

Effects of offenders and the community criminology essay



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The use of incarceration as a punitive and rehabilitative approach to crime has been around for centuries. The use of penitentiaries began in the 18th century in England. The British society started a move away from corporal punishment and more towards imprisonment with the hope that it would reform the mind and body (Jackson, 1997). These changes eventually paved the way for the establishment of penitentiaries throughout Europe and onto the United States. Historically, imprisonment was based on the concept of punishing those who wronged society, by inflicting suffering on the body. Today its strives to achieve its basic tenets consisting of punishment, deterrence and rehabilitation. In focusing on the United States, over the past thirty years the country has experienced an unprecedented rise in the use of incarceration. In 1972 there were 330, 000 people residing in prisons and jails, today there are 2. 1 million (King, Mauer & Young, 2005). During this time span, the population rose by less than 40 percent yet the number of people in prison and jail rose by more than 500 percent. To explain this dramatic change, we must look to factors such as changing crime rates, demographics, cultural shifts and politics (King et. al., 2005). Today, there are many conservative, steadfast politicians who bank on “ getting tough on crime.” In this light, we must evaluate whether institutionalization is the best method for diminishing crime and whether those offenders being imprisoned, are being set up for success or for failure, especially in their ability to reintegrate back into society once their time has been served. We must address the fact that these offenders, once imprisoned, encounter serious psychological changes and stigmatizations. The incarceration of an individual affects more than just the individual, but also family, peers and the community. The release of an offender back into society leaves one

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vulnerable and scared by an “ ex-con” label. Their reintegration back into society is a critical stage that is dependant on certain vital factors, which contribute to whether one will inevitably lead a continued life of crime or a life of desistance. Is incarceration really a remedy to crime, a so-called deterrent for future criminal activity, or merely a mechanism for labeling someone as a deviant member of society?

It is important to assess what is actually known about the impact of imprisonment on crime control and with that in mind we must examine how incarceration rates have increased. The use of incarceration has significantly grown over time and the United States has become by its own creation, an extremely punitive system. The enactment of tougher sentencing rules, restrictive release patterns and the abolition of parole in some states have supported a system based on this concept. Many advocates of the system, including the Department of Justice, support this approach and have stated that tough sentencing means less crime (King et. al., 2005). However, an overview of changes in incarceration and crime in all fifty states revealed that there is no consistent relationship between the two. Crime did not decrease merely because incarceration was increasing (King et. al., 2005). Therefore, incarceration may not be the most effective way to achieve results in crime control. Advocates believe that by locking someone up, they can physically no longer commit crime. This concept may very well uphold to be true, but what about after their release from prison? Will they be more susceptible to or away from crime? Introducing someone to a life of incarceration inevitably leads to institutionalization and the effects of

prisonization, which can seriously hinder one's adaptation and reintegration process.

Institutionalization is a term used to describe the process by which inmates are shaped and transformed by the institutional environment in which they dwell. Sociologist, Irving Goffman described in his book *Asylums*, that institutions were " a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life (King, 2000, p. 2)." By this account, we can claim prisons to be a form of institution. Later, the term was also coined " prisonization" when it occurred in correctional settings (Haney, 2001). The term, often thought pejoratively, expresses the negative psychological effects of imprisonment.

Goffman identified five modes for adapting to an institutional life. The first step involved a situational withdrawal, where prisoners begin to minimize their interaction with others. Next, prisoners form antagonistic behavior and refuse to cooperate with staff members and begin to show hostility towards the institution itself. This type of behavior will often result in prisoners being sentenced to the conditions of solitary confinement. Colonization is a step in which involves the prisoner making a transformation to which he or she becomes " institutionalized." In this step, prisoners begin to feel that life in prison is more desirable than life outside the prison. Next is the conversion step, which leads prisoners to adopt to the behavior that the guards and facility regard them to be like. The last step in the adaptation mode is the so-called playing it cool segment. In this stage, prisoners stay out of trouble and conform to their surroundings so that when they are released, they can have

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“ a maximum chance, in the particular circumstances of eventually getting out of prison physically and psychologically undamaged” (Haralambos & Holborn, 1995 p. 306).

Once an offender is confined to an incarcerated life, the prisoner often is forced to undergo a unique set of psychological changes in order to survive the prison experience. Prisoners must undergo serious adaptations and recognize the deprivations and frustrations that come along with a prison life. This is commonly referred to as the “ pains of imprisonment” and most certainly carries certain psychological effects (Haney, 2001). Such psychological symptoms can include dependence on the institutional structure, hyper vigilance, interpersonal distrust, suspicion, emotional over-control, alienation, psychological distancing, social withdrawal, isolation, incorporation of exploitative norms of prison culture, diminished sense of self-worth and personal value and post-traumatic stress reactions to the pains of imprisonment (Haney, 2001).

With the rate of incarceration increasing, it also brings about the changes in prison populations. As a result, the size of the U. S. prison population has led to widespread issues in overcrowding. Penologists have described this dilemma by claiming that the U. S. prisons are “ in crisis” and have characterized each new level of overcrowding as “ unprecedented” (Haney, 2001). The United States incarcerates more persons per capita than any other nation in the world. The U. S. rates have consistently been between four and eight times more than those for other nations such as Japan, Netherlands, United Kingdom and Australia (Haney, 2001). This combination of both overcrowding and rapid expansion of prison systems adversely

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affects the living conditions in these prisons. Overcrowding leads to jeopardized prisoner safety, compromised prison management, and limited prisoner access to meaningful programming. The rehabilitative process is in effect significantly hindered.

Many sociologists, psychologists and psychiatrists, have studied the process of prisonization extensively and all agree that the process involves a unique set of psychological adaptations that often occur in varying degrees in response to the extraordinary demands of prison life (Haney, 2001). A prisoner must incorporate the norms of prison life into their habits of thinking, feeling, and acting. However, given today's expansion and overcrowding of prisons, this is a demanding and dangerous process. The prison environment is not a friendly one and many "soft" criminals leave prison as "hardened" criminals. Prison life can consist of many negative attributes, which affect a prisoner's ability to rehabilitate. The more overcrowding in prisons, the less access to rehabilitation, which therefore leads to higher reconvictions rates (Hanks, 2008). The presence of gangs and violence within prisons, along with the feelings of anger, depression, rage and sadness all accompany incarcerated individuals. Prisons are often the scenes of brutality, violence and stress to the point where many prisoners are concerned for their own safety. The increase in sentence lengths for prisoners also results in prisoners experiencing higher levels of psychological strains of imprisonment due to the longer periods of incarceration time. The psychological isolation of prison from ones community, the lack of prison visitation programs and the already scarce resources that have been used to maintain ties between prisoners and their

families and the outside world, seriously affect the prisoner's chances for survival and rehabilitation (Haney, 2001). Juveniles are especially more prone to the effects of prisonization. An example of such transformation is the case of "Boston Billy." Billy spent half his life in prisons and jails and claimed that these institutions were horrible places that toughened up people up "to a point that you don't care" (Bhati & Piquero, 2008).

Once the institutionalization phase has been completed, the prisoner must eventually undergo their reintegration back into society. Facilitating the transition from prison back to the free world is a very delicate and critical stage. There are many stigmatizing aspects of incarceration, which may result in a prisoner's inability to successfully make the transition. Prisons are aimed to essentially cure criminals of crime so they can be fit to reenter society, however, this concept may not be so encouraging. Studies show that whether a prison releasee will reoffend once back in society depends on their life trajectory and life course post prison life. Certain factors contribute to the indication of whether they will have a successful readjustment. However, the stigma of a deviant past and life in prison never leaves their mind. We live in a society that unfortunately judges those for "doing time" and often society is the culprit to the basis of their reoffending and self-fulfilling prophecy to remain deviant.

PRISON ISSUES

Prisons have traditionally been coined "schools of crime." The prison experience helps to build up resentment, expose prisoners to many skilled offenders who help to teach them many tricks of the trade. Many inmates will often go into prison as petty, nonviolent offenders who are released back

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into society as now serious, violent offenders. It is customary to state that two-thirds of all released prisoners will be back in prison again within three years of their release (Stevens, 2004). Since prison life is comprised of its own structure and institutional rules, a form of governing amongst this institution will exist. There are at least four sets of codes, or rules, that govern prison life: (1) the official administrative rules and regulations; (2) the convict code; (3) the color line; and (4) gang membership rules (Stevens, 2004). The official rules are the basic tenets of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and rules. The convict code is an idealized description of how the perfect convict should behave. The color line is rather an invisible code, which one instantly becomes aware of when certain racial groups appear to be dominating or in control. Race tends to be a factor in many prison issues such as the determination of friendships, cell assignments and cell locations. This process is sometimes referred to as balkanization (Stevens, 2004). Gang codes also dominate some prison lives and tend to be underground outlines for criminal enterprises.

Similar to Goffman's theory on institutionalization, Wheeler (1961), found that inmate commitment to prison society followed a U-shaped curve. When an inmate first enters the prison, they enter so still being committed to the rules of conventional society, however as time passes, their misbehavior increases. This misbehavior begins to reflect a commitment to inmate codes. As their release from prison is encroaching, they begin to renew a commitment to the values of the outside world. This can be viewed in a positive light because it signifies that most inmates orient themselves for law-abiding behavior shortly before they are released (Stevens, 2004).

However, there remains no assurance in knowing that a released prisoner will avoid continuing a life of crime.

LABELING THEORY IN CORRELATION TO INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Labeling theorists argue that the state is to blame for anchoring people in their criminal careers. Prisons are not the answers to solving our crime problems and they are in fact, dangerously criminogenic. There is a significant societal reaction towards offenders and when they are treated like such, there lies the unanticipated consequence of creating the very behavior we seek to prevent. Society makes assumptions about offenders and sees them as people with poor character who will most likely recidivate. This public scrutiny can either shame the offender into conformity or push them into crime because they see no other means to overcoming their label.

Chiricos, Barrick, Bales and Bontrager (2007) conducted a study on the fate of convicted felons facing probation. In support of labeling theory, Chiricos et. al. concluded that, " being adjudicated a felon significantly and substantially increases the likelihood of recidivism in comparison with those who have had adjudication withheld" (Cullen, Lilly & Ball, 2011, p. 151).

Further research on the effects of imprisonment has been conducted by criminologists in which have also supported labeling theory. Three general conclusions have been resulted which claim that a custodial sanction has either a null effect or criminogenic effect, the longer the time spent in prison leads to a higher likelihood of recidivism and lastly, the harsher the prisoner living conditions, the higher the likelihood of reoffending (Cullen et. al., 2011). A meta analysis of 50 studies analyzed the effect of prison sentences

on recidivism and found that longer prison sentences were associated with higher recidivism rates for both high and low risk offenders. It was also reported that lengthy exposure to the harsh conditions of prison life and the institutionalization resulting from that living, has both short and long term effects on an individual's ability to readjust to life outside prison (Visher & Travis, 2003). It is important to realize that there are collateral effects of incarceration and the reentry process is fundamentally a dynamic, social process. The public stigma attached to an ex-convict status seriously affects the reintegration process. We can deduce that prisons may in fact be doing more harm than good.

REINTEGRATION AND POSTRELEASE

Recidivism is directly affected by post prison reintegration and adjustment. This is in turn, dependent upon four sets of factors: personal and situational characteristics, social environment of peers, family, community and state-level policies (Visher et. al., 2003). Understanding an individual's pathway to reintegration and the various support systems necessary, both privately and governmentally are crucial to a successful integration. Reconnecting with the institutions of society is a goal and a process in which a released offender must consistently work through and one to which policymakers need to take attention to. In 1994, the Bureau of Justice Statistics conducted the largest study of its kind when it examined criminal recidivism using a sample of 300,000 prisoners released in 15 states. The study found that 67.5 percent of prisoners were arrested for a new offense within three years and 51.8 percent were back in prison for committing a new offense or violating their parole. These percentages demand for progress in the reintegration process.

In 2002, the federal government awarded \$100 million dollars to the states in order to help develop more effective reentry programs for those released from prisons (Visher et. al., 2003).

Similar to the social bond theory, the process of reintegration is dependant upon a prisoner's attachment and bonds to society. Strong ties between prisoners and their families have the strongest positive impact on their post release success. A commitment to family roles is imperative to avoiding a life of crime. Rejoining the labor market and ensuring stable and consistent employment is also crucial in the process and often this element is diminished for prisoners who have dismal job prospects given that they have learned few marketable job skills while institutionalized. These offenders will often find difficulty in finding a job while being labeled as an ex-convict (Cullen et. al., 2011). The stigma of a criminal record is a significant barrier in the search for employment. Watts & Nightingale (1996) reported that as many as 60% of ex-offenders are not employed within one year after their release and this figure is partly due to the limited availability of felon-friendly employers (Counsel on Crime and Justice, 2006). Laub and Sampson found that incarceration as a juvenile had a negative effect on later job stability, which was also negatively related to ones continued involvement in crime over the course of their life (Bahr, Armstrong, Gibbs, Harris & Fisher, 2005). Many offenders will leave jail feeling unprepared for their release and face obstacles in their way towards becoming a healthy and productive member of their communities. In a focus group study of women and men, researchers found that substance abuse, employment, and housing were the most significant factors that facilitated or blocked successful reintegration into

communities (Weiss, Hawkins, Despinos, 2010). Leaving a highly structured environment like a prison for an unstructured society leaves many decisions and responsibility for an individual to consider. Post release is a highly vulnerable time for ex-convicts and their susceptibility to negativity is very probable.

COLLATERAL EFFECTS OF IMPRISONMENT

Recently, the effects of imprisonment on families and communities have been becoming a focus of research for some. Hundreds of thousands of prisoners return to their communities annually and therefore, the reentry process has become an increasing interest. The extents of the consequences that result from mass incarceration often go beyond just the individual offender but also onto their families and their communities. Research has indicated that due to the rise in incarceration rates, there has also been an increase in broken homes and disenfranchised

communities (Counsel on Crime and Justice, 2006). The Counsel on Crime and Justice introduced the existence of the concept of “collateral effects” which refers to the unintended negative consequences that result from an offender’s conviction and incarceration. Incarceration effects more than just the one being locked away and the costs of imprisonment are paid both directly and indirectly on many levels. Imprisonment can directly negatively affect the offender’s family and children and can include personal, social, financial, emotional, psychological, and physical concerns. Social and economic structures of communities are also affected. Researchers will also argue that the removal of offenders from communities does harm, especially in communities of color (Counsel on Crime and Justice, 2006). Incarceration

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can also be conceptualized as a form of coerced mobility. Coerced mobility is a practice that takes large numbers of males out of inner-city communities for prolonged absences (Cullen et. al., 2011). While it would be appropriate to suggest that offenders are liabilities in their communities, theorists also suggest that they are also assets to the community in the sense that they are members of their own social networks as well as income providers. Therefore, the elimination of these offenders from communities will also result in social disorganization and weak economic development.

THE CREATION OF AN AT-RISK POPULATION

Many people tend to forget the fact that imprisonment affects more than just the individual being imprisoned. Incapacitation can be contagious and unintentionally creates an at-risk population for some. For example, today there are an increasing number of children with incarcerated parents. It is estimated that 1.5 to 2 million children are affected nationwide by incarcerated parents (Miller, 2006). There is evidence to suggest that these children are responding negatively to being separated from their parent. A child with an incarcerated parent is often left feeling depressed and sad which leads to externalizing behaviors that may include aggression and delinquent activity. Approximately 50% of youths in the correctional system have a parent in the adult correctional system. Children with parents in prison are 5 to 6 times more at-risk to become involved in the criminal justice system, however the short and long-term effects of this phenomenon are difficult to accurately quantify (Miller, 2006). We can therefore observe that in this aspect, prisons are causing more harm than good by creating a repercussion factor. More crimes are essentially being committed or going to

be committed as a result of someone being taken out of the community, especially in the case of a person who had family bonds tying them to the community. Children and youth are impressionable and vulnerable beings who are learning by example. The reality of incarceration in their home life is a life-altering experience, which can often set the course or direction for their own path towards criminal behavior.

LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE VERSUS DETERRENT THEORY

There is much research on why people commit crime, but much less research about why people who have committed criminal acts choose to desist from crime. In reviewing the post release life of offenders, the theory to focus on is life course perspective. Refraining from crime depends on ones local life circumstances. There are certain transitions that can help to increase social bonds and may help to alter a criminal trajectory. Bahr et. al (2005) explored the entry process by interviewing 51 parolees three times, over a period of three months from their release from prison. Of the 51 parolees, 10 were reincarcerated within six months after their release from crime. The findings suggest that overall, a network of family relationships is important in making the transition from prison life to community life. The extent of ones family bonds helps to change the criminal trajectories of parolees. The quality of the parent-child bond also significantly influenced the likelihood of a parolee returning to prison.

While there have been established links between incapacitation and crime on a negative standpoint, there are also findings that support incarceration as a deterrent. Incarceration can influence criminal careers based on two strands

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of criminological theory, those that focus on the role of punishment and that which focuses on the relationship between past and future criminal activity (Bhati et. al., 2008). A key policy question in criminology is whether incarceration serves as a deterrent, criminogenic or null effect on subsequent criminal activity. Given that a lack of research exists in this area, Bhati et. al. (2008) conducted a study on this topic by developing micro-trajectories using information from past arrest patterns. The data used in this research came from a larger study on recidivism of prisoners released in 1994, which was collected by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. A total sample of 32, 628 persons was studied across 15 states. The findings reported that 96 percent of the releasees were either deterred from future offending or merely incapacitated by their incarceration. A small percentage consisting of 4 percent of the releasees exhibited a criminogenic effect. This study is not consistent with the labeling theory hypothesis but instead is more in favor of deterrence-based theories. However, this data also raised the question of generalizability as it only consists of data on 15 states in a country of 50.

DISCUSSION

In review of the literature on institutionalization, incarceration and its effect on crime, we can conclude that there is significant evidence linking incarceration with crime. While researchers have struggled to accurately quantify the degree to which crime reduction is attributable to imprisonment, the truth remains that prisons may actually be doing more harm than good. The effect of incarceration on subsequent criminal activity at the individual level is still far from being recognized and further research on the area is needed. However, we can recognize that the incarceration experience as a

form of punishment tends to have varied effects on offenders. For some it may operate as a deterrent, others as a criminogenic factor and for some irrelevant either way. It is sad to realize that in our society, one single deviant event can be enough to stigmatize a person indefinitely as an offender or as a deviant person. Some offenders leave prison and make the case that they have permanently changed and are reformed, new people. Unfortunately, there is a negative bias with this, and labeling theorists will agree that regardless of whatever reformation is claimed, the deviant stigma will continue to exist. For some, one's past behavior is the best predictor of their future behavior. Researchers can support this by finding that well over half of ex-prisoners are returned to prison within 3 years of their release. In today's world it is much easier to establish oneself as deviant, than it is to establish one's credentials as a reformed person. As a result of labeling theory, many members of society are unwilling to take a chance on a once incarcerated individual who appears to be trying to make positive steps forward. These obstacles only hinder an offender's chance for effective survival and reintegration into society.

Incapacitation strategies seek to reduce crime and do so in some ways. It is true that incarcerated offenders are prevented by incapacitation from committing further crimes, but at what cost to themselves and to society. Incapacitation strategies "take a slice out of" an individual's career, but who's to tell that that career will cease once they are back in the free world. The United States currently has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world with over two million people under the jurisdiction of correctional authorities (Weiss et al., 2010). The majority of this rate can be blamed on

the get tough on crime movement and the nation's continued war on drugs. In comparison to other industrialized nations, these rates are five to eight times higher and have risen significantly over the last thirty years (Weiss et al., 2010).

The criminal justice system's use of correctional facilities to punish those members of society who violate laws and commit crimes is a method based on the concept of deterrence. The idea of becoming institutionalized and taken out of society for a period of time is suppose to make an individual recognize his/her bad behavior to the point to where he/she will no longer behave in such a way for fear of becoming institutionalized again. At the same time, society can be at peace knowing that that person is no longer a current threat to society. However, the stages involved in this transition involve many negative aspects, which question its intended function. The process of institutionalization and becoming " prisonized" is a traumatic event filled with psychological changes that in some cases never heal or reshape themselves. Institutionalization desensitizes offenders and creates hardened criminals, the very thing it seeks to prevent. During prisonization, physical and psychological transformations occur which negatively changes an individual, but are however, necessary in order for an individual to survive the entirety of the experience.

During the time in which an offender is incarcerated, those close to him such as his family and community may be suffering as a result of this imprisonment. An offender with children loses the ability to bond with their child and as a result, the child faces the risk of becoming scared from the experience. This detachment from a parent can result in negative forms of

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behavior and delinquency and as research has demonstrated, children with incarcerated parents have a much higher risk for getting involved in correctional settings themselves. In this respect, imprisonment promotes crime. The community also suffers greatly when those are taken out of it. People are assets to a community in the sense that they are members of the social networks and everyone, a possible income provider. The elimination of offenders from communities results in social disorganization and weak economic development. When there is a weak economic and social disorganization, a breeding place for crime will persist.

Prison life is another world, one that often does not make ease for a smooth transition back to reality. Research has shown that the stage of reintegration back into society once being institutionalized, is a very critical stage and to which is dependant on several factors. The life course perspective focuses on the steps necessary in ones life to avoid a criminal trajectory. A combination of life course theory and social bond theory creates a medium to which explains the elements necessary for a successful reintegrated life, void of crime. Family bonds, especially that of child-parent bonds, are extremely important in the reintegration process. Socialization with positive peers and consistent and steady employment are also crucial to the process. A lack of one or more of these bonds creates an opportunity to allow for crime to justify means. In this process, an offender is also combating stigmatization. In accordance with labeling theory, ex-convicts have a difficult time in their reintegration period due to the stigma that is placed upon them. For some, this presents a hardship that is often impossible to defeat and some offenders will often give into their label and become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Labeling theory appears to be a valid effect of institutionalization as research has shown that as many as half of the offenders released from prison will return within three years of their release. This evidence can support labeling theory as an obstacle in the way of successful reintegration and deterrence from recidivism.

As we move towards an era highly focused on a punitive system of justice versus a rehabilitative approach, policy makers need to assess whether prison systems are really the answer to obtaining intended objectives. Incarceration is increasing at an all time record yet crime is not decreasing at an all time record. There are too many strings attached with the process of incarceration, and many of these strings lead to the realization that in the overall scheme of things, prison does more harm than good. Research accurately quantifying this finding needs to further be evaluated and discussed, but there is a consistent finding within this review, which significantly addresses the issues associated with the effects of institutionalization and its negative impact on the offender and society as a whole.