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Wardens' Views on the Wisdom of Supermax Prisons

Abstract

Super-maximum security prisons have proliferated nationally, reflecting a belief among policymakers and corrections officials that such high-cost housing is effective. Yet, we know little about the precise goals of “supermax” prisons, if these goals are achieved, what unintended effects supermaxes may have, and, more generally, whether they represent a wise investment. State correctional data systems do not readily allow for assessment of these issues. The present study therefore administered surveys to state prison wardens—a population uniquely situated to provide insight about supermaxes—to address existing gaps in knowledge and to inform research and policy debates. We discuss the study’s findings and implications.

Wardens' Views on the Wisdom of Supermax Prisons

In recent years, super-maximum security prisons—high-tech, high-cost facilities designed to house the so-called “worst of the worst” inmates in single-cell confinement for up to 23 hours per day—have become a prominent and common feature of the corrections landscape. As of 1999, approximately 20,000 inmates were housed in 57 “supermax” facilities located in over 30 states, with many more supermax facilities slated for construction (National Institute of Corrections, 1997; King, 1999; Briggs, Sundt, and Castellano, 2003; Austin and McGinnis, 2004; Pizarro and Stenius, 2004; Rhodes, 2004).¹ By contrast, twenty years ago the only supermax in the United States was the Marion federal penitentiary in Illinois (Kurki and Morris, 2001, p. 385).

Proponents view supermax prisons as a critical corrections tool, while opponents view them as inhumane and unconstitutional (Haney and Lynch, 1997; Riveland, 1999b; Haney, 2003; Toch, 2003; Bruton, 2004; Collins, 2004; Elsner, 2004; Pfeiffer, 2004; Rhodes, 2004; Irwin, 2005). Yet the largely polarized debate leaves many questions unanswered about their specific goals, whether these goals are achieved, whether supermaxes have unintended effects, and whether, more generally, they represent a wise investment. Such questions assume particular importance in light of the fiscal crises that states currently face, which have led to a reconsideration of many correctional strategies, including supermaxes (Riveland, 1999a; Campbell, 2003; Nitkin, 2003; Preer, 2004). At the same time, a critical limitation exists—with rare exception, state correctional databases do not compile data of sufficient scope or quality to assess the effectiveness of supermax prisons along a range of dimensions other than serious inmate violence (Ward, 1995; Riveland, 1999b; Reisig, 2002; Briggs et al., 2003; Ward and Werlich, 2003).

To address current research gaps on supermax prisons and to inform policy debates about their merits, we explore the views of state prison wardens, a group uniquely positioned to provide insight into supermax housing because of their executive responsibilities either managing supermaxes or the institutions held to benefit from them. Drawing on the results from a national survey, we examine six questions: (1) What are the goals of supermax prisons? (2)

Do wardens view supermaxes as effective, and what factors affect their views? (3) What, if any, are the unintended effects of supermax housing? (4) Why are supermaxes built? (5) What are the critical challenges confronting state prison wardens today, and how do supermax prisons contribute to or address these challenges? And (6) are there effective alternatives to supermax prisons? The first three questions speak directly to attempts to evaluate whether supermax prisons “work,” and the last three speak to the general policy context in which these prisons have arisen. Collectively, answers to these questions can help provide a broad-based foundation for examining the wisdom of supermax prisons as a correctional system policy choice.

Background

State prison systems have grown dramatically during the past two decades. Between 1980 and 2000, the number of inmates in the custody of state correctional authorities quadrupled, rising from 294,000 to 1,203,300 (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000; Harrison and Beck, 2003). By 2004, state prisons held 1,241,034 inmates (Harrison and Beck, 2005). Whether in response to this increase or to increased prison violence, crises (e.g., murders, riots), or management problems generally, two-thirds of states have built supermaxes during the past twenty-five years—a dramatic change from a situation in which supermaxes were a rarity.

The last national estimate of the prevalence of supermax prisons comes from a National Institute of Corrections survey, updated by King (1999), using a definition that emphasized placement of inmates “officially designated as exhibiting violent or serious and disruptive behavior” in a “free-standing facility” or “distinct unit” in a setting that involves “separation, restricted movement, and limited direct access to staff and other inmates” (p. 1). Media and research depictions typically focus on the notion that supermax confinement involves single-cell, 23-hour-per-day confinement, generally for an indefinite period of time, with few if any visitation privileges or access to programming or services (Briggs et al., 2003; Nitkin, 2003; Irwin, 2005). Some disagreement exists as to whether this definition is sufficient (King, 1999; Kurki and Morris, 2001). However, few would dispute that most states today have facilities that represent a significant step above a traditional maximum security prison (Riveland, 1999b, p. 5), and that these facilities have become increasingly popular over the past two decades.

Despite their costs, which can run up to twice as much or more to build and operate as conventional prisons (e.g., Hook, 2003; Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, 2003), and concerns about their constitutionality (Riveland, 1999b; Collins, 2004), remarkably little research has been conducted on these facilities. As one recent review emphasized, “while there is no proof of positive effects of the supermax on prisoners or on prison systems, evidence of its negative effects is also scant” (Kurki and Morris, 2001, p. 393; see also Wells, Johnson, and Henningsen, 2002, p. 179; Briggs et al., 2003, p. 1342; Ward and Werlich, 2003, p. 54).

One descriptive study of supermax prisons was conducted by Wells et al. (2002). The authors’ survey of 108 supermax-like facilities, including administrative segregation “institutions that are not truly characteristic of [supermax] facilities” (p. 175), focused on examining the characteristics of these prisons and the types of services available, and thus supplied critical insight into the conditions of supermax confinement. The study provided little foothold, however, for learning how prison wardens view the goals of supermax prisons or their impacts.

Two recent studies provide important advances in supermax research. One, a four-state study by Briggs et al. (2003), suggests that supermax prisons may have little effect on systemwide inmate assaults. Another suggests that the federal supermax facility in Marion, Illinois, did not appreciably increase violent behavior or mental illness among supermax inmates released back into general population facilities (Ward and Werlich, 2003). These and other studies that indirectly examine the highest security facilities in prison systems (e.g., Crouch and Marquart, 1989; Ralph and Marquart, 1991; Sparks, Bottom, and Hay, 1996; Bottoms, 1999) stand in marked contrast to the typically polemical accounts of supermax prisons. Even so, they rely on limited data and conceptualizations of supermax goals. They focus primarily on prison order, for example, and use institutional data, which, even for serious violent behavior, suffer from significant reliability and validity problems (Light, 1990; Reisig, 2002). Additional studies have relied primarily on descriptive or ethnographic accounts, limiting their generalizability, but providing highly suggestive insights into the experience of supermax confinement and its effects on inmates (e.g., Hershberger, 1998; Henningsen, Johnson, and Wells, 1999; Kurki and Morris, 2001; Lovell, Cloyes, Allen, and Rhodes, 2003; Toch, 2001, 2003; Rhodes, 2004; Irwin, 2005).

Our review and interviews (described below) suggest that there may be many goals other

than prison order and safety, including retribution, reducing prison escapes and gang influence, and rehabilitation (Austin, Repko, Harris, McGinnis, and Plant, 1998; Toch, 2001; Wells et al., 2002). To the extent that such goals exist, they should be documented and examined because they supply the criteria for assessing whether supermax prisons are effective, just as goals do with any other program or policy (Rossi, Freeman, and Lipsey, 1999). It is not enough, for example, to show that a supermax may reduce prison assaults if it is also intended to reduce escapes and riots or to rehabilitate inmates. Indeed, studies that delimit their focus to one goal or another without taking stock of all relevant goals risk creating biased assessments—whether favorable or unfavorable—of the effectiveness of supermax prisons.

The limited research on the goals of supermaxes is paralleled by equally limited research systematically documenting the range of potential unintended effects of supermax prisons. Many accounts mention the possibility that supermax prisons cause or aggravate mental health problems (Haney and Lynch, 1997; Kurki and Morris, 2001; Haney, 2003; Pizarro and Stenius, 2004; Irwin, 2005). But clearly the potential exists for supermax prisons to cause many other unintended effects, positive or negative, that might occur among supermax and general population inmates, correctional staff, entire prison systems, and the communities in which supermaxes reside. To mention but two examples, a supermax might reduce public fear of crime, but it also could undermine the perceived legitimacy of prison authorities among inmates, in turn increasing systemwide disorder and violence (Bottoms, 1999; Grann, 2004).

In our view, any attempt to examine whether supermax prisons constitute a wise choice entails more than documenting their goals and whether they are, or are perceived to be, effective. There is, for example, the underlying question of whether the motivations to build supermax prisons stem from legitimate causes (e.g., prison disorder) or those of questionable legitimacy (e.g., political expediency). Existing accounts suggest both possibilities (e.g., Hershberger, 1998; Henningsen et al., 1999; Bottoms, 1999; King, 1999; Austin and Irwin, 2001; Bruton, 2004; Irwin, 2005), but generally lack an empirical foundation. In rendering an assessment, we also might want to know whether supermax prisons are relevant to the challenges and issues that wardens say are most pressing in their day-to-day work. And, not least, we ideally would have information about whether effective alternatives to supermax prisons exist. Although some

theoretical and empirical research addresses this question (e.g., Sparks et al., 1996; Bottoms, 1999), few studies have taken a broad view of potential alternatives or, to this end, polled wardens to obtain their perceptions about what they believe could replace supermaxes.

The limited availability of data relevant to addressing these issues constitutes a substantial barrier to research. For example, although inmate assaults may be viewed as a legitimate measure of order (Briggs et al., 2003), it nonetheless fails to capture other dimensions—such as the extent to which rules and daily routines are followed—that might typically be associated with this construct.² In addition, questions exist as to whether most state correctional systems compile accurate statistics on the true amount of inmate assaults (Light, 1990; Reisig, 2002).

Since generating data more relevant to evaluating how well supermax prisons achieve specific goals is costly and time-consuming, and requires guidance about what data are relevant to collect, an alternative is needed that can help inform research and policy debates about supermaxes. We therefore focus on a population—state prison wardens—uniquely situated to provide insights that can inform these debates because, as we discuss below, like executives of any organizational setting, they ultimately are accountable for monitoring and supervising all that occurs within their facilities.³ Unlike Wells et al. (2002), we focus on all state prison wardens, not just those who supervise supermaxes. We do so because many of the stated goals of supermax prisons focus on systemwide effects. We also systematically examine a range of goals and potential unintended effects, as well as other dimensions, that can help provide a broad-based answer to the question: Are supermax prisons a wise policy choice?

Data and Methods

The data for this study come from a survey of state prison wardens, the focus of which was on the goals and effects of supermaxes. Of the 948 wardens to whom questionnaires were sent, 601 (63.4 percent) responded. Excluding New York, which refused to participate, and its 73 wardens, yielded a final response rate of 68.7 percent.⁴ We conducted a first mailing in October 2003 and a follow-up in December 2003. Then in January 2004, we called directors of state correctional systems and asked them to encourage wardens to complete and return their surveys.

Our focus was on adult state prison facilities housing males or females. We obtained the

name and address list from a directory available through the American Correctional Association (ACA) (2003). We excluded juvenile detention, medical, and psychiatric facilities, as well as hospitals, community corrections, and halfway houses. We then checked all corrections agency websites to update name and address information, adding new facilities and deleting closed ones where appropriate, and ensuring that wardens were correctly matched to the specific facilities they supervised. In instances where the websites differed from the directory, we used the website information, assuming that it would be more up-to-date. When a warden supervised several facilities, we sent a survey only to the highest-level facility. If a warden supervised two similar security-level facilities, we sent the survey to the facility with the larger population.

The survey was conducted as part of a study examining the goals and effects of supermax prisons, which included in-person and telephone interviews with 60 policymakers, correctional department executives, and wardens. We used these interviews, along with a review of research, to inform creation of the survey, including identification of potential goals and effects of supermaxes.⁵ Following the lead of organizational researchers, who often use surveys of chief executive officers (CEOs) of companies to examine issues that otherwise are not easily examined using official records (see, e.g., Walters and Priem, 1999), we selected wardens precisely because they are knowledgeable insiders who run supermaxes or are responsible for the institutions that supermaxes are supposed to benefit. Furthermore, the dimensions that supermaxes attempt to improve—such as safety, order, escapes, and riots—are precisely the ones upon which wardens focus daily and for which they ultimately are held accountable (Knight, 2000; Bruton, 2004).

In the analyses below, we examine wardens' responses to questions from the survey. (Appendix A lists these questions and the associated response categories.) The questions focus on wardens' views about the goals and effectiveness of supermax prisons, the unintended effects they might have, why they are built, challenges the wardens currently face, and alternatives to using supermax prisons. In each instance, we present descriptive and thematic findings that emerged from our analyses of both the closed- and open-ended questions.

We also conduct a multivariate analysis of factors associated with wardens' views on the success of supermax prisons in achieving specific goals. This analysis enables us to investigate

in more depth why supermax prisons have become so popular, as well as the logic and effectiveness of supermax prisons. We can explore, for example, whether “get tough” philosophies of punishment, common in the period in which supermaxes emerged, are associated with favorable views of them. Similarly, we can explore whether wardens who work in male-only or maximum security facilities—the very places that, according to some accounts, should benefit the most from supermaxes—are more likely to hold a favorable view of the effectiveness of these prisons. Appendix B presents the descriptive statistics for the variables we use.

The dependent variables consist of Likert-scale responses, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), concerning each of twelve possible goals potentially associated with supermaxes. Extant research provides little theoretical guidance for generating specific hypotheses. Thus, we focus on predictors that might logically influence wardens’ evaluations of supermax prisons. For example, a supermax arguably represents more of a control-oriented than rehabilitative approach to prison management, given the emphasis on restricting inmate movement and privileges (DiIulio, 1987). We therefore anticipate that greater agreement with control-oriented goals (e.g., punishment, incapacitation, deterrence) will be associated with a greater likelihood that wardens will view supermaxes as effective, while greater agreement with rehabilitation as a goal will be associated with a less favorable view of supermax prisons.

Other factors may be relevant as well. Ward and Werlich (2003, p. 59) have written that when state prison wardens visited the federal supermax at Marion in the 1970s, they “commented that they ‘had died and gone to heaven.’” Speculating that such views were colored in part by the impressions they were given by the Marion supermax warden, we expect that supermax wardens in general may be more likely to report that supermaxes are effective. (Twenty-three percent of our respondents identified themselves as supermax wardens.) By contrast, maximum and lower security wardens may view supermaxes with a more skeptical eye. Any discrepancy would be noteworthy since many of the goals of supermax prisons—such as systemwide order and safety—pertain more to the experiences of these wardens than to wardens of supermaxes.

Some studies suggest that the South is more punitive than other regions (Land, McCall, and Cohen, 1990; Borg, 1997; Corzine, Huff-Corzine, and Whitt, 1999). Southern states, for

example, hold over half of all prisoners under sentences of death (Bonczar and Snell, 2003, p. 5). Following this and King's (1999) similar line of reasoning, we expect that wardens in southern states will be more inclined to view supermaxes as effectively achieving a range of goals.⁶

Overcrowding has been a feature of U.S. prisons during the last two decades (Caplow and Simon, 1999, p. 74; Riveland, 1999a, p. 181) and has been found to increase the likelihood of inmate violence (e.g., Wooldredge, Griffin, and Pratt, 2001). For this reason, wardens of overcapacity institutions may be more likely to believe that supermaxes are effective. Similarly, larger institutions and institutions within larger correctional systems may experience more difficulty managing inmates, and so their wardens may hold more favorable views of supermax prisons.⁷

To our knowledge, few if any supermax institutions have been used to house female prisoners.⁸ Since male-only facilities therefore seem to be the primary beneficiaries of supermax prisons, we speculate that wardens of male-only institutions will be more likely than wardens of female-only institutions, or of institutions with both male and female inmates, to report that supermax prisons are effective in achieving diverse goals.

We also include as an independent variable the years of experience wardens have in corrections. Our hypothesis is that younger wardens have entered corrections during a period of marked growth and turbulence within corrections, and so may be more likely to hold favorable views about restrictive approaches to managing inmates. Among more experienced wardens, such views may be tempered by a knowledge of different correctional climates and policies.

We expect that wardens who believe that effective alternatives to supermax prisons exist will be less inclined to view such prisons as successfully achieving a range of goals. Wardens who perceive the options to be limited or non-existent should, by contrast, view these prisons more favorably out of a desire to believe that, in the final instance, some approach can work.

Finally, we hypothesize that the above-specified relationships may vary for specific goals. For example, wardens' philosophies of punishment may be more significant when asking about whether supermax prisons achieve goals that correspond to these philosophies (e.g., punishment or rehabilitation). Also, the effect of serving as a warden of an overcapacity institution may be especially significant for goals related to the order and safety of inmates and staff.

Before proceeding, we should emphasize that we do not argue here that wardens' views necessarily reflect reality. In some cases, they may, and in others they may not. We nonetheless believe that their views are important for three reasons. First, wardens are administrators (Knight, 2000; Bruton, 2004), the equivalent of CEOs, whose responsibilities center around maintaining smooth daily operations with minimal incident. Second, absent empirical studies on the range of issues addressed here, wardens' views may constitute one of the best sources available about the potential effects of supermaxes and the wisdom of investing in them. Indeed, even when wardens reside in states without such prisons, their views may still afford insight into the likely effectiveness of supermax prisons. (In our survey, 75 percent of wardens resided in states with at least one supermax. Of these wardens, 69 percent had sent an inmate to a supermax, and 54 percent had received an inmate from one.) Third, wardens' views may suggest how correctional system executives and policymakers determine whether supermaxes constitute a sensible investment. Many commissioners, for example, have been wardens, which presumably informs their views. Similarly, policymakers must make decisions about funding and priorities that at least in part reflect the priorities established by corrections officials. Of course, a question might be raised as to whether wardens would be prone to give only favorable responses towards supermaxes, and thus provide a biased view of their effects. As we discuss below, however, we found that wardens disagree about whether supermax prisons achieve certain goals. Furthermore, it is unclear, excluding those who supervise supermax facilities, why wardens in general would be "pro" supermax, especially since such facilities might divert resources and attention away from programs and policies of potentially greater relevance to their management needs. That said, without objective data to validate wardens' views, the results presented here about the effectiveness of supermax prisons should be interpreted with caution.

The survey included a definition of a supermax drawn from the National Institute of Correction's (1997) survey. Despite questions in the literature about a proper definition (e.g., King, 1999; Riveland, 1999b; Wells et al., 2002), we found little basis for concern. When asked whether they agreed with the one we supplied (see Appendix A), almost 95 percent of the wardens reported that they did.

Results

Insert Figure 1 about here

The Goals of Supermax Prisons

Figure 1 presents the percentage, ranked from highest to lowest, of prison wardens who agreed or strongly agreed that supermax prisons serve to achieve each of twelve possible goals. All but two percent of prison wardens agreed that supermaxes aim to increase safety, order, and control throughout the prison system and over 95 percent agreed that they serve to incapacitate violent and disruptive inmates. Roughly three-fourths or more agreed that supermaxes also exist to improve inmate behavior throughout the prison system and to decrease riots, the influence of gangs, and prison escapes. Half agreed that these prisons are used to punish inmates, and 46 percent said they are used to reduce recidivism among violent and disruptive inmates. Finally, 37 percent of wardens said that supermax housing exists to rehabilitate such inmates, and 24 percent said it exists to deter crime in society.

In short, wardens were largely unanimous in saying that supermax prisons serve to increase safety, order, and control throughout the prison system and to incapacitate violent and disruptive inmates. But many believed that supermaxes also have a wide range of other goals, creating a situation that makes simple assessments difficult. For example, attempts to include more than the top four goals in an evaluation of supermax effectiveness risk including measures that many wardens find questionable, yet excluding them could be problematic. Consider a state that builds a supermax with the idea that it will be instrumental in achieving order but not in reducing prison escapes. Use of escapes as an outcome measure might be viewed in this state as inappropriate even though officials elsewhere may strongly advocate use of the measure in evaluating their supermaxes. The issue is far from academic—from a policy perspective, determining whether a supermax constitutes an effective investment of resources requires having information on relevant goals and associated outcomes, ideally weighted in terms of importance.

An additional challenge lies in the fact that some goals may require assessment using relatively short time periods, such as a year or two, whereas others may require longer periods. For example, in some states, supermaxes have been developed in part as a response to riots or

large spikes in homicides (Ralph and Marquart, 1991). In these cases, it would be necessary to show that supermaxes, and not some other systemwide changes, accounted for any observed reduction or elimination of riots and homicides (Useem, Camp, and Camp, 1996). Any such assessment would be confounded, however, by the fact that states may have used multiple strategies, including staff hirings and trainings and new inmate classification protocols, to achieve these goals (see, e.g., Crouch and Marquart, 1989). Goals such as safety and order are constant concerns, and so attempts to assess the effectiveness of supermax housing along these dimensions would require relatively long periods of observation. Here, again, one must address the fact that a wide range of management strategies may be employed over the observed time period, making it difficult to isolate an effect uniquely attributable to supermaxes.

Insert Table 1 about here

The Effectiveness of Supermax Prisons and What Predicts Wardens' Views of Effectiveness

Juxtaposed against warden's wide-ranging views concerning the goals of supermaxes is the following: There are few rigorous empirical evaluations of the effectiveness of these prisons, and virtually none that take into account the range of goals presented here. So, the question arises: Do wardens believe that supermaxes successfully achieve the goals associated with them, and, to the extent that they do, what factors influence their views? The first question allows us to focus on the effectiveness of supermaxes, while the second allows us to explore both the logic and effectiveness of supermaxes and why they are now present in two-thirds of states nationally.

Table 1 presents descriptive and multivariate analyses of the goals in Figure 1, listed in the same order. As the top line of numbers shows, wardens generally hold favorable views about supermax prisons achieving a range of different goals. A mean score of 2.5 suggests an equal balance between those who agree and those who disagree about the effectiveness of supermaxes. Only for the last three listed goals—recidivism, rehabilitation, deterrence—does the mean dip below 2.5. In most others, the mean is higher, and for the top four goals from Figure 1, it is substantially higher. In short, wardens strongly believe that supermax prisons are effective in achieving these four goals, but only somewhat so for the others, such as improving inmate behavior, reducing prison riots, gang influence, and escapes, and increasing punishment.⁹

The regression analyses in Table 1 examine factors that we hypothesized might affect wardens' views about the effectiveness of supermaxes. Across all twelve goals, three characteristics emerged as relatively frequent predictors of holding a favorable view: Being a supermax warden; serving as a warden in the South; and believing that deterrence is the goal of the criminal justice system.¹⁰ Additional factors were significant in some models, but not in others. For example, as hypothesized, wardens' views about the goals of the criminal justice system were associated with their views about whether supermaxes achieve related goals. Wardens who believed punishment is the goal of the criminal justice system tended to think that these prisons successfully punish inmates, wardens who believed rehabilitation is the goal of the criminal justice system tended to think that they successfully rehabilitate, and so forth. Our hypotheses about the size of the correctional systems in which wardens work or of their institutions, as well as our hypothesis about wardens' years of experience in corrections, were disconfirmed. Supervising an overcapacity institution emerged as significant for the goal of improving inmate behavior and, using a lower threshold of statistical significance, for the goals of order, control, and incapacitation. In two models, wardens of male-only facilities were more likely to hold a favorable view of supermaxes, suggesting partial support for the hypothesis about this variable. Finally, in two models wardens who felt there were effective alternatives to supermax prisons were more, not less, likely to view supermax prisons as effective. Our speculation is that wardens who believe there are many alternatives may in general hold a more optimistic view of diverse management strategies, including supermaxes.

Two observations about the patterns in Table 1 merit comment.¹¹ First, if we allow for significance levels of .10 and lower, it is clear that wardens of overcapacity and male-only facilities were more likely to hold favorable views about supermax prisons achieving three of four central goals of supermaxes—safety, order, control, and incapacitation—providing some validation that these prisons may help the very institutions that one would expect to benefit from them. Overcapacity institutions typically experience more management problems, for example. And since females generally are not incarcerated in supermaxes, presumably only institutions with men would benefit from their availability and presence. Countering that view is the fact that maximum security wardens held a less favorable view of supermaxes than did supermax

wardens. As the putative primary beneficiaries—since they house the very types of inmates that are targeted for supermaxes—one would expect markedly stronger views as compared with wardens of both supermax and lower security prisons.

Second, the three variables that were consistently significant—being a supermax warden, serving as a warden in the South, and adhering to a deterrence philosophy—do not logically speak to the effectiveness of supermax prisons. Supermax wardens are not the intended beneficiaries of supermaxes; there is little reason to anticipate that supermax prisons in the South produce greater benefits than in other regions of the country; and personal philosophy presumably should not dictate whether a supermax is effective. However, taken together, the three variables help provide a potential explanation for the emergence and spread of supermaxes. Consider the following possible sequence: Supermax prisons emerge in Southern states¹², where prison population growth is most rapid and where “get tough” attitudes predominate. Then, as other states contemplate how to address real or perceived increases in prison management problems, they send emissaries to visit southern states¹³, including, presumably, supermax wardens, the very people most likely to hold a highly favorable view of supermax prisons. The opinions of these wardens might well have resonated with corrections officials from other states, who increasingly were facing political and public demands for strong responses to crime.¹⁴

Insert Table 2 about here

The Unintended Effects of Supermax Prisons

When evaluating any program or policy, we want information about whether specific goals are achieved and whether unintended effects arise that might affect the overall assessment (Rossi et al., 1999). Perhaps the most commonly leveled complaint about supermax prisons is that they cause or increase mental illness among the inmates housed within them (e.g., Haney and Lynch, 1997; Haney, 2003). Apart from this presumably unintended effect, few other effects have been systematically explored by researchers. Notably, wardens in this study identified a wide range of such effects, some positive and some negative, that influence supermax staff and inmates, staff and inmates throughout the prison system, or the community at large.¹⁵

Table 2 lists the positive unintended effects that were proffered by 99 (16 percent) of the 601

warden respondents.¹⁶ Among the effects mentioned, supermax prisons were described as creating better staff working conditions, which in turn contribute to reduced staff burnout and turnover, and as improving staff effectiveness by increasing the amount and quality of staff training, teamwork, and professionalism. Wardens also noted that supermax prisons make it easier to deliver programming to general population inmates, reduce inmate fear of victimization, and, in some cases, increase inmate morale and perceptions that prison authority is legitimate. Last but not least, wardens identified supermax effects that fell outside of the correctional system. They suggested, for example, that supermax prisons improve local economies, increase public perceptions of safety, enhance the correctional system's relationships with local communities, and, more generally, heighten the prestige of the correctional system among corrections agencies in other states.¹⁷

More than half of all wardens (57 percent) identified negative unintended effects. They cited, for example, decreases in staff morale and increased stress on staff, leading to high burnout and turnover. Some wardens indicated that the presence of supermax prisons creates a false sense of security among staff, which in turn lulls them into greater complacency and less vigilance. Wardens also suggested that supermax prisons foster increases in staff abuse of authority, staff disciplinary actions, and use of force incidents. Further, they argued that supermax confinement diminishes inmate mental health and increases suicide attempts, and even constitutes cruel and unusual punishment, not least because some inmates, such as the mentally ill and nuisance inmates, are placed in them and receive little to no appropriate treatment or services. The wardens also highlighted systemwide effects, such as increased inmate violence and decreased perceptions among inmates that prison authority is legitimate. As with the positive unintended effects, wardens identified negative effects external to the prison system, including heightened public concern about inhumane treatment of inmates, on the one hand, and fear of crime, on the other. They also emphasized that the high cost of supermaxes drains limited funds away from state budgets, leading policymakers to eschew other policy priorities. In addition, wardens mentioned concern about increases in litigation and court interventions, as well as increased recidivism and reentry failure among released supermax inmates.

How widespread any of these effects are remains largely unknown. It appears likely that

some effects may occur in specific states and not in others, and that the way in which correctional systems utilize their supermax prisons affects which unintended outcomes arise. For example, if placement in and release from a supermax were perceived by inmates to be fair, presumably that might well increase inmate perceptions of the legitimacy of prison authority. By the same token, if inmates perceived supermax placement and release decisions to be unfair, presumably perceptions of legitimacy would decline. The more general point from Table 2 is that a range of unintended effects likely accompany supermax prisons. And if one or more of them were to occur with regularity or in sufficient magnitude, they would clearly be relevant to deciding whether supermax prisons constitute a wise investment.

Insert Table 3 about here

Why Supermax Prisons Are Built

When asked why supermax prisons typically are built, almost all wardens (over 94 percent) identified increased prison control problems and prison violence as the primary reasons (see Table 3). Interestingly, however, over 60 percent agreed or strongly agreed that political and public interest in “get tough” policies contribute to decisions to build supermaxes. Almost half agreed that dramatic increases in violent crime rates or the occurrence of a specific riot were relevant. And roughly one in seven wardens agreed that prison overcrowding had resulted in a shortage of beds, and that this shortage led to supermax construction.¹⁸

The wardens’ responses bear comment. First, their views suggest support for the general model we sketched above for why supermaxes have proliferated. Namely, both management challenges, such as riots and violence, and political and social pressures may have created a situation conducive to states adopting symbolic, “get tough” correctional policies (Riveland, 1999b). Once a few states, such as Texas, pursued supermax prisons as a specific policy, other states may soon have followed example, much as organizations sometimes do, even when no compelling need exists, to increase their perceived legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).¹⁹

Second, the notion that public demand has driven decisions to build supermax prisons is ironic. Perhaps the public supports supermaxes and does so solely for retributive reasons. It would seem more likely, however, that at least some expectation of crime control would exist.

Yet, as wardens indicated, the goals of supermaxes appear to be focused primarily on benefits to prison systems—the extent of order, safety, control, and the like—not to society at large. For example, although 72 percent of wardens said the goal of supermax housing is to reduce prison escapes, over half disagreed or strongly disagreed with the claim that the goals of such housing are to reduce recidivism among violent and disruptive inmates or to deter crime in society (see Figure 1). The intriguing question, then, is whether support would diminish if the public felt that supermax prisons would not reduce crime.

Third, bed space shortage is an anomalous reason for building supermax prisons, which are costly and typically entail confinement of only one inmate per cell. To the extent that bed space shortage actually affects decisionmaking about supermax prisons, it raises concerns about whether the investment is appropriate or cost-effective (Riveland, 1997b, p. 7).

Insert Table 4 about here

The General Policy Context Confronting Wardens

In addition to investigating the goals and unintended effects of supermax prisons, we explored the policy context confronting state prison wardens and the relationship between this context and supermax prisons. In an open-ended question, we asked wardens: “What are the most important challenges you face in managing your prison institution?”

As Table 4 shows, the most commonly mentioned challenges were operational in nature—budget cutbacks, limited resources, and the recruitment and retention of staff, including related challenges such as problems with poor work ethics and low morale among staff, and staff burnout and turnover. Other, more inmate-focused challenges cited by wardens included providing adequate treatment, programming, services, and in-prison employment to inmates, reducing overcrowding, maintaining safety and security in institutions, addressing the mental and physical health needs of inmates, managing young and mentally ill offenders, violent inmates, and security threats, and reducing gang-related violence and the influence of gangs. Additional challenges included the need for facility repairs and maintenance, improving the institutional culture among staff and inmates, and reducing the influence of politics on correctional policies.

Of these challenges, only a small handful, such as managing violent inmates and addressing

gang activity, have any direct and logical relationship to supermax prisons. As discussed earlier, a supermax serves at least in part to manage these types of inmates. The remaining challenges, including the most commonly cited ones, such as budget and staffing concerns, do not appear to be ameliorated in any obvious way from having supermax prisons, and might in fact be made worse.²⁰ Supermaxes are, of course, costly and require a constant infusion of operational funds during their life course, which for prison facilities may span fifty years or more (Lynch, 1994). As a result, they may well contribute to reduced funding to other parts of the prison system, including staffing, training, programming, and treatment. At the same time, it is possible that if supermaxes substantially increase systemwide prison order and safety, some of these challenges, such as staff morale and turnover, may decline.

Insert Table 5 about here

Alternatives to Supermax Prisons

Finally, Table 5 presents wardens' views about effective alternatives to supermax prisons. Overall, over three-fourths (76 percent) agreed that at least two effective alternatives exist. More than 60 percent of wardens agreed or strongly agreed that staff training alone would be an effective alternative. Roughly the same percentage thought that the use of segregation cells in each prison facility would be effective, which essentially constitutes a dispersion approach to managing difficult inmate populations. When asked more directly about dispersion, including transfer-and-trade policies with other jurisdictions, over one-third agreed that the approach would be an effective alternative. By contrast, 45 percent of wardens believed a different type of facility for concentrating supermax inmates would be effective. Roughly half of the wardens agreed that rehabilitative services or providing opportunities for spiritual development would be effective alternatives. Three percent of respondents listed other possibilities, including building high-security facilities designed to manage dangerous mentally ill inmates, using incentives-based sanction systems that focus on inmate privileges, offering more programming and treatment services, relying on maximum security prisons, emphasizing a strict system of discipline and enforcement of rules, and increasing staff salaries and training.

We know of little research that documents the effectiveness of these alternatives in achieving

the diverse set of goals associated with supermax prisons (see, however, Sparks et al., 1996; Bottoms, 1999; King, 1999; Gendreau and Keyes, 2001; Kurki and Morris, 2001; Irwin, 2005). Nonetheless, the fact that many wardens believe that effective alternatives exist is striking. Some of these alternatives, such as concentrating supermax inmates in a different type of facility, appear to be costly. But others, such as providing targeted rehabilitative services and dispersing inmates, appear less so, especially when contrasted with the expenses associated with building and maintaining a staff- and technology-intensive supermax prison.

Summary and Discussion

Taking note of the dearth of studies examining the range of goals and effects of supermax prisons, we conducted a national survey of state prison wardens to help answer the question: Are supermaxes a wise policy choice? We examined wardens' views about twelve possible goals of supermax prisons, as well as the unintended effects that wardens identified. We also examined the factors that helped account for variation in why some wardens are more likely than others to view supermax prisons as being successful in achieving these goals. Finally, we examined other dimensions relevant to assessing the wisdom of investing in supermax prisons, including the role of political and public support in building supermax prisons, the seeming relevance of these prisons when juxtaposed against the critical challenges that wardens say they currently face, and the availability of alternatives to supermax prisons that may be effective and potentially cheaper.

Overall, we found consensus among wardens that supermax prisons serve to increase systemwide safety, order, and control, and to incapacitate violent and disruptive inmates, and that they are successful in achieving these goals. Multivariate analyses partially reinforced this interpretation, showing, for example, that wardens who operate overcapacity facilities held more favorable views about supermax prisons. These facilities are more likely to experience violence and disruptions. Thus, it is notable that wardens who work in them express a stronger belief in the effectiveness of supermax prisons in addressing such problems.

We also found that wardens' perceptions of effectiveness are influenced by factors such as serving as a supermax warden, working in a prison in the South, and holding a deterrence philosophy of punishment. We argued that these results help paint a more complex picture about

the emergence and spread of supermax prisons. Specifically, we suggested that supermaxes obtained a foothold in the South because of marked prison growth and “get tough” attitudes, that officials from other states may have visited southern supermax wardens and obtained especially favorable impressions of supermaxes, and that they then returned to political and social contexts highly supportive of taking more aggressive stances towards prisoners. If this model holds true, it suggests that the rise of supermax prisons might have been substantially different had a different approach been pursued in the South and, of course, had other states taken notice.

Our analyses identified many unintended effects associated with supermaxes. These included increased staff morale, improved delivery of systemwide programming, and enhanced public safety (positive effects), as well as increased staff stress and turnover, greater systemwide violence and disorder, and lower levels of inmate mental health (negative effects). Although some of these effects may be rare, some of them may be relatively common. And they could easily shift an assessment about supermax prisons into a favorable or unfavorable light, depending on the magnitude of effects and the balance of positives versus negatives.

Of particular interest is the fact that wardens identified several alternatives to supermax prisons. These were alternatives—such as increased staff training, strategic dispersion of inmates throughout the prison system, and provision of targeted rehabilitative services—that they felt would be effective and that hold the potential to be considerably less costly. The finding is notable because official justifications for supermax prisons typically suggest that no alternatives exist. It also is notable because, according to the wardens we surveyed, the most pressing challenges they face include budget reductions, retention of qualified staff, and other issues that would be largely unaffected by supermaxes or, if anything, would be undercut by them.

The picture, then, that emerges from this study is mixed and complicated. On the one hand, wardens uniformly agree that supermaxes effectively improve systemwide prison safety, order, control, and incapacitation, and contribute to many positive unintended effects. On the other hand, they express markedly less consensus about other goals of supermax prisons and whether these are achieved, and they point to a range of negative unintended effects, any one or more of which might serve to substantially alter an overall assessment of effectiveness. In addition, many wardens believe that effective alternatives to supermax prisons exist. Not least, they point

to a range of pressing management challenges that supermax prisons appear ill-equipped to address; indeed, in some instances, such as limited funding for programming, it is conceivable that these prisons may contribute to the challenges. Furthermore, questions arise when we consider that wardens believe that supermax prisons have been built, at least in part, for political expediency and to satisfy putative public interest in “get tough” policies.

Without doubt, public and political support for intensive, perhaps even punitive, crime control efforts may be warranted (Useem, Liedka, and Piehl, 2003). So, given the many challenges correctional systems face in managing prison populations that in some cases have tripled or quadrupled within a decade or two, any effective policy that improves management should be given serious consideration. At the same time, we suggest that skepticism about supermax prisons is warranted given their costs, potential negative effects, the lack of research documenting their effectiveness, and the possibility that cheaper, effective alternatives exist. At the very least, the paper’s results should give pause to both proponents and opponents of supermax prisons, and suggest the need for much more careful, deliberate, and systematic analyses and discussions of the merits of these high-cost facilities. Wardens’ views should, at a minimum, be supplemented by analyses that rely on more objective sources of data.

The results of this study point to many avenues of inquiry that bear further investigation, all of which could help inform debates about supermax prisons. First, research is greatly needed that empirically examines the effectiveness of supermax housing with respect to each of the goals we have identified. Without such research, supermaxes will continue to be operated and built without the type of scientific, evidence-based foundation that ideally undergirds correctional policies (MacKenzie, 1997) and that has increasingly been incorporated into other areas of corrections, such as drug treatment and reentry programming (Cullen, 2005; Lowenkamp and Latessa, 2005). Indeed, anything less constitutes a selective focus that may provide a distorted picture of the true effectiveness of supermax prisons. At the same time, similar research efforts should be undertaken to quantify the extent to which the identified unintended effects arise. If, for example, supermaxes do contribute to or exacerbate mental illness among supermax inmates and in turn severely impede their ability to successfully reenter society, we would want to factor such information alongside of any identified benefits in any

overall assessment. Clearly, too, research should focus on identifying whether effective alternatives actually exist (see, e.g., Gendreau and Keyes, 2001) and whether they are more cost-beneficial. Finally, future studies should examine why states have invested so heavily in supermax prisons and continue to do so. Without such information, it will be difficult to provide guidance to policymakers and corrections officials in a manner that fruitfully assists them in their efforts.

One implication of the study for policy and practice is the need for states to provide clear reasons for their supermaxes and to identify measures for how they will assess effectiveness. In addition, policymakers and practitioners should give careful thought to creating the data, whether through administrative records or surveys of inmates, necessary to create such measures. At the same time, steps should be implemented to minimize potential negative effects. These steps should include improved inmate classification (Austin and McGinnis, 2004) and ideally the periodic use of staff and inmate focus groups and interviews to identify problems and solutions. Not least, policymakers and corrections officials should systematically examine whether identified alternatives could be feasibly implemented in their states, even if only on a small-scale, trial basis. The risk otherwise is that states may continue to invest in a policy of little value to the exclusion of others that may be far cheaper and effective (Irwin, 2005).

We believe that debates about supermaxes have been long on rhetoric and far too short on research, a situation that is part of a larger trend away from conducting studies of prison systems (Simon, 2000). This situation does a disservice to these systems, which face considerable challenges in managing a diverse population of inmates. And it does a disservice to the public at large, which has a right to expect that their tax dollars be effectively used. Wardens on average believe that supermax prisons can achieve a number of goals, but their views also cast doubt on whether supermaxes constitute a wise investment. We thus close with the recommendation, common but especially relevant in this case, that more research should be conducted to place decisions about supermax prisons on firmer ground.

Endnotes

¹ Some estimates place the current number of inmates in supermax-like confinement between 30,000 and 50,000 (see Briggs et al., 2003; Austin and McGinnis, 2004).

² Adding to the confusion, assaults might be viewed more accurately as an indicator of safety or control over specific high-risk inmates, two markedly different constructs than order (Sparks et al., 1996; Bottoms, 1999; Stickrath and Bucholtz, 2003). Thus, even if one could show that supermaxes increase systemwide safety or inmate control, as measured by assaults, it would remain an open question as to whether they improve systemwide order. (Safety, control, and order may, but need not necessarily, be correlated.)

³ One reviewer noted that the use of wardens' views is an indirect approach to examining the purpose and effectiveness of supermax prisons. We agree. However, a more direct approach requires first knowing what is relevant to measure. In our view, wardens' views provide useful insight into that issue, and their executive position within prison systems places them, as we argue above, in a unique position to provide insights into supermaxes.

⁴ Mail survey response rates have declined in recent years (Ayidiya and McClendon, 1990; Baim, 1991; Bradburn, 1992). A review of social science research found, for example, that the average response rate in survey-based studies today is approximately 55 percent (Baruch, 1999). Response rates among corrections officials has been lower. For example, in 1998, Wells et al. (2002, p. 175) obtained a response rate from wardens of just over 50 percent. The response rate in our study thus is substantially better than in some recent national surveys. Moreover, response rates of 50 to 60 percent generally are viewed as acceptable (Mangione, 1998), although Dillman (2000) has advocated for higher rates. Of course, nonresponse bias, where some type of shared similarity exists among those who fail to respond to a survey, is always a concern. To assess whether systematic nonresponse occurred across the states we surveyed, which would reduce our ability to generalize to state prison wardens nationally, we examined state-by-state response rates. State-level response rates were consistently high: Only two states had response rates lower than 40 percent (the two states had response rates of 14 and 33 percent, respectively), five

had response rates lower than 50 percent, and nine had response rates lower than 60 percent.

⁵ We are indebted to Wells et al. (2002), who kindly gave us a copy of their survey instrument, which provided guidance to us in creating our questionnaire.

⁶ We coded states into South, Northeast, Midwest, and West using the categorizations in King (1999) and Harrison and Beck (2005).

⁷ Data on state-level corrections populations were obtained from Harrison and Beck (2003).

⁸ Pfeiffer (2004) has described New York as using special housing unit cells for women. The conditions of confinement appear to reflect those associated with supermax prisons.

⁹ The analyses were conducted on cases with valid responses to all items. Due to the survey design, some wardens failed to respond to questions about the extent to which goals had been achieved. Respondents were first asked to state the extent to which they agreed that each of twelve outcomes were goals; 95 percent of respondents completed this section. Immediately after, they were asked to return to these goals and assess the extent to which each had been or would likely be successfully achieved due to a supermax. Between 24 and 38 percent of respondents failed to respond to these follow-up questions. Although unfortunate, we do not believe the results would differ substantially had these response rates been higher, primarily because there is little reason to anticipate patterned (i.e., non-random) non-responses. We tested this assumption in several ways. First, at a reviewer's suggestion, we compared response rates between wardens with a supermax in their state and those without—no statistically significant differences emerged across the twelve effectiveness measures. Per the reviewer's suggestion, we also re-ran the models excluding wardens from states with no supermax prisons, and the results were not significantly different. In addition, the models we present control for whether wardens resided in a supermax state. Finally, we examined the correlations between responses to questions about the goals and effectiveness of supermaxes, and found correlations ranging from .63 to .83, with an average of .75. This suggests that wardens' perceptions of the effectiveness of supermax prisons strongly correspond to their views about the goals of these prisons. Because the response rates were substantially higher for the goals questions, we re-ran our analyses using

perceived goals rather than perceived effectiveness as outcome measures. Across all goals, the results were substantially similar to those found in the effectiveness models, suggesting little basis for concern that response rates for the effectiveness question biased the model estimation. In some cases, variables were statistically significant in the goals models that were close to significance in the effectiveness models, which we would expect given the larger sample sizes.

¹⁰ Given the number of regression models, some factors might be expected to emerge as significant by chance. We thus use a more stringent criterion for reporting noteworthy results, focusing primarily on those factors that were significant at the .01 level.

¹¹ One reviewer suggested comparing the predictors in models where a majority of wardens agreed that supermaxes are effective (e.g., models 1-9) with models where less-than-majority agreement obtained (e.g., models 10-12). No obvious pattern emerged save that fewer predictors were significant in the models of outcomes where less agreement existed (e.g., region and male-only facilities emerged as statistically significant somewhat more often in the first set of models).

¹² In the early 1980s, Texas was at the forefront of states that considered supermaxes to merit investment (Ralph and Marquart, 1991). It had 16 of the nation's 57 supermax facilities in 1996, according to the National Institute of Corrections survey (1997, p. 3), and reportedly houses one-fifth of all inmates nationally who are in segregated supermax-like cells (Austin et al., 1998, p. 25).

¹³ As but one example, California's Pelican Bay supermax was modeled after a supermax in Arizona (King, 1999, pp. 172, 176).

¹⁴ That many states visited the federal supermax facility in Marion, Illinois (Ward and Werlich, 2003, p. 59) during the 1970s would not necessarily refute this model. It simply suggests that the "federal" idea may have taken hold in the South and that subsequently, state officials visited southern supermax facilities, and perhaps the federal supermax as well, including the newer one built in Florence, Colorado, in the 1990s.

¹⁵ Our analysis of unintended effects is exploratory. No researchers have systematically documented the full range of such effects. Therefore, we included categories that reflect

virtually all unintended effects indicated by respondents. Some effects may be widespread even if only a few wardens mentioned them. Conversely, though it may seem unlikely, the most widely cited effects might in reality occur rarely. For this reason, future research should include all such effects to assess the true prevalence or magnitude of each.

¹⁶ One reviewer suggested that wardens without a supermax in their state might be less aware of or be less likely to identify potential unintended effects as compared with wardens in states with supermax prisons. In fact, we found no significant differences between the two groups.

¹⁷ In this same vein, Briggs et al. (2003, p. 1342) have noted that: “For many within the prisons industry, the establishment of the supermax is viewed as the sine qua non of a progressive prison regime that is concerned with the safety needs of its inmates and staff.”

¹⁸ We compared the responses above across two groups—wardens in supermax states and wardens in non-supermax states—and found no statistically or substantively significant mean differences between the two groups.

¹⁹ Consider the title of an article in the Prison Journal, “Whatever Is Next After the Prison-Building Boom Will Be Next in Texas” (Fabelo, 1996), suggesting that Texas is at the vanguard of criminal justice policymaking.

²⁰ It might have been better, as one reviewer noted, to ask wardens to comment directly on whether supermax prisons helped or hindered them in addressing specific challenges rather than to make inferences. However, this would have entailed inclusion of an additional open-ended question. Based on consultation with wardens, as well as researchers who had conducted surveys of wardens, we decided to limit the number of such questions to ensure full participation. Although we view the inferences as reasonable, readers should interpret them with caution.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. Definition of a supermax. Do you agree with this survey's definition of a supermax? (The definition given was: For the purposes of this survey, a supermax is defined as a stand-alone unit or part of another facility and is designated for violent or disruptive inmates. It typically involves up to 23-hour per day, single-cell confinement for an indefinite period of time. Inmates in supermax housing have minimal contact with staff and other inmates.)
2. Goals of criminal justice system. In your view, what are the goals of the criminal justice system? Punishment; incapacitation; rehabilitation; deterrence; other. Response options for each goal were: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, and 4=strongly agree.
3. Goals of supermax prisons. In your view, what are the goals that states hope to achieve with supermax facilities? Punish violent or disruptive inmates; incapacitate violent or disruptive inmates; rehabilitate violent or disruptive inmates; reduce recidivism of violent or disruptive inmates; increase control over prison system; increase order throughout prison system; increase safety throughout prison system; improve inmate behavior throughout prison system; decrease prison riots; decrease influence of gangs in prisons; reduce prison escapes; deter crime in society; other. Response options were the same as for question 2 above.
4. Successful achievement of goals of supermax prisons. For each goal in the question above, please shade in the boxes to indicate the extent to which you think supermax facilities in your state are successful. If your state does not have a supermax, please indicate the extent to which you think a supermax *would* be successful in your state. Response options were the same as for question 2 above.
5. Positive or negative unintended effects (open-ended question). What do you think are or would likely be the positive or negative unintended effects of a supermax?
6. Reasons states build supermax prisons. In your view, why do states typically build supermax facilities? Dramatic increases in violent crime rates; projected increases in violent crime rates; a specific prison riot; a series of prison control problems; increased prison violence; political interest in "get tough" crime policies; public interest in "get tough" crime policies; a shortage of beds due to overcrowding; other. Response options were the same as for question 2 above.
7. Effective alternatives. In your view, are the following alternatives to supermax facilities effective?

Use segregation cells in each prison facility; disperse violent/disruptive inmates throughout system; concentrate these inmates in a different type of facility; staff training; provide targeted rehabilitative services; provide opportunities for spiritual development; transfer and trade inmates with other jurisdictions. Response options were the same as for question 2 above.

8. Facility security level. What are the security levels of your prison institution? Response options included: Minimum, medium, maximum/close/high, super-maximum, other.
9. Inmates in respondent's institution. How many inmates are *currently* in your institution?
10. Rated capacity of respondent's institution. What is the total *rated capacity* of your institution?
11. Gender composition of respondent's institution. Does your institution house males, females, or both?
12. Supermax in respondent's state. Does your state correctional system have a supermax facility?
13. Years respondent has been in current position. Number of years in current position: _____.
14. Years respondent has been in corrections. Number of years in corrections: _____.
15. Challenges to managing respondent's institution (open-ended question). What are the most important challenges you face in managing your prison institution?

Appendix B: Descriptives

	Min – Max	Mean (S.D.)
<i>Security level</i>		
Supermax warden	0 – 1	0.23 (0.42)
Maximum security warden, supermax state	0 – 1	0.21 (0.41)
Other security warden, supermax state	0 – 1	0.31 (0.46)
Maximum security warden, non-supermax state	0 – 1	0.15 (0.36)
Other security warden, non-supermax state	0 – 1	0.10 (0.29)
<i>Region</i>		
South	0 – 1	0.56 (0.50)
Northeast	0 – 1	0.08 (0.26)
Midwest	0 – 1	0.22 (0.41)
West	0 – 1	0.15 (0.36)
Punishment is goal of criminal justice system	1 – 4	2.77 (0.90)
Incapacitation is goal of criminal justice system	1 – 4	3.03 (0.86)
Rehabilitation is goal of criminal justice system	1 – 4	3.18 (0.71)
Deterrence is goal of criminal justice system	1 – 4	3.26 (0.67)
Number of inmates in state correctional system (<i>thousands</i>)	1.1 – 162.3	52.91 (52.80)
Number of inmates currently in institution (<i>thousands</i>)	0.04 – 7.2	1.28 (1.05)
Overcapacity institution	0 – 1	0.24 (0.43)
Male-only institution	0 – 1	0.84 (0.37)
Number of years spent in corrections	0.5 – 42	22.95 (6.35)
Number of effective alternatives to supermax	0 – 7	3.37 (2.12)

Note: Ns for each question ranged from 565 to 601. Variables coded as 0-1 have values of 0=no and 1=yes. For variables coded as 1-4, 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, and 4=strongly agree.

Table 1. Factors Predicting Wardens' Views about the Effectiveness of Supermax Prisons in Achieving Specific Goals

	Goal (1) Safety	Goal (2) Order	Goal (3) Control	Goal (4) Incap	Goal (5) Behav	Goal (6) Riots
MEAN SCORE	3.57	3.47	3.47	3.52	2.97	3.08
<i>Security level (ref=supermax)</i>						
Max security, SM state	-0.10 (.09)	-0.19* (.09)	-0.24** (.10)	0.03 (.09)	-0.21† (.12)	-0.36** (.11)
Other security, SM state	-0.08 (.08)	-0.19* (.09)	-0.16† (.09)	-0.05 (.09)	-0.12 (.12)	-0.15 (.11)
Max security, non-SM state	-0.15 (.10)	-0.36*** (.10)	-0.43*** (.11)	0.01 (.10)	-0.31* (.14)	-0.28* (.13)
Other security, non-SM state	-0.28* (.12)	-0.32** (.12)	-0.37** (.13)	-0.21† (.12)	-0.37* (.17)	-0.28† (.16)
<i>Region (ref=South)</i>						
Northeast	-0.28† (.15)	-0.23 (.15)	-0.23 (.16)	0.15 (.04)	-0.16 (.22)	-0.44* (.20)
Midwest	-0.16* (.08)	-0.21** (.08)	-0.19* (.08)	-0.11 (.08)	-0.15 (.11)	-0.22* (.10)
West	-0.03 (.09)	-0.20* (.10)	-0.18† (.10)	0.01 (.09)	-0.32** (.13)	-0.40*** (.12)
Punishment	0.01 (.04)	0.01 (.04)	0.05 (.04)	0.02 (.04)	0.01 (.05)	-0.04 (.05)
Incapacitation	0.03 (.04)	0.04 (.04)	0.05 (.04)	0.29*** (.04)	0.05 (.05)	-0.02 (.05)
Rehabilitation	-0.01 (.04)	0.01 (.04)	0.01 (.05)	0.02 (.04)	0.01 (.06)	-0.03 (.06)
Deterrence	0.07 (.05)	0.06 (.05)	0.02 (.05)	0.02 (.05)	0.22*** (.06)	0.25*** (.06)
No. inmates in state system	-0.00 (.00)	0.00 (.00)	0.00 (.00)	-0.00 (.00)	0.00 (.01)	-0.00 (.00)
No. inmates in institution	-0.00 (.03)	0.02 (.04)	0.01 (.04)	-0.01 (.03)	-0.04 (.05)	0.01 (.05)
Overcapacity	0.05 (.07)	0.16* (.07)	0.15† (.08)	0.14† (.07)	0.28** (.10)	0.12 (.10)
Male-only facility	0.20** (.08)	0.16† (.09)	0.12 (.09)	0.23** (.09)	0.13 (.12)	-0.01 (.11)
Years in corrections	-0.00 (.01)	-0.00 (.01)	-0.00 (.01)	0.00 (.01)	0.00 (.01)	-0.01 (.01)
Alternatives to supermax	0.01 (.01)	0.00 (.02)	-0.00 (.02)	-0.01 (.01)	0.01 (.02)	0.02 (.02)
(Constant)	3.32*** (.26)	3.26*** (.27)	3.21*** (.29)	2.33*** (.27)	2.12*** (.37)	3.04*** (.35)
R ²	0.06	0.10	0.09	0.20	0.11	0.13

Note: Unstandardized coefficients (with standard errors in parentheses) are presented above. Ns for each model range from 312 to 386. Mean scores range from 1=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree and measure the extent to which wardens believe supermax prisons achieve each goal.

† p ≤ .10 * p ≤ .05 ** p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001

Table 1. Factors Predicting Wardens' Views about the Effectiveness of Supermax Prisons in Achieving Specific Goals (cont.)

	Goal (7) Gangs	Goal (8) Escapes	Goal (9) Punish	Goal (10) Recid	Goal (11) Rehab	Goal (12) Deter
MEAN SCORE	2.96	2.96	2.71	2.37	2.18	2.01
<i>Security level (ref=supermax)</i>						
Max security, SM state	-0.18 (.13)	-0.31** (.12)	0.13 (.14)	-0.13 (.14)	-0.22† (.13)	-0.20 (.14)
Other security, SM state	0.12 (.13)	-0.26* (.12)	0.19 (.13)	-0.03 (.14)	0.13 (.13)	0.02 (.14)
Max security, non-SM state	-0.07 (.15)	-0.34* (.14)	0.09 (.16)	-0.30† (.17)	-0.32* (.15)	-0.26† (.16)
Other security, non-SM state	-0.06 (.18)	-0.23 (.17)	0.16 (.18)	-0.27 (.19)	-0.36* (.18)	-0.16 (.19)
<i>Region (ref=South)</i>						
Northeast	-0.01 (.23)	-0.22 (.21)	0.02 (.23)	-0.48† (.27)	-0.04 (.23)	-0.32 (.25)
Midwest	-0.11 (.12)	-0.41*** (.11)	0.06 (.12)	-0.20 (.13)	-0.12 (.11)	-0.11 (.12)
West	-0.02 (.14)	-0.57*** (.13)	0.02 (.15)	-0.04 (.15)	0.00 (.14)	-0.13 (.15)
Punishment	-0.03 (.05)	-0.06 (.05)	0.36*** (.06)	-0.01 (.06)	-0.03 (.05)	-0.02 (.06)
Incapacitation	0.03 (.06)	-0.03 (.05)	-0.08 (.06)	0.05 (.06)	-0.04 (.06)	-0.13* (.06)
Rehabilitation	-0.03 (.07)	-0.06 (.06)	-0.02 (.07)	0.19** (.07)	0.25*** (.07)	0.10 (.07)
Deterrence	0.30*** (.07)	0.24*** (.06)	0.10 (.07)	0.14† (.08)	0.10 (.07)	0.16* (.07)
No. inmates in state system	0.00 (.00)	0.00 (.00)	-0.00† (.00)	-0.00† (.00)	-0.00 (.00)	-0.00 (.00)
No. inmates in institution	0.04 (.05)	-0.05 (.05)	0.05 (.05)	-0.06 (.06)	-0.01 (.05)	-0.02 (.06)
Overcapacity	0.09 (.11)	0.03 (.10)	-0.04 (.11)	0.18 (.12)	0.05 (.11)	0.03 (.12)
Male-only facility	-0.13 (.13)	-0.15 (.12)	-0.01 (.13)	0.18 (.14)	0.08 (.13)	0.01 (.14)
Years in corrections	-0.01 (.01)	-0.01 (.01)	0.01 (.01)	0.00 (.01)	-0.00 (.01)	0.01 (.01)
Alternatives to supermax	0.01 (.02)	0.03 (.02)	0.04† (.02)	0.04† (.02)	0.06** (.02)	0.06** (.02)
(Constant)	2.41*** (.39)	3.28*** (.37)	1.22** (.40)	1.12** (.44)	1.30*** (.39)	1.57*** (.42)
R ²	0.09	0.18	0.15	0.10	0.15	0.10

† p ≤ .10 * p ≤ .05 ** p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001

Table 2. State Prison Warden Views about the Unintended Effects of Supermax Prisons

	Wardens Identifying Specific Effect (N)
Positive Effects	
<i>On Supermax and/or Non-Supermax Staff</i>	
• Improves staff working conditions and morale and decreases staff burnout and turnover	24
• Increases staff effectiveness through higher quality training, teamwork, and professionalism	13
• Enhances communication between staff and inmates	3
• Reduces staff fear of victimization	3
• Reduces staff disciplinary actions and use of force incidents	1
<i>On Supermax and/or Non-Supermax Inmates</i>	
• Eases delivery of programs to inmates throughout prison system	9
• Reduces inmate fear of victimization	5
• Heightens inmate morale and perception of legitimacy of prison system	4
• Reduces stress and improves mental and physical health of all inmates	4
<i>On Community</i>	
• Increases local employment, especially in rural and low-income areas	22
• Increases local business development and government tax revenues	18
• Increases public safety and perception of safety	11
• Enhances relations with local community, interest groups, and politicians	9
• Increases public perception that state is tough on crime	5
• Heightens prestige of prison system among corrections agencies in other states	2
• Increases positive media coverage of correctional practices	1

Note: Respondents were given the opportunity in an open-ended question to identify positive and then negative unintended effects of supermax prisons. Their responses were coded into the categories above. Of the 601 respondents, 99 provided examples of unintended positive effects, and 343 provided unintended negative effects. Some respondents listed more than one effect, thus the total counts above sum to greater than 99 and 343 for positive and negative unintended effects, respectively. We report Ns rather than percentages to emphasize the fact that these categories arise from coding of responses to an open-ended question (see Appendix A) to which not all wardens responded.

Table 2. State Prison Warden Views about the Unintended Effects of Supermax Prisons (cont.)

	Wardens Identifying Specific Effect (N)
Negative Effects	
<i>On Supermax and/or Non-Supermax Staff</i>	
• Diminishes staff morale and mental health and increases staff stress, burnout, and turnover	34
• Creates false sense of security among staff, leading to reduced vigilance and safety	10
• Increases abuse of authority by staff	6
• Heightens staff fear of victimization	1
• Increases staff disciplinary actions and use of force incidents	1
<i>On Supermax and/or Non-Supermax Inmates</i>	
• Diminishes inmate mental health and increases suicide attempts	85
• Reduces programming and rehabilitative services	36
• Leads to inappropriate placement of some inmates (e.g., mentally ill and nuisance inmates)	32
• Increases violence, infractions, and antisocial behavior by supermax inmates	31
• Increases disruption among inmates who want to be placed in single-cell supermax	11
• Constitutes cruel and unusual punishment	8
• Increases violence throughout prison system	4
• Decreases inmate perception of legitimacy of prison system	2
• Heightens inmate fear of victimization	1
<i>On Community</i>	
• Heightens public perception of inhumane treatment and negative media and political reaction	40
• Increases taxes and draws limited state funds away from other policy priorities	34
• Increases fear of crime among local community and general public	21
• Increases litigation and court intervention	13
• Increases post-release recidivism and reentry failure among supermax inmates	9
• Decreases local business development, property values, employment, and tax revenues	2

Table 3. State Prison Warden Views about Why Supermax Prisons Are Built

	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)
A series of prison control problems	94.5
Increased prison violence	94.2
Political interest in “get tough” crime policies	65.8
Public interest in “get tough” crime policies	60.9
Dramatic increases in violent crime rates	49.7
A specific prison riot	48.8
Projected increases in violent crime rates	39.1
A shortage of beds due to overcrowding	13.7

Note: Ns for each question ranged from 582 to 585. Four percent of respondents indicated additional reasons, which included “because other states have them” (i.e., following national trends in supermax construction), addressing staff and inmate safety, and reducing the influence of gangs.

Table 4. The General Policy Context Confronting State Prison Wardens

	Wardens Identifying Specific Issue (%)
• Budget cutbacks and limited resources	43.3
• Recruitment and retention of qualified staff	34.4
• Managing staff and improving work ethics (e.g., complacency among staff)	13.3
• Staff morale, burnout, and turnover	11.3
• Providing adequate programming, jobs, and treatment services	10.4
• Overcrowding and bed shortages	9.5
• Maintaining a safe and secure facility	8.2
• Addressing the mental health needs of inmates	5.1
• Managing specific inmate sub-populations (e.g., young and mentally ill offenders)	4.9
• Providing adequate staff training	4.5
• Reducing the influence of politics on correctional policies (e.g., political, legislative, and public pressures, including unions)	3.8
• Managing violent inmates and security threats	3.8
• Addressing gang activity and violence	3.1
• Treating the medical needs of inmates	2.4
• Preventing distribution of contraband	2.2
• Improving infrastructure, including repairs and maintenance	2.2
• Maintaining a positive institutional culture	1.3
• Treating drug and alcohol problems among inmates	0.9

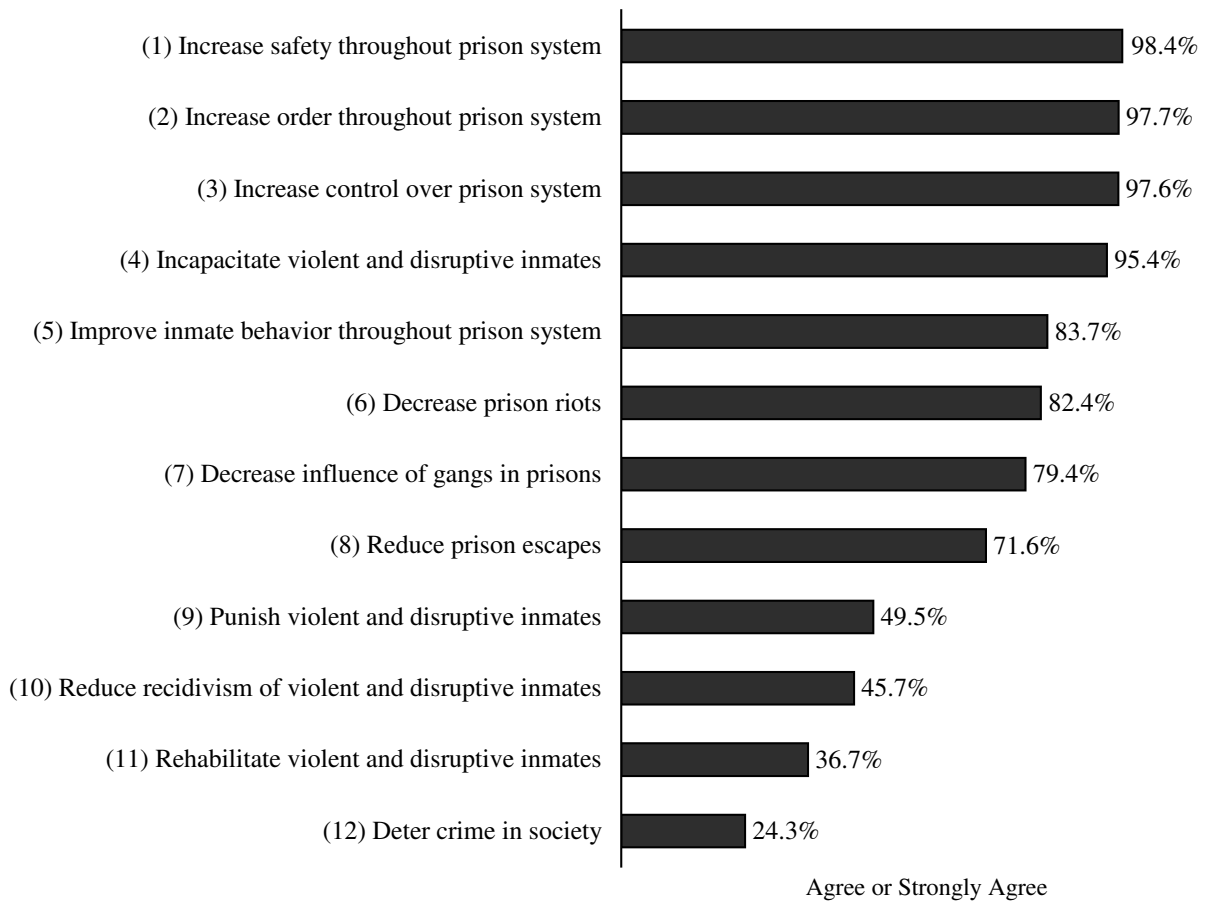
Note: N=550 (51 respondents are omitted who did not identify any issue). Respondents were given the opportunity to identify the most important challenges they face in managing their prison institutions. Their responses were coded into the categories above. Percentages do not sum to 100, because some wardens provided multiple responses.

Table 5. State Prison Warden Views about Effective Alternatives to Supermax Prisons

<i>Alternatives Described in the Survey</i>	<i>Agree or Strongly Agree (%)</i>
Staff training	62.5
Use segregation cells in each prison facility	59.4
Provide targeted rehabilitative services	52.1
Provide opportunities for spiritual development	45.8
Concentrate these inmates in a different type of facility	45.3
Transfer and trade inmates with other jurisdictions	37.6
Disperse violent and disruptive inmates throughout system	37.4
 <i>Additional Alternatives</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build high-security mental health units for dangerous mentally ill inmates • Restrict inmate privileges (e.g., visits, phone calls, types of meals) • Offer more programming, especially mental health treatment services • Utilize regular maximum-security prisons • Exercise strict and severe disciplinary action • Increase staff salaries and training throughout prison system 	

Note: Ns for each question ranged from 567 to 584. Respondents were given the opportunity to identify additional alternatives (other than those listed in the survey) to supermax prisons. Three percent of respondents did so, and their responses were coded into categories listed in the bottom half of the table.

Figure 1. State Prison Warden Views about the Goals of Supermax Prisons



Note: Ns for each question ranged from 567 to 575.
