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

• 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 powered 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 psychically 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

3.1 of Iowa is black

25.8% of Iowan’s prison is black people

Iowa is ranked as 3rd in disproportionally locking up black people

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

Haley (2016)
Why Does Racial Disparity in US prisons matter?

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.
Link of Race Disparity to Mental Health

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

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

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

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

Bahena, Cooc, Currie-Rubin, Kuttner, & Ng (2012)
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.

Bahena, S., Cooc, N., Currie-Rubin, R., Kuttner, P., & Ng, M. (2012),
School to prison pipeline accelerated the time to get into the criminal justice system due to racial disparities. Harsh and strict punishments were only given to Black and Latino students. The "get hard on crime" trend was extended from the war on drugs to schools. Bahena, et al., (2012), Immarigeon, R. (Ed.). (2006),
What Did I Learn

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

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

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


- Bahena, Cooc, Currie-Rubin, Kuttner & Ng (2012). *Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline*. Harvard Education Press. 8 Story Street First Floor, Cambridge, MA 02138


