**Recidivism in the U.S. Prison System**

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Social Work 300-01

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October 16, 2022

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Ex-offender, Johnson, was given his ID, documents regarding his criminal history, two bus tickets, and 40$ after serving 44 years in prison (Belhumeur, 2015). This is one of the many cases where inmates and ex-convicts are being set up for unfair obstacles in society after or during their prison stay. Prison is a place for rehabilitation for citizens who have broken the law, but current conditions of the prison system only lead to more harm than already done for the inmate. There is a serious need for reform in the system for issues like mental health for prisoners, building an education system within the prison, substance abuse treatment, regulations on solitary confinement, and programs to reduce recidivism. The policy context for this population of people is unique because of the mixed feelings people have towards prisoners. Policy makers may believe funding towards the prison system is useless and that offenders do not deserve the money because of their status. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (2022), prisoners serving less than 10 years make up 50% of the prison population. A substantial percentage of the prison system are serving relatively short sentences, so the need for reform to enhance their rehabilitation and well-being is crucial to decreasing recidivism rates. The prison system overwhelmingly harms their inmates in various ways and sets ex-offenders up for reoffending rather than rehabilitation and it is up to legislators to develop policies to offset these frailties.

**Mental/Physical Health Programs**

The mental and physical health of inmates often deteriorates during their time served. In a study that interviewed inmates in jail, it was found that 65% of men and 77% of women had a history of poor mental health (DeHart, 2018). Poor mental and physical health leads to higher rates of recidivism. Mental health issues like PTSD, depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety are prevalent in the prison population and these can have a negative effect on their sentence. Incarcerated people with mental health issues are twice as likely to break rule violations, four times as likely to be charged with assault of a guard, and three times as likely to be harmed in a fight (DeHart, 2018). According to the department of mental health, correctional staff in prisons and jails are unequipped to deal with mentally ill inmates and this may lead to the recidivism in mentally ill inmates (DeHart, 2018). Research indicates a relationship between poor mental health in prisoners and higher recidivism rates for those individuals.

Wang and Wallace (2020) examine this relationship in an observational study that looks at Serious and Violent Reentry Initiative (SVORI) data and interviews of ex-offenders to understand how mental and physical health issues cause by the prison system led to higher rates of recidivism. The researchers found a significant correlation between prisoners participating in mental health programs both within and outside of prison and lower rates of recidivism (Wang, 2020). Surprisingly, their research concluded that better physical health leads to higher rates of recidivism (Wang, 2020). This research uses the stress process theory to back up their findings. The stress process theory, in the context of the prison system, suggests that the stress of the everyday life of prison can become a long-term stressor. The finding in this study may be tainted by the small sample size and the lack of representation that may be used in the sample.

Time in prison is filled with stressors that can lead to an array of mental health issues and although physical health care is a right to all prisoners, physical health is likely to decline in prison as a result to the non-nutritional food options and limited health-enhancing activities, like exercise, vitamins, or stress-relieving activities. The lack of mental and physical health care in prisons leads to a threshold of problems for prisoners.

**Education Programs**

Education in prisons is scarce and the effect of being involved in an education program is detrimental for prisoners' well-being in prison and their employment and recidivism rates when released. Over 2.3 million people are incarcerated in the prison system and of those only 59% have their high-school diploma, compared to 83% of the general population (Bozick, 2018). Many systemic factors that contribute to the disproportionate number of inmates that do not have their high school diploma compared to the general population can also be to blame for the overrepresentation of vulnerable populations in the prison system. In 2016, the Obama Administration reenacted the Second Chance Pell Pilot program, which allowed qualifying incarcerated individuals to take college courses during their sentence. This program accelerated the emphasis on implementing education programs for inmates across the country and expanded research for this topic.

Only 35% of state prisons offer college courses and only 6% of inmates are taking advantage of this opportunity (Bozick, 2018). Bozick (2018) attempts to understand how providing inmates with education can decrease recidivism rates. The researcher utilizes a meta-analytic of over 70 studies to discern how education programs in prisons affect recidivism and employment rates after release. The study concluded that inmates utilizing education programs were 26% less likely to reoffend, but the data was inconclusive on the likelihood of finding employment after release (Bozick, 2018). The effectiveness of the study is limited because of the voluntary aspect of the education programs. The research isn't representative of the entire prison population if the inmates in the study voluntarily took the courses.

Education programs can make the inmates' time in prison more meaningful, promote a safer prison culture and environment, decrease recidivism, and increase employment opportunities for inmates. The prison system disproportionately affects uneducated Americans for reasons that are often out of their control, so implementing education programs can help counteract those systemic factors.

**Substance Abuse Treatment**

According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse (2020), around 85% of the prison populations had an active substance abuse disorder or was in prison for a drug or alcohol related crime. Prison is not a rehab facility and inmates struggling with addiction are not going to receive the help they need for their illness. Substance abuse issues are often solved in prison by detoxing the prisoner, likely without follow-up, behavioral counseling, and medications. (National Institute for Drug Abuse, 2020). The National Academy of Sciences reports that only 5% of inmates who struggle with substance abuse are given medication to relieve the effects of withdrawal, even though it is shown to be effective. (National Institute for Drug Abuse, 2020). Incarcerated addicts are unable to get the proper care for their illness when they are locked up and this can lead to a deeper cycle of addiction and reoffending when they end up reverting to drugs or alcohol when released.

The criminal justice system is notoriously unfair and the same can be said for their treatment of those with substance abuse issues. Belenko, Hiller, and Hamilton (2013) dive deeper into the criminal justice systems treatment options for those struggling with substance abuse issues and states evidence practices that would better suit inmates. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV Criteria, 53.4% of inmates have substance dependence (Belenko, 2013). The study concluded that recidivism is high among inmates receiving substance abuse care because of the ineffectiveness of the treatment in the prison system.

**Solitary Confinement**

Solitary confinement is a form of disciplinary action in the prison system that places an inmate in restrictive housing for 23 hours a day with little to no human contact. Solitary confinement is condemned by many for its arbitrary use and adverse effect on the inmate. The use of segregated housing can have long-lasting effects on the inmate and lead to recidivism. Common effects of solitary confinement include psychological trauma, difficulty thinking and concentrating, obsessional thinking, irritability, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), paranoia, suicidal ideation, self-mutilation, weight loss, hypertension, heart abnormalities, and pre-existing medical conditions can reappear.

Luigi (2020) conducts a meta-analysis to analyze the psychological effects and mortality rates of inmates who experience solitary confinement during their sentences. Luigi used several databases and searched keywords “solitary confinement,” “psychological,” and “mortality outcomes” to locate data for the study. The study concluded that solitary confinement can be associated with the mental deterioration of an inmate that differs from that of the normal incarceration and pre-incarceration rate. More research is needed to explore the longterm effects of solitary confinement after release.

The Solitary Confinement Reform Act of 2019 is currently being reviewed by legislators and will reform the way prisons administer solitary confinement. The bill urges to put limitations on the use of segregation and will implement national standards to be followed. These standards include the use of solitary confinement to be limited to 15 consecutive days and only 20 days in a 60-day period. The bill has last been introduced to the House of Representatives and not much has been done since then.

**Recidivism**

Recidivism refers to an ex-offender's relapse of criminal activity. Recidivism affects 68% of prisoners after release, with 82% of the reoffenders being arrested within 3 years of being released (Alper, 2018). The recidivism rate is often used to measure the effectiveness of prison reform policies and decreasing this rate is crucial for prisoners nationwide. Many factors affect recidivism including mental and physical health of prisoners, substance abuse dependence, employment opportunities for ex-offenders, familial and community ties for the prisoner, and access to resources and programs after release. All the issues discussed in the prior sections are examples of how the prison system not only fails on prisoners' everyday lives but promotes recidivism. Recidivism is a heavily studied issue and very important for the country (Alper, 2018).

A study by Alper, Durose, and Markman (2018) examines recidivism patterns of ex-offenders over a 9-year period. The researchers use the Recidivism Study of State Prisoners 2005 data collection to follow recidivism trends using a sample of prisoners from 30 states (Alper, 2018). They also took note of the crimes the reoffenders committed and when they were convicted from the time they got out of prison. Understanding when and how prisoners get convicted of crimes after being released from prison can help policy makers create an implementation plan for policies. The research found that most of the reoffenders were convicted within the first four years of their release.

Recidivism is harmful for the individual and their community. The reoffender is placed back in an unsafe environment for their physical and mental health, if they were convicted for substance abuse charges, they are likely to get little to no treatment, and their communal ties are further destroyed. The longer a person is in prison, it also harms the community and nation. Time spent in prison is expensive and a key component of the rising prison population and overpopulation in the prison system. It costs, on average, 25,000 dollars to house a prisoner (Mauer, 2007). Recidivism leads to a cycle of reoffending when no reform is put in place to help this vulnerable population.

**Conclusion**

Prison reform is hard to come by because of the population's position in society and the policy context of the prison system. The incarcerated population is important to help because of the setbacks they are already facing and the systemic nature of their convictions that led to their prison sentence. Mental and physical health programs, education programs, substance abuse treatment, solitary confinement reform, and recidivism reduction are important aspects to helping inmates rehabilitate from prison and integrate back into their communities. Prison shouldn’t be someone's last stop in life and more needs to be done to help ex-offenders make their way back into society.

Literacy review is important to the social work profession, more specifically policy advocacy, because it allows us to collaborate from around the country and world and gain useful data and research for future policy and case work. Giving ex-offenders and incarcerated people access to more programs and resources is important to social justice because it helps inmates integrate into society and solves a systemic problem.

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