

Developmental Consequences of Incarceration: The Hanover Prison Study

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There is a lack of evaluative longitudinal studies of intervention for delinquent adolescents and young adults in Europe. This is a matter of great concern, since German juvenile criminal law justifies the use of penal sanctions by reference to its pedagogical efficacy. The Hanover Prison Study investigates the course of imprisonment, the consequences of incarceration and individual ways of coping with them. The study was conducted in five youth custody institutions in northern Germany. 2405 first-time incarcerated males aged from 14 to 24 were interviewed at the beginning of their sentence, shortly before release, and at least once after release. Different data sources were used and evaluated in combination. On the methodological level, cross-sectional, cross-sequential, and longitudinal designs were combined with the methodological objective of identifying the effects of incarceration and, as far as possible, distinguishing these from other conditions of deviant behavior among juveniles.

First analyses show that normative orientations of inmates did not change during prison sentence. Accordingly, moral concepts and the level of aggressiveness also remained stable. In contrast, aggressiveness decreased after release as well as the accordance with social norms. Immediately after the beginning of the prison sentence many inmates suffered from serious psychological disturbances, but at the time of their release the inmates had no higher scores than mates their age living outside prison. Self-esteem was very low at the beginning of the sentence but at the time of release and afterwards on the same level as young men not being incarcerated. The stability of self-esteem during incarceration thereby depends to a great part on accommodative coping reactions. The reported results could be replicated in all institutions, despite the fact that they vary to great extent in their housing and treatment conditions. Practical implications of the results and restrictions of the study are being discussed.

Reference

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