

**The Marion Experiment:
Long-term Solitary Confinement
and the Supermax Movement
edited by Stephen C. Richards
Carbondale (IL): Southern Illinois University Press
(2015) 336 pp.
*Reviewed by David P.***

The Marion Experiment edited by Stephen C. Richards provides a history and explains the increasing use of long-term solitary confinement to control problem prison populations. It explores the creation and explosion of Supermax institutions, primarily in the United States, but also includes other jurisdictions around the world. Through personal accounts of prisoners and academic research, it attempts to explain the potential and real psychological harm caused by extended periods of isolation.

The first portion of the book is particularly helpful to the reader. Whether the individual is an academic whom has never set foot in a correctional institution or a seasoned prisoner, the stories presented are enlightening, extremely personal and, at times, horrific. Although I have spent a ‘decent’ amount of time in CSC custody, I really have no experience when it comes to segregation. I have spent half my time in medium security, and half in minimum. I have never been to “the hole”. My only experience is a shared one, forced quarantines during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, that is not the same as the abuse and lack of stimulus that prisoners describe in the book.

The use of these stories is incredibly important to understanding the underlying issues presented further into the book. In their stories, prisoners describe the reasons for their “enhanced” punishment, the conditions they faced while segregated and the despair that most felt as the days, months, and sometimes years passed by. Simply relying on academic studies can lessen the impact on the reader without encountering these first-hand accounts.

The next section of the book deals with the effects of solitary confinement on prisoners. It takes us on a journey through what incarcerated women have to endure, what young people behind bars deal with, and what the mentally ill are subjected to. Women reported experiencing above-average levels of sexual and emotional abuse while segregated, while youth reported physical, verbal, and occasional sexual violence by staff, alongside increased rates of self-harm while in segregation. The mentally ill seemed to be singled out by staff, being segregated to control their behaviour, rather than addressing root causes. The book goes on to explain that there is an extreme lack of

support for mental health interventions in institutions, especially to those segregated from the general population. The book covers a wide range of prisoner populations, exploring their unique issues and experiences. It is critical to the book's success, as it encompasses a wide range of correctional environments, rather than focusing on one population set.

The final section of the book takes the reader outside of North America and deals with the solitary "system" in the United Kingdom, France, and Israel. This is the one area of the book that could have been improved. The authors, for one reason or another, decided to include the experience of a prisoner in the United Kingdom. At first, this sounds reasonable. However, the gentleman's account has absolutely nothing to do with solitary confinement. His personal account of doing time in the 1980s is interesting, but it is out of place when compared to the rest of the book's contents. The authors could have instead chosen an individual who had spent actual segregation time while incarcerated in the United Kingdom.

Overall, the authors try to flush out all of the reasons prisoners end up in segregation and why administrators turn to use these methods of control. Segregation appears to mainly be used as a tool by prison authorities to rid units of problematic prisoners. Rather than dealing with the underlying issues, authorities sweep the troubles away. While it does have a place to protect prisoners from those engaging in predation, it is overused to solve problems that could be addressed by conventional means (e.g. talking issues out, therapy, peer support and mentors, etc.) and has been used to inappropriately silence prisoners who engage in legal action or whom publicly embarrass the prison leadership. It goes into great detail on the multitudes of harm that segregated prisoners are subjected to and presents alternative solutions to the problem of the overuse of segregation.

I would recommend this book to anyone. It should be mandatory reading for all prison administrators, especially those running segregation units and Supermax institutions. It is also important for anyone pursuing a post-secondary education in the areas of justice and law enforcement. The book's strongest point is presenting personal experiences and accounts, which most academic papers gloss over. Aside from those students who ended up in prison, they lack the understanding of what these individuals have to cope with on a daily basis.

One could argue that any prosecutor, judge, legislator or parliamentarian should also be required to read this volume. The laws they enforce or craft can

either have a positive or negative effect on those incarcerated. Too often public officials are pressured into a “tough on crime” agenda without fully realizing how their decisions are ultimately impacting the lives of those incarcerated and the safety of communities to which most will eventually return.

The book’s editor and authors did an extremely good job at covering a wide range of issues in relation to both long-term solitary confinement and the Supermax movement. The pieces were very well researched and provide the reader with interesting, sometimes heartbreaking, examples of the harms caused under the guise of rehabilitation and public safety. It should inspire people to speak out and spark rage at how we are treating fellow human beings that, for the most part, will rejoin society sooner rather than later.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

David P. is a 40-year-old man who has served five years in prison in two different Canadian prisons. He is eligible for statutory release in another nine years. David’s interests include economics, the justice system, virology/immunology, information technology and current events.