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Behavioral Management of

Special Handling Unit Inmates

Psychological Services Division

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Canada

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The Special Handling Units (SHUs) have been a source
of controversy within the Correctional Service of Canada
(CSC) since they were established in 1977. Although there
is no debate about the purpose of the SHUs (to protect
inmates and staff from violence), there has been
considerable doubt expressed about whether SHUs are the
best solution. My purpose in writing this report is not
to enter this debate, except tangentially, but rather to
address the issue of inmate management within the SHUs.

I was originally asked to investigate the topic of
treatment within the SHUs but, as is so often the case,
the formulation of an answer to a question leads to the
alteration of the question itself. The term "treatment"
carries with it too much semantic and value-laden baggage
to be useful in the discussion which follows. The concept
of treatment creates further difficulties because it

frequently implies illness of some sort (which is often incorrect or irrelevant) and can be applied to procedures which are as disparate as brain surgery, psychoanalysis, and behavior modification. In addition, the term treatment has been made controversial through its use in what are essentially ideological debates within correctional circles.

However, the term treatment will not be used in this report for yet another and much more important reason; that is, a discussion of whether to provide treatment mistakenly implies that there is some choice in the matter. Discussions within CSC have suggested that treatment may be appropriate. The 1983-12-05 Report on evaluation of SHUs conducted by the Dangerous Offender Consultation Committee recommends the provision of treatment while indicating its ambivalence over the issue by placing the word treatment in quotes. The fact of the matter is that "treatment" is inevitable regardless of anyone's wishes and the only question is: What kind?

Some conceptual analysis will be necessary to clarify this point. All animals, including people, are affected by their environment; the nervous systems of all complex animals, from sea slugs to men, are constructed so as to be modifiable in a more or less permanent manner by the effects of previous environments. The changes in behavior which are occasioned by these alterations in

emotional functioning are said to be learned. Learning
automatically occurs whether anyone wants it to or not.
In designing a total environment such as the SHUs,
therefore, the question is not whether "treatment" should
occur but rather what behavior the environment will
produce now and later.

If one of the goals of the SHUs is to reduce violent
behavior among the inmates who are or who have been in
them, then great attention must be paid to the conditions
under which the inmates are kept as the SHU environment
will inevitably have some effect. Thus, I prefer to focus
on inmate behaviors which are caused by environmental
influence; these behaviors can be desirable or
undesirable and change or remain stable. This focus on
behavior and environmental influence is broader than a
focus on treatment and, hopefully, less controversial.

I will return to give flesh to these abstractions
later. Before becoming more concrete, however, some
background information must be provided: a description of
the SHU population, a description of the SHU programs,
and a description of the social learning model of human
behavior. After this background, a critique of the SHU
program will be presented, followed by a series of
recommendations. Before proceeding, however, it should be
clear at the outset that I am more concerned that my
reasoning be followed than I am with the fate of any

particular recommendation. I propose to indicate what
phenomena have to be attended to regardless of one's
predilictions and what the inevitable consequences of
various courses of action are. Rather than the
advisability of various forms of therapy, therefore, this
report is concerned with the system of managing SHU
inmates because such management is inevitable and its
form consequential.

Description of the SHU Population.

Porporino and MacDonald-Depew (1983) have provided a
useful description of the characteristics of men who have
been admitted to the SHUs. There have been 304 admissions
to the SHUs from September of 1977 to December of 1982.
Ninety percent of these men were originally admitted to
the CSC for a violent offence: the most common offence
was armed robbery (43 percent of the total). Of interest
is the finding that 26 percent had been admitted to the
CSC for first or second degree murder and that 94 percent
of these had committed previous violent offences. The
average age of men admitted to the SHU was 27 years and
74 percent of them were under 31 years of age. In terms
of education, 39 percent had achieved grade 8 or less.
Sixty-one percent of them were single. Forty-six percent
had been admitted to training schools, 12 percent had had
psychiatric treatment in the community, and 21 percent

had received psychiatric attention within CSC. Fifty
percent had a drug and/or alcohol problem.

Turning to the offences that precipitated admissions
to the SHU, the most common reasons were: assault (37%),
rioting (32%), and hostage-taking (21%). The offences
were very serious: 69 percent involved weapons, 35
percent death, and a further 26 percent significant
injury. The victims were most commonly CSC staff (52%)
and inmates (21%). Thirty-five percent of these incidents
resulted in additional sentences (11% of these were life
sentences). Most of the offences (83%) occurred in
maximum security settings. Accomplices were involved in
53 percent of the offences.

What implications do these statistics have? Although
the data are reported in aggregate form and involve
institutional records rather than prospective and
systematized behavioral recording, a number of
conclusions are possible. First, these inmates have
problems of institutional adjustment in addition to their
difficulties outside of institutions. The primary
undesirable behavior is aggression. It is of interest
that these individuals, unlike many persons who have
committed serious crimes against persons outside of
institutions, are assaultive within institutions as well.
More commonly, persons who have committed very serious
crimes against persons in the community display

appropriate behavior in an institutional context and even
have gross assertive deficits (Quinsey, Maguire, &
Varney, 1983).

Secondly, because of the long history of repeated
violence that many of these individuals have displayed,
the overprediction of dangerousness due to low baserates
of violent behavior will be minimal. Consistent
application of stringent behavioral selection criteria
for admission to the SHUs will insure a high baserate as
will the procedure of selecting some inmates for release
from the SHUs on a regular basis (for a detailed
statistical argument on this point see Quinsey, 1980).

Because many of the offences leading to the SHU
admission involved weapons and accomplices and because
the most common offence leading to admission to CSC is
armed robbery, most of these individuals probably
identify themselves as criminals and have pro-criminal
beliefs and attitudes. In addition, the presence of a
large number of individuals who have had previous
psychiatric involvement inside and outside CSC indicates
that major psychiatric illness is a common problem.
Finally, some of these individuals, because of the
spontaneity and frequency of many of their crimes of
violence, appear to have difficulties in managing their
anger. In short, we find criminal identification and
psychopathy, psychoses, and self control deficits as

common problems among the SHU population. Careful and
detailed observation of individuals would undoubtedly
reveal a host of other difficulties.

The SHU Program.

The SHU program is understandably security oriented;
its most salient feature is the isolation of the inmate
from other inmates and more particularly from CSC staff.
The system of inmate management is very traditional and
involves a level system of privileges (in CSC parlance, a
phase system). Level systems of management are very
common for aggressive institutionalized persons and I
have had a great deal of direct experience with a number
of them.

The SHU phase system involves a one month assessment
phase which is similar to, if not identical with,
punitive dissociation. Basically, inmates are kept in
their cells except for a period of exercise each day. In
phase two, the inmate associates with other inmates (in
Prince Albert, 7 other inmates) and can obtain some
amenities such as a TV and access to more activities. In
phase 3, inmates associate with each other in larger
groups and have access to more activities. Phase 4 is a
probationary period in a maximum security institution.
The inmates seldom have direct interaction with any CSC
staff as they are ordinarily separated by their cell door

or a transparent partition. Inmates spend two years in
the SHU unless special circumstances dictate another
course of action (for example, new offences, mandatory
supervision date, etc.).

There is opportunity for some work and handicrafts
as well as access to weight equipment and a heavy
punching bag. Inmates are exercised in the outside yard
each day.

Various professional staff interview the inmates on
a regular basis. Psychology, psychiatric, and other staff
have some contact with the inmates (through screened
interview rooms). An individual program plan is drawn up
for each inmate by the Case Management Officer and
consists of a needs analysis and action plan which guides
the inmate's progression through the phases by
establishing criteria for movement between phases.
Reports of progress are made at regular intervals. The
warden reviews each inmate every three months to
determine if there should be a change in that inmate's
phase level. A central committee determines whether an
inmate moves into or out of the SHU.

The Social Learning Model.

The social learning model of behavior asserts that
behavior is the result of a reciprocal interaction
between behaviors and the social environment; behaviors

are controlled by reinforcing events and cognitions (for the most influential statement of this position see Bandura, 1969). The overall thrust of a social learning model of human behavior has received a great deal of empirical support; of more interest to the present discussion, however, is the application of social learning principles to the analysis of aggression (Bandura, 1976). The social learning theory of aggression specifies the conditions under which aggressive behaviors are acquired and maintained. Without going into detail, some features of this model are very relevant in the present context: The specific behaviors involved in aggression (fighting ability, etc.) are facilitated by practice; aggressive behaviors can be acquired by observation of aggressive models; aggressive behaviors are maintained and acquired by direct reinforcement from the environment; and instigating factors, such as physical assault, insult, threat, and radical decrements in one's standard of living are important in producing aggressive behavior. These phenomena, which social learning theory suggests are of importance, have received a great deal of research support.

Within criminology, differential association theory has become the most popular explanation of criminal behavior. Differential association theory is compatible with a social learning approach and has benefitted from

methodological links with behavior theory (Andrews, 1980). Three propositions are central to the theory of differential association: (a) criminal behaviors are learned because of reinforcement for criminal beliefs and behaviors and from the availability of criminal models, (b) most of this learning occurs in intimate groups, particularly where criminal others have control over rewards and punishers, and (c) criminal acts occur where there are stimuli which are associated with favorable outcomes for criminal acts. The contingency and relationship principles specify where the learning occurs and the self-management principle (principle c) specifies the conditions under which the acts occur. In essence, the self-management principle deals with the stimulus and cognitive controls of criminal behavior.

Both the social learning model and the theory of differential association deal with different levels of phenomena; in particular, both assert that both cognitions or beliefs and behaviors or acts are important and, furthermore, that both are closely related to events in the environment. In designing a system of inmate management, however, it is important to keep the distinction between beliefs and behaviors razor sharp, as much mischief is caused by their confusion. The effects of any change in the environment or in a program should always be evaluated by behavioral change. An example of a

common and fatal error is to assume that we or the
inmates know what events control behavior. We might
assume, for example, that locking an inmate up is a
punisher. This assumption may be totally incorrect. We
can only know for sure by making observations about the
effects of locking a particular inmate up. Punishing
events can only be defined by the suppression of some
behavior when the putative punishing event is made
contingent upon that behavior. Thus, what we think or
what inmates say about the aversiveness of the event is
irrelevant. Program elements must, therefore, be retained
or eliminated on the basis of their effects. In order for
this to be possible, the relevant behaviors must be
measured and control over program elements maintained.

These observations pertaining to the theories of
social learning and differential association are
necessarily very brief and at this point extremely
abstract. In addition, the chief virtue of these
theories, namely, their research support, has not been
detailed, as that would take too much space. It is,
however, necessary to understand some of the
characteristics of these theories in order to understand
the critique of the SHU programs which follows. Indeed,
one of the recommendations which will be made at the end
of this report is that the management of SHU inmates
requires a consistent point of view, rationale, or

theory A consistent outlook is necessary in order to
create a consensus among CSC staff as to what sorts of
programs for SHU inmates should be provided and how they
should be implemented. It has been demonstrated that
forensic clinicians who do not necessarily share an
explicit theory disagree among themselves about what
sorts of programs offenders might benefit from and how
much (Quinsey & Maguire, 1984).

In summary, the social learning approach and theory of
differential association are well supported empirically
and have specific implications for the management of
inmates. These models also encourage decision making
based upon data rather than tradition or presumption.

A Critique of the SHUs

The SHUs have been designed with security as their
primary focus. Concerns over security are natural, as
there is no doubt that the SHU population is an extremely
dangerous one. Because of the careful selection of
inmates on the grounds of actual violent behaviors (the
inmates transferred to the SHUs on proactive grounds
excepted) and because many of the misbehaviors leading to
transfer have occurred in institutional environments, the
problem of overprediction of dangerousness is minimized,
at least for short periods of confinement in the SHUs.

The security arrangements involve primarily static security (i.e. security which depends on the physical characteristics of the environment). Decisions have to be made, however, about the level of security (phase level) which an inmate will be placed in within the SHU and when, or if, he will be transferred back to a maximum security facility. These decisions are critical and are not affected by the safety of the physical plant of the SHUs. What information can be used to determine whether an inmate should be transferred between phases or out of the SHUs? How does one know whether the data on which the decision is based are reliable and relevant? Because the goal of the SHUs is to protect CSC staff and inmates from violence, how can it be ensured that an inmate will be less likely to be violent upon release from the SHU than upon entry? Because most inmates will be released from the SHUs, the question of reducing the probability of their being violent is hardly idle.

The issues of whether inmates are aided in becoming less violent while in the SHUs and whether there is adequate information available pertaining to release decisions are raised by an examination of preliminary release statistics. Porporino and MacDonald-Depew (1983) report that 21 percent of inmates released from the SHUs have been returned after a short follow-up period. Of 35 inmates who have returned to the community, 3 have been

returned for mandatory supervision violations and 5 for
violent offences (including 2 for murder). Although these
data can be interpreted in differing ways, they
demonstrate at a minimum that there is room for
improvement and cause for concern. The difficulty in
obtaining information regarding inmates' dangerousness in
the SHU environment is indicated in a different way by
the practice of transferring acutely disturbed
psychiatric cases out of the super-secure SHUs into much
less secure institutions (Regional Treatment Centres, Oak
Ridge (at Penetanguishene) or Philippe Pinel) with
typically no incident in these other less secure
institutions. Clearly, not all SHU inmates require
super-maximum security.

Consider what we would expect inmates to learn in
the SHU environment from a social learning and
differential association perspective. Contact with other
persons is made very rewarding by social deprivation in
the first month. Social contact is thereafter with
intimate groups of criminals; there is limited contact
with non-criminals and, what there is, occurs under
stilted circumstances. Correctional officers are remote,
often fearful, and not encouraged to develop close
empathic relationships with offenders. A procriminal peer
group in combination with austere "straight" officers is
associated with high recidivism rates in other contexts

(Andrews, 1980); disapproval of procriminal statements
and the provision of a non-criminal model has a positive
effect only in the context of a real and positive social
relationship. When not associating with known felons,
inmates spend their time watching TV (one conjures up the
Hill Street Blues and the A-Team), hitting a heavy bag
and lifting weights. There is a great deal of evidence
that heavy TV watching is associated with aggression (at
least in children) and the perception of the world as a
dangerous place. Weight lifting gives one the strength to
appear and actually be physically aggressive. Punching a
bag is excellent for practicing fighting skills (in the
long term there is no such thing as "working off" one's
aggression).

There are potent rewards for aggression within the
SHUs. Several SHU officers expressed a compelling point
of view to me when I visited Millhaven. They thought that
all of the inmates were terrified of each other. Thus,
killing another inmate (or even better an officer) is
enormously rewarding as it establishes an inmate's
reputation as being fearsome. Such a reputation buys an
inmate safety, respect within the criminal subculture,
and increases the probability with which he can
intimidate others to obtain goods and services. Moreover,
such a violent act occurs at little cost to inmates who
have very lengthy sentences to serve.

One of the features of a level or phase system is that it makes little contact with the inmates' behaviors. Essentially, appropriate behaviors are ignored and only serious misbehaviors consequated with a reduction in privileges. Consequences within a level system tend to be massive; the principle mechanism is punishment by deprivation. The difficulty with such a system is that, once everything is taken away from an inmate, the system has completely lost control over that inmate's behavior. Changes in phase levels are poor incentives because they are gross and do not immediately follow appropriate behaviors. Such systems can function with persons whose mental abilities are unimpaired, although they are extremely inefficient as behavior change technologies.

A further difficulty with level systems is that they are based on assumed rewards and punishments, rather than on empirically demonstrated rewards and punishments. Punitive dissociation, for example, is assumed to be a punisher when, for an individual inmate, it can in fact be a reward: An inmate may be seclusive because of paranoid schizophrenia or an inmate may be afraid of his peers on the range and welcome such a placement. A further issue is the difference between the inmates' normal living conditions and the conditions in punitive dissociation; if the differences are small, there is a great deal of evidence that the dissociation will be

ineffective.

The provision of work opportunities, counselling with CSC members. etc. are, of course, desirable (not only because the devil makes work for idle hands). These interventions are obviously insufficient, however, when a social learning analysis makes it clear that these inmates should be expected to become more, rather than less, violent in the SHU environment. A further problem with these interventions is that they do not deal in specific terms with the problem behaviors (such as inappropriate aggression, procriminal attitudes, etc.) which the inmates exhibit and the SHU environment supports. Such efforts may indeed be counterproductive; Wormith (in press) has argued that "Programs which "motivate" offender lifestyle changes and do not provide an effective means for doing so may have deleterious effects."

The priorities for promoting behavior change within the SHUs have simply not been thought out. For (an admittedly extreme) example, it makes little sense to priorize correspondence courses and handicraft work, when an inmate is busily manufacturing weapons, bullying his peers, and reacting violently to perceived "threats." I am not arguing that correspondence courses aren't good things but that they are too indirect in themselves and do not deal with the type of behaviors which led to the

inmate's admission to the SHU in the first place. A
social learning perspective indicates that the focus of a
management system should be on the consequation of
relevant observable behaviors as they occur.

Notice how a social learning perspective places the
emphasis on environmental control. This emphasis does not
deny that some individuals are much more likely to be
violent than others but instead focuses on the
interaction of an individual with his environment. With
respect to an intervention, however, only environments
can usually be altered so as to change the
characteristics of the individual himself in some
enduring fashion or to reduce the propensity of the
environment to instigate or reward aggressive behaviors.
To the extent that environmental factors elicit
aggression, the SHUs will fail to address the problem of
increased violence in the maximum security prisons. Such
an increase in violence in Canadian penitentiaries has
reportedly occurred both before and after the
introduction of the SHUs (Porporino &.Marton, 1983);
although the intrepretation of such increases is
problematic, they are worrisome. To put the matter
simply: If violence in the prison system is primarily a
function of the environment, placing persons in the SHU
will have no effect; the environment in the
penitentiaries must be altered instead or in addition.

Recommendations

My analysis of the SHUs indicates that there are no
easy solutions to the problem of inmate management.
Neither tinkering with the phase system, providing
medication for psychotic inmates, blindly providing more
activities for the inmates, nor providing counselling
services or interview type interventions can be expected
to have more than a miniscule effect. Such efforts are
necessary in order to have a humane system, of course,
and they can be made part of a more relevant program but
they will be totally inadequate in themselves as measures
to reduce the probability of inmate violence.

A solution to the problem of inmate violence will
require fundamental organizational change, a different
way of looking at the problem, and money. Even with
organizational commitment to such an enterprise, change
will be slow in coming and the solution imperfect.

Because my mandate is to provide recommendations for
the SHUs, I will only consider the problems of violence
in the maximum security penitentiaries briefly. The
ultimate solution to the SHU system is prevention of
violence in the maximum security prisons. Porporino and
Marton (1983) have in general and theoretical terms
suggested some measures which may be effective. Quinsey
(1982), in a previous report to the Offender Program

Branch, has outlined the form of program which can be used for selected groups of inmates who have problems of anger management. Much more work needs to be done in this area before the problem can be effectively addressed. In the meantime, the SHUs receive the most violent inmates.

At this point, my recommendations with respect to the SHUs should come as no surprise and should appear inevitable from the foregoing.

1. A behavioral system of management based on social learning principles should be developed and implemented to be consistent with the phase and security system. Inmates should progress between phases based upon earnings of points and losses of points (fines) for the emission of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, respectively. Among the behaviors to be consequated should be prosocial statements and activities such as work and recreation. Antisocial statements and antisocial behaviors should be punished. Nothing in the SHU system should be free (e.g. TVs should be rented in the point economy). Any event which is to be encouraged (e.g. interviews with the psychologist, etc.) should earn points and any behaviors which are to be discouraged should cost. In essence, the entire environment should be arranged to shape up appropriate behaviors. Subtle attitudinal phenomena can be dealt with by having officers rate inmates on their attitudes and paying the

inmates in accord with their ratings.

2. Such a system requires behaviorally trained persons to implement and supervise it. The officers require extensive training in principles of behavior management (everything from the skilfull use of ignoring to calculating inter-observer reliabilities). In addition, such a system requires the promotion of a great deal of inmate behavior so that the inmates exhibit the kinds of behaviors which are relevant and can be consequated.

3. A behavioral system of this kind requires extensive record keeping and behavioral description. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Quinsey, 1979), the usual kind of narrative descriptions which are found in institutional records involve observations of different behaviors over nonstandard intervals instead of the same behaviors observed over standard intervals. Typical institutional records are, therefore, gloomy caricatures of the inmates' behaviors which allow no inferences about change or lack thereof. The development of a good recording system provides the data necessary for making decisions about what level of security is appropriate for a given inmate in a consistent and sensible manner.

4. Superimposed upon such a behavioral system and integrated into the point economy should be specialized programs for infrequently occuring behaviors or behaviors which only occur in other environments. Such programs

might include anger management (Quinsey, 1982), self control training in the area of alcohol and drug abuse, etc. Efforts to provide inmates with a means of increasing their self-esteem in a non-criminal context (e.g. occupational training and correspondence courses) should also be encouraged and integrated into the point economy.

5. The support of the officers for such a program is essential. In addition to training in behavioral techniques, they require training in crisis intervention and prevention with an emphasis on security through verbal and programmatic techniques (Quinsey, 1982). Such training will only be effective, however, if there is genuine and consistent support within the administration of the SHU itself. Clearly, selection of officers based on their interest and aptitude for this type of work is essential, as are concrete forms of administrative support at all levels.

These recommendations have, of course, only been sketched here, as the design of such a comprehensive system is a major task. The technology for such a system has, however, already been developed; the major problems are organizational, they do not involve lack of knowledge.

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