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Undergraduate

Breaking Youth Behind Bars: A Literature Review

What are the Psychological Effects of Incarceration on Youth?

By Virginia Powell

Abstract

Few conclusions have been made about the psychological effects of incarceration on young offenders. However, studies indicate that the current approach of the juvenile justice system is not favorable for the development of adolescents. The high prevalence of recidivism (repeat offending), among youth demonstrates the shortcomings of the primary goal of detention centers, which is to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents. This brings up questions about the actual impact imprisonment has on adolescents since the desired outcomes are not being met. The hostility and isolation regularly experienced in detention centers deprive adolescents of developing the necessary skills to function effectively within society. While incarceration may be an immediate solution to halting juvenile criminal behaviors, research continues to highlight the lasting negative psychological consequences detention centers have on adolescents. Delving deeper into the prevalent situations often experienced by juvenile delinquents before, during, and after incarceration, it can be concluded that imprisonment contributes to the behavioral and emotional problems often found among incarcerated youth. These findings suggest the need for a more developmental and diplomatic approach within the juvenile justice system to provide the most effective treatment for this population.

Introduction

I. Background

This literature review will focus on the psychological effects of incarceration on youth. It will include research studies that assess the role developmental factors, influencing factors, and the prevalence that substance abuse and psychiatric disorders have on the impact of incarceration on the population of juvenile delinquents. Studies will also address the effect emotional and

physical treatment during incarceration has on the psychological consequences experienced by detained youth. Lastly, the post-release effects of incarceration will be analyzed to identify the lasting outcomes of incarceration on adolescents.

Despite the decrease in the amount of youth crime rates over the years, there continues to be thousands of juveniles who are arrested and placed in detention centers across the United States (Lambie & Randall, 2013). The juvenile justice system was established during the nineteenth century in an attempt to create a more rehabilitative approach towards offenders under the age of 18. Rather than the disciplinary focus the criminal justice system takes, the juvenile justice system was created with the aim of helping juvenile delinquents from committing future crimes. As a part of the juvenile justice system, detention centers were created to house juvenile offenders who were being tried or have been found guilty of committing a crime and believed to be high-risk if released back into the community. These detention centers strived to maintain the goal of rehabilitation by providing youth with services such as educational courses, counseling, and substance abuse programs (Apel & Sweeten, 2010). Even though the initial establishment of the juvenile justice system became an accepted approach across the states and was viewed as a positive alternative for young offenders, with time, flaws within the system started to become more apparent. The laws enacted during the 1980s permitting states to charge youths as adults in attempts to address these issues caused a shift away from the system's primary objective to rehabilitate and assist young offenders. As a result, the juvenile detention centers that were once built around these pertinent goals have gradually disappeared in today's juvenile justice system.

Nowadays, due to the issues that have been presented within the system, juvenile detention centers are becoming more and more similar to adult prisons. Through several studies previously conducted, "It has been estimated that about three fourths of adolescents who have previously been incarcerated will reoffend, also known as recidivism" (Werner, 2001, 22).

Consequently, the juvenile justice system has begun to gravitate towards the disciplinary aspect of incarceration rather than taking advantage of the opportunities to rehabilitate young offenders. The increased use of detention centers has caused them to become overcrowded, short-staffed, and significantly less effective (Mallet, 2013). Many studies have suggested that the conditions, under which adolescents are being detained, may have harmful effects to their mental and physical well-being.

It is proposed that detention centers are not providing the necessary environments for developing adolescents. Developmental needs are crucial to the cognitive constructs of youth, especially to the delicate population of juvenile offenders. When these needs aren't met, the emotional, motivational, and intellectual health of youth may be negatively impacted (Lambie, 2013). It could be further argued that the current state of detention centers is contributing to the high rates of recidivism. The hostile environments and isolation often experienced in correctional facilities deprives adolescents of the necessary psychosocial exposure needed to thrive in the outside world (van deer Laan & Eichelsheim, 2013). Even though research doesn't support the current approach detention centers are taking to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents, the juvenile justice system has not made the necessary improvements to address this problem. Not only have detention centers shifted away from fulfilling the primary objectives of the juvenile justice system, but it also appears that incarceration is doing more harm than good to juvenile offenders (Werner, 2001). Throughout this paper, the mental influences of incarceration on youth will be explored in order to gain a deeper understanding about the current impact detention centers have on adolescents.

II. Developmental & Influencing Factors

Two of the primary purposes for establishing juvenile detention centers were to create a safer place for juvenile offenders and provide them with the necessary skills to achieve success

post-release. This shows that during the nineteenth century there was an understanding about the importance of differential treatment between juveniles and adults within the justice system. However, with the recent shift in the juvenile justice system, research revealing the importance of fulfilling developmental needs during adolescence has become overlooked. Many studies conducted on the brain development and functioning of adolescents have found major biological differences from adults. As discussed in an article by Hare et al. (2008), “Adolescence is a transition period from childhood to adulthood that is often characterized by emotional instability” (927). The article found that adolescents experience greater amygdala activity than children and adults, putting them at greater risk for poor emotional outcomes such as, suicide, anxiety, and depression (Hare et al., 2008). The impact the developing brain has on adolescents is an important factor to consider when determining how to treat those who have offended. The inappropriate approach could do more harm than good to the community at large and young offenders, which seems to be the current effect of the juvenile justice system. Not only has research conveyed the importance of development during adolescence, but it has also displayed the negative consequences incarceration can have on juveniles when developmental factors are no longer being considered.

In the literature review, “Imprisonment of Juveniles and Adolescents: Deficits and Demands for Developmental Research,” Werner Greve argues that incarceration on youth must not shift from being used as a developmental intervention. Greve finds that little is known about the psychological effects of incarceration on youth and proposes that a developmental approach be taken to assess these consequences. When viewed from a developmental point of view, shortcomings within the intended effects of detention centers are revealed. As mentioned earlier, detention centers are intended to provide juveniles with assistance to prevent future lives of crime. However, one incident that has consistently been found “is about three fourths of the

juveniles or adolescents that have once been incarcerated subsequently reoffend” (Greve, 2001, 24). One reason for this may be that detention centers are not actually providing effective treatment for developing juveniles but rather hindering their development. While little has been found about the clear mental impact of incarceration on youth, this article draws attention to the needs of developing adolescents and detention centers inability to meet those demands. For example, an essential component of development and adolescence is autonomy (Greve, 2001). However, in attempts to reduce the amount of delinquent acts committed by young offenders within communities, detention centers revoke this privilege from adolescents. It could only be assumed that the conflict between development and incarceration presents damaging psychological effects for imprisoned youth.

The research conducted by Lambie and Randell (2013), supports this assumption and the conclusions drawn from the literature review by Greve. Lambie and Randell declare, “Literature published since 2000 suggests that incarceration fails to meet the developmental and criminogenic needs of youth offenders and is limited in its ability to provide appropriate rehabilitation” (448). This literature review also discusses the impact of development on adolescents. As a result of their psychosocial immaturity, they are more susceptible to instances of impulsivity and peer influence. As mentioned in the previous article, social autonomy and integration have been found to be an important part of adolescence. Based on these findings, Lambie and Randell argue that the longer juveniles are incarcerated the more they are restricted from the opportunity to socially develop and “age out” (452) of criminal behavior. “Research has demonstrated that roughly a third of all juveniles will engage in some form of serious delinquent behavior, but many will naturally grow out of this behavior as part of their maturation process” (Lambie & Randell, 2013, 452). With the high occurrence of recidivism amongst incarcerated

youth, it again could be concluded that imprisonment interferes with the developmental needs of adolescents and decreases their likelihood for future positive outcomes.

In order to analyze the potential mental and cognitive effects of incarceration on youth, the population of those commonly incarcerated must first be understood. A high prevalence of child maltreatment and mental health has been observed amongst incarcerated youth (Coleman & Stewart, 2010). This means that a majority of incarcerated young offenders have experienced maltreatment during their childhood years and that a lot of them suffer from mental health issues while serving out their sentences in detention centers or prisons (Mallet, 2013). Both of these factors create for a sensitive population that should receive individualized care relative to other adolescents. Research has shown that detention centers are not often equipped to successfully assist psychologically impaired and mentally ill youth. With the shortcomings of the juvenile justice system, it is argued that incarceration does not help rehabilitate juvenile delinquents suffering from these issues. The experiences juveniles may undergo while being incarcerated might only contribute to the detrimental effects of their unfortunate life situations.

In a study conducted by Coleman and Stewart (2010), about 400 incarcerated youth were given questionnaires to assess the prevalence and impact of childhood maltreatment. A high prevalence of exposure to sexual and physical abuse during childhood was found within this sample. "Fifty-five percent of the sample indicated a history of a sexual experience with an adult" (345). Family mental health problems and family substance abuse were also found to be strong risk factors of incarceration during youth. As Coleman and Stewart (2010) highlight, each of these incidences found to commonly occur during childhood amongst incarcerated youth are traumatic experiences that often affect their psychological stability. For instance, sexual assault has been found to produce the highest rates of posttraumatic stress disorder, more than any other assault. Furthermore, studies have also found an association between sexual abuse and feelings

of anxiety and depression. Coleman and Stewart (2010) conclude, “The rates of childhood maltreatment are markedly higher in incarcerated youth, and these traumas are associated with internalizing mental health problems” (348).

The findings and conclusions drawn from the study conducted by Coleman and Stewart (2010) isn’t information that is unknown by the juvenile justice system. However, as mentioned in an article by Mallett (2013), “While this problem is increasingly recognized within the juvenile justice system and social work profession, often the impact and correlation to delinquency of these child and youth difficulties is underestimated” (1). This supports the claim that the juvenile justice system is not successfully addressing the actual needs of the general juvenile delinquent population. Learning disabilities have also been found as a predicting factor of incarceration during adolescence. “Reviews have found that adolescents with learning disabilities, compared to those adolescents without such learning disabilities, have two to three times greater risk of being involved in offending activities” (Mallett, 2013, 9). Based on these findings, it could be proposed that the current approach of the juvenile justice system either contributes to or causes the psychological problems a majority of juvenile delinquents experience to persist. These influencing factors need to be considered in order to better understand the potential psychological effects of incarceration on youth.

Prevalence of Psychiatric and Substance Use Disorders

I. Consequences of Incarceration: Emotional & Physical

The influencing factors that increase the risk of offending and incarceration during youth are issues that still affect juveniles even after being detained. “A large proportion of incarcerated youth suffer from mental health problems, such depression, suicide attempts and ideation, as well as drug and alcohol abuse” (Lambie, 2013, 453). Lambie and Randell (2013) suggest that the

environment experienced during incarceration exacerbates these issues. Adverse conditions such as bullying, isolation, boredom, and victimization have been found to commonly occur in detention centers. Additionally, mental health problems are generally not recognized during incarceration. Even with the high prevalence of incarcerated juveniles that suffer from substance abuse issues, statistics convey an alarming limitation about the lack of care provided by the justice system. According to the National Center on Addiction & Substance Abuse in 2004, “Drug and alcohol treatment was only available in 36% of juvenile correctional facilities in the United States, and of those incarcerated individuals who benefit from treatment, only 16% received it” (Lambie & Randell, 2013, 453). The fact that detention centers do not adequately provide treatment for a large amount of incarcerated youth reveals the negative effects incarceration can have on these juveniles. Rather than young substance abusers being sent to alternative facilities that can provide them with the appropriate care, they are being detained and forced to tackle these difficult circumstances alone.

In an article by Karnik et al. (2010), a study was conducted to assess the prevalence of psychiatric disorders among youth that have been incarcerated for nine months. Researchers believed that opportunities for treatment during incarceration would decrease levels of psychopathology throughout a nine-month time period. The participants chosen in this study included 790 incarcerated juveniles from diverse backgrounds and of both genders. The Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV was used for each of the participants in order to make diagnoses about mood, anxiety, and personality disorders. After conducting this study, researchers found that the results did not support their initial hypothesis. In fact, the exact opposite was found. Results showed higher rates of psychopathology amongst the group of participants after nine months of incarceration. Due to these findings, Karnik et al. (2010) indicate “that all youth who are incarcerated at the division of juvenile justice are in need of

psychiatric care, medication treatment, substance abuse treatment, and/or milieu therapy in the highly structured setting of the division of juvenile justice” (248). Both articles identify the crucial need for psychological treatment within correctional facilities. Without this care, the psychological health of juvenile delinquents is being hindered during incarceration rather than improved upon.

While the psychological difficulties juvenile delinquents experience prior to detainment have been shown to impact the effects of incarceration, experiences during imprisonment also play a large role on the end results of imprisonment. As discussed previously, instances of violence and bullying are not uncommon during incarceration. Experiencing such adverse situations can cause psychological complications to arise. Dierkhsing, Lane, and Natsuaki (2013) conducted a study to investigate the effects of emotional experiences during juvenile incarceration. Researchers hypothesized that there would be a high prevalence of abuse during incarceration and an association found between these rates and experiences of social and emotional maladjustment. Participants for this study were composed of young adults who have been incarcerated for a crime within the past year. A sample size of sixty-two, recruited from a voluntary reentry program in Southern California was included in the study. Interviews were conducted to examine experiences of abuse during incarceration and responses of posttraumatic stress and depression as a result of these occurrences. Researchers found that “the majority of youth reported some form of direct abuse during incarceration (77.4%); an account by one youth described, ‘I got my collar broken by a staff at camp.’” (Dierkhising, Lane, & Natsuaki, 2013, 5). These results support previous findings that indicate high incidences of abuse within detention centers. Furthermore, an association was found between experiences of abuse during incarceration and the development of posttraumatic stress disorder and symptoms of depression.

The psychological effects incarceration can have on juvenile delinquents when adverse factors are presented have become evident through research. However, studies have also been conducted to identify characteristics of a more advantageous environment that present better opportunities to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents. For example, a volatile and violent environment is not adequate for juvenile delinquents to improve themselves and receive the appropriate care many of them need. Researchers Laan and Eichelshiem (2013) search for factors that have been found to help juveniles during incarceration. The level of adaptation to imprisonment amongst juvenile delinquents was studied as a determining factor in the effectiveness of detention centers. According to Laan and Eichelshiem (2013), “Adaptation to imprisonment involves feelings of safety, autonomy, well-being, stress or misbehavior among detained offenders” (424). Poor adaptations to incarceration were found to increase the possibilities for negative psychological effects, such as, anxiety, depression, thoughts of suicide, and aggression. It is believed that incarceration would be more effective if the quality of life among juvenile delinquents were to be improved upon during imprisonment. Creating positive experiences for juvenile delinquents would increase opportunities for motivation and reflection rather than the negative feelings often developed in response to the unsafe environments currently found within detention centers. Based on these findings, emotional experiences during incarceration can be deemed as a contributor to the mental consequences of incarceration on youth.

The emotional experiences by juvenile delinquents during incarceration should not be the only concern when assessing the effects of incarceration. Physical health has also been found to impact psychological well-being. In general, the healthier an individual feels physically, the healthier they will also feel mentally. When health issues are presented, such as infectious diseases, feelings of stress and anxiety begin to develop. This phenomenon is important when

considering the impact of incarceration. It is proposed that the physical health juvenile delinquents experience during incarceration will also have an impact on their psychological health. Unfortunately, evidence reveals a high prevalence of infectious diseases and chronic health issues within correctional facilities. It could be assumed that with the overall lack of treatment provided in detention centers, these issues are not adequately addressed. As a result, serious long-term effects may arise to the physical and psychological health of juvenile delinquents once incarcerated.

Massoglia (2008) conducted a longitudinal study to explore the relationship between imprisonment and the overall health conditions of inmates. His research also reveals a high prevalence of diseases within detention centers. “For instance, one study reported that 15 percent of all individuals infected with HIV and approximately 40 percent of all individuals infected with hepatitis C passed through correctional institutions” (Massoglia, 57). This proves that juvenile delinquents are at an exposed risk of acquiring diseases during incarceration. The relationship between stressors and health issues present damaging outcomes on personal perception from an increased exposure to infectious diseases. Conversely, the stressful experiences most incarcerated juveniles experience have been found to increase their chances of acquiring health issues, such as hypertension, and infectious diseases. In assessing the impact of incarceration on inmates, Massoglia (2008) conceptualizes correctional facilities as neighborhoods that impact everyone included in the community. Detention centers are viewed as “neighborhoods characterized by high levels of fear, incivility, and disorder negatively affect health by exposing individuals to high levels of stress” (65). This view supports the claim that an increased likelihood for the physical health of juvenile delinquents to be negatively impacted during incarceration will also cause them to be affected psychologically. This risk presented in correctional facilities does not contribute to the rehabilitation of young offenders but further

contributes to their difficult life situations. If the juvenile justice system does not investigate and address the high prevalence of diseases and illness within jails, juvenile delinquents will continue to be psychologically harmed by the conditions presented during incarceration.

II. Post-release Effects

Post-release behaviors can serve as a strong indicator in determining if the primary objectives of the juvenile justice system are being met. In a study conducted by Werner (2001), it was estimated that 75% of adolescents would reoffend. This statistic correlates with many other studies that have found the lasting effects of juvenile incarceration to be damaging. Research provides many findings that deem juvenile delinquents as an especially vulnerable population. Despite this fact, detention centers commonly fail to meet the developmental, educational, and mental healthcare needs of juvenile delinquents (Lambie, 2013). As concluded by Lambie (2013), “Incarceration impairs positive psychosocial development and transition into adulthood, resulting in an impaired ability to reintegrate successfully into the community, and a number of negative adult outcomes” (456). Such effects could possibly explain the high prevalence of recidivism. There seems to be a strong connection between the difficulties juvenile delinquents often face after incarceration and their reversion back to criminal behaviors.

However, not only does the lack of assistance detention centers provide negatively affect the future development of juvenile delinquents, but their experiences while incarcerated have also been found to have enduring effects on their mental condition. For instance, the dangerous environments often found in correctional facilities can cause young offenders to develop psychological issues, such as posttraumatic stress disorder. As reported by Dierkhising et al. (2013), “More frequent reports of abuse exposure during incarceration are positively associated with posttraumatic stress reactions, depression symptoms, and continued criminal involvement post release” (3). These findings about the common post-release behaviors and psychological

disorders presented after incarceration reveal that youth are not successfully being rehabilitated or provided with the necessary tools to achieve future success. Another factor that could affect the post release behaviors of juvenile delinquents is post release support. The lack of support juveniles may receive after incarceration could influence decisions to commit further offenses. In many aspects, there are insufficiencies in the amount of care juvenile delinquents should receive in attempts to induce more positive post release effects of incarceration.

Discussion

I. Further Research & Implications

More than just providing possible conclusions that can be drawn about the psychological effects of incarceration on youth, this literature review has also exhibited the need for further research regarding this topic. While mental disorders, learning disabilities, and child maltreatment have been identified as high risk factors for juvenile incarceration, little research has been conducted on these causal relationships, while controlling for other risk factors (Mallet, 2013). Discovering the direct effects of these factors on incarceration, if any, would allow for more specific preventative measures to be taken. There are also few studies that address psychological effects of incarceration on juveniles by gender. It is suspected that young females would respond differently to the conditions of imprisonment than males would. Identifying these distinctions between genders may help establish an emphasis in treatment for each group, with the hope for more effective outcomes. These are just two of the several areas that need to be investigated in order to fill in the empirical gaps. Many of the articles discussed throughout this review indicated that not enough research has been conducted about this issue. Consequently, additional research serves as a prominent component towards the needed reform within the juvenile justice system.

Taking into consideration the findings about the effects of incarceration on youth could help devise alternatives for the juvenile justice system to use in providing more effective treatment for juvenile delinquents. As declared by Lambie et al. (2013), “For any intervention to be effective, it must address all risk factors or criminogenic needs, and thus be tailored to the specific aspects of an individual’s ‘social ecology’ that are key to their offending behaviors”(455). Generally, the risk factors and criminogenic needs of juvenile delinquents include instances of child maltreatment, poverty, and mental disorders (Dierkhsing et al., 2013). One alternative presented in the article by Lambie et al. (2013) to address such issues was a community-based approach. Utilizing support from the community would create a more collaborative approach towards the treatment of young offenders. Community-based programs that incorporate cognitive behavioral therapy, education, and substance abuse treatment would assist youth while addressing their need for psychosocial development (Lambie et al, 2013).

Research even points to improvements that can be made within detention centers for juvenile offenders that are considered too high-risk to remain in the community. It is believed that juvenile delinquents would greatly benefit from incarceration if a safer environment were provided. Despite the Prison Rape Elimination Act that attempts to protect inmates from sexual abuse, it does not help protect against other types of abuse and does not always guarantee immediate protection (Dierkhsing et al., 2013). As a result, incarcerated juveniles would greatly benefit from additional policies that would address other forms of abuse, along with an adequate amount of trained staff to handle these issues. Implementing such changes could further assist the juvenile justice system in attaining their goal of rehabilitating and providing youth the necessary tools to obtain future success, rather than contribute to the hindrance of adolescent’s psychological stability.

II. Conclusion

One of the major discoveries this literature review presents is the need for change within the juvenile justice system in order to provide more effective treatment for juvenile delinquents. The current disciplinary approach of the juvenile justice system and the unsuitable environments often presented in detention centers have been shown to negatively affect young offenders. Research has found that development in the brain still occurs during adolescence, making juveniles highly reactive to their environment and experiences. This finding points to the developmental factors that need be taken under consideration when determining the best approach for detention centers to take. The adverse situations often experienced by juvenile delinquents, such as encounters with abuse or neglect during childhood, suggests that a more therapeutic technique be used rather than the disciplinary approach detention centers are currently taking. This factor can be linked to adolescents psychological reactions to experiences of incarceration. Unfortunately, many instances of abuse and diseases are reported within correctional facilities. As a result, it can be inferred that the psychological health of previously impaired juvenile delinquents are further hindered by their experiences while incarcerated. Additionally, common experiences of juvenile delinquents after incarceration such as, the development of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression provide further evidence to exhibit the negative psychological effects of imprisonment.

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Virginia Powell

My name is Virginia Powell and I am a third year Psychology major at University of California, Merced. Throughout my college experience, I have been introduced to many different areas of Psychology, but have found great interest within the sector of Forensics. I have explored this interest through a Forensics Psychology course offered at my university and plan to pursue this area of study by enrolling in a Clinical Psychology doctorate program with a concentration in Forensics. This literature review provides me with the opportunity to develop deeper insight about the often-overlooked issues presented in the legal system. I have learned a lot about the corruption that takes place in the legal system and how impactful the law can be on people's lives. I am interested to discover how people, specifically youth, are psychologically impacted by imprisonment. Adolescents contain the great ability to grow and prosper when provided with the necessary tools and environment. This highlights the importance in becoming more aware of the effects of interventions, such as incarceration, on this population. My interests and future goals have fueled my dedication to thoroughly investigate and report one of the many pressing issues presented within the justice system.