Example of essay on individual effects of incarceration

Sociology, Social Issues

Literature Review

Individual Effects of Incarceration

Prisons are becoming an increasingly hostile place, which leads prisoners to undergo various psychological changes in order to cope (Haney, 2002). In particular, Haney (2002) posits that prisoners tend to become too dependent on the institutional structure and contingencies that they lose their sense of independence or self-initiative. They also tend to lose their personal value and self-worth. In addition, they tend to become hyper vigilant, suspicious, and distrusting (Haney, 2002). They tend to be too controlling of their emotions, feel alienated, or psychologically distance themselves. They tend to withdraw from other people and to prefer isolation. On the other hand, some prisoners conform to informal prison norms, which usually mean exhibiting negative or inappropriate behavior, which enable them to cope with the danger and the deprivation that they are forced to endure during their incarceration. Moreover, some prisoners develop post-traumatic reactions to the difficulties brought about by prison life. As a study conducted by Hochstetler, Murphy & Simons (2004) shows , prison victimization can cause symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress (PTS) where PTS can in turn lead to recurring problems. In addition, the study of Hochstetler et al. (2004) shows that prisoners who have experienced trauma prior to incarceration have higher risks of being victimized, which confirms the earlier findings of Wooldredge (1999). In particular, these findings show that the characteristics of prisoners upon incarceration influence how well they are able to adapt to their environment (Wooldredge,

1999). Moreover, it is worth noting that Wooldredge's (1999) findings show that a prisoner's ability to reduce his fear of the unknown and to control his environment contribute to their mental health.

The study of Wooldredge (1999) further shows that visits from outsiders, safe environments, and participation in programs enhance the prisoner's psychological well-being. However, this is somewhat contradictory to the findings of Hochstetler et al. (2004), which show that supportive relationships do not have a significant impact on the prisoners' distress. In fact, the recipients of this study claim that relationships outside the prison are irrelevant and can even add to their hardship because of their inability to maintain social and familial responsibilities (Hochstetler et al., 2004). This is supported by the findings of Lindquist's (2000) study, which show that social relationships within and outside the prison cause higher levels of distress for the prisoners. In particular, the study shows that married prisoners experience higher levels of anxiety and depression while prisoners who have close social relationships within the institution experience higher levels of hostility (Lindquist, 2000).

According to Mears, Wang, Hay & Bales (2008), prisoners who reenter society experience " higher levels of recidivism for violent crime" -- although not for property crime --because of resource deprivation (Mears et al., 2008, p. 326). They also claim that drug and property recidivism is significantly greater among young non-white males (Mears et al., 208). In the same regard, a study by Tewksbury, Vito & Higgins (2012) show that parole

supervision and the diverse set of experiences that prisoners had within the institution can lead to increased recidivism.

As Petersilia (2005) indicates, many of the prisoners who are released from incarceration have developed serious physical, psychological, and social problems. With these many problems possibly impeding their reentry into society, Haney (2002) suggests that necessary changes be made to the conditions of prisons and to the practices and programs employed in these facilities. These will enable prisoners to better prepare for their release. In this regard, Seiter and Kadela (2003) indicate that the following programs are the most effective in facilitating prisoner reentry and in reducing recidivism: work release programs and/or vocational training; drug rehabilitation; half-way house programs; and pre-release programs. They also find education programs and violent- and sex-offender programs to be helpful to some extent (Seiter & Kadela, 2003).

Haney (2003) specifically also stresses on the psychological and emotional damage that can be caused by the harsh conditions of supermax prisons for which Haney (2003) suggests that some form of step-down or transitional program be provided to prisoners who have undergone supermax confinement. These will help them adjust to the new environment where they will be placed. Moreover, Haney (2003) suggests that such services and programs be continued even after the prisoner's transfer from supermax, with the consideration that supermax confinement can have long-term effects. Similarly, Hochstetler et al. (2004) suggest that inmates be provided with rehabilitative services to help them cope with the trauma that they

experience both within and outside the prison. Finally, a study conducted by Berg & Huebner (2011) shows that family ties have implications for both job attainment and recidivism where quality social ties are found to be particularly helpful for men who often have difficulties in obtaining employment.

In summary, the hostile conditions of correctional facilities can cause physical, psychological, and social damage on the prisoners. These in turn make their reentry into society more difficult and increase their chances for recidivism. While some studies show that social relationships can enhance the prisoners' psychological well-being, others show the same to be detrimental. In addition, it has been found that resource deprivation can increase the rate of recidivism, as can parole supervision and the diversity of the prisoners' experiences during incarceration. Moreover, certain groups are found to be more vulnerable to fail in their reentry into society.

As such, experts suggest that changes be made to prison conditions, practices, and programs in order to better prepare inmates for their reentry into society. Similarly, rehabilitative programs and services should be provided for prisoners who have undergone supermax confinement or have experienced trauma either within or outside the institution. Finally, experts suggest that strong social ties and employment opportunities can facilitate prisoner reentry and reduce the risk of recidivism.

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