



# The Relationship Between US Prisons and Mental Health: A Review of the Research Literature

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How do mental  
health and  
prison  
overlap?

- Criminology major
- UNI Psychology and Law course
- McNair topic

# Overall Research Question



**What is the relationship between U.S Prison and mental health?**



**Three related topics that help us understand:**

War on Drugs

School to Prison Pipeline

Racial Disparity in US Prisons



**Together (with others), these three topics reveal some pathways between mental health issues and incarceration patterns**



# War on Drugs 1980s

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- The war on drugs was a series of laws created in the 1980s which influenced and encouraged U.S. officials to act more aggressively on drug charges
  - Criminalization of crack cocaine but not powdered cocaine
- Why is it important?
  - The War on Drugs was a form of social control that criminalizes drug use that targeted the low income African American and mental health communities
  - Punishes people who cannot afford proper medication
  - People who wanted to feel better temporarily

# The Impact of the War on Drugs

- How did it get started
  - There was a major uproar of crime in the late 70s
  - Citizens were victimized both psychologically and physically and politicians took a stand on it by creating strict policies and harsher punishments with mandatory sentences
- The increase of women in prison
  - Overall women experienced the greatest increase in drug offences of inmates with an increase of 12% since 1980
  - In 1998 alone, an estimated 3.2 million women were arrested
  - Black women, in particular saw an increase of 78% from 1989-1994

## 2. Racial Disparity in Iowa

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3.1 of Iowa is black

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25.8% of Iowa's prison is black people

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Iowa is ranked as 3<sup>rd</sup> in disproportionately locking up black people

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Black people are 11.1 times more likely to be incarcerated than white people

01

Once incarcerated, the chance of returning to prison increases

02

While incarcerated, legal professional opportunities disappear, and likelihood of legal paid work once released is small.

03

Depending on the crime, could lose majority of voting rights

Why Does Racial Disparity in US prisons matter?



## War on drugs

- Criminalized a particular drug

## Race disparities

- The criminalized drug results in high arrests among black population

## Mental Health

- Typical drug use begins with wanting to temporarily escaping reality
- Suffering from a mental illness



### 3. School to Prison Pipeline

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The pipeline is a set of processes by which young people are pushed out of schools and in/directly into the criminal justice system

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Racism in schools assists the disproportionate number of African American and Latino students subject to various forms of school discipline

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Students were swept into the “Get tough on crime” trend

# School to Prison Pipeline Consequences



Zero tolerance and other punitive discipline strategies contribute to the pipeline

Expulsion and suspension



Kids get referred to the juvenile system instead of mental health officials

This starts the school to prison pipeline at a young age



Without the services of trained professionals and without a parent at home during the day, students with out of school suspension are more likely to commit crimes.

War on  
drugs

The “get hard on crime” trend was  
extended to schools



Racial  
disparities

Harsh and strict punishments only given  
to Black and Latino student



School to  
prison  
pipeline

Accelerated the time to get into criminal  
justice system

Links of the  
School- to-  
Prison  
Pipeline

## What Did I Learn

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The relationship between U.S prisons and mental health is complicated

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The war on drugs impacted a lot of innocent people with one methodical policy

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This policy resulted in a high disproportionate rates of races within prison



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