

AMERICAN

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COMMUNICATION



STAFF WELLNESS

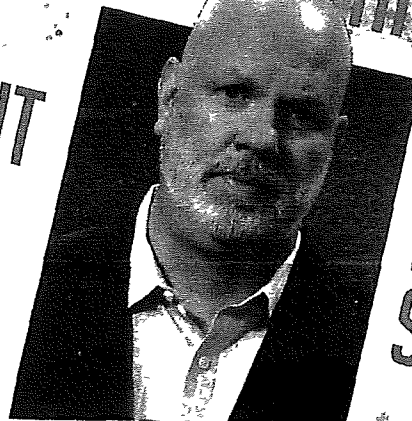
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Addressing Criminogenic Characteristics of Repeat Offenders

The following is a qualitative review of the criminogenic characteristics of 7,000 male inmates based upon personal interviews with those incarcerated in the New Jersey Adult Correctional system. Male inmates represent the vast majority of incarcerated personnel. Therefore, the following characteristics are typical of that population. Recommendations for addressing some of the characteristics are included.

Characteristics and Recommendations

Minority Representation. More than 50% of the incarcerated population in New Jersey is comprised of Black Americans. This is noteworthy inasmuch as they represent about 14% of the total population. There are a number of reasons this occurs. To be in prison, they must have committed a serious offense and/or had a lengthy prior criminal history. Other factors may be profiling and discrimination.

When going to court, was the individual represented by private counsel or the public defender? The majority of incarcerated tend to be represented by a public defender, who usually has a large caseload because many of the offenders are from the lower economic strata and can-

not afford the fees of private counsel.

Private attorneys can pick and choose their clients and set their own fees as compared to the public defender, a government employee. The private attorney may have additional investigative and administrative employees to assist in providing a comprehensive defense. It should be noted that the majority of defendants have taken a plea bargain in lieu of trial by jury. Much of this is due to court backlogs and attorney recommendations.

Low Educational Level. Approximately 80% of the incarcerated population never graduated high school or received their GED (graduate education degree). They may have dropped out of school for a variety of reasons. Their peer group may have been a major influence on their decision, especially if many of their peers had dropped out or were expelled.

A lack of positive-parenting skills may have also affected their decision. A learning disability can lead to a student feeling inadequate and, therefore, dropping out. The monetary incentive of making a significant amount of money from some other illegal means (i.e. drugs, robbery, etc.) can also be an incentive to withdraw from school. Most drop-outs from formal education do not possess marketable skills, therefore they may be suscep-

tible to some illegal pursuits to make money.

Recommendation. To address the low educational level of many inmates, the following sources for volunteering to tutor may be considered:

- retired teachers;
- college students as an internship for credit;
- senior citizens seeking volunteer work; and
- retired social workers.

Fragmented Family Structure. A vast number of repeat offenders, unfortunately, have not been reared by what we refer to as an “intact” traditional family structure—a mother and father. Having both parents, in most cases, can provide meaningful guidance and supervision.

In a significant number of cases, the biological parents were not married and had no significant presence in the upbringing of the child. The opportunity for this offspring to make a meaningful adjustment would be marginalized. If they had the benefit of a positive influence by a grandparent or other loving, caring relative, their chances of a crime-free existence is increased.

In a significant number of cases, offenders had several children. (In one case, an inmate had 15 children with 7 different women and was not married to any of them.) These children often don't see the possibility of a meaning-

ful crime-free existence, and the likelihood of gravitating toward gang affiliation is greatly enhanced as they may be seeking the love and security that a gang membership promises.

Recommendation. For youthful offenders initially becoming involved in the criminal justice system, the following may be considered to assist these individuals in avoiding a repeat offender status:

- Big Brothers & Big Sisters programs;
- volunteers in probation and parole;
- carefully screened offenders who have made positive and successful adjustments; and
- senior citizens with appropriate vetting and training.

Lower Income Level. More than 50% of the incarcerated population was from the lower-income strata. The fact that they had limited income may have resulted in having to reside in lower-income housing areas. There appears to be a higher likelihood that these were also higher-crime areas.

Lower income may also result in having less money to secure and pay for healthcare insurance. This can result in not seeking medical help due to a lack of funds and more health

problems than those with healthcare insurance who are more financially secure. This also seems to correlate with healthier food choices.

Lower-income individuals may be less likely to pursue further educational programs, thereby securing less well-paying jobs. Stealing, robbery, and selling drugs are means of quickly securing more money—an alternative to which many may turn.

Recommendation. Programs for employment preparation should be instituted in the early stages of incarceration to prepare the offender for meaningful employment upon release and returning to society. Certifications offered for particular careers while incarcerated are important. Also helpful are practical work assignments while incarcerated; for example, food services, maintenance, and computer science training. The facility may want to offer college-level courses for further education. Budgets at respective institutions are always critical to address these issues.

Prior Delinquent and Criminal Behavior. It should also be noted that prior delinquent and criminal behavior appeared to be more prevalent in repeat offenders. In fact, many considered it to be a “badge of honor” or a “rite of passage.” Additionally, in a substantial number of cases

family members and relatives had some criminal behavior and even served time in jail or prison. This behavior by many was deemed acceptable; many of their peers and even family members had exhibited similar behaviors.

Lack of Positive Peers.

Generally, repeat offenders tend to associate with those with whom they have something in common—similar backgrounds, culture standards, and perhaps even criminal records. People, places and things tell us a lot about a person—the people with whom one associates, the places they go, and what they do. The neighborhood and housing where one resides affects to some degree with whom one may associate. If the individual is a high school dropout, then they are more susceptible to gang affiliation and crime. Many repeat offenders did not complete high school and associate with other dropouts, placing them in this high-risk category. Unless there is strong parental supervision and mentoring, which often is not the case with these offenders, they are in this high-risk group.

Lack of Appropriate Value and Moral System. This becomes evident when a significant number of cases of repeat offenders are reviewed; inmates committing aggravated

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assault on others, and even family members because they were “insulted.” Case in point: On Thanksgiving day, an individual was hosting a dinner for family and friends. He had to run to the store to buy alcohol and asked attendees to wait until he got back before eating. He did not return quickly enough and many of the attendees began eating. When the host returned, he got into an angry dispute with one of the attendees who was a good friend. He picked up a knife and stabbed him. He subsequently was charged with aggravated assault and received a 5-year prison term.

How about the case of a father sexually assaulting his 10-year-old daughter? He and his wife were in the middle of a divorce. The father was distraught over this and admitted to committing the act. These are some examples of inappropriate value and moral systems of some repeat offenders.

Recommendation. Youthful offenders are often influenced by parental examples. Unfortunately, many offenders grew up in single-parent families or in family units where their biological parent was not married or even available. Therefore, we must seek our assistance from the religious community, school social workers, and significant positive family members to assist in the inmate’s value and moral decision-making.

Physical and Emotional Health. Keeping in mind that more than 50% of the incarcerated repeat offenders came from lower incomes and were either unemployed or underemployed; they probably did not have adequate health plans and insurance. In many cases, the first time they had a physical examination was when they were initially incarcerated. It also may be the first time they saw a dentist. This neglect can have long-term negative effects on not only physical ailments but also mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Emotionally dependent on their family environment, they may not have the love and caring environment for positive development.

COMMISSION CHAIR

Michael Harris, CJM
Superintendent/Special Sheriff
Norfolk County Sheriff’s Department
Dedham, Massachusetts
mharris@norfolksheriffma.org

COMMISSION VICE-CHAIR

Jared Schechter, CJM
Colonel/Jail Administrator
Sedgwick County Sheriff’s Office
Wichita, Kansas
jared.schechter@sedgwick.gov

COMMISSIONERS

Amber Redmond, CJM
Deputy Director
Douglas County Department of Corrections
Omaha, Nebraska
amber.redmond@douglascounty-ne.gov

Henry Reyes, MAM, MPA, CJM, CCE
Chief Deputy Detention Bureau/Housing
Tarrant County Sheriff’s Office
Fort Worth, Texas
HReyes@tarrantcounty.com

John Johnson, PhD, CJM
Division Chief
Miami Dade Corrections & Rehabilitation Department
Miami, Florida
John.Johnson@miamidade.gov

CJM
CERTIFIED JAIL MANAGER

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Recommendation. We must pursue resources financially and assist with providing medical and mental health services. This demands more funding and special grants from local, state, and federal agencies. Lobbying for these services is of paramount importance. We can also solicit volunteers from professionals in medical, psychological, and social work professions. It should be noted that a number of mental health and psychological professions require completing volunteer services to qualify for their annual recertification.

Lack of Positive Role Models and Mentors. In a significant number of cases, most of the repeat offenders interviewed did not possess the benefit of a positive role model or mentor. As previously noted, in the majority of cases their biological parents were not legally married and may not even have lived together. In fact, in a number of cases one of their parents was also incarcerated during part of their upbringing. If the individual offender was fortunate enough to have a different significant caregiver (i.e., grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other responsible adult) this could have made a difference in their development and adjustment.

Physical and Sexual Abuse.

A large number of inmates were abused physically and sexually prior to their incarceration. It is difficult to get an accurate number of incidents of this nature as they tend to be underreported by victims. Victims are sometimes embarrassed or fearful of some type of retaliation if they report these kinds of crimes.

Physical abuse by a parent or guardian could have been meted out by them as perhaps their parent had done, making this a generational problem. It could have been as excessive corporal punishment to get compliance to their demands. A parent or guardian may have been under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Sexual abuses may have taken place also as a result of similar incidents that the parent had undergone themselves. Victims of abuse sometime become abusers.

Recommendation.

Unfortunately, a significant number of repeat offenders have been physically and sexually abused. This must be detected as early as possible to prevent further negative repercussions. Primary agencies such as school personnel, youth service agencies, probation officers, and police officers can detect this abuse and should refer to Division of Youth and service agencies for investigation and assistance.

Conclusion

The criminal justice system is not perfect. However, based upon my 50-plus years of working with law enforcement, correction probation, and parole officers, I have found the vast majority are dedicated and professional in their positions. I have also witnessed numerous positive changes in the system over the years and foresee additional positive improvements as needed. I have been most honored to work in this most important humanistic discipline. ■

John M. Paitakes, PhD, is Professor Emeritus, Seton Hall University in New Jersey. He worked as a probation officer for more than 25 years and served on the New Jersey State Parole Board for 10 years, where he has interviewed over 7,000 inmates. In addition, he has written numerous articles on a diverse number of criminal justice issues and participated as a criminal justice expert on EBRU television, several podcasts, radio, and Fox News television. He continues to work in criminal justice as an Adjunct Professor at Rider University, a criminal justice consultant, and an Alternate Member of the New Jersey State Parole Board. He can be reached at Pait@optonline.net.