The Problem With Prisons

Incarceration is the most common punishment doled out in modern America, and 5% of Americans will be imprisoned at some point throughout their life. In the past, these prisons possessed disgusting conditions and often included forced labor to impel the prisoners to be obedient and convince them that they should do whatever was necessary to remain outside of these cesspools in the future. Although this concept usually worked, in recent years the prison system seems to have become an ineffective punishment for many crimes, since many convicts who are released are reincarcerated within a short period of time. In her article, “In America, mass incarceration has caused more crime than it’s prevented,” economist and experienced journalist Allison Schrager discusses the negative effects of this practice and specifically what causes it to be so detrimental to individual prisoners. Award winning journalist and author Christian Jarrett builds on these claims and does in depth analysis of the total transformation that takes place in most prisoners in his article, “How prison changes people.” In order to offer some explanation for this confounding idea that incarceration creates criminals, Philip Zimbardo, psychologist and professor at Stanford University, examines his findings from an experiment he conducted during his time at Stanford in the article, “The Stanford Prison Experiment.” The majority of Americans would say that convicts are simply bad people, otherwise they would not
be in prison, but upon closer examination the concept that human nature and, ironically, obedience seem to be causing this recidivism is revealed.

The rates of mass incarceration are much higher in the United States than in any other free and developed nation. Most people would believe these high rates would benefit society, since criminals are being removed from the streets, which removes their ability to commit crimes. However, in the last 40 years while the increase in incarceration rates has occurred, crime rates have not fallen, and have even climbed in some states and cities. Many experts have tried to explain this phenomenon, and the most common answer stems from a change deep within people during their time in these strongholds of obedience. Any amount of time spent in these prisons causes the human mind to adapt, and in some cases this adaptation negatively affects the prisoners after they have served their sentence. Psychologists have called this adaptation *prisonization*, and it can lead to former prisoners exhibiting traits such as, “distrusting others, difficulty engaging in relationships [and] hampered decision-making” upon release (Jarrett). These adverse symptoms all make a person less pleasant to be around, but the main part of this syndrome that leads to recidivism is the hampered decision-making. This symptom in particular causes released prisoners to be more impulsive and more easily influenced by others, both of which can lead to them committing crimes alone or after being persuaded by someone else.

Although becoming more impulsive can happen even after a short stay in a prison, people are more likely to reoffend based on the amount of time they have spent incarcerated. According to a study done at the University Michigan, “each year in prison increases the odds that a prisoner [will] reoffend by 5.6% a quarter” (Shrager). Even if the crime was minor and the
sentence was not extremely long, this number held true. This fact relates to the information discovered by Jarrett, specifically the statement that even a short and relatively easy stay in prison changes someone’s personality traits. More than the change in personality, a stint in prison completely destroys a person’s earnings potential. Being convicted of a felony disqualifies someone from certain jobs, housing, and even voting, effectively removing them from normal society. In the aforementioned study, “Mueller-Smith estimates that each year in prison reduces the odds of post-release employment by 24% and increases the odds you’ll live on public assistance” (Shrager). Additionally, even prisoners in on minor charges are exposed to more hardened criminals that may teach criminal skills. The difficulty of finding legitimate employment paired with the know-how to lead a criminal lifestyle makes crime a better alternative.

In order to force obedience and deter people from a life of crime, the consequences must be severe enough to deter innocent people from committing any crimes in the first place. However, this scenario is not taking place within the current system. When looking at juvenile delinquents today, there is not much of a consequence before they turn 18 due to the fact that the most they can receive is a few months in a juvenile detention center, and all crimes are sealed in their record once they finally turn 18. Upon turning 18, the prison sentences can be much longer and the consequences of being an ex-convict come into play. Because of this fact, one would expect the impulsive nature of juveniles to defer to their obedience to the law due to fear of suffering one of these consequences.

Deference not only to the peers, but also to institutional pressures are another factor in the high rate of recidivism. Social psychologist Philip Zimbardo examines this fact in his prison
experiment. Zimbardo took students from Stanford and randomly assigned them to act as guards or prisoners. After six days, the guards had deferred so greatly to the pressure to maintain order that they had gone against their own morals and started to abuse the prisoners. These findings proved something that many other psychologists had speculated in the past, which is the fact that people will go to extreme lengths if they are convinced by a higher authority that it is the right course of action in a given situation. The students assigned as prisoners also underwent severe changes in the six days, and one student was released after a mere 36 hours due to “extreme depression, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying, and fits of rage” (Zimbardo 112). These traits of disorganized thinking and fits of rage that began to present themselves during the study are also common in many prisoners today, contributing to their increased likelihood of committing another crime after being released. In his article, Zimbardo states that “the potential social value of this study derives precisely from the fact that normal, healthy, educated young men could be so radically transformed under the institutional pressures of a ‘prison experiment’” (116). These same institutional pressures are exerted on prisoners every day that they are forced to spend incarcerated. This fact is another reason prisons fail to rehabilitate the people within them.

In modern America, the number of people incarcerated has soared to astronomical levels. Even though many criminals are behind bars, the crime rates throughout the country are not lowering. Incarceration is supposed to be used as a deterrent for criminals, and in the past this method was effective. However, the world is changing more and more every day, and the same old methods of handling delinquents simply is not working any more. The prison system would most likely benefit from making changes in order to either focus the majority of its efforts on
rehabilitating current prisoners to allow them to continue to live their lives upon release, or formulating a different consequence, besides incarceration, that will actually deter criminals.
Works Cited

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