Prison Reform &

Rehabilitation

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Abstract

 This paper is the study of much needed prisoner reform programs, prison rehabilitation, and mental health therapy. It must all begin with prison reform, from the inside out. Each of these is discussed in some detail although the amount needed to fully explore each would make this paper much longer than the requirement. For the purposes, then, of this assignment, each issue will receive some attention. The hope is that the small amount of information provided will inspire others to delve deeper, discuss the areas of improvement needed, and bring about change; it just makes sense that “exploring incarceration could lead to, among other things, a fruitful synergy among studies on fundamental causes, stigma, and stress” (Schnittker, & Andrea, 2007). Much of the study focuses mainly on prison reform, as that is where any other programs must begin in order to be successful. Prison reform begins with laws that must be changed. Education includes college degrees and technical training not just for the incarcerated but also their families. Then, mental health services must also be provided to the families as well as the inmates. It is the idea of a strong family unit that can sometimes help everyone survive the time apart.

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 Imagine the toll it takes on an individual in prison, constantly in fear for his life, knowing that the police in force are too few in number to protect him against attacks from other prisoners. Unfortunately, there are many instances where those doing the attacking are the corrections officers themselves. Regardless of who attacks, the mistreatment of prisoners does not instill respect, trust, a feeling of safety, or good conduct while incarcerated. Even though many in prisons are guilty, there are some who are not. Either way, no one should be treated inhumanely. Everyone should be given every opportunity while serving their prison sentence to help themselves become better people. This then helps all of society who will eventually absorb at least some back in to society. Because of these issues, prisoner rehabilitation is vital to the success of the United States and must include a reorganization of the prison system, a wide variety of prisoner rehabilitation such as educational opportunities, and finally, different forms and types of mental health therapy.

**Reorganization**

 A reorganization of the current prison system is necessary for the vision of prisoner rehabilitation to be successful. Prisoners cannot begin the long road back to society if treated inhumanely while in prison, or if under constant fear of assault from officers and fellow prisoners alike. It was reported in 2001 that from 1976 to 2001, U.S. prisons “have [been] described…as ‘in crisis’ and…each new level of overcrowding as ‘unprecedented’" (Haney, 2001). In fact, in the 1990s, “the United States incarcerated more persons per capita than any other nation in the modern world, and it has retained that dubious distinction for nearly every year since” (2001). These statistics are inexcusable. The main reason for these horrendous facts is due to the anti-drug programs which were helpful in many ways, but also contributed to the imprisonment of so many people simply because of drug use, not even drug dealing. However, no matter what crime has been committed, or what reason a person is in jail, each has already enough to deal with without the feeling of claustrophobia because of severe overcrowding. Just see what happens when four men occupy a cell meant for two, or too many men in the rec room or the cafeteria. It is a volatile-enough situation already; overcrowding almost assuredly leads to more conflict.

 All personnel need to undergo specific training on how to treat prisoners better. Advocates need to be placed in each prison as mediators. Prisoners must know that they are safe, and must be shown respect. Remember, some of those convicted could be innocent, and the guilty could be there because the other guy wasn’t caught but they were. In fact, there are government officials who have committed crimes and have just not been caught. There have been police, lawyers, doctors. The point being, judgement needs to stop and in its place there must be equality, safety, and respect in order to truly help these individuals. The truth is, anyone who goes against the law can be caught, and could be where the incarcerated live now if they had been. It’s just all a matter of luck and time, really.

 One exciting change to the former prison system came about ten years ago. In the case of *Brown v. Plata*, “the state’s overcrowded prisons amounted to cruel and unusual punishment” (Kuznia, 2016). Because of this ruling by the Supreme Court, “California’s prison population has fallen by more than 50,000 inmates” (2016). President Obama will be releasing “twenty-two people who are serving lengthy federal prison terms for drug offenses” (Rhodan, 2015). One woman was quoted as saying there are about 2000 inmates serving life without parole for nonviolent offences (Liptak, 2015). The comment was made because of Obama’s other commutes, that of “46 drug offenders,” saying “their punishments didn’t match the crimes they committed” when they were first arrested decades ago (2015). Laws must be rewritten, sentences must be re-examined, and every inmate deserves a hearing to determine if they have served their time.

**Educational Opportunities**

 In addition to prison reform is the wide variety of educational opportunities that are a must in order to change the way prisoners think about themselves and their future. Whether getting a high school diploma, ITT Tech training, other vocational training, or college degrees, these programs must be made available to every prisoner. Career counselors can be assigned to each prisoner so that the inmate can look forward, move forward, to a new future and a new life. No one moves in stagnant water.

 In addition to education for prisoners, there needs to be the same help for the wives and mothers of their children to keep them moving forward. Education opportunities include parenting classes, anger management classes, and other support groups that help create a sense of family within the prison structure. Anything other than enemies is a plus. Four areas of consideration “toward healthy and successful reintegration” include “redemption, employment, health care, and social support” (Dill, Mahaffey, Mosley, Treadwell, Barkwell, & Barnhill, 2015). These can all be accomplished through educational programs.

**Mental Health Therapy**

 Finally, there are many different forms and types of therapy that prisoners could benefit from, considering how many there are who suffer from mentally illness. In fact, the incarcerated are more likely than not to suffer from mental illness, based on the fact that they “are over-represented in prison populations around the world” ((McCandless, Stewart, Rempel, Venners, & Somers, 2014). One reason is because “they are more vulnerable to arrest” (2014). It becomes clear that based on the findings from several studies, “offenders with mental illness experience higher mortality that is mediated by higher rates of criminal justice contact” (2014). Repeated offenses only aggravate the conditions, and “a history of incarceration strongly increases the likelihood of severe health limitations,” whether physical or mental (Schnittker, & Andrea, 2007). One certainly can lead to the other.

 There is another mental health effect not discussed yet, and that is the effect incarceration has on the mental health of the family who are left to fend for themselves. Most often it is the father who is incarcerated, and unfortunately, “no quantitative research considers the consequences of mass imprisonment for the well-being of the women who are the link between (former) prisoners and their children” (Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012). The stress must be overwhelming when the mother becomes an instant bread-winner, father replacement, and mother. If the father and husband behind bars is to be rehabilitated, his family must be helped right along with him. A study called Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing, shows that “recent paternal incarceration increases a mother’s risk of a major depressive episode and her level of life dissatisfaction” (2012). This of course affects the children in a great many ways. When they are affected, they act up in school, at home, making their mother’s job even more difficult. The current prison system, if there is no change, “may have important effects on poor women’s well-being beyond increasing their economic insecurity, compromising their marriage markets, or magnifying their risk of divorce” (2012). What affects the mother and children will most assuredly affect the inmate.

 To help each family with mental health services, the first step is to have every prisoner evaluated by a psychologist and a psychiatrist to first determine if therapy is needed, or if further testing is required for a correct diagnosis, or if the inmate needs any special medications. Recommendations must then be made as to whether the inmate needs a psychiatric hospital or in-house therapy. Types of in-house therapy offered need to include family therapy, individual therapy, and group/support therapy. Family therapy is vital if the family is to be healthy and prepared for the inmate’s release. If inmates learn to understand their disorders and why they may act the way they do, such as the reason they are incarcerated, it will help them to begin the healing process. To not know what is wrong almost ensures more arrests and longer incarcerations.

 Added to these concerns is something maybe not everyone considers: freed inmates suffer a great deal of discrimination on the outside, and because of that, it “is an important social stressor with negative implications for…mental health” (Turney, Lee, & Comfort, 2013). Not only do they worry about being in prison, they worry about getting out, and what life will be like when free. To have mental health services in place will help to lessen these potential problems.

**Interview**

I interviewed Officer Shenica Collier of the Manatee County Sheriff Department and I asked her a series of questions pertaining to Prison Reform and Rehabilitation. Her current job is a Florida Department of Law Enforcement Parole and Probation officer. Officer Collier has worked as a certified Correctional Officer at South Florida Reception Center and the Miami Dade Corrections and Rehabilitation Department. During her tour of duty she has witnessed several instances of the non-rehabilitation effort by both departments.

1. Have you ever seen what a reformed former prisoner looks like?

Actually I have. I began my corrections career at very young age. Although the job was done as far as safety and security, but as I matured both personally and professionally, I realized that I could be more effective. I started reaching back to the inmates that reached out to me and wanted to change. If they were interested in receiving their GED, doing college correspondence work, wanting information about trade school, employment opportunities, I made provisions to provide the information, but left it up to them to do the research and request the information. I did my part to motivate them, I corrected inappropriate behavior. I began to teach them the importance of respect, which respect had to be given to be received. The importance of communication, body language, etc. and most importantly, that everyone deserves a second chance. Doing these things were not a breach of security, it actually helped reduce incidents by giving them something to look forward to and it made my job easier. I begin to witness graduations, and if I was invited, I attended. I began to realize that it was the small things that made a huge difference. A reformed/rehabilitated prisoner has a new sense of self-worth and purpose, they are motivated by the new sense of direction, and they realize that the task may not be easy but it is attainable. Reformed inmates, interestingly enough, are the greatest motivators of other inmates. This encouraged other inmates that wanted to make a change.

2. How will inmates be chosen, or how will it be decided who participates in reform/rehabilitation?

In my opinion, I think it goes back to the answer in the first question. At initial instruction or orientation, conduct a needs assessment. If left to me, I would take volunteers, because yes, ideally we would like to transform everyone that we come into contact with, but realistically, we can only help those that want to be helped. I believe if they display an interest, certain criteria needs to be met. They need to attend mandatory meetings and complete them timely, you know make them accountable and show real interest. The second option would be to target high risk offenders that have short sentences and see what is needed to help them become productive citizens and reduce recidivism. I think the Criminal Justice System as a whole are attempting to make adjustments, to find something that really works. The Florida Department of Corrections has a new slogan “Transforming one l life at a time.” I really like that. It could mean apply to the inmate, the victims, and the staff. You ever heard the saying “Hurt people, hurt people”? Well I’d say “Transformed people, transform people.” I am a living witness. Once I changed my thinking, my life and work took on a new meaning. I began making a more positive impact on the lives that I touch on daily basis, inmates, probationer’s co-workers and the community in general. Imagine what would happen if we were able to actually “transform” one third of Florida’s inmate population? The world would be such a nicer place to live.

3. Is there anything that can be done to rehabilitate a prisoner once they have been incarcerated for an extensive period?

Yes I believe there is always hope. It is never too late to offer assistance or rehabilitation to a prisoner if they want to change and are open to new ideas. I would say to begin by doing a needs assessment, if one is not used by the institution, to first select several different generic versions and test them on different inmates (of different risk or custody levels), to see which seem most reliable for determining needs. When I say needs, I am referring to: basic human needs-(such as food, clothing, shelter) mental health/substance abuse counseling and or/treatment, literacy, you know, whatever it is that they may need to begin to make better choices and decisions. Once that is determined put in place resources that are available to assist the inmate. Secondly, once that is determined and they begin to utilize the resources available to assist them in whatever area they struggle, then a plan need to me made, and goals established. I would suggest this is done by them (the inmate) listing things that they would like to see in their lives, how they will survive once released, and training or programs that would assist them in meeting those goals. It also helps if institutions have programs in place for cognitive thinking, budgeting, interviewing skills as well as technical and educational programs to prepare them. I believe that if certain criteria is met prior to being released, the entire process is not so overwhelming.

4. Is there any type of special training or courses that staff can take to assist in the rehabilitation process?

Staff can attend conferences such as Restorative Justice, which is a system that focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with the victims and the community or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy which is a shot-term goal oriented treatment that takes a hands-on approach to problem solving. The goal of both is to change patterns of thinking or behavior that are behind people's difficulties and change the way that they feel. Staff can also host Victim Impact Panels, AA/NA, basic life skills trainings, provide a forum for topics such as parenting, establishing/maintaining family life and making provisions for inmates to attend training classes or programs. Many criminal justice sites offer conferences, provide online training, host seminars and webinars to assist staff to train the populations that we assist. I have learned that sometimes the help that inmates need to get started, stems from something that seems very basic to someone that is not in custody, yet is so unattainable to the offenders.

**Conclusion**

 There is still much work to be done in the areas of prison reform, educational opportunities, and mental health therapy options. Evidence has proven that reform and rehabilitation works. Those who remain behind bars can benefit greatly from more reform, with more opportunities to better themselves, and different ways of dealing with the high stress related to incarceration.

 The people elected to public office must re-examine the laws that put so many inmates behind bars, some of the laws written many, many years ago. Then questions must be answered: are the punishments justified based on the crimes, and if arrested today, would the punishment be more, less, or the same? If the sentence would be less today, then these prisoners must be released if their punishment has been served. The President, before leaving office, could do a lot to change the lives of those who have served enough time for nonviolent crimes. Hopefully, there will be news of more releases in the news in the coming year.

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