The Effects of Prison Overcrowding on Penal Programs

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Introduction

In America today the war on drugs is still being fought on a day to day basis. American society has gone to many extremes to combat this threat, from tougher laws to the formation of agencies such as the DEA. Even with all of this, is everything being done to the extent that the public wishes? According to the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring program, approximately 60 percent of all arrestees test positive for illicit drug use (ADAM, 2000). On top of that 84 per cent of state prisoners expected to be released to the community were involved with alcohol and drugs at the time of their arrest (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001). One such form of this fight is the institution of drug rehabilitation programs in prison. These programs are there as a way to force convicted users into cleaning up their act. Yet, for all the good intentions of these programs, is that the proper place for them? What impact is there from other outside influences?

Overcrowding and Logistics

It takes a degree of confidence and determination for a drug user to commit to being clean. So what sorts of distractions face an inmate who is sentenced to go through such a program? The list is large and varies from person to person, yet most would look quite similar. Topping the list would be overcrowding, illness, and peer influence. Ironically, to a degree, the three can be narrowed down to overcrowding as the root cause. Those may seem like just three minor things, but some have far reaching effects that most don’t know.

First, there is overcrowding. Prevalent throughout the 1980’s, and only getting worse at the beginning of the 90’s. America saw a dramatic increase in incarceration rates. Going from 313 per 100,000 in 1985 to 600 per 100,000 in 1995 (Greene, 1997). Improvements, law changes, and new prison construction have been attempted to thwart this ever present problem.
Yet nothing seems to get rid of it, only postpone. Oregon saw fit to try and change policy by every angle possible, first by trying to pass prison bonds in 1980, 1983, and 1986. The bonds, in turn, were denied by the public every time (Greene, 1997). Then they resorted to having the Oregon Criminal Justice Council set up strict sentencing guidelines to cut down on the flow of inmates (Greene, 1997). Where as other states must deal with the situation at hand. Prison population in California in 1985 was already operating at 181 percent (Greene, 1997). Combined that with a crime boom and the passing of the ‘three strikes’ law in the early 1990’s, and the prison population has not seen much relief.

What sort of effects does overcrowding have? Studies have shown that anytime there is a change in prison population both illness and death rates react directly proportional (McCain, Cox, Paulus, 1980). These studies, taking in over six years worth of data at over twelve different institutions, showed direct correlations on a long term basis with multiple institutions’ data mirroring each other. Yet with so many forms of institution and confinement what is described as being crowded? To understand that question one must take a look at the housing arrangements that penal institutions are currently using. There are numerous types of facilities including small county jails, state prisons, federal prisons, Federal “super-max” high security prisons, and even large military prisons like Ft. Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. In each of these settings there are different types of housing, sometimes two or three per facility. They contain everything ranging from large dormitory style twenty man rooms, to the infamous ‘solitary’ style one man isolation chambers. A summary of results for a series of research at the Federal Correctional Institution at El Reno stated that double occupant housing produced greater feeling of being crowded, more negative ratings of the living units, greater disciplinary problems, and higher illness complaint rates than singles (McCain, Cox, Paulus, 1980). That study was
conducted under normal housing conditions. The effects would dramatically increase in an overcrowded situation, such as in North Carolina at the end of November in 1996. At that time the state’s prisons had almost 29,000 inmates, and were operating at 118 percent capacity (Greene, 1997). With higher populations one sees an increase in peer influence. Those persons incarcerated that wished for help, might find it quite hard to complete their programs due to the fact that one of their cellmates is constantly shooting up. The dependency rates of most drugs being what they are, anyone can imagine the impossibility of such a task being asked of them.

Inside or Outside

Rampant drug smuggling and use on the inside of most large prison facilities make it increasingly difficult for one to keep clean in the midst of these facilities. Yet inmates still manage to get clean in prison, but staying clean is a whole different deal.

There are new programs now that are operated on the outside of prison that are being mandated to sentences along with parole. These programs take a further step of keeping someone clean. A majority of the time the inmate will be transported directly to the site from jail. Unfortunately most of these programs have strict guidelines dealing with admittance. Certain criminals with an extensive record or recorded violence are potentially inadmissible or have to serve mandatory sentences. The inmates may have to serve these sentences in facilities where internal programs are not available. The ease of these criminals going on parole without the much needed help stems from the restructuring of sentencing guidelines and from the fact of some of the programs also being overcrowded.

One such example of this is from a study done in 2002 in northeast America. A study, containing over 550 inmates, was conducted showing that 13 percent of those in the experiment had to be paroled without going to a Substance Abuse Treatment Facility or SATF (Zanis,
Prison overcrowding (Mulvaney, Coviello, Alterman, Savitz, Thompson, 2003). The reason for their parole, which the whole point of the study was having them go through a SATF, was due to overcrowding. In some cases it wasn’t the waiting list for the program, but that the prison was so overcrowded that it had to resort to reducing sentences to allow for others to be admitted. The study did show that with use of the programs in prison combined with the use of a ‘probation like’ facility on the outside the recidivism of inmates dropped by 17.2 percent (Zanis, Mulvaney, Coviello, Alterman, Savitz, Thompson, 2003).

Conclusion: A Direct Connection

When one looks at the big picture of what is going on in our prisons today, and takes into account the psychological data. It is very easy to see the distinct challenge facing someone trying to get clean. Yet it seems as if the two main opposing forces of drug treatment and overcrowding are somehow intertwined.

Due to sentencing guidelines and upper government influence there are more inmates in prison on drug charges than ever. Although in the last few years ‘drug courts’ have started to become popular, their impact is just beginning. The prisons of this country are reducing sentences to drug offenders trying to open up beds for those being charged with more serious offenses. What does this do to the offender, but teach him that if he is caught again all that will happen is another slap on the wrist. Leading to the higher recidivism that is choking today’s court system. One way for this vicious cycle to end is the use of a combination of things, fore there is no single solution.

First the ideal of a complete separate system, that parallels our own, must be made. Give the drug courts all drug related cases, also including the construction of a drug court in every state. The construction of institutional style treatment facilities where drug offenders can be
confined to, leaving prison space open to the violent criminals that should be there. Since, what is dug abuse but a medical disorder, a sickness that must be treated just like a disease. It is a disease where the victim doesn’t wish to be cured. Therefore, society must look at these criminals with a little bit of understanding if they ever to end this intricate debacle.
References


