PSYCHOLOGICAL TREATMENT BEHIND THE WALLS:

INSIGHTS FROM THE INSIDE

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Opinions expressed in this presentation are strictly those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions/positions of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, The US Department of Justice, Pepperdine University, California State University Systems, Orange County Health Psychologists or any of their affiliates.

The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.

(Fyodor Dostoevsky)

Who is this guy?

- I am a Psychologist working within the federal prison system
- I am bilingual and bicultural man with indigenous roots from the great state of Tlaxcala, Mexico
- I grew up within a loving family and a significant history of trauma
- I had almost every risk factor for spending my life in prison (the research was correct)
- My goal was, and remains, to be the best clinical therapist I can be

How did I get here?

- I learned the utility of violence early in life
- Criminal behaviors have always been a part of my life
- Violence met some needs, but was destroying my life
- Prison has always been a part of my life
- College was the way out
- Career goal: be a good clinician
- My culture taught me resilience
- My profession taught me patience

What is it like to be a Psychologist inside the federal prison system?

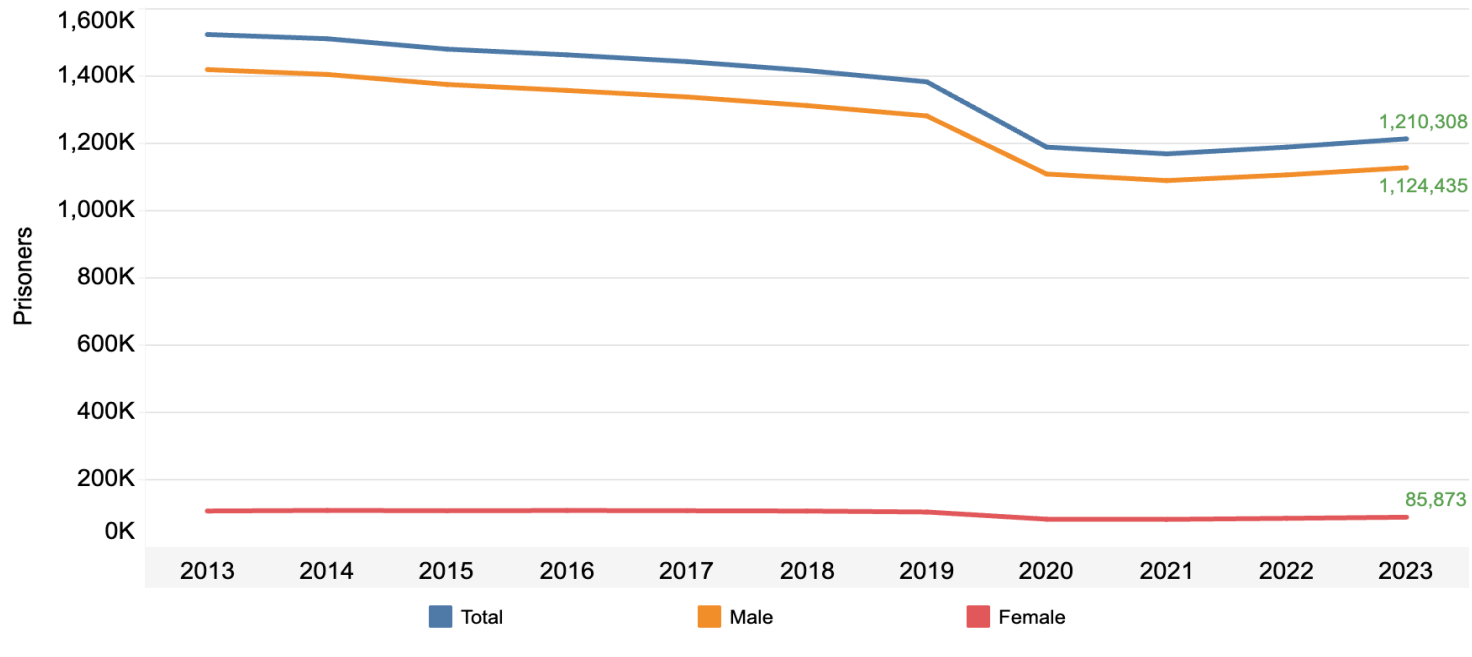
- You work directly with men and women in custody
- You’re a sworn federal law enforcement officer
- You carry protective equipment (vests, duty belt, pepper spray, etc.) with you at all times, including during therapy sessions
- You provide consultation to all staff within the prison
- In the institution, you are the subject matter expert

Key findings

- The U.S. prison population was 1,254,200 at yearend 2023, a 2% increase from 2022 (1,230,100). At yearend 2023, persons sentenced to more than 1 year under the legal authority of state and federal correctional authorities accounted for 96% (1,210,300) of the total U.S. prison population.
- There were 1,124,400 males sentenced to more than 1 year in state or federal prison at yearend 2023 (93% of the U.S. prison population sentenced to more than 1 year). This represents an increase of 2% from yearend 2022 (1,103,200) but a decrease of 21% from 2013 (1,416,100).
- There were 85,900 females sentenced to more than 1 year in state or federal prison at yearend 2023. This represents an increase of 4% from yearend 2022 (82,500) but a decrease of 18% from 2013 (104,300).
- The number of persons sentenced to more than 1 year under the jurisdiction of the Federal Bureau of Prisons decreased 2% from yearend 2022 (146,100) to yearend 2023 (143,300).

For figure 1 and table 2, users can view information for specific data points by hovering the cursor over the trend line or point.

Figure 1. Sentenced prisoners under the jurisdiction of state and federal correctional authorities, by sex, 2013–2023



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California Arrest Rates

California Department of Justice (2022)

Arrests for Violent offenses	Arrests for Assaults	Arrests for Homicide
98,115	80,044	1,485
61% Between 20-40 years old	62% Between 20-40 years old	66% Between 20-40 years old
77% Male; 22% Female	76% Male; 24% Female	89% Male; 11% female
25% White; 45% Hispanic; 23% Black	27% White; 45% Hispanic; 21% Black	18% White; 46% Hispanic; 30% Black

According to:

Survey of Prison Inmates

Indicators of Mental Health Problems Reported by Prisoners (USDOJ, BJS. 2021)

- About 14% of state prisoners and 8% of federal prisoners met the threshold for past 30-day Serious Psychological Distress (SPD).
- About 43% of state and 23% of federal prisoners had a history of a mental health problem.
- An estimated 40% of state prisoners and 26% of federal prisoners who met the threshold for past 30-day SPD reported they were receiving treatment for a mental health problem.

Cultural carryover into prison

- Prison is a closed system of scarce resources
- Natural tendency to regress compelled by resource deficiencies, coercive dynamics, controlled environments, family isolation etc.
- Formulation of most basic needs is often centered around familial and security bonds
- Hypermasculine environments lend to development of stricter gender roles and rigid cultural scripts

Contextual Realities of Prison

- Increased hyper-masculine system of strict hierarchy
- Decreased attachment to significant others
- Increased trauma response and hyper arousal
- Loss of significant primary relationships
- Positive reinforcement for aggressive behaviors
- Positive reinforcement for coercive behaviors
- Marginalized identity
- Decreased career/vocational opportunities
- Prison culture actively enforces de-individuation

Exposure to correctional institutions

- Correctional environments tend to promote aggression and hypermasculine behaviors that influence provision of mental health services (Kupers, 2005)
- Walter (2003) found that for novice inmates (< 6 months of incarceration) entering a medium security facility, exposure to prison increases criminal thinking and criminal identity
- A study of 2158 male inmates found that violent misconduct in prison is correlated with younger age and gang affiliation (Griffin & Hepburn, 2006)
- Mass incarceration has increased racial inequities in children's behavioral and mental health problems by 15-20% for externalizing problems and 24-46% for internalizing problems (Wildeman et al. 2018)

Role of Gangs in Violence

- Most common measures for anger assessment (*STAXI-II*, *MAI-R*, *Anger Disorder Scale*, *NAS-PI*) do not incorporate such factors as: affiliation, loyalty, role fulfillment, or ethnic pride as a component of (or influence on) anger expression
- Clinical interviews often reveal that these factors are highly instrumental in the administration, use, and belief in violence as a mode of communication
- "*I guess my willingness to commitment violence for the Mexican Mafia stemmed from my low self-esteem, desire to be accepted, and my continuous fear of organizational rejection*" Rene Enriquez, 2011 (Former Mexican Mafia member)

Role of Gangs in Prison

- Gang involvement serves similar purposes inside and outside of prison (protection, affiliation, security, resource allocation, status)
- Socialization of gang lifestyle and affiliation can be a product of family and environmental exposure prior to institutionalization (generational gang families, neighborhood exposure)
- Construct of “Respect” is key to various aspects of gang life
- Gang participation in correctional settings must be viewed contextually to understand dimensions of resulting behaviors

Biases often encountered when working with prison populations (T or F)

- Criminals are violent
- Inmates will often use mental health symptoms as an avoidance strategy
- You can’t do therapy inside a prison/jail setting
- I can never work with this population (moral reasons)
- I can never work with this population (safety reasons)
- The don’t pay enough

Biases often encountered when working with prison populations

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- Inmates will often use mental health symptoms as an avoidance strategy **(True and False)**
- You can't do therapy inside a prison/jail setting **(True and False)**
- I can never work with this population (moral reasons) **(True and False)**
- I can never work with this population (safety reasons) **(True and False)**
- The don't pay enough **(True)**

Ethics of the role

- I walk into a cell block where I can hear down the range, a person screaming in rage of a matter that I don't know and can't control. What I do know is that I have been called to "de-escalate" this man. What that means is to reduce his hostility so that he complies with the officers and submits to restraints.
- Who is this person
- What does he want?
- What does the system want?
- What do I want?
- What is my job?

Case Consult? (deidentified case)

The man is a Latino male 27 years of age with a history of impulse control and anxiety problems. Never been in treatment for psychological issues. His record indicates some problems with alcohol abuse and violence prior to custody. He is incarcerated on drug related charges. He grew up in Los Angeles and is of Mexican descent. He reported that he was frequently exposed to violence at home due to his abusive father and in the community due to gang activity. He reported that he belonged to a gang early in his life but quit after completing high school early and enlisting in the marines. He was exposed to several combat environments including an explosion which killed his passenger in a Humvee. Due to his extensive combat experience he has extensive knowledge of tactics which is a source of pride for him. Since his recent transition to custody placement he has not requested treatment and is paranoid in social situations. He reports frequent nightmares related to his combat experiences. His family is reported to have gang ties but he reported that “even though some family members are still active” the inmates don’t pressure him because of his military expertise and status as a veteran.

Hypermasculinity (machismo) or evolutionary coping strategy?

- Reduced emotional expressiveness leads to decreased risk of subjective misattributions of neutral behaviors in oppressive social environment (i.e. the less emotion I show, the less likely people interpret me as hostile/threatening)
- Restricting emotions can reduce ANS arousal states which in turn can lead to decreased stress response behaviors
- Emotional stoicism facilitates use of alternative communication methods to establish trust and kinship, particularly in uncertain or hostile environments

Barriers to treatment within a prison setting

- Bureaucracy
- Swimming up stream (therapy in an untherapeutic place)
- Staff burnout
- Prisons are not designed for therapy
- Maintaining ethics and professional role
- Remembering why you do this?

Change process inside

- Therapeutic change inside the walls is as slow as it is on the outside
- Evidence-based practices are only the starting point
- Acknowledging where you work is first principle of therapeutic trust
- Look for signs of belief that indicate hope is present (stay strength based)
- We are all understaffed (both inside and outside the walls)

Is there recovery after prison?

- Changes on the inside require sustained engagement after prison
- The person and the system must invest in recovery
- Institutionalization is real, don’t be afraid to acknowledge that reality
- Identity politics remain, discover and work with that new identity
- Stigmatization of the formerly incarcerated is legal

What I've learned from being a prison psychologist

- Culture matters
- Violence is present, even when its unseen
- Impoverishment breeds victimization
- It takes a village to raise a criminal
- Drug addicts can also be depressed
- Just because your paranoid, doesn't mean they are not watching you
- I don't have the luxury of subjective positions inside the walls
- An empty heart takes little to fill up

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