

Ask the big questions

JW: So there are signs that Supermaxes are not welcome by all?

SS: Guantanamo Bay did a lot to raise public awareness and people are now making the connection, because Guantanamo was modelled directly on Supermaxes. But I don't think that Supermaxes will simply be closed down, especially as prison systems are hugely overcrowded, so what is there, will be used.

My hope is that the financial pressures caused by the recent economic crisis will push states to rethink the Supermax concept, because it is too expensive. It costs twice as much to hold someone in solitary confinement as in a normal prison – so it is an expensive way to make people worse.

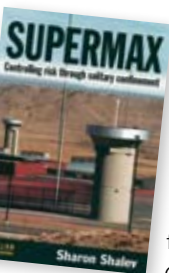
I also think that there has to be a system of penalties, particularly for architects and health professionals. Sadly, I don't think we can expect people to just start behaving ethically, but if they knew they could lose their job or their licence to practice, then maybe things would be a bit different. That is where I think we should apply the pressure now. ■



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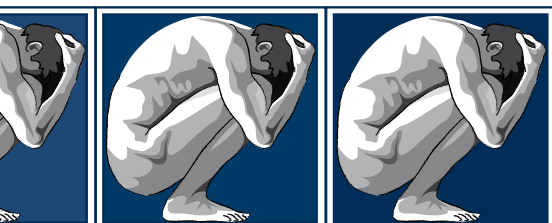


Jess Winterstein is deputy head of press at LSE.



Dr Shalev's book *Supermax: controlling risk through solitary confinement* (Willan Publishing, 2009) won the British Society of Criminology's Book Prize for 2010. *The Sourcebook on Solitary Confinement* can be downloaded at

www.solitaryconfinement.org/sourcebook



Is population growth good or bad? This is one of the questions that students on LSE100 – a new course that challenges students to work across disciplines to consider major issues of the day – will address.

Population growth is an old but unresolved debate (in)famously associated with Thomas Malthus; one that is moving up international agendas today. We know that if you do the maths, the world's population could theoretically fit into the state of Texas, but it probably would not be a very pleasant way to live.

It is a debate that is both complex and simple at the same time – one that incorporates issues about global security, sexuality, food production, reproduction and ethics, to name a few. Headlines might claim that the best way to reduce climate change is to use contraception, but the causality is tangled.

Both sides of the debate tend to take a macro-level perspective. We know that most of the world's rapid population growth is concentrated in low income countries, and although the era of explosive global growth is over, the populations of many low income countries look set to keep growing in the next decades. In many ways, rapid population growth might be interpreted as a success story. Why? Because population growth has been driven by rapid declines in mortality rates, even though preventable deaths for much of the world's population remain at unacceptably high levels.

Mortality is just one part of the equation, however. Rapid population growth is also fuelled by high fertility. If we take a micro-level perspective when considering whether population growth is good or bad, then the assessment might change. At the individual, family and household level, the impact of population growth

in low income countries can be negative. Women with high fertility have a much higher risk of dying due to pregnancy related causes, including unsafe abortion. Babies born soon after a preceding birth are more likely to die during infancy. At the same time, larger families allow economies of scale and offer opportunities to spread risk. The paths of the demographic superpowers, China and India, provide contrasting views of the implication of, and appropriate responses to, population growth.

In some high income countries population growth is negative, sparking different sorts of debates and policy reactions. Fertility is supported to varying extents through family policies, including the subsidised provision of assisted reproduction. The policy and media debates change again, focusing on the 'right' sort of fertility, with immigrant fertility frequently in the spotlight, despite the poor evidence base.

By posing such a simplistic question to LSE100 students, we have to engage with the extremes of the debates. Inevitably we condense and simplify, but it remains one of the big questions, and one that has relevance for everyone, now and in the future. ■



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To find out more about population studies at LSE, see lse.ac.uk/socialPolicy/Researchcentresandgroups/populationAtLSE. For information about LSE100: The LSE Course, which is now compulsory for all first year undergraduates, see lse.ac.uk/LSE100

