

The Impact of Correctional Environments on Older Inmates

Older inmates tend to function better in prison environments that have age-segregated housing units and smaller inmate populations. This finding, among others, was the result of a 1989 study investigating the impact of prison environments on older inmates.

The study followed up on an earlier research project conducted at the State Prison of Southern Michigan (S.P.S.M.) in Jackson, Michigan. The S.P.S.M. facility, with an inmate population of approximately 6,000, comprised two cell designs. One was the "spine design" in which cells were located in the centre of a corridor, and the inmates' view was toward the exterior walls of the cell blocks. The other was the "open design" in which cells were arranged along the exterior walls facing each other across an open space. Although the spine design offers a higher level of privacy, the open design offers greater opportunities for socialization (that is, inmates can see each other and communicate from their cells).

The earlier study examined noise levels and health care demands in the two different designs. Results showed, among other things, that the spine-type cell blocks were noisier over longer periods of time than the open cell blocks.

The next study involved relocating a group of older inmates from S.P.S.M. to a different facility, a former mental hospital. This served as a follow-up to examine the health care needs and demands as well as the influence that the environmental change had upon these older relocated inmates.

The new facility was located in Ionia, Michigan, and was established as part of a program to house elderly prisoners with special needs in one location more suitable to their unique needs. The design included double bunks in dorm rooms as well as a number of single rooms on each of the two floors. Inmates had control over the window and heating radiator located in each room, and each room had a solid door. A fenced yard for the exclusive use of the elderly inmates was located adjacent to the building in which they were housed. As one might expect, the correctional environment induced by this institutional design was different from that of the S.P.S.M. facility.

Forty-one men, with an average age of 62 years, participated in the study. Of these, 40% were serving sentences of one to two years, and an additional 46% were serving ten years or more. The short-term group of offenders had served, on average, almost one third of their sentences while the longer-term offenders had served only 14.6% of their sentences on average. Almost half the sample had been convicted of murder or homicide. Eighty-three percent had at least one chronic health care problem while almost half were reported to have three or more.

Structured interviews were conducted with the inmates, addressing three major areas: changes in general well-being, perceptions of environmental changes and open-ended questions which helped explain influences on inmate perceptions of change. The average time served at the Ionia facility at the time of the interview was two months.

With regard to changes in general well-being, an improvement in mood level was experienced by 69% of the men after the relocation; only 9% had experienced a decrease in mood level. A quarter of the men

were involved in fewer confrontations and incidents. Thirty-six percent indicated that while they previously had no good friends during their time at S.P.S.M., they had established at least one good friendship since being moved to the new facility. The latter finding is particularly interesting when one considers that the inmates had spent an average of only two months at Ionia compared to two to three years at S.P.S.M.

In regard to inmates' perceptions of changes in environment, some improvement was found in general relationships with others, in privacy satisfaction and in satisfaction with the cells, rooms and wards, although this change was not found to be significant. Alternatively, attendance at religious activities significantly decreased, as did the number of visits from friends and family.

The open-ended questions uncovered what the inmates preferred at Ionia compared to similar situations experienced at S.P.S.M. What 63% of the inmates liked most about Ionia was the physical environment, that is, the cleanliness and physical arrangement (ward, room, windows, doors). Fourteen percent said they preferred staff at Ionia compared to the staff at S.P.S.M. A number of inmates (45%) stated that they liked being with men of similar age. Sixteen percent believed they were hassled less and felt they were in a safer place, while an additional 16% indicated they liked the quieter environment at Ionia.

When asked what they liked least, 55% cited loss of "trustee status" which can be described as gaining certain privileges for good behaviour and for having served a significant portion of their sentences without mishap. Twenty-one percent of the inmates stated they did not dislike anything at Ionia.

It was noted that the move to Ionia seemed to increase health care demands temporarily, but other measures of inmate welfare showed significant improvement. The findings supported the conclusion that the policy of age segregation along with improvements in the physical environment have a positive impact on inmate welfare. Based on these findings, a number of design suggestions for the better accommodation of older prisoners were offered, including:

- age-segregated housing units should be used for elderly inmates as these tend to provide an added measure of personal safety;
- one-storey living areas should be used to accommodate older inmates, as their various chronic health problems often result in physical limitations;
- space should be allocated in or near the housing unit for basic medical examinations and delivery of certain health care services;
- rooms should have doors to provide more privacy and security for older inmates; and
- such security measures as heavy-duty prison hardware and building construction could be reduced in housing for older inmates who generally are not hostile or aggressive.