

Skye White

SC 101

June 23, 2020

Mental Health and Jail Systems

Every single day in the United States people with Mental Health issues are going to jail for unnecessary reasons and doing more harm to themselves and others in the long run. In the

United States, our past with how we handle and “take care” of our citizens with mental health issues is shameful. Before we fully understood what a mental illness was, those who were suffering with mental illness were considered scary and dangerous, and were believed to have had evil spirits residing within them. During this time we treated these individuals in the most horrible way, by placing them in asylums where they were experimented on and tortured.

Since then, there have been some improvements, but not nearly enough. Unfortunately today those who struggle with mental health issues are commonly labeled as violent and dangerous. They are oftentimes treated as criminals, and slip through the cracks spending much of their lives in jail. Our health system has completely failed those with mental illness, and unfortunately the jail system seems to have become the norm when dealing with someone suffering with mental illness.

Research shows that those “labeled” with a certain title, will oftentimes take on that role subconsciously allowing it to have a negative affect on their life. This is called labeling theory, and sadly affects many people who struggle with mental illness. Many people with mental illness can be entered into the criminal justice system from minor offenses, but once in the system, they are put into a downward spiral.

When looking at research, you can see that when dealing with people with mental illness putting them into the criminal justice system does nothing to help these people in the future, yet for some reason we are still placing people in jail instead of into rehabilitation centers. Our mental health services within these jails is minimal and does more harm than good for those that fall victim to it.

“In a mental health crisis, people are more likely to encounter police than get medical help. As a result, 2 million people with mental illness are booked into jails each year. Nearly 15% of men and 30% of women booked into jails have a serious mental health condition.”(National Alliance on Mental Illness, 1).

We need to implement a better way to help these people that end up forgotten into the criminal justice system. After someone is released this sentence continues to haunt them, and after developing a criminal history, the people that most badly need help are now ineligible or unable to receive the help they need.

I believe that we can start better helping these people by implementing better mental health services all throughout the criminal justice system. I believe that jails are currently playing the role of multiple jobs they do not need to, and because of this they are overworked, underpaid, and dealing with situations that they do not have training in. People that are struggling with substance abuse often end up in jail because of the choices they felt they were forced to make during their addiction. Many times, those that are struggling with addiction, PTSD, bi-polar, and many other mental illnesses are not given the care or tools needed to help them onto the road to recovery.

It is proven that using rehabilitation services over jail time, results in a recovery rate and less recidivism. There are also many other pros to sending those with substance abuse and mental illness to rehabilitation programs rather than prison. Firstly, over time it is much more cost effective to send offenders to recovery programs than it is to keep them in jail for that duration of time. Because these people will be working on developing their life skills, and learning prevention methods and receiving cognitive therapy the likelihood of them reoffending is

drastically lessened. Having programs within our jails, and programs for those with mental illness, helps all around.

“If only 10 percent of drug-addicted offenders received drug rehabilitation instead of jail time, the criminal justice system would save \$4.8 billion compared to current costs. If 40 percent of addicted offenders received treatment instead of jail, those savings would rise to \$12.9 billion.” (Foundations Recovery Network, 5).

Within our jails in Maine, we have been desperately needing a better Mental Health system for over a decade with little to no improvements on the system, despite having serious incidents in the past.

“In 1989, after ten patients died from deficiencies in the care provided to them at the Augusta Mental Health Institute (AMHI), patient advocates sued the state and the following year achieved a sweeping legal settlement known as the “consent decree.” This 99-page document ordered what is now named the Department of Health and Human Services to create a decent, robust system to care for Maine’s seriously mentally ill citizens — and to do it within five years. The Department agreed. But decades later, law enforcement officials, mental health experts and patient advocates agree that the state is still far from meeting the consent decree’s mandates.” (Tapley, 4).

The list of issues in our jail system is never ending, and although the proof is easy to see, we have still not made nearly enough changes. If we truly want to help people recover, then we need to understand that those with mental illness are just like everyone else, and stop putting them in jail when they really just need some help and guidance. I think if we worked harder to help connect those inside our jails and struggling with mental illness to places they can learn

coping mechanisms and life skills while receiving the help they need, we would see a missive difference in not only the cost of our jail systems, but the positive outcome of the people we are rehabilitating.

**Works Cited:**

Benokraitis, N. V. (2019). Chapter 10/ Race and Ethnicity. In *SOC 6- Introduction to Sociology* (p. 191). Boston, MA: Cengage.

Jailing People with Mental Illness | NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2020).

<https://www.nami.org/Advocacy/Policy-Priorities/Divert-from-Justice-Involvement/Jailing-People-with-Mental-Illness>

Foundations Recovery Network. Drug Rehab Instead of Prison Could Save Billions | Dual Diagnosis. (2020). <https://dualdiagnosis.org/drug-rehab-instead-of-prison-could-save-billions-says-report-2/>

Tapley, Lance. The Criminalization of the Mentally Ill in Maine | Prison Legal News. (2020). <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2018/mar/7/criminalization-mentally-ill-maine/>