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Loneliness, Prosocial Relationships, and Recidivism in Long-term Incarcerated Juveniles

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Abstract

Lengthy juvenile facility placement has resulted in deterioration of important prosocial supports and social isolation, increasing risk for recidivism. Lengthy juvenile incarceration impacts on loneliness, post-release prosocial relationships, and desistance implications have been investigated utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis. Social maladaptation, institutionalization, stigmatization, identifying with prosocial support, antisocial peer dissociation, and loneliness were six overarching themes discovered. Recommendations for future research efforts and proactively addressing youth maladaptation with relatable prosocial supports will be discussed. Implications for practice may be used to promote positive social change towards improving public safety, mitigating recidivism, and avoiding negative transgenerational effects from mass incarceration.

Doctoral Capstone

Problem

Juvenile incarceration of one year or more results in significantly worse psychological and physical health, lasting into adulthood (Barnert et al., 2018).

Youth incarcerated have experienced **heightened loneliness** (Reid, 2017), having negative implications for psychological wellness, health, prosocial relationships (Peltzer & Pengpid, 2019), and successful desistance.

Prosocial relationships are required for mitigating **recidivism**, conforming to conventional adulthood roles, and establishing healthy pathologies (Backman et al., 2018; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017).

Investigation on loneliness, durations of youth incarceration, and post-release relationships have been collectively lacking.

Purpose

An interpretative phenomenological analysis was conducted to investigate loneliness within forensic context using reaffiliation motive for exploring implications of loneliness on desistance barriers (Qualter et al., 2015).

Young adults' lived experiences of loneliness, lengthy incarceration, and post-release relationships were explored. Explorational intent was to understand how collective phenomena informs desistance processes, as described by participants.

Significance

Youth recidivism is a substantial societal problem requiring further investigation to all aspects of desistance barriers (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017).

Listening to marginalized populations has resulting with advancements for effective service delivery and reentry transitioning (Herman & Sexton, 2017; Tracey & Hanham, 2017).

Investigation on unexplored phenomena regarding recidivism through the voices of those with direct experience may result in effective reentry service planning and rehabilitation programming.

Results were used to recommend effective programming strategies, further research, and policy considerations for more appropriate sanctioning practices.

Theory or Framework

Reaffiliation Motive (Qualter et al., 2015):

- Theoretical basis for explaining loneliness across ontology
- Derived from literature on human motivation driving behavior
- Loneliness is essential to evolution and survival
- Loneliness is more prevalent in adolescent populations and within certain contexts
- Motivation to reaffiliate may fail, resulting in maladaptive behavioral and cognitive patterns
- Loneliness has resulted in worsened mental and physical health
- Loneliness may result in problematic future relationships and self-reinforced maladaptive cycles of behavior

Relevant Scholarship

Incarceration: Adult suicidality rates, mental health, and physical health have significantly worsened after a year of youth incarceration but can be addressed without youth confinement (Barnert et al., 2018).

Loneliness: Incarceration has resulted in experiences of loneliness or social isolation (Reid, 2017), having negative ramifications on youth development and future relationships (Arpin & Mohr, 2019; Peltzer & Pengpid, 2019; Williams & Braun, 2019). Adolescence is a phase where substantial development occurs (Demers et al., 2019) often accompanied by more severe experiences of loneliness (Williams & Braun, 2019). Loneliness and social isolation have resulted in deteriorating motivation to develop prosocial bonds needed for healthy development, life satisfaction, and avoiding persistent criminality patterns (Demers et al., 2019; Ma, 2019; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017; Williams & Braun, 2019).

Relationships: Adolescents' relationship needs shift towards higher focus in quality romantic relationships and friendships (Shulman et al., 2019). The ability to have quality social bonds, especially after incarceration, is critical for healthy development and positive life trajectories (Hecke et al., 2019; Ma, 2019; Shannon & Hess, 2019).

Recidivism: Juveniles require developmentally normative patterns toward romantic relationships fulfilling a natural progression towards steady intimate relationships and conformality to adult conventional roles (Shulman et al., 2019). Romantic relationships and any familial relationships are interrupted during incarceration and this may have an aversive impact on recidivism.

Research Question

RQ1: How does the lived experience of loneliness in young adults, who as juveniles underwent a lengthy incarceration, impact prosocial relationship formation post-release

RQ2: How does the lived experience of post-release relationships in young adults formerly incarcerated as juveniles inform the ability to desist criminality

Participants

Purposeful criterion-specific sampling and voluntary response to advertisements were utilized to locate 8 participants having direct experience with investigative phenomena. All participants were 18 to 29 years old, in community reentry no longer than five years, and had experienced juvenile incarceration for one or more years.

Procedures

Research-designed semi-structured protocol pre-tested and refined through three qualitative expert faculty members

Screening protocol to determine eligibility and ethicality prior to interview

Audio-recorded face-to-face and telephonic interviews

Analysis

Audio-recorded interviews and manual transcription

Organized data and moved data inductively with three cycles of coding

Send participants preliminary findings and completed intercoder agreements

Triangulated data and located overarching themes

Comparison to quotes and refine conclusions

Findings

The overall lived experiences of loneliness in young adults who went through a lengthy juvenile incarceration resulted with described **social maladaptation, institutionalization, and stigmatization.**

Three overarching themes were developed based on how the experience featured into post-release desistance through **identifying with prosocial support, antisocial peer dissociation, and loneliness.**

Subordinate themes regarding participant post-release relationships were difficult affiliation, rehabilitation support, intimate relationship, prosocial family members, and perceived isolation.

Subordinate themes based on participant identified needed social support attributes encompassed safe outlet, identity, accountability, reentry support, growth, trust, and dependability.

Institutionalization experiences resulted in post-release barriers for relating with prosocial others through inopportunity to learn conventional adult values and functioning. Institutionalism was equivalent to participants' interpretation as being an environment resulting in survivalist mentality.

Interpretation

Participant inability to acquire relatable post-release prosocial relationships resulted in cyclical loneliness, maladaptive social anxiety, substance abuse, reaffiliation with negative peers, aggression, and social withdrawal.

The lived experience of loneliness and lengthy youth incarceration commonly resulted with described social maladaptive patterns, institutionalization, or perceived stigmatization, making it difficult to reaffiliate post-release. Inability to reaffiliate with prosocial others often resulted with self-reinforced maladaptive behavioral patterns, having **negative implications for successful desistance.**

The ability to identify with prosocial others and completely disassociate with antisocial peers **successfully mitigated loneliness and maladaptive recidivism risk.**

Limitations

Rehabilitation approaches and opportunities vary from state to state. Participants were geographically diverse. This may impact interpretational data and pose difficulty in transferability.

Participants may have been reluctant to express criminal temptations or behaviors in detail. Assumptions made were that participants expressed honesty in disclosure of their accounts.

Recommendations

Future research:

- Investigation on reaffiliation motive, or impacts of loneliness within diverse forensic groups, is necessary for generalizability and substantiating findings.
- A cost analysis on placing youth in less restrictive settings with evidence-based treatments versus the public safety gains of incarceration

Recommendations for practitioners:

- Proactively placing at-risk youth with identifiable prosocial social supports. Rehabilitation must be planned well before release.
- Administering therapy centralized on quality relationships may mitigate loneliness or cyclical maladaptation

Recommendations for policy:

- Consider sanctioning alternatives to fit the developmental, psychological, and physical health needs of troubled youth

Social Change Implications

Increasing social capital in post-release youth may enhance **psychological welfare of at-risk individuals**

Mitigating maladaptive behavioral patterns has positive implications for reducing recidivism and increasing **community safety**

Addressing direct health concerns of youth incarceration and loneliness

Addressing indirect consequences of youth incarceration and loneliness on loved ones

Vindicating **mass incarceration, negative transgenerational impacts, and systematic oppression**

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