

Treating the Mentally Ill to Reduce Recidivism

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Treating the mentally ill during incarceration can significantly decrease the rate of recidivism upon their release. Many carceral residents struggle with a mental illness, and due to the inability to receive treatment while in custody their challenges remain untreated and go with them upon release. If proper treatment was offered and provided to residents, the rates of recidivism would be much lower making both formerly incarcerated individuals and their families and communities safer. The concept of being stripped of your freedom, being under constant supervision, and the feeling of constant fear can take a toll on an individual's mental health. If left untreated, it can lead to higher recidivism rates (Wallace, Wang, 2020). There is a significant importance in funding and providing mental health programs for residents because it can provide true rehabilitation, which is (or should be) ultimately the goal of *corrections*. On the contrary, many individuals feel that treating a carceral resident is a waste of tax money and time or they believe these folks simply do not deserve treatment because they are criminals. If residents are able to receive the proper treatment that they deserve then they are able to become contributing members of society upon their release instead of becoming a victim of a never-ending cycle of criminality.

Many of the mentally ill residents suffer from illnesses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disease, therefore if left untreated those conditions can certainly hinder on an individual's quality of life (cite). These untreated conditions can make it extremely difficult for an individual to find employment, or to keep steady employment therefore making them feel as they have no choice but to return to a life of crime to support themselves (Weatherburn, 2021). Receiving the proper treatment is a critical step in rehabilitating a mentally ill resident. Many residents who struggle

with mental health issues feel as they cannot open up and talk about their struggles, therefore it is extremely important for the prison staff to build a relationship with residents. Once a relationship has been established, residents are more willing to truly open up about their struggles and are able to work on their rehabilitation (Lamberti, 2016). Establishing trust between residents and correctional staff allows residents to take the first step into their rehabilitation and allow themselves to see how or why they are struggling and how they can get the help they need. The most important factor of the treatment program is that the resident's participation is voluntary. The resident will be much more receptive to the program if admitted voluntarily, compared to mandatory participation the treatment will simply be a waste of time (Weatherburn, 2021). If the resident chooses to participate on their own free will, that means that they are ready to work on their issues and work towards treatment.

One research experiment provides evidence that mental health programs in the prisons truly lower recidivism rates. In this study, residents with mental health issues were divided into two groups, one who chose to actively participate in the programs and one who chose not to participate. Over a period of time these residents were monitored, and it was recorded which residents returned to prison after their release and which did not. The results indicated that the residents who chose to participate in the programs had a much lower recidivism rate than the residents that did not participate (Dirks-Linhorst, 2012). While individuals may argue that residents do not deserve treatment and the programs are simply a waste of money, the research suggests exactly the opposite. There are different types of programs available to residents and it depends on the level of treatment that is required. Some programs are more rigorous than others and require much more active participation from both the resident and the staff therefore true voluntary participation and dedication to the treatment program is incredibly important (Lamberti, 2016). This idea circles

back to trust between residents and the correctional staff. The more open and comfortable the resident feels about the program the more willing the individual is to participate regardless of the program. Some programs can even require participation after their release date simply to help the resident stay on track as they transition to civilian life. Residents undergo an examination by a mental health professional to determine the type of treatment program that will be best for their rehabilitation. Receiving the proper treatment for the level of need that the resident requires is critical to their rehabilitation, meaning a proper evaluation is absolutely critical.

In fact, the process of rehabilitation can also start earlier in the process. Police officers can be trained to do evaluations of individuals to determine if they are suffering from a mental illness and make the proper determination whether to send the individual to jail or a mental health facility. If police are properly trained for this, an individual who is truly suffering can be sent directly to a mental health facility to jump start their treatment instead of being sent to prison/jail with all other types of criminals (NAMI Virginia). Individuals who are suffering from a mental illness may not be criminals by nature, they may not even be fully aware of their actions that resulted in them committing a crime. For an individual who is suffering from a mental illness the stigma of being incarcerated can have a negative impact on their mental health, which can actually cause their condition to worsen if left untreated. Also, by being housed with other residents, it can make them a target of violence because of their conditions. Sending a mentally ill individual to the proper facility upon their arrest is critical for their safety and rehabilitation.

On the contrary, individuals have argued that spending tax money on treating residents can be a waste of time because they are labeled as criminals, and they belong behind bars. It is viewed that those who commit criminal acts cannot be rehabilitated and deserve to be away from society. Funding mental health programs can be costly, and tax money should be spent on active

participants of society instead of those who decide to disregard the law. The individuals who choose criminal activity have that mentality and that is something that cannot be changed, that is simply how their mind is wired.

Mental health programs inside the prison system will not only reduce recidivism rates and lower the prison population, but it will also inevitably create a safer society. Residents who receive proper treatment and rehabilitation will have the ability to find stable employment and stay away from a criminal lifestyle after their release from prison. Hopefully the carceral systems and staff will begin understanding the significance of the programs and will dedicate funds towards this cause. Many incarcerated individuals will eventually be released, therefore working towards rehabilitation instead of incapacitation is a much smarter, long-term solution. For the prisons/jails that do engage in mental health treatment programs, the staff needs to understand how important their involvement is and that creating that strong relationship and trust with residents will have a significant impact on their rehabilitation.

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