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Depression Among Incarcerated Youth

Have you ever thought of the emotional state of incarcerated youth? It is not a good emotional state after the youth have been incarcerated for some time. Mass incarceration gives many youth depression or worsens the depression they already had before going to prison, so something needs to be done to stop their depression from getting worse. If these youth are already in the criminal justice system, I suggest that they aren’t punished by solitary confinement. Instead, they are put into a support group with others to talk about their feelings and show that some of them are dealing with the same issues and can get through it together. These groups also make it so depression doesn’t take over their well-being after they get out. Depression is a mental health condition characterized by severe dejection, that can also go with feelings of inadequacy and guilt, which can be accompanied by lack of energy and less appetite and sleep. It weighs on the persons soul who has it.

Mass incarceration is still a relatively recent problem. Michelle Alexander in her argument in *the New Jim Crow* states that, “ mass incarceration is, metaphorically, the New Jim Crow and that all those who care about social justice should fully commit themselves to dismantling this new racial caste system” (Alexander 11). She goes into depth on what she means by this by looking at the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights movement. Then, she looks at the effect of the War on Drugs on people of color and poor and working-class people. Mainly, Alexander looks at court cases like *Terry v. Ohio* and *Purkett v. Elm*. The case of *Purkett v. Elm* in 1995 was where the Supreme Court said that any reason that was race neutral, no matter if it was crazy, was enough to satisfy a prosecutor’s burden of displaying the pattern of striking a specific racial group, so it wasn’t exclusively based on race. All of this is background to show how Alexander defines mass incarceration as the New Jim Crow era.

Ava DuVernay’s film *13th* shows how it is important to get rid of mass incarceration in the state of the world today. Her film starts off with the startling statistic that the United States is only 5% of the world’s population, and about 25% of those people make up the prison population in the world. It goes into saying how there is a loophole in the 13th amendment that makes it so that everyone is free unless they are being punished as a criminal. Then, the film goes into detail of how the civil rights movement made being arrested fine and seen as noble. Throughout the film, statistics are displayed that show how the prison population has gone up because of historic events like the War on Drugs from 1970 until as recent as 2014. These statistics start in 1970 by saying the prison population was 357, 292 people and then the population goes to 513, 900 people in 1980. In 1990, the population goes to being 1,179,200 people, and in 2014 the prison population goes up to 2,306,200 people in prison. Also, they show the likelihood of white men being imprisoned during their lifetime as 1 in 17 as opposed to 1 in 3 black men. These black men are only 6.5% of the U.S. population, but they make up 40.2% of the U.S. prison population. 97% of these people never go to trial, instead they plea bargain. The problem of mass incarceration is highlighted through everything that is mentioned in the film.

Now that there is more of an understanding of mass incarceration, I will show how incarceration can affect someone’s mentality by either giving them depression or making the depression they already had worse. There have been studies to show that every person has different types of depression if they get it while incarcerated or if they already had depression. One particular study called *“Our Depression is Different”: Experiences and Perceptions of Depression in Youth with a History of Incarceration* illustrates the different effects of depression well. The people who made the study did this by talking in a semi-structured interview to twenty young Black men who met the criteria from a program that helps ex-offenders’ transition back into society after incarceration. What the interviewers found was that these men saw depression in lots of different ways. Some of them said that the negative feelings like anger or wanting to commit suicide are signs of depression, while others said that depression was weak and that made them seem feminine. Some even said that nobody cared for their feelings of depression unless they knew the incarcerated person well, so it was necessary to hide their emotions that portrayed depression. Also, some of these men said they felt they had to have strategies to cope and be strong even with their mental illness, and that none of their depression experiences were the same because of racism, discrimination, and White privilege. Here we see how depression affects inmates, and how if we did something about this, their lives would be better. With a good solution, these inmates would be able to recognize that there are others just like them going through similar things, so they can all find a solution together.

Also, the study *“Incarcerating Juveniles in Adult Prisons as a Factor in Depression”* shows the effect of depression among youth who are incarcerated as opposed to those who aren’t incarcerated. How the experiment was done was by looking at data from 47 Michigan youth in adult prisons and 31 youth with the Department of Human Services who were in juvenile placement. The other two groups came from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, with a third group of incarcerated youth and a group of non-incarcerated youth. The analysis of this data tells us about depression and the scales it uses as variables, as well as types of incarceration like if a parent was incarcerated or the need for public assistance. The main finding here shows how youth who are incarcerated and go to prison for serious offenses are more likely to be depressed than other youth. Moreover, the data indicates that incarcerating youth in adult prisons could elevate the risk of depression. There is vulnerability that could lead to offenses if we leave their mental health untouched, so we need to raise awareness and figure out a good solution for those who need the solution.

I propose that we focus on programs to help people know the symptoms of depression and support groups for those in the system with depression, so they know they aren’t alone and can get help. These support groups could use many different methods like Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy or Multisystemic Therapy. The method used just depends on what is deemed best. Cognitive-Behavioral therapy uses brain functions and mindfulness to reduce recidivism and depression. In the study, *Cognitive Decline as a Result of Incarceration and the Effects of a CBT/MT Intervention*, this therapy was done by group sessions that were weekly or biweekly. They were run by two clinicians who had mindfulness training and had an accompanying book with exercises done during the session. They were cognitive behavioral exercises and had different meditation types like sitting and walking meditation. Multisystemic Therapy is where there is a team put together of professionals like therapists, psychologists, and supervisors who watch an inmate closely to make sure they don’t try to hurt themselves when they are in prison or jail, and when they get out. Multisystemic Therapy can lead to 54% fewer arrests over 14 years and 75% fewer violent felony arrests for juvenile offenders. These methods are effective to reduce depression among incarcerated youth in different ways and they make it so recidivism is unlikely. Recidivism is when a convicted criminal goes back into the system after getting out because they committed another offense.

Another way to be a part of a support group would be by going through a mental health court. If the person has been tested so that the system is positive that they have depression, the person should immediately be put into a group so their depression doesn’t get worse. Mental health courts are where an individual pleads guilty and is subject to incarceration, but they get treatment from mental health treatment providers. Furthermore, we need to follow the lead of The Stepping Up Initiative which brings together organizations like NAMI, the Council of State Governments Justice Center, and the American Psychiatric Foundation to defer people from jail and into treatment. The initiative challenges local counties and communities to work together on effective reforms that help the local community and reduce the number of people with mental illnesses like depression in jail. Also, the initiative mentions how passing reforms will help to reduce the risk of recidivism when there is a higher risk of recidivism for those with depression or other mental illnesses. A statistic to go along with what is being said here is that 64% of jail inmates, 54% of state prisoners, and 45% of federal prisoners all have mental health concerns like depression. This goes into how there is concern about the overuse of solitary confinement. This confinement can create experiences of depression, especially when in confinement for long periods of time, so it should not be used a lot on one person. Support groups help these people feel safe and mentally sane, so they are the better option to use when an inmate has a mental illness like depression.

Some people might say that those who are depressed deserve to be in jail because they can hurt someone badly if they show their depression by anger or some way that provokes violence. I say that not everyone shows their depression through violence. There are many people who show it by extreme sadness, which means they are more likely to hurt themselves by cutting themselves or trying to attempt suicide. This can be shown in the case of Khalif Browder that we saw in the film *13th*. The film talks about how Khalif got into many fights after his mental health started to deteriorate, which led to two of his years in Riker’s Correctional Facility in solitary confinement. Then, the film talks about how in those years he went through many beatings by fellow inmates and guards, and these factors made him attempt suicide on many occasions. Khalif got out alive, but two years after being free, he hung himself in his apartment in Brooklyn. Also, some of these people don’t deserve to be in jail because they decrease their criminal behavior. They do this because they don’t have the desire to act out like they did beforehand. You never know what people are going through unless they tell you.

By instituting plans and reforms that raise awareness like The Stepping Up Initiative and using different forms of therapy like Multisystemic Therapy or Cognitive- Behavioral Therapy in support groups, we will be on our way to reducing depression among incarcerated youth. All we need to do is be aware that there are options to help incarcerated youth and to make sure depression does not happen or get worse while incarcerated. By lowering depression among incarcerated youth, these youth have better mental health, and that makes them less likely to come back into the criminal justice system. There are so many different ways to get the word out and help those already in this situation. Now we need to know if these ways really are beneficial towards a majority of incarcerated youth who deal with depression. Everyone’s mental health is important, so do not give up on the mental health of incarcerated youth, especially those who have depression. They are the ones who need help the most.

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