Prison Treatment and Therapeutic Communities

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Crim 391

Author Note

Let’s fix the system.

Table of Contents

[Abstract 3](#_Toc531714817)

[Prison Treatment and Therapeutic Communities 4](#_Toc531714818)

[History of Prison Treatment 4](#_Toc531714819)

[Therapeutic Communities 5](#_Toc531714820)

[Conclusion 7](#_Toc531714821)

Abstract

For this paper I decided to research the way prisons handle drug addicts. I chose to research this topic because I believe that the way our system handles drug offenders can be improved. In the following pages I will outline how the prison system treats drug offenders as well as input my opinions on the importance of fixing the system. The prison system focuses first on the punishment a criminal should face, while rehabilitation takes a back seat.

Prison Treatment and Therapeutic Communities

# History of Prison Treatment

In the 1970’s the idea came about that retribution was more important than rehabilitation when it came to sentencing our criminals. This in turn created a snowball effect of negative outcomes. Since retribution focuses more on vengeance than trying to reconstruct an inmate’s life, these inmates (drug addicts especially) started having a revolving door relationship with prisons. This in turn caused many issues with politicians creating more severe sentencing. While this affected all crimes it specifically targeted drug users which sparked up the countries War on Drugs. The War on Drugs has been negatively affecting our country by causing our country to lose money, overcrowd prisons, and heighten our statistics of recidivism.

As the criminal justice system has begun looking for ways to reduce recidivism and control overcrowding, a simple answer came to light. This answer was to put more resources into expanding drug treatment programs in our prisons. While this is a great step in the right direction, it is upsetting to find out that this has been a rather recent discovery for our correctional authorities. I find it extremely important that our system switches their idea of sentencing. After watching the Ted Talk, *The Surprising Reason Our Correctional System Doesn’t Work,* one quote from Brandon W. Mathews immediately stuck out to me, “We spend a lot of time identifying whether you go to a high or low security prison and that is key. Inmates are assigned to prisons based upon how much we anticipate they’re going to misbehave while they’re there, which means that they aren’t assigned to prisons based upon their specific needs of rehabilitation and treatment.” This quote really connected to me because I believe that the only way to lower the recidivism rates and control overcrowding in prisons is to conform our punishments to each offender specifically. While this is difficult, we notice in Mathew’s words that we already evaluate an inmate before they enter the prison system, the only issue is our evaluation should be changed from anticipating their misbehaver to anticipating and interoperating their treatment needs.

## Therapeutic Communities

One prison treatment program that is becoming more and more popular in prison systems today is Therapeutic Communities. Therapeutic Communities are isolated residential places within the prisons that specifically help individuals with drug abuse issues. These communities only connect with the prisons general population during meals and other standard activities. This benefits an inmate with addiction issues because it causes them to truly focus on their recovery while serving their time. Many inmates click with this type of treatment because it forces the inmate to take full responsibility for their own recovery. These types of recovery programs give the inmates a solid foundation for success but let the inmates know that they must also put in the effort to turn their life around. Many active participants in this program describe it as one of the hardest things they’ve had to do. This is a common statement because this type of treatment requires so much emotionally, physically, and intellectually.

These types of programs have proven to help reduce recidivism as well as decrease the rotating door relationship drug addicts have with prison. This type of treatment has also shown us that inmates whom go through this type of program are more likely to reach out for post-release programs. This is beneficial in my opinion because released inmates whom have gone through this type of program can help others after they’re released.

As with everything however, there are problems we face with these types of programs. The first problem we face is the difficulty prisons face with having the ability to incorporate these types of treatment programs. One reason why this is, is because of the overcrowding problem we face in our prisons. Overcrowding causes prisons to not have enough room and resources to start up these types of programs. Brandon W. Mathews mentions, “So if it’s addiction that got you in trouble in the first place, cross your fingers and hope that your prison has addiction counseling and therapy.” This ties into this section because although these programs are beneficial, it’s upsetting when an inmate doesn’t get an opportunity to recover in prison because not all prisons have these types of treatments available. I think this quote also connects back to my argument that we need to focus on where we’re placing individuals rather than just focusing on their potential behavior in prison. Another issue faced is that these types of programs can’t be used in jails. This is because of how long these types of programs take. After researching different types of prisons that implement this, it shows that this process is months long. The reason why this affects jails is because the amount of one’s time in jail could vary from 30 days to over a year. If programs like this were put into jails, then there would be many inmates that wouldn’t be able to go through the program fully. This would result in them not being recovered when their release comes and we would’ve wasted resources on trying to help. That being said I think that we should figure out a move effective way to treat inmates in jail.

While there are issues with this type of treatment, I believe that Therapeutic communities are more positive than negative. The reasons behind this is because this treatment program is beneficial in both personal and monetary basis’. On a personal level it directly helps the inmate turn their life around. The way it does this is by giving the inmates a head start on their recovery, this in turn prevents them from going back to their life before prison. On a monetary basis TC have been proven that helping one inmate through their recovery and helping them become crime and drug free out of prison will save our prison system around $91,000. This money is saved by the prison not having to repeatedly house and feed a repeated offender. Another example on why this type of treatment is so beneficial comes from our textbook. “Another way of looking at the potential benefits is to imagine that if all 1.3 million inmates with untreated substance abuse disorders were treated in prison and approximately $12-13 billion were spent in doing so, the “break-even” point would be reached within one year after the prisoner was released.” I think that this evidence shows the immense importance in giving Therapeutic Communities a try in all prisons in America.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that approaching our prison system in a light that focuses on rehabilitation before retribution will overall help the problems that we created through the War on Drugs. Our treatment of drug use prisoners will in turn reduce the recidivism rates in our country. The overcrowding of prisons will decrease and the government will have a lower budget needed to house and feed inmates.

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