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The Sociopolitical Context of Prison Violence and Its Control

A Case Study of Supermax and Its Effect in Illinois

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This research explores the sociopolitical context of prison violence and its control in the state of Illinois, and discusses the series of events that led to the opening of a supermax prison. Interrupted time series analyses were used to test whether the use of the supermax was associated with declines in prison violence, controlling for the potentially confounding influence of a systemwide effort to restructure the Illinois Department of Corrections following a prison scandal in 1996. There was no association between the opening of a supermax and inmate-on-inmate assaults; however, the supermax appears to have resulted in an abrupt, permanent reduction in assaults against staff. The opening of the supermax was also associated with an abrupt, permanent reduction in the use of lockdown days.

*Keywords:* supermax; prison violence; prison order; administrative control; interrupted time series; correctional policy

The rapid expansion of prison populations in the United States over the past 25 years has contributed to the emergence of certain phenomena...
that are novel to the modern era of corrections. Included is the emergence of specialized correctional facilities designed to address unique correctional issues and/or target populations. As an example, the “supermax” prison was adopted in several states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons as a new technique for controlling institutional violence. These facilities are charged with housing and controlling the “worst of the worst,” the most recalcitrant inmates from the general prison population. A supermaximum security institution functions as a prison for prisons—it is an administrative classification used for inmates who have engaged in behavior, while in prison, that is deemed especially disruptive or violent. As Kurki and Morris (2001, p. 391) have noted, the supermax facility serves as a “new form of double incapacitation: not only to isolate prisoners from the rest of society but to isolate the worst of them from other prisoners and the staff.”

It is estimated that there are at least 57 supermax prisons in the United States, housing approximately 20,000 inmates (Irwin, 2007; King, 1999; National Institute of Corrections, 1997). Paradoxically, the rapid expansion of the supermax has occurred despite no empirical evidence substantiating its effectiveness or value. Several observers note that there is a great deal of ambiguity about the purpose and goals of the supermax (King, 1999; Mears & Castro, 2006; Mears & Watson, 2006). Moreover, numerous scholars question the theoretical, empirical, and moral basis of supermax prisons (Briggs, Sundt, & Castellano, 2003, Kurki & Morris, 2001; Lippke, 2004; Mears & Reisig, 2006; Toch, 2003). What, then, explains the proliferation and substantial social investment in these institutions? Pizzaro, Stenius, and Pratt (2006) maintain that the supermax can be explained primarily as a political and cultural response to changing sensibilities in American society toward greater punitiveness and control.

In this study, we explore the sociopolitical context of prison violence and its control in the state of Illinois and discuss the series of events that led to the opening of Tamms Correctional Center, a supermax prison located in southern Illinois. This is a story of a prison system in crisis and the Illinois Department of Corrections’ (IDOC) efforts to reestablish control. Using interrupted time series analyses, we test whether these efforts were related to declines in prison violence and increases in prison order. Previous analyses by Briggs et al. (2003) found no support for the hypothesis that supermax affects levels of inmate-on-inmate violence and mixed support for the hypothesis that supermax increases staff safety. We attempt to replicate Briggs et al.’s results here, controlling for the potentially confounding influence of a systemwide effort to restructure the IDOC following a prison scandal. In addition, we extend the analyses further by examining whether the opening
of the supermax reduced the systemwide use of lockdowns, potentially improving the living conditions of inmates housed in the general population.

**The Emergence of Supermax in Illinois**

The IDOC constructed its only supermaximum security facility at Tamms in southern Illinois (see Kurki & Morris, 2001, for a detailed facility description). Tamms Correctional Center consists of a 200-bed minimum-security unit (MSU) and a 500-bed closed maximum-security facility (CMAX). Compared to supermax prisons found in other states, this 500-bed capacity is relatively low. For example, Tamms’s capacity is smaller than either of Arizona’s two supermax facilities, each of which has a capacity of 1,000, despite the fact that Illinois’s total adult inmate population (40,893) is nearly one-and-a-half times larger than Arizona’s total adult inmate population (26,747). Tamms Correctional Center also has a low utilization rate. For example, Tamms operated at approximately 53% capacity during 2001. The capacity of Tamms and its utilization rate suggest that this facility may have less potential for an incapacitative effect than supermaxes found in other states.

The building and opening of Tamms occurred in a highly politicized context. Issues of prison violence and control have been long-standing in Illinois, especially within its maximum security prisons (see Jacobs, 1977, for an excellent, albeit dated, introduction to the Illinois prison system). A variety of administrative and management approaches to prison control were employed throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with differing models emphasized by each administration. Despite the use of a variety of prison control models, the IDOC entered a period of crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and rates of violent misconduct rose. Between 1987 and 1992, for example, there were a number of serious assaults on correctional officers in the state’s maximum security prisons. Over a 4-day period in September 1987, four correctional officers and a superintendent were seriously assaulted, superintendent Robert Taylor was slain at Pontiac Correctional Center, and three correctional officers were seriously injured when boiling water was thrown on them. In 1989, correctional officer Lawrence Kush was put on a gang hit list and killed by inmates at Pontiac. In 1991, two officers were stabbed at Menard Correctional Center in separate incidents, and the inmates at Stateville rioted for two days. In 1992, a female correctional officer was assaulted at East Moline Correctional Center, a minimum-security institution. This event was notable because it was the first serious officer assault to occur at a minimum-security facility in contemporary IDOC history.
The prison population also rose dramatically during this time. Between 1985 and 1990, the state of Illinois adopted hundreds of sentencing enhancement laws. The resources to build new prison facilities and cover increased operational costs, however, were not forthcoming, and the IDOC struggled to accommodate the burgeoning prison population. Double celling became more common, and the ratio of correctional officer to inmates dropped to historic lows.

The major factors associated with perceived deficits in prison control included crowding within maximum-security prisons, the use of lock downs, the dominance of inmate gangs, and reductions in staff-inmate ratios. According to the Illinois Task Force on Crime and Corrections (1993), crowding within antiquated facilities was considered a major culprit; the newest of its four traditional maximum-security facilities—Stateville—was more than 80 years old at the time. The other three maximum-security prisons in operation in 2003 (Menard, Pontiac, Joliet) were all more than 100 years old. In addition, the task force asserted that double celling in these facilities was normative, and both segregation and protective custody units could not accommodate demand for these cells. Wardens had little flexibility in making within-prison cell assignments, weakening attempts to control the large gang-affiliated inmate populations in these facilities. The task force also found that prison lockdowns were common throughout the 1980s and 1990s, especially within the maximum-security prisons. This period witnessed almost annual increases in lockdown days, and by the mid- to late 1990s, it was not uncommon for maximum-security prisons to be locked down more than 200 days per year.

The gang presence in Illinois’s prison system is especially significant. The IDOC regularly estimates that 80% to 90% of its inmates are gang members. This high percentage has led some, including officials of the correctional officers’ union, to conclude that an informal policy of “shared power” with gang leaders was prevalent in the IDOC during much of the 1980s and 1990s. Declining staff-to-inmate ratios from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s were also seen as compromising prison security and offender-based programming, resulting in increased levels of prison violence (Illinois Task Force on Crime and Corrections, 1993, p. 10).

By the early 1990s, the situation in the prison system had become politically untenable, and a proposal to build a supermax was presented as a means to help solve the “prison problem.” In February 1992, then-governor Edgar issued an executive order creating a bipartisan, 21-member Task Force on Crime and Corrections. The mandate of the task force included a wide-ranging set of duties such as estimating future prison bed-space needs, studying alternatives to incarceration, analyzing existing prison policies and sentencing.
statutes, and recommending solutions to cost-effectively protect public safety. The task force studied these issues for a year and issued its report in March 1993. The task force, often referred to as the Valukis Commission (named after its chair), focused on ways to reduce prison crowding and the negative consequences of prison crowding—including security and violence problems within the prison system. One key recommendation was for the construction of a 500-bed supermaximum security prison—a recommendation strongly supported by the correctional officers’ union and a bipartisan group of legislators. The wording of the recommendation follows:

Build a super-maximum security level institution (“Super-Max”) to manage dangerous and predatory inmates and enable the Department of Corrections to provide a habilitative environment for inmates at other institutions. (Illinois Task Force on Crime and Corrections, 1993, p. 87)

Facing little organized opposition, the call for a supermax shortly resulted in signed legislation to build a state-of-the-art facility. As early as January 1994, a senior prison warden within the state prison system was appointed to become warden of the new supermax and to guide planning, construction, and policy-making processes. A site in deep southern Illinois was selected for the location of the new prison (Tamms), which was to be operational in 1996. Due to some delays, the 500-bed facility at Tamms opened in March 1998.

A “New” Prison Scandal

After the supermax legislation was signed and steps had been taken to build and open the facility, a major prison scandal shocked the state. In May 1996, a documentary narrated by Bill Curtis, a prominent figure in the newscasting industry, aired on the Arts & Entertainment (A&E) channel. Subsequently dubbed the “Speck tapes,” the documentary featured “home” video of Richard Speck and other inmates engaging in drug use and graphic sex acts behind the walls of Stateville Penitentiary. The video was actually recorded in 1988, and Richard Speck had died in the intervening period. Nonetheless, the fact that Richard Speck, one of the most notorious criminals in the history of Illinois and who was serving a life term of imprisonment for the murders of eight female nurses in the 1960s, was involved was especially incendiary. The image of inmates having free rein to snort cocaine and have sex without any semblance of correctional supervision within a maximum-security prison enraged much of the Illinois population, including
legislators and the governor’s office. The long-standing complaint that the Department of Corrections had lost control of the prison system, and that inmates were really “running the show,” gained further credibility. Within days of the public release of the Speck tapes, the Illinois judicial committee held a hearing on the issue and the attorney general formed a task force to investigate the prison system.


The Response: The “Longest, Most Thorough Shakedown in the State’s History”

Although control and security issues in the Illinois prison system were long-standing concerns, the “furor over the Speck tape underscored the urgency of the issue” (IDOC, 1999, p. 9). Governor Edgar “ordered a comprehensive program of physical improvements and policy changes in maximum security prisons. Thus began the longest, most thorough prison shake-down in the state’s history” (IDOC, 1999, p. 9). Some of the key aspects of this “shakedown” included

- The passage of legislation prohibiting inmates from curtaining off their cells.
- The introduction of property boxes to limit the amount of private property an inmate could possess.
- The elimination of “amenities” including college education, free postage stamps, picnics, pagers, and cell phones.
- Reduction of visitation rights and the introduction of greater visitation security.
- A 55% increase in the number of segregation cells at maximum-security prisons.
- Menard, Pontiac, and Joliet went on lockdown through the end of the 1996 fiscal year.
- Conversion of Pontiac to a segregation facility to “house disruptive inmates throughout the system.”
- Expanded use of drug testing for prison employees and inmates.
- Introduction of canine units in maximum-security facilities.
- Expanded use of cell searches.
Thus, the shakedown included a number of initiatives and policies that increased the use of coercive controls (e.g., segregation and cell searches) and reduced the use of remunerative controls (e.g., visitation and amenities). The many control mechanisms introduced in response to the furor caused by the release of the Speck tapes in 1996 signaled a major turning point in the IDOC. Moreover, these changes were perceived as highly effective. Below, we consider this issue in greater detail and empirically test the effect of these changes on prison safety and order.

The Supermax Model and Prison Control

The supermax model is predicated on the assumption that prison disorder is primarily the result of a handful of disruptive, violent inmates. This assumption has some basis in research (Barak-Glantz, 1983; Flanagan, 1983; Toch, Adams, & Douglas, 1989), which finds that a relatively small number of inmates are responsible for a significant amount of disorder, including violence. What is not clear, however, is whether prison order can be achieved by focusing efforts on removing or otherwise controlling this subset of inmates.

Numerous observers note, for example, that levels of prison violence cannot be explained simply by pointing to inmate dangerousness. Indeed, research is persuasive in showing that prison violence varies by prison, correctional system, and time (DiIulio, 1987; Useem & Piehl, 2006), irrespective of the composition of the inmate population. There is also solid empirical evidence that shows that inmate violence is best understood as a dynamic process shaped by the interactions of prison administrators, staff, inmates, and the correctional and political environment they inhabit (see Bottoms, 1999, for a review). In other words, whether a particular inmate or group of inmates engages in prison misconduct and violence is dependent on a complex combination of individual characteristics, social and environmental factors, the nature of staff and inmate interactions, and the quality of prison leadership. Simply removing a subset of inmates is unlikely to address the overall dynamic that contributes to the occurrence of prison violence.

Although the control of inmate violence is the implicit purpose of supermax, Mears and his colleagues (Mears & Castro, 2006; Mears & Watson, 2006) note that the goals of supermax are not well established or articulated. Still, there is a consensus of views among prison wardens that the primary goals of supermax are increasing systemwide levels of safety and order (Mears & Castro, 2006). Similarly, Mears and Watson (2006) found that
increasing prison safety was the most widely cited goal in the literature on supermaxes.

How specifically supermax is supposed to accomplish prison safety and order is not clear. The logical and theoretical basis of the supermax model seems to rest primarily on its supposed ability to incapacitate and deter. For example, supermax may increase systemwide levels of prison safety and order by removing particularly disruptive, violent inmates from the general population and placing them in isolation. Although a simple idea, the efficacy of a system of incapacitation rests on the ability to successfully identify inmates engaged in high rates of violent and disruptive misconduct and provide additional restrictions on their opportunities to engage in further misconduct. There is no effective means, however, of identifying disruptive inmates at this time (Mears & Reisig, 2006). Moreover, as Rhodes (2004) poignantly illustrates in an ethnographic study of supermax, extremes of prison control can lead to extremes of resistance (also see Maghan, 1999). Rhodes shows how inmates held in supermax use the control of their bodily functions (e.g., eating, sleeping, defecation, and urination) to resist and defy prison authority and power. It is ultimately impossible—and inhumane—to remove all opportunities for defiance.

The success of a policy of incapacitation also rests on the assumption that there are a finite number of disruptive inmates who will not be “replaced” by other equally troublesome inmates. Prison populations, however, are not stable populations; rather, they are characterized by constant turnover as new inmates are admitted to prison and others are released. Observers also note that the social and behavioral roles within the inmate subculture are likely to be filled regardless of efforts to remove individual inmates from the general population (Irwin & Austin, 1997). This occurrence may be especially prevalent among prison gangs where gang leaders are identified for segregation and are then replaced within the gang by the “next in line” (see, e.g., Ralph & Marquart, 1991).

Empirical research on the effect of segregation and solitary confinement also raises doubts about the potential of supermax prisons to reduce prison violence. Huebner (2003) found, for example, that the use of solitary confinement was unrelated to levels of inmate assaults in a national study of inmate violence. Similarly, Useem and Piehl (2006) argue that recent levels of prison order cannot be explained by the use of segregation, which actually declined slightly between 1982 and 2001.

Although incapacitation is a primary objective of supermax, it would be a mistake to overlook the extremely punitive features of the regime. Supermax is, by design, painful and demeaning, and it cannot be understood simply
as a method to incapacitate inmates. The aversive quality of supermax confinement is argued to create a deterrent to inmate violence and misconduct. As the warden of Tamms commented in an interview about the prison’s opening, “The majority of inmates will detest this place. . . . How much they detest it is going to be the key to how successful it is” (Hallinan, 1995). It is argued that supermax will specifically deter inmates who are held there from engaging in additional acts of violence or disruption and generally deter potentially disruptive and violent inmates held in other facilities. Again, however, there is no empirical support for either specific or general deterrent claims about the effect of supermax incarceration. Moreover, specific deterrent claims find little to no support in the broader literature (Gendreau, Goggin, Cullen, & Andrews, 2000), and severity of punishment has a very limited general deterrent effect (Nagin, 1998).

Supermax prisons may also create greater systemwide order by normalizing prison relations (Kurki & Morris, 2001; Mears & Reisig, 2006). According to this perspective, removing instigators and troublemakers allows officials and staff to focus on providing better services and more control to the general prison population. As Mears and Reisig (2006) explain, normalizing may occur via improved legitimate opportunities, greater staff influence, and reduced negative peer influence. System normalization theoretically could result in more safety as well as improvements in other indicators of order such as program participation, fewer lockdown days, and vandalism.

Hypotheses

The series of events that unfolded in the IDOC throughout the 1990s constitutes a natural experiment that allows us to test the effect of policies implemented to control prison violence and increase order. Both the “crackdown” and the opening of the supermax are based on similar assumptions about how to achieve order, namely, the expanded use of coercive controls. Both interventions also relied heavily on the use of inmate segregation. The crackdown, however, included a broader range of control approaches. It is important that both the decision to open a supermax and the policy changes following the release of the Speck tapes were precipitated by significant political involvement and public will to bring order to the IDOC.

Previous analyses by Briggs et al. (2003) found that the opening of Tamms was unrelated to inmate-on-inmate assaults but decreased inmate-on-staff assaults in Illinois. We attempt to replicate these findings here while controlling for the potentially confounding effect of the policy changes implemented
following the release of the Speck tapes. In addition, we expand the inquiry by testing whether the opening of Tamms resulted in less use of lockdowns at other facilities within the IDOC.

Specifically, this research tests three hypotheses based on the expectation established by the Valukis Commission that the opening of the supermax prison would result in increased systemwide safety and order in Illinois.

1. The opening of Tamms resulted in lower levels of inmate-on-inmate assaults in the IDOC, independent of policy changes implemented in May 1996.
2. The opening of Tamms resulted in lower levels of inmate-on-staff assaults in the IDOC, independent of policy changes implemented in May 1996.
3. The opening of Tamms resulted in less use of lockdowns in the IDOC.

In addition, we test whether the policy changes implemented after the release of the Speck tapes improved systemwide levels of safety. Assuming that the policy changes were effective, we tested whether

1. The policy changes implemented in the IDOC following May 1996 resulted in decreased levels of inmate-on-inmate assaults.
2. The policy changes implemented in the IDOC following May 1996 resulted in decreased levels of inmate-on-staff assaults.

Method

Research Design

A quasi-experimental interrupted time series design was used to test whether the crackdown and the opening of Tamms resulted in greater systemwide levels of prison safety and order. A time series design involves making consecutive observations of one or more dependent measures over a relatively long period of time. The effect of a “treatment” or “intervention” is tested by examining whether a change in the level of the series occurs after the intervention is introduced. If the intervention has an effect, the dependent time series is “interrupted,” and a new series level is temporarily or permanently achieved. Strong causal inferences can generally be made from such a scenario (i.e., when a time series is interrupted at the point of intervention) given that the design requires a large number of observations.
and an intervention that is implemented at a known point in time. In fact, for an internal validity threat (see Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2001) to be plausible, it must account for the observed change in the dependent series at the precise point of the intervention. Historical events coinciding with the intervention are the most common type of plausible threat encountered with this design. We are unaware of any specific such historical events or policy changes that would pose a threat to internal validity in this study.

The design used here includes two intervention points (release of the Speck tapes and the opening of the supermax at Tamms) and three dependent time series (inmate-on-inmate assaults, inmate-on-staff assaults, and lockdown days). This design is diagramed above in Figure 1, where $O_x$ represents observation $O$ at time $x$, $X_1$ represents the release of the Speck tapes, and $X_2$ represents the opening of the supermax at Tamms. More detailed information on the interventions and dependent time series is provided below.

**Measures**

*Interventions.* As mentioned above, two impacts were modeled. The first impact was modeled to begin during the month in which the Speck tapes were released (i.e., May 1996), and the second impact was modeled to begin during the month in which the supermax at Tamms opened (i.e., March 1998). Both interventions were included in the model for the inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff assault series. Only the supermax intervention was modeled for the lockdown-days series, however, given that the policy changes associated with the release of the Speck tapes included the use of lockdowns at three maximum-security facilities. The specification of independent dummy variables for both interventions was carried out according to procedures outlined by McCleary and Hay (1980).
Dependent variables. Two aggregate measures of prison safety—inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff assaults—were obtained from the IDOC in 2001 and 2002. Data for both inmate-on-inmate assaults and inmate-on-staff assaults were provided over a 12-year period (January 1989 through December 2000; \( n = 144 \)). The IDOC defined assaults on inmates as physical attacks with weapons, fists, feet, teeth, or an inmate’s body. Assaults on staff include striking, hitting, or kicking an officer, the use of a weapon against an officer, or throwing objects or liquids at an officer for the purpose of causing injury or intimidation. The dependent time series for inmate-on-inmate assaults was normalized by the inmate population and represents officially recorded incidents per 10,000 inmates per month. The series for assaults on staff represents untransformed monthly counts.

Beginning in July 1999, the departmental definition of assault became more expansive and sensitive, which resulted in a large increase in recorded assault incidents. Due to this instrumentation effect, the observations from July 1999 through December 2000 were excluded from the analysis, reducing the number of observation months to 126. Thus, only 16 months of data are available for the period following the opening of Tamms Correctional Center. As a result, it is not possible to determine whether any observed effect associated with the opening of Tamms decayed subsequent to July 1999.

Various scholars have raised questions about the validity and reliability of official indicators of prison violence and misconduct (Bottoms, 1999; Hewitt, Poole, & Regoli, 1984; Howard, Winfree, Mays, Stohr, & Clason, 1994; Light, 1990; Poole & Regoli, 1980; Silberman, 1995). Systematic bias is less likely, however, when serious violations and violent misconduct are measured, as is the case here. In addition, there is no reason to believe that there was systematic error in the reporting of assaults over time. Still, we are not able to rule out potential problems with measurement error, and this limitation should be kept in mind.

Prison order was measured as the total number of days per month that IDOC prison facilities were placed on lockdown status. A lockdown refers to the practice of confining all inmates in their cells for a period of time. Lockdowns are typically used to regain control of a prison and constitute a major disruption in the daily routine and function of a facility. These data were provided by the IDOC over a 21-year period (July 1982 through June 2002; \( n = 240 \)). Unlike official measures of inmate violence and misconduct, there is little reason to question the validity or reliability of this measure. Moreover, the data are available for a longer period of time and extend for more than 4 years after the opening of Tamms.
Method of Analysis

As mentioned above, interrupted time series designs allow researchers to determine whether a time series changes significantly following the introduction of an intervention by making a “comparison of the pre- and post-intervention time series segments” (McDowall, McCleary, Meidinger, & Hay, 1980, p. 12). Common statistical procedures such as a $t$ test and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, however, are typically not appropriate for time series data. The former statistical technique fails to take advantage of the temporal component in the data, and both tests often suffer from violated statistical assumptions (i.e., independence of observations) given that most time series are characterized by trend, drift, and serial correlation. The preferred method of analysis involves using autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) models (Box, Jenkins, & Reinsel, 1994; Glass, Wilson, & Gottman, 1975; McCain & McCleary, 1979; McCleary & Hay, 1980). ARIMA modeling techniques empirically identify and statistically control for trend, drift, and serial correlation in the time series (for a step-by-step procedural description, see McCleary & Hay, 1980). By controlling for these influences, ARIMA models result in more reliable parameter estimates than OLS regression techniques and other statistical models that assume the independence of observations (McCleary & Hay, 1980, pp. 270-272).

Prewhitening procedures. ARIMA modeling is part of a larger process of prewhitening a time series. A prewhitened time series is characterized by a lack of outliers, a constant variance, and by observations that are normally and independently distributed about a zero mean. If a series meets these conditions, it is considered stationary in the larger sense (McCleary & Hay, 1980) and is referred to as a “white noise” process. Only when a white-noise process is achieved can one move on to assessing the impact of the interventions.

The first two steps in the prewhitening process involve readying the time series for the identification of an ARIMA model. Specifically, each time series was first examined for outliers. When outliers were encountered, they were replaced by the mean of the two observations prior to and following the observation in question. Second, the homogeneity of variance assumption was examined for each series. When a series was characterized by a non-stationary variance (i.e., heterogeneity of variance), a variety of transformations (i.e., square root, natural logarithmic, and log10) were considered. The transformation that best normalized the data was then applied to the series during the ARIMA modeling and impact assessment procedures.
Last, the assumption that observations in the time series are independently and normally distributed about a zero mean was examined. Both the autocorrelation function (ACF) and partial autocorrelation function (PACF) are instructive here. The ACF is a graph of the correlations between a set of observations at time $t$ with a set of lagged observations. The PACF is a graph of the correlations between a set of observations at time $t$ with a set of lagged observations $k$ units apart with the correlations at the intermediate lags partialled out. Nonsignificant correlations among the first 25 or so lags in the ACF (as indicated by a nonsignificant Box-Ljung Q statistic) indicate that the series is already distributed independently and normally about a zero mean. In such cases, ARIMA modeling techniques are not needed, and OLS regression procedures are appropriate. In most cases, however, the ACF and PACF will provide a pattern of significant correlations in the first few lags that point to a particular non–random error structure (i.e., trend, drift and/or serial correlation) in the series. The analyst’s job is to identify the ARIMA model that best controls for, or partials out, the non–random error structure in the series. This last step is an iterative process that is guided by the ACF and PACF plots and several diagnostic tests (for more detail, see McCleary & Hay, 1980); successful completion of this last step results in a white-noise process.

Because an intervention can affect the identification of an appropriate ARIMA model, each of the ARIMA models identified in this study were built on the preintervention series (i.e., before the release of the Speck tapes). Both the identification of the ARIMA models and the impact assessments were carried out using the Regression Analysis for Time Series (RATS, Version 5) software package (Estima, 2000).

**Impact assessment.** Once each of the time series was reduced to white-noise processes, the effects of the crackdown and opening of the supermax prison at Tamms were tested using the procedure outlined by McCain and McCleary (1979) and McCleary and Hay (1980). Specifically, without a priori expectations regarding the nature of the impact, we began by modeling a first-order abrupt-temporary impact. If the estimated abrupt-temporary impact was nonsignificant or if the rate parameter was near the bounds of system stability (i.e., near 1.00), then a first-order gradual-permanent impact was modeled. If the estimated gradual-permanent impact was nonsignificant or if the rate parameter was near the bounds of system stability (i.e., near 0.00), then a zero-order abrupt-permanent impact was modeled.

The method of impact assessment outlined above has been criticized as atheoretical (Ostrom, 1990). Specifically, the empirical structure of the data, rather than theoretical considerations about rival causal factors and the
timing, duration, and functional form of the hypothesized effect, drives the analysis. Yet, when theory is unclear about the specific nature of the impacts, this method of impact assessment is preferable (McDowell et al., 1980; for a discussion of these and other methodological strengths and weaknesses of ARIMA, see Chamlin, 1988; Chamlin, Grasmick, Bursik, & Cochran, 1992).

**Results**

The inmate- and staff-assault time series data are summarily described in Table 1 and visually depicted in Figure 2. An examination of the preintervention and postintervention means in Table 1 indicates that inmate-on-inmate violence declined following each intervention. Specifically, before the Speck tapes were released, there was an average of just greater than 17 inmate-on-inmate assaults per 10,000 inmates per month ($M = 17.15$, $SD = 3.64$). This rate declined by about 4 assaults ($M = 13.68$, $SD = 2.88$) during the period after the Speck tapes were released and before the supermax was opened. A similar decrease was then observed following the opening of Tamms ($M = 9.95$, $SD = 2.06$). Although these figures suggest that the two interventions may have been responsible for the declines in inmate-on-inmate violence, an examination of Figure 2 indicates that the declines in violence may have been part of a larger trend. Specifically, Figure 2 reveals that with the exception of a slight increase in inmate violence between 1993 and 1995, the inmate-assault rate slowly and steadily declined throughout the entire study period. Time series analysis was used to determine if the two interventions contributed to the overall downward trend in inmate violence or if these two interventions were merely two points along a long, downward slope.

The inmate-on-staff assault series shows considerably more variability than the inmate-assault-rate series (see Figure 2). During the first year (i.e., 1989), both the inmate- and staff-assault series gradually declined. Beginning in 1990, however, the staff-assault series escalated to a high of 133 in July 1991 and then fell considerably before oscillating between 50 (April 1992) and 113 (December 2004) through the end of 1995. In February 1996, the staff-assault series escalated to its highest point of 147 and remained relatively high through September 1996. Thereafter, however, the staff-assault series mirrors the inmate-assault-rate series and declined for the remainder of the study period, hitting its lowest point of 35 staff assaults in October 1998. An examination of the preintervention and postintervention means (see Table 1) reveals a similar pattern. Specifically, there were more
than 80 inmate-on-staff assaults ($M = 80.93, SD = 15.70$) recorded every month in the IDOC prior to the release of the Speck tapes. This rate decreased, on average, by approximately 8 assaults per month ($M = 72.36, SD = 18.51$) during the period between the release of the Speck tapes and the opening of the supermax. Consistent with the results from Briggs et al. (2003), the mean number of inmate-on-staff assaults then decreased dramatically following the opening of the supermax ($M = 56.50, SD = 11.05$). Again, however, time series analysis is needed to determine if the Briggs et al. findings regarding supermax hold up given the introduction of the Speck tapes intervention in the model.

The lockdown-days time series is presented in Figure 3. The total number of lockdown days increased steadily and noisily between 1982 and late 1996,
Figure 2
Illinois Department of Corrections Monthly Rate of Inmate and Staff Assaults (January 1989-June 1999)

Figure 3
Number of Lockdown Days per Month in the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC; July 1982-June 2002)
reaching a high of 110 in October 1996. Beginning in late 1996 and continuing through 1997, the number of lockdown days decreased markedly, after which point they again began to increase, but at a gentler slope. The descriptive statistics in Table 1 also capture these trends. Specifically, the mean of the pre-Speck time series segment was around 25 lockdown days per month \( M = 25.55, SD = 21.55 \). This figure rose to just greater than 55 lockdown days per month \( M = 55.16, SD = 30.50 \) after the release of the Speck tapes and before the opening of the supermax. After the supermax opened, the average number of lockdown days per month declined to a new low at just over 20 lockdown days per month \( M = 21.56, SD = 12.91 \). Here again, time series analysis is needed to determine if the decrease in lockdown days per month following the supermax is nontrivial.

**Prewhitening**

A number of analytical steps were required to test whether the policy changes put in place following the release of the Speck tapes and the opening of the supermax were responsible for the observed fluctuations in the three respective time series. As discussed previously, neither simple pre-post mean comparisons nor OLS regression analyses are appropriate for analyzing time series data. Instead, it is necessary to statistically model and “filter” out the non–random error in a time series through the process of prewhitening. Below, we report the steps taken to prewhiten each of the three dependent time series (see Table 2 for all ARIMA model parameter specifications).

**Inmate-assault-rate series.** The inmate-assault-rate series did not require a transformation as it was characterized by a stationary variance (Kolmogorov-Smirnov \( Z = 0.82, p = .52 \)). A second-order autoregressive model, AR (2), was then identified from the ACF and PACF plots. After running diagnostics on this and other competing models, the AR (2) model was retained as the simplest model that was able to reduce the inmate-assault-rate series to a white-noise process (see Table 2). This AR (2) model suggests that any given observation in the time series is, in part, determined by the sum of the previous two exponentially weighted observations.

**Staff-assault series.** Two outliers in the staff-assault series (July 1991 and February 1996) were identified and replaced, but no transformation was needed as the series was characterized by a stationary variance (Kolmogorov-Smirnov \( Z = 0.95, p = .33 \)). A white-noise model was achieved for the staff-assault series by including four AR parameters that were modeled at lags 1,
### Table 2

Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) Model Parameter Estimates and Fit Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Time Series and ARIMA Model</th>
<th>Q-value (df)</th>
<th>Constant (SE)</th>
<th>1st Parameter Estimate (SE) t Ratio</th>
<th>2nd Parameter Estimate (SE) t Ratio</th>
<th>3rd Parameter Estimate (SE) t Ratio</th>
<th>4th Parameter Estimate (SE) t Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inmate assault rates (2,0,0)</td>
<td>26.67 (30)</td>
<td>16.82 (.86)</td>
<td>$\varphi_1 = .27 (.10)$</td>
<td>$\varphi_2 = .35 (.10)$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p = .54$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$t = 19.51^{****}$</td>
<td>$t = 2.59^{**}$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff assaults (4,0,0)</td>
<td>26.38 (30)</td>
<td>81.54 (1.58)</td>
<td>$\varphi_1 = .23 (.12)$</td>
<td>$\varphi_3 = .23 (.13)$</td>
<td>$\varphi_{12} = -.24 (.13)$</td>
<td>$\varphi_{18} = -.29 (.13)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p = .44$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$t = 51.77^{****}$</td>
<td>$t = 1.78^*$</td>
<td>$t = -1.93^*$</td>
<td>$t = -2.24^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Square root total lockdown days (0,1,3)</td>
<td>31.34 (30)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>$\theta_1 = -.89 (.01)$</td>
<td>$\theta_{17} = -.24 (.05)$</td>
<td>$\theta_{19} = .42 (.05)$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$p = .26$</td>
<td></td>
<td>$t = -68.16^{****}$</td>
<td>$t = -5.26^{****}$</td>
<td>$t = 8.39^{****}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $\varphi = \text{autoregressive parameter}; \theta = \text{moving average parameter. All ARIMA models were built on the pre–Speck tapes time series segment.}^{*}p \leq .05, ^{*{*}*}p \leq .01, ^{*{*}*{*}}p \leq .001.$
3, 12, and 18 (see Table 2). This AR (4) model is somewhat unusual given that three of the four parameters did not meet the $p < .05$ criterion for significance. Two of the parameters had $p$ values less than .06, however, and the $p$ value for the third was less than .08. Moreover, each of the four AR parameters represented significant sources of serial correlation in the ACF and PACF plots, and each of the four parameters achieved statistical significance in lower order AR models. Finally, the AR (4) model was the only model to “pass” the diagnostic checks after the impact analyses had been carried out. This AR (4) model suggests that any given observation in the time series is, in part, determined by the sum of four exponentially weighted prior observations that are removed in time by 1, 3, 12, and 18 lags.

**Lockdown-days series.** A total of five outliers in the lockdown-days series (October and November 1987, July 1991, and September and October 1996) were identified and replaced, and a square root transformation was needed in order to achieve a stationary variance ($\text{Kolmogorov-Smirnov } Z = .74, p = .65$). A white-noise model was achieved for the lockdown-days series by differencing the series once and including three moving average parameters that were modeled at lags 1, 17, and 19 (see Table 2). This ARIMA (0,1,3) model means that any given observation in the series is, in part, a function of three error terms that are removed in time by 1, 17, and 19 lags.

**Impact Analysis**

The opening of Tamms had no effect on inmate-on-inmate assaults. The policy changes made following the release of the Speck tapes, however, had a significant, abrupt-permanent impact on this time series (see Table 3). Specifically, there were 3.29 fewer inmate-on-inmate assaults per month per 10,000 inmates after May 1996. This change in level can be compared to an average of 52 inmate assaults per month before the Speck tapes were released.

The model predicting inmate-on-staff assaults revealed that the policy changes following the release of the Speck tapes had no effect on officer safety. The opening of Tamms, however, was associated with a significant, abrupt-permanent decline in assaults against staff (see Table 3). This abrupt-permanent change in the staff-assault series level indicates that there were nearly 25 fewer inmate-on-staff assaults following the opening of the supermax. This change in level can be compared to an average of 72 staff assaults per month after the Speck tapes were released and before Tamms opened.

Finally, the opening of the supermax at Tamms was also associated with a significant, abrupt-permanent decline in the use of lockdown days within
Table 3
Impact Parameter Estimates for May 1996 (Release of Speck Tapes) and March 1998 (Opening of Supermax)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Time Series</th>
<th>Impact Type</th>
<th>Constant</th>
<th>Impact Parameter Estimates</th>
<th>Opening of Supermax at Tamms (3/98)</th>
<th>Change in Series Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inmate-assault rates</td>
<td>Abrupt</td>
<td>16.73 (0.75)</td>
<td>(\omega = -3.29 (1.42))</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>3.29 fewer inmate assaults per 10,000 inmates per month following the release of Speck tapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>permanent</td>
<td>(t = 22.22^{****})</td>
<td>(t = -2.31^{**})</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff assaults</td>
<td>Abrupt</td>
<td>82.10 (1.65)</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>(\omega = -24.82 (8.14))</td>
<td>24.82 fewer staff assaults per month following the opening of supermax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>permanent</td>
<td>(t = 49.69^{****})</td>
<td>(t = -3.05^{***})</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lockdown days</td>
<td>Abrupt</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>(\omega = -3.45 (0.89))</td>
<td>28.99 fewer lockdown days per month following the opening of supermax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>permanent</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>(t = -3.87^{****})</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \(\omega = \) impact parameter.

\(* * p \leq .05. * * * p \leq .01. * * * * p \leq .001.\)
the IDOC (see Table 3). Specifically, there were approximately 29 fewer lockdown days per month within the IDOC following the opening of the supermax at Tamms. This change in level can be compared to an average of 55 lockdown days per month after the Speck tapes were released and before Tamms opened.

Discussion

The emergence of supermax across the U.S. prison systems as a possible means to reduce levels of prison violence and maintain greater control of prison systems has become a distinguishing feature of the modern prison landscape. Despite claims from prison officials that these types of prison facilities have had highly desirable impacts on levels of prison violence and safety, to date relevant empirical evaluations have been largely nonexistent. The decision to establish a supermax in the state of Illinois was a political one and part of a governmental response to the perception that something had to be done about prison violence and disorder. There appears to have been little effort to analyze the potential effectiveness of the policy. Its utility was assumed self-evident.

To exclude the possibility that a prison shakedown in Illinois starting in 1996 confounded the assault-reduction estimates attributed to the supermax, the beginning of the shakedown (May 1996) and the opening of Tamms (March 1998) were introduced as interventions in time series models. Consistent with results reported by Briggs et al. (2003), the opening of Tamms did not have a significant impact on inmate-on-inmate assaults. The prison scandal and subsequent shakedown, however, had a significant but modest impact on inmate-on-inmate assaults, resulting in approximately 3 fewer inmate assaults per month per 10,000 inmates. In contrast, the opening of Tamms was associated with reductions in staff assaults, but staff assaults were not affected by the policy changes following the release of the Speck tapes. Specifically, the opening of Tamms corresponded with a gradual permanent reduction in assaults against staff. This impact translates into a reduction of approximately 24 staff assaults per month in a system that averaged 72 assaults against staff per month between May 1996 and February 1998.

These findings provide partial support for the hypothesis that supermax increases systemwide levels of prison safety. The results are not wholly consistent, however, with deterrence or incapacitation, which predict similar impacts for inmate and staff assaults. It is unclear why the supermax in Illinois appears to affect inmate assaults on staff but not inmate-on-inmate assaults.
This result may be due to selection criteria that differentially target inmates for incarceration in supermax who have a history of assaulting correctional staff. The certainty of transfer to a supermax may also be higher when an inmate assaults a correctional officer, resulting in a greater deterrent effect. It will be important for future research to consider these issues.

The possibility also exists that the implementation of supermax in Illinois had an effect on staff and/or organizational behavior rather than inmate behavior. Some observers have noted that supermax may have the effect of “deskilling” correctional officers and prison administrators (King, 2001). Rather than addressing problems on site, the existence of a supermax makes it possible for correctional officers and prison administrators to transfer their “problems” to other facilities. Thus, officers may have less incentive or need to intervene directly with inmates. This scenario (and many others) could alter correctional officers’ patterns of interaction with inmates, particularly problematic inmates, and may be responsible for the findings observed here. Rhodes’s (2004) ethnographic work on life inside supermax is an important contribution to understanding the complex dynamic of interactions within high-security prisons. More research of this type is needed to generate hypotheses and insight into the way that supermax prisons condition the experiences and behavior of inmates, staff, and administrators.

The finding that the prison shakedown and related policy changes were associated with improved inmate—but not staff—safety is also intriguing and difficult to interpret within the framework of deterrence or incapacitation. The shakedown included extensive use of segregation and lockdowns and in that sense is similar to the mechanism of control used by supermax, namely, restrictions on opportunities for violence and the increased use of sanctions. What, then, explains the differential impact of these policies? This question cannot be answered here with these data. It is reasonable to speculate that the shakedown included the active engagement of correctional officers and other staff in restoring order to the IDOC. This may have put staff at continued risk for assault while improving overall order and restoring control. More broadly, the findings indicate that prison control is complex and that efforts to physically isolate inmates, whether through segregation, lockdown, or supermax, can have variable effects on prison safety.

This study also examined whether supermax has a normalizing effect on general population facilities as measured by the use of lockdowns. In Illinois, the supermax was proposed in part to remove disruptive and dangerous inmates from general population in order to “provide a habilitative environment for inmates at other institutions” (Illinois Task Force on Crime and Corrections, 1993, p. 87). When a prison is placed on lockdown to restore
order, the entire population is affected, not just those involved in the incident that led to the lockdown. Locking down a facility involves a significant disruption in the prison routine as well as opportunity costs. Inmates who are locked in their cells are not working or participating in programs. This analysis found that supermax was associated with an abrupt, permanent reduction in the systemwide use of lockdowns. Thus, we found support for the hypothesis that supermax has a normalizing effect on prison systems.

A number of methodological caveats about this study should be noted. In addition to the shortcomings discussed above about official measures of inmate misconduct, the number of postsupermax observations for the assault series is a limitation of this research. In particular, we are not able to determine whether the affect of supermax on staff safety was sustained or decayed over time. Therefore, it is likely inappropriate to generalize the effect of supermax on staff safety beyond the observations included here.

The external validity of the results is also unknown. Too little research exists to conclude with confidence that the effect of supermax on safety or prison order observed here can be generalized to other prison systems or over time within this prison system. We do not know, for example, whether potential deterrent and incapacitative effects are conditioned on the relative number of supermax beds in a prison system, utilization rates, selection and referral criteria, or policies governing release from supermax. It seems likely, too, that the characteristics of the inmate population will influence the effectiveness of supermax. Illinois has a large gang presence in its prisons, for example, and this may affect both the utilization and efficacy of supermax. Prison gangs are responsible for a significant proportion of prison violence (Griffin & Hepburn, 2006). A large gang presence may therefore increase the demand for supermax and segregation. Social networks such as prison gangs may be particularly difficult to control via supermax, however, if other members of the gang fill the social and behavioral roles of those sent to supermax (Ralph & Marquart, 1991). These considerations make it difficult to predict the effect of supermax across different prisons systems and different time periods.

Also of note, the measure of the interventions implemented following the release of the Speck tapes is limited in several respects. First, the intervention was modeled at a single point in time, when, in practice, several of the policies implemented as a result of the Speck scandal were implemented after this date. Although the analysis is capable of detecting a delayed impact, this measurement scheme does not capture the complexity of events that occurred in response to the Speck tapes. Second, this analysis is not able to distinguish what aspects of the crackdown were responsible for improvements in inmate
safety. The intervention modeled may be cautiously conceptualized as an “announcement” effect, although the IDOC did immediately implement several changes including extensive lockdowns, as illustrated in Figure 3. The data presented here and anecdotal information confirm that the IDOC was a much safer and more orderly prison system by the end of the 1990s, a trend that began in late 1996. This research is suggestive, but not conclusive, in showing that administrative control efforts were responsible for improved prison safety.

Many questions warranting further theoretical and empirical investigations have emerged from this study, ranging from fairly microlevel issues, such as How do inmates perceive and respond to the threat of a possible placement in a supermax facility? to What are the implications of the supermax experience for theories of prison life, violence, and social control? The supermax experience, in very tangible ways, presents a natural experiment that can potentially shed a tremendous amount of light on basic issues surrounding the meaning and consequences of the imprisonment in the modern world. It is time for correctional observers and scholars to capitalize on the windows onto the prison experience that have been opened by the creation of supermax. We encourage our colleagues to engage in systematic and multifaceted explorations of this major contemporary phenomenon.

In the state of Illinois, the decision to build a supermax prison grew out of a political crisis and public demand for increased control and accountability. It was part of a larger social movement within the state to respond to prison overcrowding, prison violence, and disorder. We find evidence suggesting that the supermax resulted in some positive outcomes in Illinois. It would be a serious mistake, however, to ignore the negative effects of supermax. Any benefits of supermax must be weighed against their potential costs, which appear to be significant (Haney, 2003; Mears & Watson, 2006; Pizarro & Stenius, 2004; Toch, 2003). Moreover, there is evidence supporting less restrictive, dehumanizing, and costly alternatives to achieving prison control (Gendreau & Keys, 2001). The measure of any social policy—especially one that is so depriving and aversive—should never simply be whether it “works,” although that is certainly a minimum requirement.

Notes

1. The term *shakedown* is used here colloquially and does not have a specific meaning. It is the phrase that the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) used in their monthly news magazine to characterize the series of policy initiatives undertaken following the release of the Speck tapes.
2. *Level* is a statistical term referring to the mean of a time series that is characterized by a constant variance with observations that are independently and normally distributed about a zero mean. Conceptually, it is similar to a slope in a regression analysis.

3. Despite the fact that the Speck tapes intervention is not modeled for this dependent series, descriptive statistics are provided for the pre- and post–Speck tapes time series segments because they help shed light on important features relevant to the interpretation of a possible supermax intervention effect.

4. Briggs, Sundt, and Castellano (2003) utilized a univariate Levene statistic (using year as the independent variable and assaults as the dependent variable) to check the homogeneity of variance assumption for the staff-assault series. Using this test, homogeneity of variance was not achieved until a square-root transformation was applied to the data and the last observation in the series was removed. Here, we use a more appropriate homogeneity of variance test, namely, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z test, which did not call for a transformation. Because different series were used in the two studies (i.e., a square-root series in Briggs et al. and a raw series in this study), different autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) models were also identified, and slightly different results were obtained from the impact assessments. It should be noted, however, that the nature of the findings (and their implications) did not change from study to study.

5. Two outliers (September and October 1996) were identified using traditional criteria (i.e., plus or minus three standard deviations from the mean). The other three outliers were initially identified via visual inspection of the data. Potential outliers were visually evident in 1987, 1991, 1996 (see above), and 2001, but because the level of the time series changed so dramatically over the course of time, the spikes were not identified as outliers using the traditional criteria. Because outliers can present problems in the identification of an appropriate ARIMA model (see McCleary & Hay, 1980), the time series was divided into four parts. Each part included one of the four spikes; recalculation of means and standard deviations for each of the four segments revealed outliers in October and November of 1987 as well as in July 1991.

6. Imputation of the July 1991 outlier was accomplished by calculating the mean of the two observations preceding and following this particular outlier. The same method of imputation was used for the remaining four outliers, but because these outliers represented temporally adjacent observations, a slight modification was used. Specifically, the imputation of each observation in a pair was carried out using the information from the adjacent outlier. For example, the September 1996 outlier was included in the imputation of the October 1996 outlier, and vice versa. This method of imputation allowed us to reduce the extremity of the data points (for purposes of statistical analysis) while retaining as much information as possible on the level of the series at that particular point in time.

References


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