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Therapeutic Alternatives to Separate Confinement

Progress toward Rehabilitative Goals or
a Euphemistic Rebranding?

Ashley B. Batastini, Jonathan Singer, Michael Trood,
Keegan Diehl, Suzanne Grey, & Robert D. Morgan

Swinburne University of Technology
Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center
University of Southern Illinois-Carbondale

SEPARATE CONFINEMENT

The separate detention of individuals from the general institutional population in response to an active security threat or to prevent such a threat.

Individuals often spend 22-23 hours per day in their cell and access to services and social interaction are limited.

An estimated 50,000 to 75,000 adults are housed in separate confinement across the U.S. at any given time (Correctional Leaders Association & Liman Program, 2022; Maruschak & Buehler, 2021).





While more scientifically rigorous research has failed to show strong evidence of so-called "special housing unit syndrome" and courts have ruled that even indefinite placements are not necessarily unconstitutional, there are several commonly recognised problems.

(Chadick et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2016; Luigi et al., 2020; Hutto v. Finney, 1978; Hope v. Harris, 2022)

TO NAME A FEW

No appreciable effects on curbing misconduct (Meyers et al., 2021; Labrecque & Smith, 2019)

Black people and those with serious mental illness more likely to be placed regardless of misconduct severity (Labrecque & Mears, 2019; Pullen-Blasnik et al., 2021; Simes et al., 2022)

May prevent opportunities for adjustment, growth, treatment afforded to the general population (Chadick et al., 2018)

Group-based studies may not reflect individual experiences (e.g., Kalief Browder)

More time segregated is associated with higher odds of reoffending in the community (Silverthorn & Zgoba, 2024)

DIVERSION

- ✓ Preventative focus
- ✓ People with a high risk of placement are identified and connected to programming
- ✓ Designed to reduce the likelihood of placements

STEP-DOWN

- ✓ Transitional focus
- ✓ People in SC are exposed to a specialized program structure with progressing privileges
- ✓ Designed to prepare people to return to the general population and remain there

PRIMARY QUESTIONS

- 1 What do these programs “look like” in practice?
- 2 What level of scientific rigor (if any) is used to evaluate the impact of these alternative programs?
- 3 Are programs showing promise in reducing high-risk or destabilising behaviours or creating a safer environment (e.g., via reduced misconduct?)



PUBLICATION ELIGIBILITY



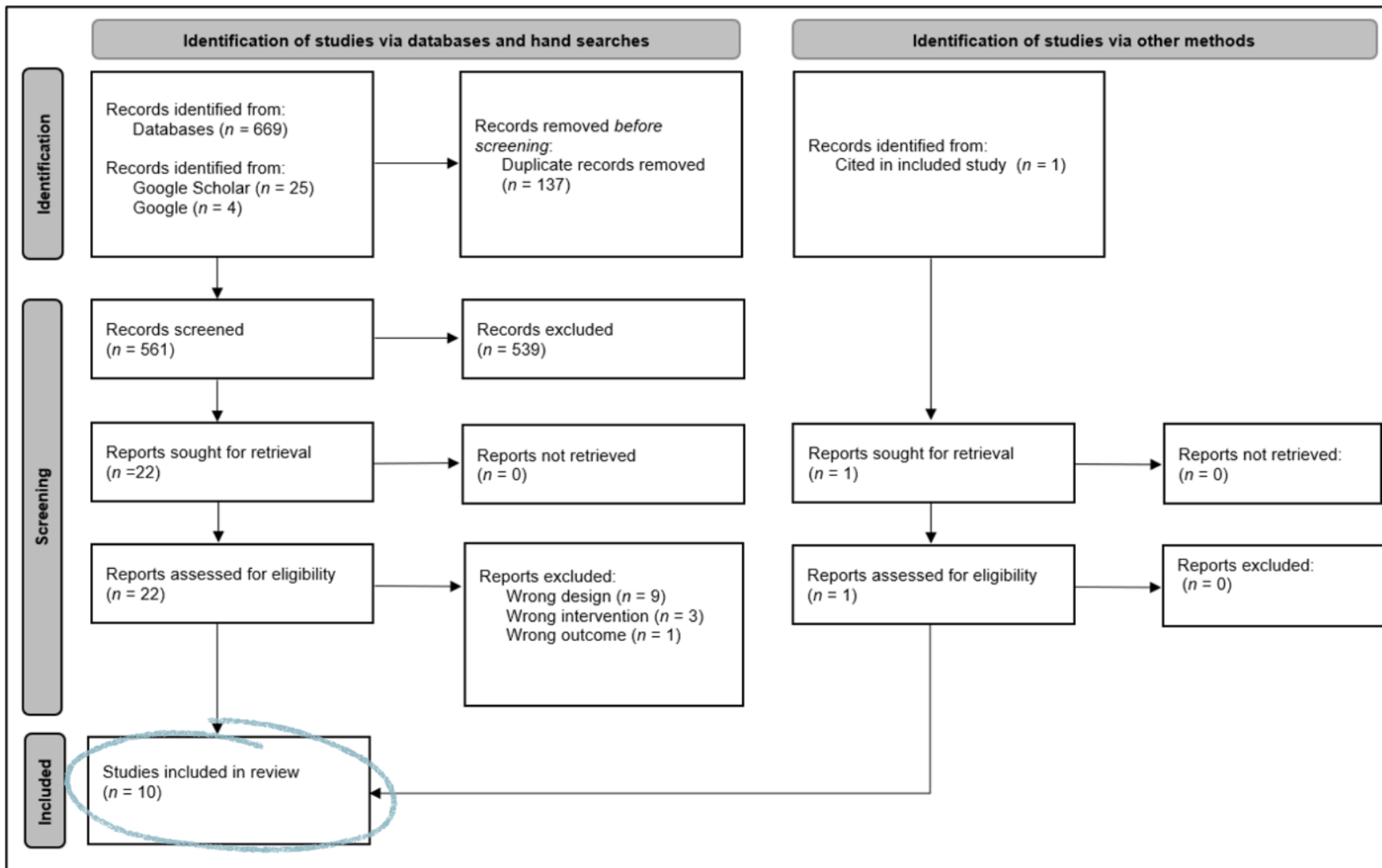
1. Available in English
2. Studied an alternative program model to reduce SC placement
3. Adult facility
4. Examined changes in a psychological or behavioural outcome in relation to the incarcerated population

1. Singular policy change or program element
2. Only examined logistical, economic, or staff-specific outcomes
3. Examined effects of traditional SC placement only (no comparison to an alternative)

PRE-REGISTRATION

Open Science Framework (Registration number: rkcmg)

FigShare (Registration URL:
<https://figshare.com/account/home#/projects/221788>).



First Author (year)	Publication Title
Kupers et al. (2009)	Beyond supermax administrative segregation: Mississippi's experience rethinking prison classification and creating alternative mental health programs
McCarthy & Connor (2010)	Sheriff's department reforms special management unit
Giblin et al. (2012)	Reducing the use of seclusion for mental disorder in a prison: Implementing a high support unit in a prison using participant action research
Olive (2015)	The impact of policy reforms in segregation at the Hampden County Jail and House of Corrections
Glowa-Kollisch et al. (2016)	From punishment to treatment: The "clinical alternative to punitive segregation" (CAPS) program in New York City jails.
Remch et al. (2021)	Impact of a prison therapeutic diversion unit on mental and behavioral health outcomes
Remch et al. (2022)	Sustained impacts of North Carolina prison therapeutic diversion units on behavioral outcomes, mental health, self-injury, and restrictive housing readmission
Cloud et al. (2023)	The resource team: A case study of a solitary confinement reform in Oregon
Remch et al. (2023)	Evaluation of a prison violence prevention program: Impacts on violent and non-violent prison infractions
Remch et al. (2024)	Association of a novel restrictive housing diversion program with rates of mental health and self-injury in prison

STUDY AND PROGRAM DETAILS



- All published between 2009 and 2024
- 8 academic papers, 1 thesis, 1 in Corrections Today (magazine of ACA)
- 9 in US, 1 in Ireland
- 9 in state prison/departments, 1 in county corrections centre
- Total sample sizes ranged from 43 to 4,284 -- approx. 95% were male
- 7 diversion; 2 step-downs, 1 "intensive behavioral management"
- 4 studies focused on at-risk populations with co-occurring mental disorders; 2 were specific to people with more serious mental illnesses
- CBT elements were predominant, along with out-of-cell groups and increased recreation time as participants progressed
- 5 documented the use of specialised staff (e.g., psychologists, mental health nurses) to delivery services

EFFICACY OUTCOMES

6 studies rated as Level 2 out of 5 on the Maryland Scientific Methods Scale; 4 studies rated at Level 4

4 studies rated as Level 2 favoured the alternative program; 2 found neutral effects

Mixed findings among the Level 4 studies

- 2 studies favoured alternative over traditional SC for those with mental health needs, but some findings were not maintained after returning to GP
- 2 studies suggested poorer outcomes associated with the alternative for those with substance use and violent infractions



KEY LIMITATIONS



Scientific integrity rated low for most studies (lacked controls)



Insufficient details about structure and content to understand process of change or whether accepted models of intervention were followed (e.g., RNR)



Limited research on outcomes beyond institutional misconduct



Included studies were rather homogeneous in terms of population, setting, and jurisdiction

“Results shine a light on other pathways that hold promise for mitigating harms perpetrated by and against incarcerated persons. Nonetheless, we may need to consider the possibility that these programs (at least in their current form) simply are not functioning as well as we hoped they would.”





Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

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A systematic review of therapeutic alternatives to segregation placement: Progress toward rehabilitative goals or a euphemistic rebranding?



Ashley B. Batastini ^{a,*}, Jonathan Singer ^{b,c,d}, Michael D. Trood ^a, Keegan J. Diehl ^b,
Suzanne Gray ^c, Robert D. Morgan ^e

^a Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science, Swinburne University of Technology and Forensicare, Australia

^b Department of Psychological Sciences, Texas Tech University, USA

^c Department of Pharmacology and Neuroscience, Texas Tech University Health Science Center, USA

^d Garrison Institute on Aging, Texas Tech University Health Science Center, USA

^e College of Health and Human Services, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA

Thank You

ABATASTINI@SWIN.EDU.AU