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Punishment and Rehabilitation Within the Prison System

Preface

Sasha was an 18-year old young woman who suffered from bipolar disorder. During one of her manic episodes she committed a felony and when she was arrested she became violent with the cops. She was subsequently charged with assault as well as the crime she was originally arrested for and her sentence was lengthened by nine months. When in prison, Sasha had to wait two weeks for her medication to be approved by the prison she was in, and her manic episodes became frequent. She was locked away in a padded cell and put on suicide watch for 24 hours a day. The only human interaction that she had was when she was visited by her psychiatrist. Her mother and sister claimed that they knew nothing about what condition Sasha was in, and that the prison did not communicate when she would be released and what she would need after she was released. When Sasha's mom and sister came to pick her up when her sentence was over, her sister recalled that Sasha was crying and screaming and seemed worse than ever before.

Introduction

In this essay I will be focusing on a few different topics that fall under the general category of incarceration. I will start by discussing what life is like for inmates who struggle with mental illness in United States' prisons. I then move on to detail what happens in an ideal psychiatric hospital and how, although they can be dull and dangerous, these are safer than

prisons for convicted individuals with mental illness due to the fact that they are run by medical professionals instead of prison guards. I subsequently move on to compare and contrast United States prison system philosophies and conditions with Scandinavian prison system philosophies and conditions. I conclude by writing about my process of becoming inspired by the above topics and the journey my interests and research took me on.

Mental Illness in Prison

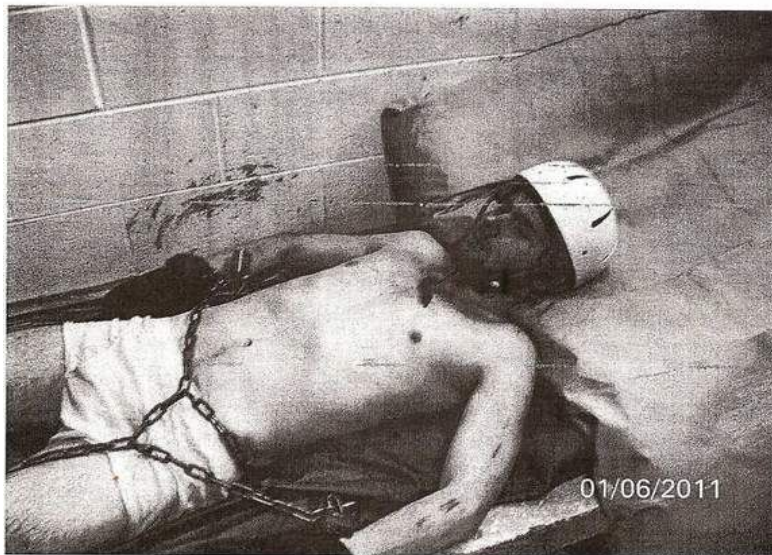
Mentally ill criminals are offered very few opportunities to reform. They are given very little leeway when it comes to the punishment for a crime they may have committed during a psychotic break when they had no control over their actions and reactions. The United States justice system punishes them as if they have the mental control of criminals without an active mental illness. Anyone who commits a prosecutable crime must have some mental unrest. At the same time, however, I will be specifically writing about individuals who suffer from more severe mental conditions, such as schizophrenia, mania and some cases of bipolar disorder and dementia. Prison is not safe for these people and they need to go to a facility that does not worsen their mindset.



Many American prisons put their severely mentally ill inmates on suicide watch in a 22 to 24 hour windowless room with only their thoughts to keep them occupied. (Guy, 2016) There is plenty of research to back up the fact that putting these people in such conditions triggers their mania or psychosis. Their transition to prison facilities is worsened by the fact that many prisons take two to three weeks to approve inmates' medications and provide access to a psychiatrist. (Rooted In Rights "Inmates with Mental illness Tell Their Stories |AVID Jail Project") There are generally one to two psychiatrists for an entire prison population, and due to the very unbalanced ratio of health professionals to prisoners, mentally ill prisoners do not get the individual attention they need. In many cases mentally ill inmates are dispersed throughout the prison and once a month they are visited by a psychiatrist who gives them their medication, and occasionally a psychotherapist comes by. This is not the fault of the mental health specialists employed by a prison, or even the prison itself; rather, the government is not providing prisons with enough funding dedicated to the mental health of inmates. This fact relates to another important social issue: the funding for prisons is coming from our tax revenues and taxing people more is not

sustainable for many United States citizens; a solution might be to tax the rich, however that is a whole other essay topic.

Another concern with incarcerating mentally ill criminals is how they are treated by the guards. The guards in prison are trained to use violence and be intimidating. The intimidation and violence methods might work in dealing with inmates who do not suffer from an active or severe mental illness, but the actively mentally ill inmates generally do not feel safe in the prison environment to begin with so they are more likely to lash out and in doing increase the chances of getting attacked by the guards. The guards are not trained to work with mentally ill people; they are trained to keep prisoners compliant and out of trouble and prison staff safe. A guard's job is largely based on asserting control, but that is not the correct way to treat an actively mentally ill person and has at times resulted in fatal injury and death from the guards beating the individual into submission. (Fault Lines "Us Mental illness in America's Prisons ")





The psychiatrist that I interviewed told me about a tragic case. A schizophrenic young man broke into his grandfather's laundromat and stole all of the money from the machines during one of his psychotic breaks. When he was arrested, he lashed out at the police and was charged with assault as well as theft. The grandfather wanted to get his grandson some legitimate help by sending him to a psychiatric hospital where he could face his sentence in the safest way possible. The police told the grandfather that it would take a few months to secure a spot for the young man in such a facility, and meanwhile he would get the treatment he needed at the county jail and be perfectly safe for those few months. A couple of weeks into the grandson's time at the jail, the grandfather received the terrible news that his grandson had been beaten to death by one of the guards. This story is a testament to the fact that guards are not trained to be MTAs (Medical Technical Assistant) and should, therefore, not be handling mentally ill prisoners. In a psychiatric hospital or prison the inmates are overseen by medical professionals, not guards.

Psychiatric prisons and hospitals are dangerous, but the officials are trained to give the inmates space, and to approach them carefully. The psychiatrist that I talked to told me that most of the time when the police are arresting someone they will chase them, and taser them or pin them down, because they are trained to protect themselves and others. But when police do this to mentally ill people there is a higher risk of killing them. Mental health professionals are trained to run after mentally ill people but to stay away from them and let them tire out so they can approach them with less of a risk of scaring the person and being lashed out at.

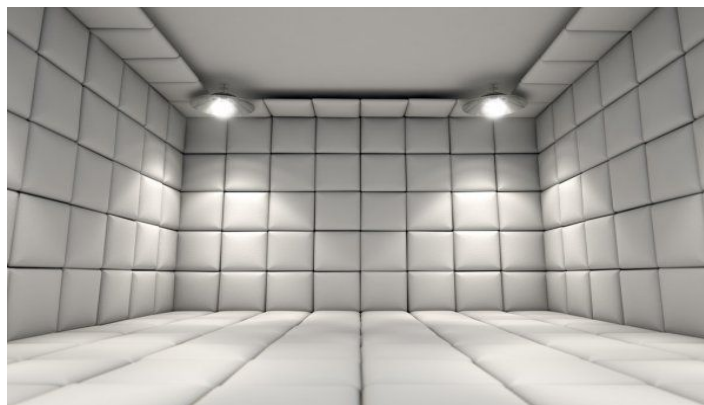
Psychiatric Hospital/Prison Solution

In an ideal example of a psychiatric prison there are two categories of prisoners: inpatients and outpatients. Inpatients are actively quite mentally ill. They are kept in isolation and yet still visited by their psychiatrist, up to as many as three times per day. Providing an actively mentally ill person with an education would be difficult, so in this case that is not a focus of these types of facilities or programs. Outpatients are inmates who suffer from conditions like depression and anxiety, and in some cases, coping with the distress associated with transsexuality. Outpatients are separated from other prisoners, but they have more access to social and interactive opportunities. Not only do they meet with psychiatrists, psychotherapists and psychologists, but they also have opportunities to take psychoeducational classes that educate them on the nature of their psychiatric challenges and also teach effective coping skills.

There are a few steps to psychoeducation: the first is to educate the individual on how to treat his/her/their mental illness, which is intended to give the individual hope and motivate him/her/them to take a greater interest in self-understanding and self-development. Learning how

their brains work, identifying what triggers them and how they can counteract the voices of their mental illnesses are all fundamental to helping them better deal with their mental illness. In the second step, the individual is tested and assessed for overall intelligence level and aptitude, which can help them identify and learn more about their capabilities and skills. The third step builds on the previous two and helps outpatient program inmates focus on and start to prepare for what job or career they might be interested in pursuing once their sentence is over.

If outpatients show they are benefitting from these classes and they are motivated to learn, there will be classes offered about broader educational topics in a group setting. Learning about a topic other than mental illness has proved to be of value to people with less severe or active mental illness. New topics provide a way for these people to broaden their identity and become identified by their passions rather than just their mental illness. As well as group classes being helpful, group therapy can also often be beneficial to certain outpatients. Group therapy increases an individual's support circle as well as allowing him/her/them to develop more empathy towards other people and their struggles. It also gives an individual the opportunity for other people to rely on his/her/their support, which helps the individual realize that he/she/they play an important role in the lives of the people around them.



(room that inmates are locked in during a psychotic break or a manic state)

Inpatients are locked in their room when his/her/their mental illness is very active because inpatients can be dangerously violent. People who suffer from mania sometimes experience a time period when they have flare-ups and need to be kept in solitary confinement until they return to a rational state. Schizophrenics need to be locked in their cell during their psychotic breaks; but other than those periods they are safe to interact with people. Keeping people with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia locked away at all times can cause them to experience concentrated anxiety which exacerbates their distress. They benefit from interacting with other people during their lucid states; it allows them to get out of their mind and focus on playing cards or going for a walk or having a conversation. For example, one of the psychiatrists I talked to, Dr. Gonnick-Hallows, used to work in a psychiatric asylum and said one of his patients was capable of carrying out a conversation and playing cards with the other inmates while he was not psychotic, and he really benefited from that opportunity.



The United States Prison System versus The Scandinavian Prison System

I decided to broaden my research to study the American prison system in contrast to the Scandinavian prison system. The incarceration rate in the United States as of 2017 was roughly 750 people for every group of 100,000, which is the highest recorded rate on a global scale, which makes the number of incarcerated people as of 2017, roughly 1.5 million. In contrast, the ultra-liberal Scandinavian prison system in Norway has an incarceration rate of 75 people for every group of 100,000, and out of Norway's population of 5 million that means that only roughly 4,000 people were in prisons as of 2017. In the past decade, the number of incarcerated persons in Sweden decreased by 2,000, from 6,000 to 4,000 in a population of 9.4 million, which has resulted in the closing of several Swedish prisons.

As far as recidivism rates (reincarceration rates), the US has the highest percentage of reincarceration: within 5 years of being let out of prison, a whopping 76.6% of criminals in the US are recidivated, which is the highest recorded rate in the world. Norway has the lowest recidivism rate globally, reaching an average low of 20%. Sweden has the second lowest recidivism rate, which has rested at roughly 37.9% for the past 5 years .

The Scandinavian prison system focuses on rehabilitation, which, based on the previously mentioned statistics, seems to be effective. Their prisons are places where criminals receive help and are given opportunities to change and work in order to create a better chance of having a secure life for themselves in the future by taking classes and learning new skills. Halden is a maximum security prison built on the Swedish-Norwegian border, and like many Scandinavian prisons it is committed to the futures of their inmates. Each inmate has his/her/their own room furnished with a bed, a refrigerated TV and a desk. It is common for a Scandinavian prison to

have a fully equipped music studio, commercial kitchen and wood shop; not to mention, the prisoners have easy access to college courses. “Our role is not to punish. The punishment is the prison sentence: they have been deprived of their freedom. The punishment is that they are with us.” (Nils Oberg, Director-General of Sweden's prison and probation system.)



The United States press has painted a negative picture of the Scandinavian prison system, accusing it of being too agreeable, undemanding, unsophisticated and ignorant. It is true that Halden and other Scandinavian prisons are designed differently than American prisons. Along with the opportunities and facilities within each prison many Scandinavian prisons do not even have security fences. “There were no coils of razor wire in sight, no lethal electric fences, no towers manned by snipers—nothing violent, threatening or dangerous.” (Benko, “The Radical Humaneness of Norway's Halden Prison”, *New York Times*, 2015)



In contrast to the Scandinavian philosophy, the United States focuses on punishment, and assurance that their inmates suffer and pay a price for their crime. In general, the American criminal justice system sees crime as the fault of the prisoner alone; it does not believe that sociocultural forces play a central role. Thus, the guards and other prison officials do not believe that the inmates should be treated with respect or as a civilian; instead, they ensure that the inmates are reminded of their crimes and mistakes multiple times per day. This makes it difficult for those prisoners who will be released to move on and focus on preparing for life outside of prison. “If you come to prison, your privacy is gone. The inmate has given up the right to be in society by violating the law. That person should not be given a situation where we are concerned about how they would feel if somebody walks by their cell and sees them on the toilet. Who cares how they feel?” (James Conway, American prison system official.)



When I interviewed the psychiatrist Dr. Gonnick Hallows, he said that he had noticed that, paradoxically, the prisoners who were incarcerated for life seemed to be the most stable, and I wonder if that is because they have accepted their situation and they do not have to prepare to go back out into the world. They can make the decision to make the rest of their life meaningful, and they have plenty of time to do so.

A further example of the liberality of the Scandinavian prison system is the trust they have in their prisoners. The officials and guards treat their inmates as normal civilians as much as they can. There is no use of force against prisoners by officials which allows the two groups to build up trust and even have friendly relations. Yet another example of the trust that the Scandinavian prison system has in their inmates is that they provide what the US prison system would see as weapons available for the prisoners to use. Prisoners are given a full set of metal

cutlery -- not just plastic spoons as the US system provides -- and, as well as the normal daily cutlery, there is a kitchen fully equipped with chopping knives, cleavers and all of the appliances usually found in a kitchen. There is also a wood shop that houses nails, chainsaws and axes.

In the US prisons, the inmates are not allowed any object that could be used as a weapon. They are only given plastic spoons to eat with. They are not allowed wire hangers, zip ties, plastic bags or heavy objects. I am in awe of the trust that the officials have in the Scandinavian prisoners, but I also understand the ban of potentially dangerous objects in the US prisons. I do think that if trust was a value that the US prison system cultivated that maybe the ban could be lessened; however, I do not blame the US for enforcing that ban. The environment in the US prisons is such that both the guards/officials as well as the prisoners are prepared to fight for their lives. It is not a place where trust can be easily introduced; a lot of work would need to be done in a long process to slowly create an environment where that kind of trust can develop. But most importantly, the core focus of the US prison system has to change from punishment to rehabilitation with an emphasis on restorative justice.

The American criminal justice system has been relying on mass incarceration; there are more people locked up in the US than any other country -- and yet the crime rate is no higher than many countries all over the world. Mass incarceration is based on four factors. The first contributing factor is overpopulation; the ratio of criminals to prison space is not equal. The second component is that there are people who receive sentences that are longer than they should be, meaning that it is harder to move people out of the prison system than it would be if individuals received appropriate, shorter term sentences. This also results in the prisons having to put multiple people in a cell, which is not only dangerous due to prisoners' states of mind, but is

also unsanitary. The third factor is that the justice system is imprisoning people who probably shouldn't actually be in prison -- like a certain percentage of the mentally ill inmate population, or those with substance abuse issues. This is somewhat related to the fourth component, which is the fact that some homeless people try to get arrested so they can have free shelter, food and a place to sleep. This is not true for all, however, as there are, in fact, many homeless people who do not seek refuge in jail because they either do not want to give up their freedom, they do not want to be separated from their community or the fact that going to jail would prohibit drug use.

The American prison system is not all bad, it does have some rehabilitation offerings for its prisoners and many inmates find them helpful and enjoyable. The prisoners have access to academic classes based at the prison as well as Junior College courses, and many prisoners get their bachelors or masters degree from within prison. Prisoners can also apply for jobs within the prison. Some of the common job opportunities are construction, plumbing and repair, and even though the pay is around \$0.86 per job in California, it gives the prisoner a creative outlet, a purpose and a commitment. Jamie Worthington, San Quentin Vice Principal told me that some of the short-term inmates have the opportunity to be a volunteer firefighter during fire season. Although there are limited counselors within a prison, the prisoners do have access to emotional, social and academic counselling. Although it is difficult to eat a balanced diet in prison there are plenty of opportunities for inmates to stay active. And lastly, there are a variety of occasions for inmates to create a community bond: religious services, volunteering, as well as group classes and games. (ConnectNetwork).

The Story of My Process

I have had an interest in criminal mindset since I started reading murder mystery books. I have always been fascinated by a killer's motive, which often seemed to be jealousy. The crimes that I read about in books were either meticulously planned out step by step or executed in the heat of a moment. Once I was old enough to stomach it, I started researching famous killers such as Jack the Ripper and Ted Bundy, however, I was not so interested in how they killed, but why they killed, why they picked a certain demographic of victims and why they developed a signature way of killing. In short I was fascinated by the psychology of the killer and the criminal in general. What would make a person shoplift or hijack a vehicle, commit murder, rape or assault? I was convinced that not all crimes were committed out of malicious intent.

I initially thought that this topic would either be too complicated, broad or touchy. But ultimately my genuine curiosity took over and I realized that my passion would help me stay motivated. I decided that I wanted to start doing some basic research on the American criminal justice and prison systems to help narrow down my interest and solidify a topic question. I interviewed Jamie Worthington, the Vice Principal in the education department at San Quentin. She talked about the layout of the prison, the basics of the security system and explained her job responsibilities. She told me some amazing and eye-opening stories about what it is like to work in a prison. That first interview helped me direct my research which in turn allowed me to identify what I initially wanted to focus my project on. I wanted to study the opportunities that the United States prison system offers its inmates in terms of education, reformation and preparation for release. However the topic was not as interesting as I originally thought it would be; it was broad and yet not as complex as I was expecting.

I zoomed my research lens in even further by bringing it back even further than my initial curiosity about the mindset of the criminal, and to a less trodden path: what happens to severely mentally ill criminals within the American prison system? Is the way that the criminal justice system treats criminals with certain mental illnesses effective? I consequently learned about the violent American Prison system that values punishment instead of rehabilitation. This led me to be inspired to research a region that is renowned for its successful social justice and criminal reform: Scandinavia.

The Wrap Up

As I mentioned in a previous paragraph, the American prison system does offer some good opportunities for inmates such as access to an education and trade work. However, I do believe that there are some other key aspects that need to be addressed, like aiming to lower the recidivism rate, amending its core value system, and working to model its restorative justice program after the obviously successful Scaninavian system.

Before this project, my thoughts on how prisoners were treated were garbled: part of me believed that prisoners were receiving the punishment they deserved, but another part of me understood that punishment should not be the only purpose of prison. I started my project with a vague idea of what I wanted to research, but as I conducted more research, the more I wanted to learn. My research helped me come to the conclusion that the punishment did not always fit the crime, and beyond that, the punishment did not always take into consideration the mindset in which the felony was carried out. This project has confirmed that when I am interested in a topic I will live and breathe it. Hearing real life stories and gaining very trusted knowledge from the

people that I interviewed has helped transform my fascination with the psyche of a criminal into a desire to play an active role in educating those around me on the United States Justice System and what needs to be improved for the mentally ill prisoners.

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Dr. Gonick-Hallows is a psychiatrist who has worked in a county jail as well as having private clients who were in and out of psychiatric hospitals. In my interviews with him he answered many of my questions and was very eager to help. He is very knowledgeable and he has had first hand experience working with mentally ill inmates.

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Jamie Wothington is the Vice Principal of the educational program at San Quentin State Prison. She was the first person that I interviewed and she was very helpful in introducing me to the basics of the prison layout and what her job is. She told some amazing stories about her experience within the prison.

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Full Disclosure:

All of the images in this paper were taken from the internet. I did not take any of them myself.

To find these, or similar images the reader can use search phrases such as "Prison Guard Brutality Towards Mentally Ill Inmates", "American Prison Conditions" and "Scandinavian Prison Conditions".

