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English 101

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### The Correlation Between Mental Health and Criminal Behavior

Studies show that more than 70% of people in jails and prisons have some mental disorder. This research supports that individuals with mental health disorders are more likely to engage in criminal activities. The relationship between mental health and criminal behavior shows how untreated psychological conditions can increase aggression, poor decision-making, and create a higher likelihood of committing crimes. Often, people living with these conditions don't get the help they need, which can worsen their symptoms and lead to repeated encounters with the criminal justice system. Factors like trauma, abuse, and limited access to mental health services can further intensify these issues, contributing to the development of mental health issues and the risk of criminal behavior.

In many cases, mental disorders stem from personal trauma and experiences. According to "The Psychopathology of Crime" by Adrian Raine, "Criminal behaviors range widely in their seriousness and impact on the public. A few isolated individuals kill people and then eat parts of their victims' bodies. At the same time, the bulk of criminal activity consists of more mundane acts such as theft, burglary, robbery, and assault" (Raine 1). This quote by Raine emphasizes how criminal behaviors can vary significantly. Extreme cases, such as individuals who commit acts of cannibalism, often draw public attention, but these instances are rare. Most criminal acts, according to Raine, tend to involve more common offenses like theft, burglary, or assault. These patterns suggest that trauma and mental illness don't always lead to violent crimes but can

instead create less dramatic yet still harmful behaviors. There are specific traumas and experiences, such as childhood abuse, neglect, or exposure to violence, that can disrupt normal psychological development and lead individuals to develop mental disorders. These disorders impair judgment, increase the lack of self-control, or reduce empathy, which can raise a person's risk of engaging in criminal activity. For instance, if someone was abused when they were young, they may grow up struggling with trust, anger, or controlling their emotions, making them more susceptible to committing crimes as a coping mechanism. In the book, "Selected Readings in Criminal Justice" by Greenhaven Press, it explains that brain damage can be a major cause of crime, "A recent study of 279 veterans who suffered penetrating head injuries in Vietnam show that those with frontal lobe damage were anywhere from 2 to 6 times as violent and aggressive as veterans who had not suffered such injuries. This kind of aggression is what is known as neurological, or organic, rage" (39). This evidence underscores the idea that violent behavior can have a biological foundation, especially when the brain's ability to regulate emotions and impulses is compromised. The frontal lobe, which is often called the "control panel" of our personality and ability to communicate, plays a crucial role in decision-making and emotional stability. When this part of the brain is damaged, such as in the case of veterans who sustained traumatic head injuries, the individual may lose the ability to manage anger or stress. As a result, they may become more prone to aggressive outbursts or violent actions that they might not have otherwise committed. The term "neurological, or organic, rage" refers to this unintentional type of aggression that isn't intentional, but arises from disrupted brain function. This kind of information is essential because it says that criminal behavior in many cases cannot be blamed on someone being naturally "bad" or choosing to do wrong. Instead, it reveals the complex ways that physical and psychological trauma can influence behavior.

Incarceration can prolong and intensify preexisting mental disorders. In the article “Unjust Punishment: The Impact of Incarceration on Mental Health” by Patricia Warth, it highlights, “Dix’s vision of treating people with mental illness in state hospitals rather than warehousing them in jails was only partially realized – dozens of state mental hospitals were built, but most were not adequately resourced, and while some provided treatment, others merely warehoused people in conditions no better than jails or prisons” (83-84). This quote underscores the failure of the U.S. mental health care system to fully carry out Dix’s original vision of treatment for those with mental illness. While the idea was to replace the punishment of placing the mentally ill in jails with proper medical care in psychiatric hospitals, the reality fell short. Many of these mental institutions were underfunded, poorly managed, and lacked the staff necessary to provide effective treatment. As a result, instead of being places of healing and rehabilitation, they became overcrowded, understaffed facilities that resembled prisons more than hospitals. Some institutions made attempts to offer care, but ended up confining patients without addressing the root causes of their mental health struggles. This failure to provide sufficient support meant that individuals with mental illnesses were still being neglected, just in a different setting. The quote shows how the promise of mental health reform was never truly fulfilled, leading to a system where mentally ill individuals continue to suffer without the care they need. This neglect contributes to a continuous cycle in which undertreated mental illness leads to criminal behavior, which then results in incarceration rather than recovery. Warth also explains:

“In the last quarter of the 20th century, the dramatic reduction of inpatient mental health care was accompanied by an equally dramatic increase in criminalization and incarceration. In 1973, the United States incarcerated adults at a rate of 161 per 100,000

adults; by 2007, this rate had quintupled to 767 per 100,000. In absolute terms, ‘the growth in the size of the penal population has been extraordinary; in 2012, the total of 2.23 million people held in U.S. prisons and jails was nearly seven times the number in 1972.’ This increase in incarceration was historically unprecedented, occurring after decades of relatively stable rates of incarceration” (33-36).

The dramatic rise in incarceration reflects how the United States has failed in handling mental health care. The sharp increase in prison population corresponded with the decrease in funding and support for mental health institutions, resulting in many individuals with mental illnesses being driven into the prison system instead of receiving the medical care they needed. The statistics paint a clear picture of how widespread the issue has become. Instead of investing in proper mental health foundations, the country has responded to the rising social and behavioral problems by locking people away. This approach doesn't address the root cause of crime and mental instability, and as a result, prisons have become overcrowded with individuals who are not receiving the psychological support they require. Without intervention or access to treatment, these individuals often return to society in the same or worse condition, increasing the risk of repeat offenses. This pattern shows that incarceration without rehabilitation only deepens the cycle of crime, making mental health care reform not just a moral issue but a necessary step in reducing crime and improving public safety.

To prevent the criminality rates from rising, there needs to be steps taken towards bettering the opportunities and awareness about mental health, inside and outside, of the jail cell. According to “Psychiatric Illness and Criminal Justice” it explains, “To break the links between mental illness and criminality requires an inter-professional team of psychiatrists, social workers, and patient advocates to detect and reduce or eliminate risk factors that lead persons with mental

illness to commit a crime” (Ghiasi et al.). This emphasizes that addressing criminal behavior effectively involves much more than just incarceration; it requires a collaborative approach to mental health care. The presence of psychiatrists, social workers, and advocates creates a support system that can identify warning signs, provide consistent treatment, and help individuals build healthier coping mechanisms. Without this kind of structured intervention, people struggling with mental illness are left vulnerable to cycles of crime, incarceration, and committing other offenses. The current criminal justice system largely fails to recognize the need for such specialized support, leading to missed opportunities for rehabilitation and personal development. Rather than healing, incarceration often worsens underlying conditions. This is why increasing access to treatment and mental health services both within prisons and before individuals enter the system is vital to reducing crime and promoting long-term recovery. The text also highlights, “For those individuals already inside the criminal justice system, there needs to be a targeted approach that includes rehabilitation, education, and empowerment. Finally, a concerted effort is required to educate the public at large and those in the criminal justice system, in particular, to dispel misperceptions and prevent mischaracterization, mislabeling of criminals as persons with mental illness and vice versa” (Ghiasi et al.). Not only do the incarcerated need to be helped and educated about this matter, but so does the public. If the public is aware and proactive about this issue, they become advocates for change within this system. Public understanding and empathy can shift societal views away from punishment and towards rehabilitation, reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness and criminality. When communities are informed, they are more likely to support policies that provide mental health resources, increase funding for treatment programs, and demand reforms in the criminal justice system. If society as a whole works together to recognize the signs of mental illness and intervene early, it becomes possible to stop

the cycle before it begins. Collectively, people can figure out prevention methods not only to help the incarcerated become stable, but to protect vulnerable individuals in their communities from falling into similar patterns of crime and imprisonment. This creates a caring environment and responsibility that uplifts both individuals and society.

In conclusion, the research highlights a significant relationship between mental health and criminal behavior. Specifically, untreated psychological conditions and increased aggression, poor decision-making, and a higher likelihood of committing crimes highlight the importance of addressing mental health issues to reduce criminal activity. When proper treatment isn't provided, individuals tend to end up caught in the criminal justice system, especially those already vulnerable due to trauma or neurological damage. This cycle not only harms the individual but also puts society at risk for public safety concerns and increasing incarceration rates. To break this cycle, the criminal justice systems need to prioritize solutions to support mental health, such as implementing early intervention, access to proper treatment, and rehabilitation programs both inside and outside of psychiatric facilities. Also, if the public and criminal justice systems are more educated, it can shift policies towards more effective solutions. Ultimately, mental health care promotes a safer and more just society for all when it's properly invested in.

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