

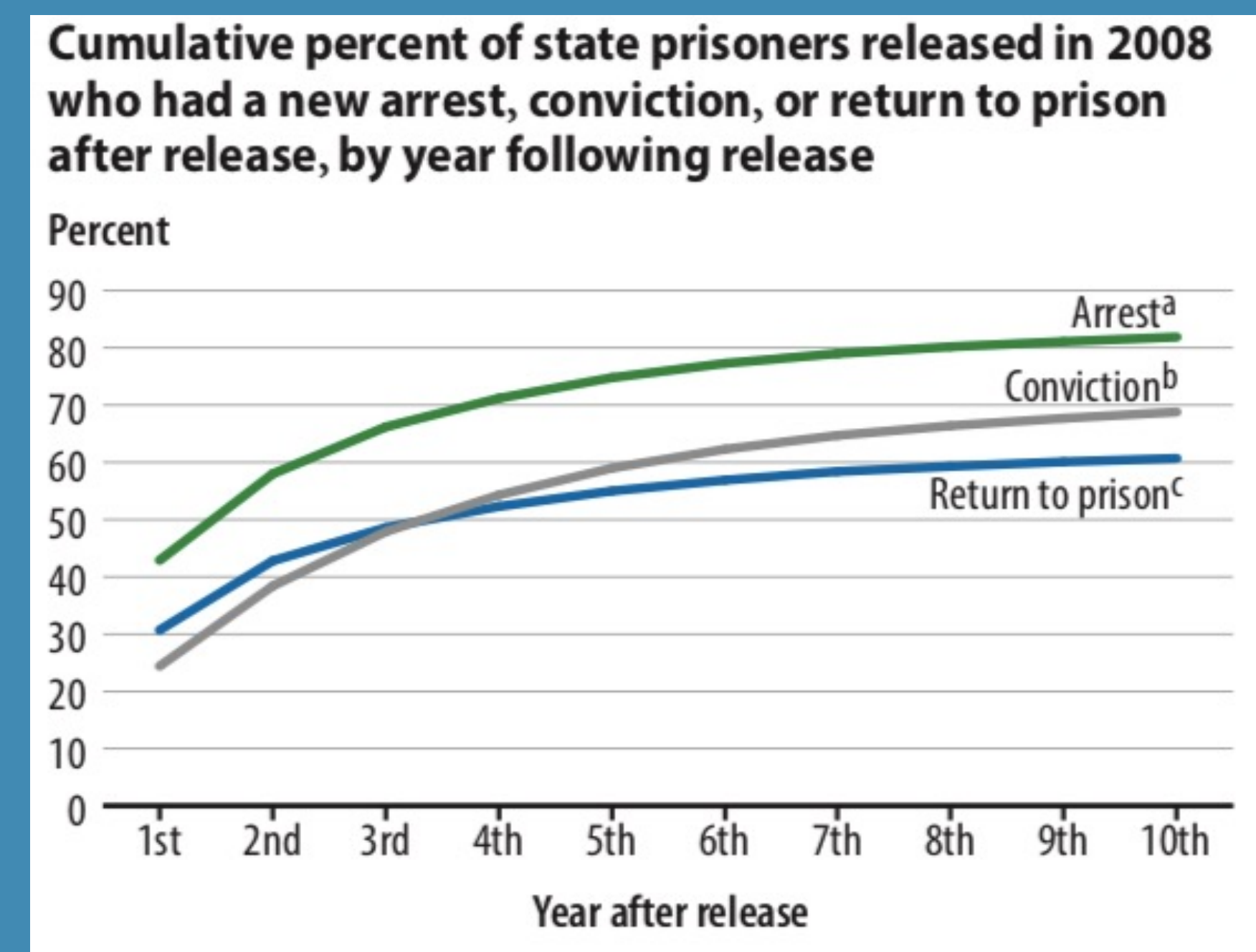


COLLATERAL BENEFITS? EXPLORING PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF INCARCERATION AMONG A SAMPLE OF INCARCERATED MEN WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

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Abstract

This research study works to understand the perceived benefits of incarceration, in dealing with inmates who suffer from substance use disorders (SUD). Substance abuse is defined as the overindulgence in or dependence on addictive substances, especially alcohol, or drugs. The US has the highest rates of incarceration among countries, with extremely high rates of recidivism as well. Recidivism is defined as the tendency for a convicted criminal to re-offend. Contributing to recidivism is SUDs, which around 65% of incarcerated individuals have. We know that there are many collateral consequences of incarceration, such as difficulty with employment and housing, poor health conditions, and stigma. Counter to this, what are-if any- are the benefits to incarceration that prisoners with SUDs perceive? In-depth, interviews were conducted with 88 incarcerated men, who all struggled with SUDs. All prisoners were sourced from the same Pennsylvania state prison. Through iterative team-based coding, using the software NVivo, common themes regarding the prisoner's experiences were identified within the transcripts. Coding is still in progress but early themes that relate to the perceived benefits of incarceration include that the prisoners were able to have extended time sober/abstinent from drugs, their ability to clearly reflect and think on their life choices, their time to develop relationships within the friendships, the time to keep up with their outside world relationships, and to overall be able to work on themselves. It is important to understand these perceived benefits of incarceration as they shed light on the challenges that these men faced prior to their incarceration. Incarceration provides, resources, relationships, and time that inmates would not have received if they had not been incarcerated. These perceived benefits give us insight into how we can work to better our prison systems and in turn reduce recidivism rates.



Bureau of Justice Statistics. "Annual Arrest Percentage of State Prisoners Released in 24 States in 2008." U.S. Department of Justice. Sept. 2021. https://bjs.ojp.gov/BJS_PUB/rpr24s0810/yup0818/Web%20content/508%20complan%20PDFs.

Above is a table showing the statistics of prisoners who were released in 2008 who either had a new arrest or conviction or ended up going back to prison after their release. The term to describe a criminal reoffending and going back to prison is "recidivism." This table tracks recidivism over a 10-year period.



Walmsley, Roy. "Incarceration Rates Amongst NATO Members." *Prison Policy*, 2013. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/>.

Above is a table of incarceration rates among NATO countries, with the United States leading the numbers by almost 5 times

Below are quotes that have been pulled from the interviews with the prisoners, representing the theme of self-betterment in prison.

Interviewer: "Is there anything you feel like you benefited from being incarcerated? Like is there any good that came from it?"
Interviewee: "Oh absolutely. If I would've been out there, I probably would have been dead."

Interviewee- "Jail has taught me structure I guess I wanna say. It has taught me structure because now, I could simply say, I know the respect of authority and where I'm at and in order for that to be balanced, we have to be meeting here, and letting them know."

Interviewee- "So, really had to get better and not only had to not think about the outside and stay focused on myself in here like really on myself than anybody else."

Interviewee- "It wasn't good. Wasn't a good year, but give me a chance to get my head back on straight again. That's pretty much it. Then you go out there try starting over."

Interviewee- It's called the [inaudible 11:23] community. A lot of the things I learned, how to deal with life is learned there, in here."

Interviewee- "I learned basic like self-awareness and stay positive, stay away from people that ain't - that ain't gonna benefit you."

Interviewee- "Sometimes I think about it like if I ain't get put in jail, I'd probably be dead or facing life sentence. [Inaudible 53:35] and this ain't good for you to get locked up but I look at it as it is seeing me from the streets up cuz I don't know where I'd be right now. That's what I've been thinking about and like if I was still out there, how much money would I have right now or would I be dead or would I be on the run from something crazy?"

Interviewee- "Actually, prison in a whole helped me to take on these challenges just because everything was reinstated into me and [learned 39:58] in prison - like coming from prison, sitting in here dealing with myself and going through all the problems I had and asking a lot of questions and reading a lot of books and go [inaudible 40:12]. Everything I learned I have to give a lot of credit to [prison 40:19] system, truthfully."

Results/Conclusion

Upon coding the interviews, many trends were found in the data. One main finding was that prisoners who suffered from substance abuse upon entering the prison system were able to mitigate the effects of some of their disorders during their incarceration. The researchers found that many interviewees recalled that being incarcerated helped them with their substance abuse disorder, giving them a time when they could be sober. More examples of these perceived benefits included the prisoner's mentality to become better for their families and sometimes even improving their relationships within the outside world. A large proportion of the interviewees also touched upon forming relationships within the prison. These relationships allowed for a community between some inmates, where they could communicate about their shared struggles, giving them someone who understood their situation. The interviewees also spoke about ideas that could improve the prison system, especially for prisoners, like themselves, who suffered from substance abuse. They gave insight into which programs worked, and which ones did not. These results can work to improve the prison systems throughout our society. Substance abuse is a problem that around 65% of incarcerated people suffer from. If we can use the results from this study to work to improve our prison systems, it can in turn work to improve the prisoners within the system. Upon reentry into society, these incarcerated people can have a more positive impact on the world.

Implications

- How can we better set up our prison systems to treat prisoners with substance use disorder?
 - Incarcerating prisoners is very costly, so the better a prison can help an inmate with a SUD, this can reduce the rate of recidivism, and help to lower costs for the state
- Do the prisoners who develop a sense of community with their fellow inmates (that face similar substance use struggles) find the reentry process back into society easier?
 - Answering this could help prison systems structure inmate programs and their daily activities.
- Can the perceived benefits of incarceration be met without the collateral consequences of incarceration?

Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to have a better understanding of what prisoners who struggle with substance abuse go through when re-entering society. In addition to this, we want to work to understand the perceived benefits that prisoners have experienced from their incarceration. The research is centered around adult males who are currently in prison and suffer from substance abuse. Substance abuse is defined in this study as overindulgence in or dependence on an addictive substance, especially alcohol, or drugs. Prisoners were used in this study because 85% of all prisoners within the American prison system have suffered with or are currently suffering from a substance abuse disorder. In addition to this, the incarceration rates in America are almost 5 times the number of incarceration rates in the next-placed country. Incarcerated men with substance abuse disorders make up a large part of America's population, so, understanding their relationship with substance abuse and the prison system can have a large impact on today's society. This study aims to better understand the troubles and successes that these prisoners have found throughout their imprisonment. In addition to this, this research focuses on providing a better understanding of the benefits that prisoners have found to be in prison.

Methods

The primary source of data collection for this research study was a series of interviews, conducted by a team of multiple interviewers. Around 88 prisoners who had suffered from a substance abuse disorder were interviewed with a series of set questions that aimed to understand their experiences within the prison system. Some of the questions were made to elicit certain responses about different aspects of their life. Some examples of parts of their lives that were frequently asked and talked about were their familial ties now that they were incarcerated, self-betterment within the prison, and questions regarding the relationships formed within the prison. The interviews were then anonymized and coded by researchers to find similarities within the interviews. When the researchers had reached saturation (the point in coding when no new codes occur in the data), they ceased coding and worked together to build a master codebook. The entire interviews (the sections had been taken away) were then recoded with respect to the final codebook. This allowed the researchers to be able to code anything that was related to the master codebook, that was not a part of the sectioned-off material. This aids the researchers in being able not miss any information, pertinent to the study. The study is currently in the process of recoding the data.

Emerging Themes

- Drug usage/sober in prison
- Prison reform programs
- Relationships formed within the prison
- Becoming better for the family
- Lessons learned from prison/people in the prison
- Reflection time

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