptions. Use of force decisions are influenced by several factors including previous training, experience in corrections, automatic emotional responses, and safety concerns. A phenomenological approach was used in this study to differentiate conventional understandings about use of force from actual events experienced by correctional officers. Organizational stress experienced by correctional officers impacts their visibility within the field and limits opportunities to be heard. Correctional officers are affected by environmental and personal factors that shape their behavioral responses. The need to maintain safety within solitary confinement settings is a motivating factor when making use of force decisions.

Emotional and behavioral responses are formed by causal explanations for an event (Talpade et al., 2012). Attributional explanations are formed by outside members of society when receiving information about punitive force. The most common attributional explanation when correctional officers use force against inmates is cruelty or inhumanity. Attributions are not always an accurate depiction of reality (Pekrun & Marsh, 2018). An improved understanding of correctional officers' perceptions and lived experiences

within corrections is needed. Correctional officers are among the least studied professions (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2021). Qualitative research exploring correctional officers' lived experiences was previously lacking. Improved understanding of the negative impacts experienced by correctional officers can more effectively inform prison policy initiatives.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The current study can be interpreted as an initiative in the research on correctional officer perceptions of punitive force. Future research is needed to further examine correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force within jails and prisons across the U.S. A more in-depth understanding of the impacts penal environmental factors can have on correctional officers' perceptions is needed. Fear of reprimand by administrative officials significantly limited the participant pool. Study findings should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size. The onboarding process for correctional officers needs to be updated with more appropriate training opportunities focused on inmate mental health and communication techniques. Updated requirements for officer trainings is the first step toward increasing more effective interactions between inmates and correctional officers.

High-stress work environments within solitary confinement can cause misdirected judgment by correctional officers (Evers et al., 2020). Correctional officers learn through experience and exposure to verbal and physical assaults that inmate behaviors cannot be taken personally. Insufficient training is a significant factor in use of force decisions. High security correctional facilities are linked with increased levels of correctional officer stress (Paleksić, 2020). Correctional staff and inmate safety is an underlying

consideration of prison policies. Punitive force is more likely to be used in situations where a perceived threat or danger by an offender is imminent. Correctional officers should receive on-the-job training in stress management techniques to recognize and address escalating tension.

Unique experiences with punitive force were described by participants. The male to female gender ratio in this study was four to one. The possibility of gender influences on punitive force perceptions should be further explored. Future studies should include more female participants to explore how gender influences study outcomes. Participant ethnicity is another factor that should be explored in more depth. Cultural implications of correctional officer ethnicity on punitive force perceptions could be incorporated into future studies. Correlational research using a quantitative approach could improve understanding regarding use of force decisions.

Increased awareness of correctional officer duties, obligations, and lived experiences is critically important to successfully operate correctional facilities. Correctional officers feel undervalued, misunderstood, and more recently a target for disparaging media coverage. The stigma surrounding correctional officers complicates their ability to maintain order without a fear of backlash. Future studies can expand the scope of this study to collect data on correctional officers' perspectives across various state correctional facilities. The code of silence is a significant factor to consider when recruiting correctional officers. Correctional officers are more likely to share their experiences when confidentiality can be confirmed. Each officer experiences solitary confinement in a unique way requiring individual consideration and further study.

**Conclusion**

This phenomenological study explored correctional officers' perceptions of punitive force in solitary confinement across various Colorado corrections facilities. Prison environments are influenced by risk perception, sense of security, and institutional characteristics (Peterman et al., 2021). Violence, injury, or the likelihood of death are work related concerns for correctional officers. Correctional officers punitive force decisions are more heavily influenced by safety concerns than their view of inmates. The most violent offenders within a correctional facility are housed in solitary confinement units. Correctional officers must maintain the safety of inmates and staff while also building rapport to ensure basic needs are met. The continual balance between administrative expectations and a duality of roles convolutes rehabilitative efforts.

Staff turnover rates have continued to increase across Colorado correctional facilities. A lack of departmental support is experienced by correctional officers who are expected to work overtime and take on additional roles. The results of this study illustrate challenges experienced by correctional officers working in solitary confinement. Administrative staff have been implicated in encouraging the code of silence among correctional officers. Correctional institutions must be held to a higher standard of care for inmates and correctional staff alike. Correctional officers who take on the job to make a difference from within are often met with resistance and denied a voice. The code of silence has led to important issues getting ignored as a direct result of administrative intimidation tactics.

Correctional officers must be given a voice without fear of reprimand to encourage change within solitary confinement settings. Individuals housed in solitary confinement are viewed the same by correctional officers as all other inmates. Use of force decisions are solely needs based and dependent upon safety concerns. Correctional officers use the minimum amount of force needed to maintain control and safety of inmates and staff. Inexperienced correctional officers who take inmate assaults or comments personally and react inappropriately face disciplinary action. Excessive use of force is the exception as opposed to the norm. Correctional officers play a significant role in mitigating conflict and maintaining order with compassion.

High staff turnover rates have been linked with low pay, dual role expectations, increased overtime, and exposure to violence. Lack of resources for both inmates and correctional staff have contributed to security and health risks. Correctional facilities have not been made a priority. Under-valued and over-stretched correctional officers are placed under immense pressure to maintain institutional safety while also remaining humane in their treatment. Unrealistic expectations combined with misplaced assumptions by administrative officials have led to ineffective policies. The most poignant expectation placed on correctional officers is to do more with less. A one size fits all mentality in carceral environments is short-sighted and ineffective.

The Colorado Department of Corrections handbook outlines work hours fall under discretion of appointing authority (CDOC, 2022). Flexible work life arrangement options are not an employee benefit and must be approved by appointing authority. Staff shortages are a growing issue within Colorado correctional facilities. The high risk nature

of corrections work combined with poor training models have been suggested as significant factors in high turnover rates (Harizanova & Stoyanova, 2020). Improved training and supportive resources can be provided to all correctional staff. Communication efficacy can be achieved by providing officers with a safe way to offer feedback. Barriers currently in place discouraging correctional officers from providing feedback are detrimental to the success of criminal justice systems.

This research contributes to existing knowledge by providing correctional officers' perspectives on punitive force within solitary confinement. These results could have significant implications on prison administrators to implement new policies and practices that impact correctional officers. Changes in policy could provide more effective trainings focused on mental health of inmates. A more informed prison culture understanding can be achieved through policy changes targeting the code of silence. Correctional officers are taught in training not to share any information with outsiders, a fear instilled into officers by management. One participant explained while inmates are stressful, management is worse. Increased supervisory support, resources, and insight can benefit inmates, correctional officers, and the larger society by improving reintegration and rehabilitative services.

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Appendix A: Proof of Completion of Human Subjects Research Training

Appendix B: Semistructured Interview Protocol

SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Date of Interview: ____/_____/2022

Interview Completed By: Megan Oberholtzer

Participant ID #:

☐ Explanation of study purpose and implications.

☐ Any questions before beginning.

Demographic Questions:

1.      What is your employment status?

2.      What is your age?

3.      What is your ethnicity?

4.      What is your gender identity?

5.      How long have you held your position with the Department of

Corrections?

Participant Semistructured Interview Questions:

1.      What exposure have you had to punitive force?

2.	How long have you worked in solitary confinement?

3.	What are your experiences working in solitary confinement?

4.	How have your experiences working in solitary confinement influenced your

	perceptions of punitive force?

5.	What trainings have you received surrounding emotional expression among

	inmates?

6.	What are your thoughts on the effects of punitive force on inmate compliance?

7.	How do you view inmates in solitary confinement?

8.	Is there anything else about your experience working in solitary confinement that

	you would like to share with me today?


☐ Close interview by thanking participant.

☐ Check-in with participant in the event a referral is needed.

☐ Remind participant of requirement to maintain confidentiality of participation

	information until study is complete.

☐ Schedule follow-up interview with participant.


Follow-Up Interview:

Date: _____/_____/2022     Time: _____ a.m./p.m.

Location: _____


Confirm contact information, follow-up date and time, and THANK YOU!