

Institutionalized: The Mental Health Crisis Behind Bars

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Introduction

How has deinstitutionalization influenced the population of the mentally ill within the Criminal Justice System?

Deinstitutionalization in the United States, refers to the closure of state mental institutions. Widespread lack of treatment for those with mental illnesses has led to a rise in the number of people with mental illness sent to jails and prisons without proper care.

Background

Mental illnesses were seen negatively amongst communities. People with mental illnesses were treated by family members, but in extreme cases they were sent to jail. By 1890, every state had at least one publicly supported institution. The main factor of the mental health crisis today, deinstitutionalization, refers to the closing down of large, state-run mental institutions in order to move severely ill patients out. Deinstitutionalization began in 1955 with the introduction of antipsychotic drugs, pushed forward ten years later with the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid. During the 70s, Richard Nixon tried to discontinue the programs, while Gerald Ford attempted to restrict the expansion of these programs. These actions were usually countered due to overwhelming opposition. Expansions of the programs were unsuccessful due to lack of appropriate funds.

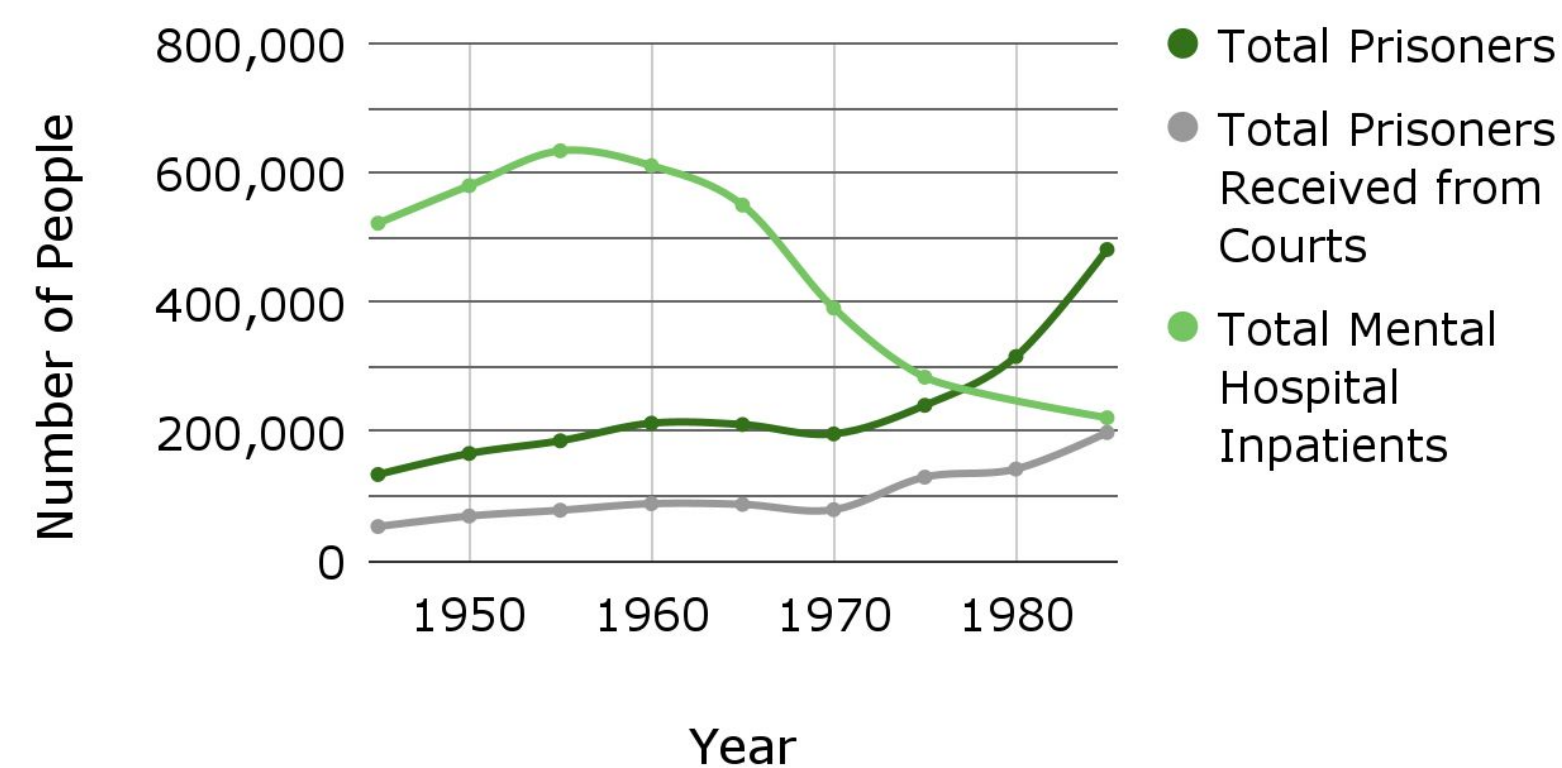
- 2 million people with mental illness are booked into jails each year.
- Nearly 15% of men and 30% of women booked into jails have a serious mental health condition.
- It is estimated that only about 17% of U.S. adults are considered to be in a state of optimal mental health.

Data and Results

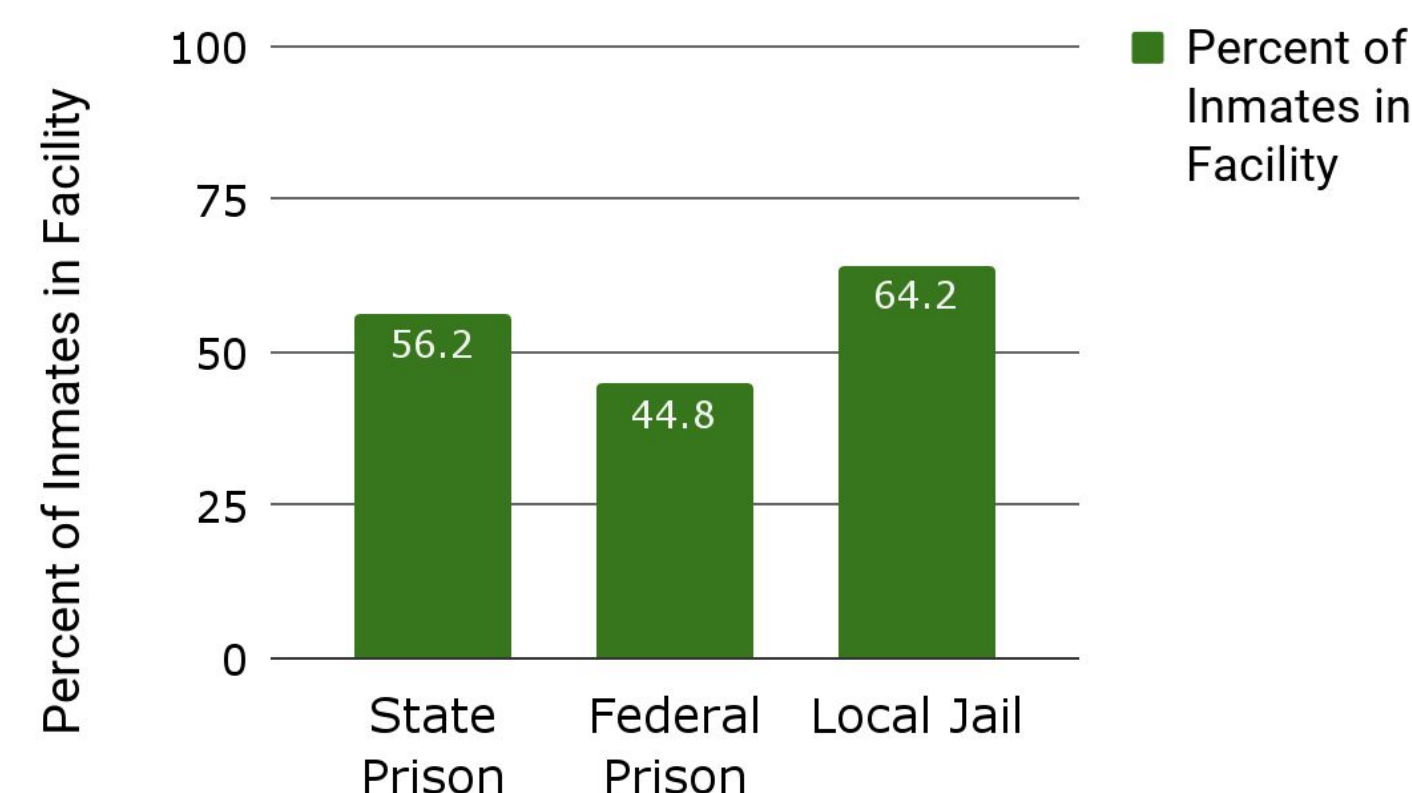
According to data, there is an irrefutable relationship between the prison population and the population of mental institutions. As the number of inpatients within an institution increases, the prison population increases as well. It is important to note that rising incarceration rates may also be highly attributed to racial discrimination and policies such as the three-strikes law.

- It is estimated that between 25 to 40 percent of the American population with a mental illness will be jailed or incarcerated within their lifetime.
- These Americans will only exacerbate the crisis by ending up in facilities such as Cook County Jail in Chicago, where 30% of the 9,000 inmates have a mental illness.

Total Prisoners, Total Prisoners Received Courts and Total Mental Hospital



Percent of Inmates in Facility



Methodology

When gathering and interpreting data, I relied on scholarly articles, as well as reputable institutions such as the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. I gathered data from various points in time, ranging from the 1950's to the 2000's. It was difficult to find data for the population of inpatients within mental institutions.

Mental health is a widely misunderstood and ignored topic around the world. I decided to focus on the United States due to the fact that we have the largest prison population in the world to start with. Adults and children alike can be impacted by psychiatric disorders at any point in their life, for periods lasting from a couple weeks to becoming lifelong issues. The largest mental health provider in the United States is a jail, which shows the severity of the mental health crisis and its connection to high rates of incarceration.

Conclusion

It is important for everyone to be informed on the illnesses and the problems surrounding them. Those with mental illnesses have been widely shamed and discriminated against throughout history, in all corners of the world. It is of utmost importance to implement policies that everyone can agree with that will benefit society, with minimal or no adverse effects. Institutes, jails, and prisons only aggravate mental illnesses due to their cold, isolated nature. Mental illnesses vary in severity, but the first step in helping people is realizing that they're just that. People, real humans with fears and aspirations just like anyone else.

- It is estimated that by 2020, depression will be the second leading cause of disability throughout the world, trailing only ischemic heart disease.