**Mass Incarceration and Alternative Solutions**

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It’s no secret that the United States currently has huge mass incarceration problem. In fact, the U.S. has holds nearly 25 percent of the world’s prisoners, despite only being 5 percent of the world’s population (Collier, 2014). This fact alone begs many questions. To explore this issue, there are a few things that need to be examined, such as the demographics of incarcerated citizens and exactly what crimes are people being incarcerated for. With this information, one can then examine exactly what should be done about the mass incarceration in the United States and produce alternatives to incarceration for certain low-level crimes such as public intoxication and minor drug offenses.

**Public Policy and Demographic Disparities**

There a number of reasons for why the United States currently houses the largest number of incarcerated people in the world, and there are disparities in the various groups of people being incarcerated as well. According to Collier (2014), “Over the past four decades, the nation's get-tough-on-crime policies have packed prisons and jails to the bursting point, largely with poor, uneducated people of color, about half of whom suffer from mental health problems”. These tough-on-crime policies are largely a result of increase in drug concerns, implementation of mandatory minimum sentences, and interestingly, policy decisions made for political reasons (Collier, 2014). Increase in drug penalties coupled with harsher public policies resulted in the mass incarceration problem the U.S. faces today.

Mass incarceration has had a particularly destructive impact on the African American community in the United States. In fact, the incarceration rates for African Americans in the United States are 5 to 7 times higher than the incarceration rates for Whites (Izzary et al., 2015, p. 237). This disparity has increased dramatically for the last few decades and only continues to grow. People of color also more likely to suffer disparities in mental health treatment as well, which often results in their being disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system (Collier, 2014).

**Alternatives to Incarceration**

Mass incarceration has been justified by its assumed effect on deterrence, crime reduction, and rehabilitation (Clark et al., 2017, p.223). However, there is an increasing amount of evidence that punishment and imprisonment does not provide any of these things (Clark et al., 2017, p.223.) Instead of mass incarceration, many are beginning to look to other alternative solutions for people with low-level misdemeanor crimes such as public intoxication or minor drug offenses.

Jarvis et al., (2015) discusses implementing sobering centers as a possible alternative to incarceration for individuals with charges for public intoxication (p.597). According to Jarvis et al., (2015), “A promising public health intervention, sobering centers offer an alternative to incarceration and relieve overuse of emergency services while assisting individuals with substance use issues” (p.597). In fact, when Houston Police Department implemented a sobering center, their jail admissions decreased by 95% (Jarvis et al., 2015, p.597). Sobering centers free up valuable resources and allow people to get the help that they need without overcrowding jails. In addition, the operational costs for the sobering centers were observed to be much lower than if the individuals had remained incarcerated. Also, the cost burden shifts from expensive public services to lower-cost community service providers (Jarvis et al., 2015, p. 598).

In addition to sobering centers, there are many other alternatives to incarceration. Clark et al., (2017, p. 223) identifies the following as alternatives to incarceration from a public health perspective:

* Decriminalize personal use of illicit drugs,
* Provide treatment and social reintegration of people with drug use disorders who come into contact with the criminal justice system,
* Move the focus of funding away from supply-reduction measures towards demand- and harm- reductions measures.

These public health alternatives have many positive aspects for the community and the individuals both. Not only do these alternatives help the affected individuals recover, but it also helps cut costs by reducing incarceration and arrests. Additionally, Clark et al., (2017) says that convictions of minor drug offenses do not prevent drug use, and instead cause harm by using up valuable resources that could be used more effectively for prevention and treatment (p. 223).

There’s no question that the incarceration system in the United States needs to make changes. This is not only to reduce the costs of incarceration, but to provide citizens with the help and resources that they need to recover, rehabilitate, and reintegrate into society. Mass incarceration is not an easy issue to solve, especially with the decades of public policy that has built the system that is alive today, but by taking effective measures to ensure the health and safety of the citizens, that structure and be rebuilt into a more effective system that does not have a destructive impact on the poor, people of color, or people suffering from mental illnesses.

**References**

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**Quiz Questions**

New tough-on crime policies are a result of

1. Drug concerns
2. Political influence
3. Implementation of mandatory minimum sentences
4. All of the above

When Houston Police Department implemented a sobering center, their jail admissions decreased by:

1. 95%
2. 50%
3. 10%
4. 25%