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A Study Assessing the Mental Health Challenges Faced by Inmates and the Need for Comprehensive Psychological Services in Prisons

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study is to outline the mental health problems experienced by prisoners and highlight how important it is for them to have complete psychological services. This paper has four major objectives: the identification and analysis of prevalent mental health issues among incarcerated persons, evaluation of current psychological support systems, and whether these mental health problems are recognized to the capacity of the inmate especially in their allocation of term period, furthermore compare prisons across the world and their systematic protection of the well-being of inmates pre and post their term period. The study will employ both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to achieve these objectives. Initially there will be an extensive literature review, supported through empirical studies, theoretical approaches, and case studies for comprehensive understanding of the mental health environment in correctional institutions. Topics such as prevalence rates of mental disorders among inmates, effect of prison on mental well-being, and efficiency of existing psychological services should be explored.

To cover gaps that literature review may have and provide a comprehensive perspective, there will be empirical research by administering questionnaires to ordinary citizens of India. The investigation aims at determining the public attitudes and ideas regarding mental health treatment provided to prisoners. It will specifically find out whether they believe that they need improved psychological services within correctional systems. Furthermore, it will explore respondents' understanding of how mental healthcare is important inside jails and whether reformation is needed. Integrating the findings from both literature review and empirical research this study aims to create a solid framework for understanding and improving inmate's mental health services. Practical insights combined with theoretical ones can enhance more effective correctional practices towards mentally ill inmates through a humanistic approach.

Keywords: Health, Inmates, Issues, Psychological Well-Being, System.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In law and order, the health status of patients who have been incarcerated is one of the important aspects which is frequently neglected. Custodial institutions have their own specific challenges that are likely to aggravate existing conditions and bring about new mental health problems. As the understanding of these challenges improves, the demand for good quality mental services directed towards prisoners also increases. The title “A Study Assessing the Mental Health Challenges Faced by Inmates and the Need for Comprehensive Psychological Services in Prisons” suggests that the focus is on a relevant topic and, thus, urges to consider addressing issues of mental health care in prisons.

The primary objective of this research is to document and provide a close analysis of the mental health issues that affect prisoners and justify the need for adequate psychological attention. This study is organised around four principal objectives: studying typical psychiatric conditions among prisoners; analysing present psychological aid provisions, determining how such practices understand these aspects over terms of incarceration, and lastly reviewing international practices concerning the mental well-being of the incarcerated.

In order to reach these objectives, the research methodology will combine qualitative and quantitative methods. Specifically, literature review will facilitate development since it contains empirical, theoretical and case study materials to comprehensively assess the background of mental health services within the context of correctional facilities. Psychopathology in prison, the consequences of imprisonment on mental health, and the effectiveness of psychological treatment, are some of the issues that will be addressed in detail.

Furthermore, in order to fill any existing research gaps and to broaden our horizons, empirically based research will be carried out. The people of India will be surveyed and interviewed to determine what they think about the mental health of prisoners and its treatment. This part of the research seeks to understand the awareness of the citizens about the mental health concerns of the prisoners, the demand for better mental health services, and the demand and supply for mental health reforms in the correctional facilities.

Consequently, this study aims at developing a comprehensive understanding of the psychological services for inmates by combining theory with practice. This will address the practical recommendation on how to improve the mental health of prisoners and support the paradigm shift that respects the human rights of prisoners in relation to their mental health.

(A) Objectives

1. Identify the mental health issues prevalent and majorly faced by inmates in India.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of the current psychological support systems for inmates in India.
3. Evaluate whether the mental health issues are a contribution of the systematic correctional methods of inmates.
4. Compare practices in India with that of other countries around the world, within regards to psychological support for inmates.

II. PREVALENT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES FACED BY INMATES

To solve any problem, there is a requirement for a well rounded base data which will serve as the beginning for analysis. In the case of this specific research problem, it is crucial for an individual as a researcher to understand the specific issue within regards to what specific mental issues are majorly faced by inmates in India.

According to the reports published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), in 2022, there were a total of 1330 prisons with a total capacity of 4,36,266 prisoners; at the end of that year the actual occupancy was 5,73,220, meaning that prisons were at a 131.4% occupancy rate. When at such a rate of occupancy, it makes it far more difficult to provide any form of service at full capability, let alone psychological support. Many studies prove that psychiatric issues are morbidly more prevalent among inmates. A study conducted in the District Jail, Kozhikode, Kerala, included 255 participating inmates, out of them it was diagnosed that 11 of them were dealing with ‘Mood Disorders’, 4 of them were dealing with ‘Anxiety Disorders’, 16 of them had ‘Psychosis’, 35 of them had ‘Adjustment Disorders’, 49 of them had ‘Antisocial Personality Disorder’, and the large majority of them, which is 120 inmates, were dealing with “Substance Use Disorder” (Ayirolimeethal, A.). Even with such a high probability of mental illness the NCRB reported in 2022 that only 9,084 prisoners suffered from mental illnesses, this shows how often the mental health and psychological issues of inmates goes unnoticed.

(A) Substance Use Disorder

‘Substance Use Disorder’ is often a result of the lack of resources or viable services to help individuals struggling with various different mental issues, such as anxiety, depression etc. They then turn to substances such as cocaine, heroin or even just alcohol to deal with such problems. When the use of these substances becomes uncontrollable, that is when these individuals start becoming addicts at the mercy of these substances, hence causing distressful

and alarming withdrawal symptoms when restricted from them (Cenikor Foundation).

(B) Antisocial Personality Disorder

Antisocial personality disorder, also known as sociopathy, is a mental health disorder where an individual consistently disregards ethics and dismisses the feelings and rights of others. Individuals with antisocial personality disorder typically engage in behaviour intended to provoke anger or distress in others, as well as manipulate or mistreat others in a callous manner. They show no remorse or regret for their actions (Mayo Clinic).

(C) Psychosis

Psychosis is when a person has various symptoms suggesting they are having difficulty differentiating between what's real and not. Symptoms include things like hallucinations as well as delusions. Psychosis can also be a symptom for underlying schizophrenia or even bipolar disorder. This can be a result of various factors both physical and mental and is often treatable with medication (Professional, 2024).

(D) Adjustment Disorders

Adjustment disorder is multiple symptoms grouped together, symptoms which include, stress, hopelessness, general dullness, often caused after experiencing a vastly stressful life event. (*MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia*).

These are the most commonly prevalent psychological or mental health issues prevalent among inmates incarcerated. These mental health issues are vast but very much treatable, but to be treated, firstly they need to be recognized. Only then can they be treated with the appropriate ailments.

III. EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

To begin discussing the future of any problem in hand it is essential to understand its current state, within regards to the care for the mental health of incarcerated persons it is then crucial to understand the state of the current psychological support systems available and its effectiveness. Understanding this will scope out areas of interest and help navigate a path for improvement.

When we look at the provisions that exist to protect the human rights of prisoners by providing support for their respective mental health issues, there is one act that is required to be discussed specifically, The Mental Healthcare Act, 2017. This act was passed on 7th April, 2017, and came into force on 7th April 2018. The purpose of this act, as per the act itself is "An Act to provide for mental healthcare and services for persons with mental illness and to protect,

promote and fulfil the rights of such persons during delivery of mental healthcare and services and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.” This act's history begins at the Indian Lunacy Act, 1912, which focused on keeping the general public safe from people considered mentally ill, as they were looked upon as dangerous beings. Fast forward the country had advanced to the Mental Health Act, 1987 which came into force in 1993 and was the first act that focused on helping these mentally ill patients. This act was then eventually realised to be not coherent with the UNCRPD and was then utmost finally replaced by the now, Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 (Times of India Blog).

Section 31(2)

This section and subsection of the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 states that “The appropriate Government shall, at the minimum, train all medical officers in public healthcare establishments and all medical officers in the prisons or jails to provide basic and emergency mental healthcare” This shows that provisionally speaking, healthcare officials in prisons should be equipped with basic capability for primary emergency care for mental issues. Whether or not it really happens cannot be investigated or measured in any way.

Section 93(2)

This section and subsection of the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 states that “The State Government may make such general or special order as it thinks fit directing the removal of any prisoner with mental illness from the place where he is for the time being detained, to any mental health establishment or other place of safe custody in the State or to any mental health establishment or other place of safe custody in any other State with the consent of the Government of that other State.” This shows that provisions do exist to ensure that mentally ill prisoners that are in need for better facilities can avail them, but at the same time the decision of whether or not the prisoners should be transferred to another facility is the complete discretion of that government.

Section 103

Several subsections under this section provide various different rights to prisoners whilst also providing a system for the process, subclause (3) says “The medical officer of a prison or jail shall send a quarterly report to the concerned Board certifying therein that there are no prisoners with mental illness in the prison or jail.” This system as much as it protects prisoners, it is ineffective; the number of cases that truly get reported are far less than they should be, this maybe be an indication of man things, either certain conditions are overlooked as disimportant or low priority, facilities aren't equipped to diagnose people correctly and or the medical

officers aren't full qualified. Subsection (4) says "The Board may visit the prison or jail and ask the medical officer as to why the prisoner with mental illness, if any, has been kept in the prison or jail and not transferred for treatment to a mental health establishment." This shows that under provisions a mentally ill person should be treated at another more well equipped facility and might exactly be the reason why many prisoners aren't diagnosed for what they have.

Based on the provisions that exist, it can be concluded that there are reasonable levels of laws protecting the mental health of prisoners, but none of these laws are followed with strictness and therefore many of these provisions are bypassed. To make these provisions more effective there should be a much stricter form of enforceability, only then can we say that our prisons are continuing to be indiscriminate and protecting the human rights of prisoners too.

IV. PRISON CORRECTIONAL SYSTEMS EFFECT ON MENTAL HEALTH OF PRISONERS

Any individual is often a product of their circumstances, their capacity, environment, etc are what shape or destroy an individual. When we look at this from the lens of prisoners, these are individuals that once were exercising their personal freedoms and are now being punished with incarceration which will prove to have its effects on their mental health, the constant dissociation from society, family, and the world itself will play a crucial part in diminishing the sense of purpose in life for these individuals (Cunha et al., 2023).

The toxic environment that is highly prevalent amongst the setting of a prison, with the constant punishment, threats among one another and the anxiety of safety is a common issue. These toxic environments play a crucial role in impacting the mental state of the prisoners, the inherent violence is constantly damaging a person's mental capacity. The extent of fear that is prevalent in prisons can be measured by the statistic that the first 2 week of prison are the most common periods of suicide by inmates (Cunha et al., 2023).

The period of incarceration also plays a crucial role in the capability of prisoners to cope within the prison environment, the prisoners serving shorter periods of time often suffer with short term aggressiveness and constant agitation in a state of vast distress as they learn to accept their situation and grasp the reality of the matter in hand. People incarcerated for a longer period of time such as life imprisonment tend to show similar symptoms initially but eventually progress towards either acceptance, or mild to extreme insanity, in which way their mind sets foot is a path unknown to even them. These terms and tenures though can not be changed, how prisoners are handled can be changed, even if the mental effects caused by prison systems can not be completely exterminated it can at the very least be reduced (Cunha et al., 2023).

The mental health of prisoners and their human rights can be ignored, and these correctional

systems often do exactly that. Reform is required in all aspects of this system, especially to reduce the violent tendencies of both the officers of the prison as well as the prisoners serving their terms. Prison is to reform individuals and not to destroy them even more.

V. PRACTICES IN OTHER COUNTRIES COMPARED WITH INDIA

When looking at scope for improvement in any matter, understanding steps taken by others with similar issues and looking for things to learn and adapt from that is a very simple yet effective form of improvement. In the case of mental healthcare systems in prisons of India, it may benefit us to look at what other prisons around the world are doing to battle their battle of protecting and helping prisoners of mental health issues.

(A) Netherlands

The Netherlands has most recently been heavily commended for their steps to help incarcerated persons deal with mental health care issues. Firstly and most importantly their staffing level is extremely high, higher than the recommended standard, this ensures that prisoners are all receiving the utmost best care and attention they can be receiving. Though it is understood that Netherlands has the fourth lowest incarceration rate in the world and India is far from that, it still goes to show that simply hiring more staff can have a grave impact on improving the life of these individuals, as rightly said by Dr Filipa Alves da Costa, a public health consultant working for WHO/Europe's Alcohol, Illicit Drugs and Prison Health Unit "We need to remember that places of detention restrict freedom – but they should never compromise people's access to quality health care." (World Health Organization: WHO, 2024).

(B) Education

Many prisons around the world provide their prisoners with world class educational opportunities with courses etc, that help provide a platform for learning even within the boundaries of a prison. This could possibly invoke the sense of purpose in their lives and even give them a platform or a degree to use if and when they get out of prison. Prison in many countries is still a place full of opportunities whereas in India it is merely a storage facility for rule breakers, which is at the core of the mental issues faced by these prisoners.

If prisoners too are recognized as humans with rights and their mental health and issues are cared for, they as individuals are also given the opportunity to betterment and reform, that is when India can truly make a significant impact in shaping the state of the nation as a whole.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, addressing the mental health challenges faced by inmates within the prison

system is not only a matter of ethical responsibility but also a crucial element for the effective reform and rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals. The research presented underscores the critical need for comprehensive psychological services tailored to the unique environment of custodial institutions. The staggering prevalence of mental health issues among inmates, as evidenced by high rates of disorders such as Substance Use Disorder, Antisocial Personality Disorder, and Psychosis, highlights the urgent necessity for reform in how mental health care is administered within prisons.

Despite the existence of legislative frameworks like the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, which aims to ensure adequate mental health services for prisoners, the actual implementation and effectiveness of these provisions remain problematic. Issues such as inadequate training for medical personnel, ineffective reporting systems, and the lack of stringent enforcement of existing laws contribute to a scenario where the mental health needs of prisoners are frequently overlooked or inadequately addressed. This gap between policy and practice reveals a dire need for reforms to ensure that mental health services in prisons are not just a formality but a functional, effective support system.

Moreover, the comparison with international practices reveals valuable lessons for India. Countries like the Netherlands demonstrate that higher staffing levels and a focus on educational opportunities within prisons can significantly improve the mental well-being of inmates. These examples illustrate that improving mental health care in prisons requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing better resource allocation, enhanced training, and a shift towards viewing incarceration as a phase of reform rather than mere punishment.

The findings from this study stress the importance of integrating mental health care into the core of prison reform efforts. By addressing the psychological impact of incarceration, improving the quality of mental health services, and learning from global best practices, India can take significant strides towards creating a more humane and effective correctional system. Recognizing prisoners as individuals with rights and needs, rather than just offenders, can pave the way for meaningful reform that supports their mental health and facilitates their rehabilitation. Ultimately, such efforts will not only improve the lives of those incarcerated but also contribute to a more just and compassionate society.

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