

Factors Contributing to the Increase of the U.S. Incarceration Rate in 2020

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Keywords: Epidemic, Defensive measures, Incarceration rate, Mental illness

Abstract: In face of the severe epidemic in 2020, governments around the world have taken a series of defensive measures. One of them is the U.S. home quarantine policy, which is based on the purpose that physical isolation will prevent patients carrying virus from remaining and spreading in society. While it does facilitate the prevention and control of the epidemic, the policy creates a closed environment that isolates an individual physically from society. Under such circumstance, the accompany and communication of a community can only be formed through the Internet, which inevitably gives rise to some side effects. This article summarizes a phenomenon based on a large number of statistics, surveys and news reports in the past: the prevention and control of the epidemic has led to a significant increase in poverty, domestic violence and divorce rates. These three factors in turn result in, according to previous psychological experiments, to a high incidence of mental illness and an elevated incarceration rate. Higher rates of incarceration will not directly pose a negative impact on the level of stability in society. Deeper through the lens of social psychology, the physically enclosed environment leads to the phenomena that people rely more, even exclusively, on information interaction through the Internet and other new media. The collective negative emotions, which then become intensified and extreme after the dissemination of information online, are more likely to trigger violent, chaotic, and dangerous behavior, leading to a more unstable social state.

1. Introduction

To curb the spread of SARS-CoV-2, varieties of strategies including quarantines, home offering, social isolation, online schooling, travel restrictions, holiday extension, and stay-at-home orders have been adopted. The starting point of most of these policies is to build a conscious, closed space to prevent the circulation of the coronavirus, reducing the emergences of potential second and third generation cases. Although they have significant success in effectively preventing and controlling the epidemic, they, unfortunately but inevitably, lead to financial, social and psychological repercussions. Increasing rates of poverty, domestic violence and divorce in 2020 will contribute to mental illness, which will increase the incarceration rate in the United States.

2. Epidemic and Mental Illness

A study jointly released by economists at the University of Chicago and the University of Notre Dame at the end of 2020 shows that about 8 million Americans have fallen below the poverty line since June, and the national poverty rate rose to 11.7 percent in November, well above the unemployment rate level in June. U.S. Department of Labor data also show that as of November, the number of unemployed Americans remained over 10 million, with long-term unemployment accounting for about 37 percent of the population. It is because the coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc on the labor market, and benefits from government assistance programs have been expired for months. When the current policy of awarding an additional \$600 per week in unemployment benefits expires at the end of July 2020, the additional unemployment benefits available to unemployed American workers could be reduced to about \$200 or \$300 per week. Some United States citizens will still be able to receive unemployment benefits in excess of their previous wages, but the number will be far less than the current level. If the U.S. Congress fails to

agree on the next New Crown bailout program by the end of 2020, two important federal unemployment benefits passed by the CARE Act in March will expire after Christmas, which would be 12 million Americans losing their benefits. Meanwhile, mass pandemic unemployment assistance as well as mass pandemic emergency unemployment compensation will both expire at the end of the year, according to a new study released by the Century Foundation, an American think tank. However, up to 4.4 million unemployed Americans will have exhausted both unemployment benefits by Dec. 26. As the new epidemic continues to worsen across the U.S. and state governments take new blockade measures, many economists say that future employment figures are likely to deteriorate further. The recession of 2020 has left more ordinary people stranded, more vulnerable, and more seemingly untouchable, with survival becoming the first priority. One study showed that from March to October 2020, in a statistical collection of nearly 100 news reports on changes in domestic violence calls, cases, charges and homicides in more than 40 U.S. states, domestic violence-type calls to police rose by 2.5 percent in San Francisco, and in Alton, Texas, domestic violence cases increased by 116 percent. Another study was similar, with an average increase of 3.4 domestic violence calls per city per day in the first five weeks after advocating for a reduction in going outside, which equates to more than 1,300 additional domestic violence calls per day across the United States. As a result of the impact of the lockdown policy, on the one hand, family members spend more time together and are more likely to argue over trivial matters and even to engage in domestic violence, which can be further exacerbated by increased unemployment and even the underlying anxiety of possible unemployment. On the other hand, these measures to lock down the home further reduce the opportunities for people to seek help in the neighborhood. The “Stay At Home” requirement further cuts people off from those who might be able to help, including relatives, neighbors, friends, community service workers, and even the police. During the epidemic, more and more women and children are facing a domestic violence crisis, and the number of victims of domestic violence is soaring high. Domestic violence intensifies life during the pandemic, fragmenting more marriages. Over the course of the epidemic, a combination of factors such as living in isolation, declining finances, rising unemployment, illness, death of loved ones, and mental illness led to a further increase in divorce rates. In fact, divorce rates in America soar by 34% during the COVID-19 pandemic with marriages crumbling three weeks into quarantine and newlywed separations doubling to 20 percent. The epidemic has made more people aware of the other side of their spouse's personality; the results of some studies point to a bleak future: divorce rates will remain high even long after the epidemic.

The skyrocketing prevalence of these factors of social instability leads to increasing rates of mental illness. Individuals who experience poverty are at risk of many adverse health conditions and developmental illnesses throughout their entire lives. Poverty in childhood is associated with lower school achievement; worse cognitive, behavioral, and attention-related outcomes; higher rates of delinquency, depressive and anxiety disorders; and higher rates of almost every psychiatric disorder in adulthood. People who experience childhood poverty tend to have mood disorders in adulthood and are less likely to control their negative emotions. This tends to lead to lower academic achievement, poorer cognition, behavior, and attention span first as a student, and later in adulthood to higher rates of mental illness, higher rates of depression, anxiety disorders, and even a greater likelihood of impulsive criminal behavior. Poverty in adulthood is similarly highly associated with mental illness, depression, anxiety disorders, and even suicide. Evidence demonstrates a causal relationship between poverty and mental health. What is more detrimental is the fact that poverty leads to mental health and developmental problems, which, combined with economic, social, academic, and family factors, further prevents individuals and families from escaping poverty, thus creating a vicious cycle of poverty and poor mental health. Poverty affects mental health through a range of social and biological mechanisms that operate at multiple levels and domains, both individual, family, community, class, and national, as well as social, economic, political, and educational. Family-level factors include poor family relationships, poor parenting, inadequate economic conditions, neglect of children's physical and mental development, lack of accompany, and even child abuse. Domestic violence can have a significant negative impact on the

mental health of the victim or other family members who witness it. It can lead to long-term physical and psychological trauma that not only affects sleep, appetite, and concentration, but also leads to higher levels of depression, higher suicidal ideation, and lower life satisfaction. In addition to its impact on families, domestic violence also poses a threat to the stability and safety of the social environment and places a significant medical and financial burden on society. Women who have been abused by a partner are three times more likely to suffer depression, anxiety or severe conditions such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder than other women, according to research. Children are often the forgotten victims of family violence, which impacts their mental health long-term. Studies have reported that children who experience domestic violence exhibit more behavioral and emotional problems than the average child. Children in violent families, for example, display more aggressive and antisocial behaviors, as well as fearful and inhibited behaviors, and they have poorer social and interpersonal skills. Domestic violence has a significant negative impact on children's emotional well-being and overall adjustment. Boys and girls in families with violence between parents exhibit greater depression and aggression, as well as lower self-esteem. In addition, these children are more likely to exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression and trauma, and to develop temperamental problems. Another consequence of domestic violence is that it affects children's perceptions of and attitudes toward coping with violent and conflictual events in their lives, and the effects are long-lasting. Many researchers believe that children who are affected by violence between adults in the home may develop attitudes that justify their use of violence to solve problems and cope with frustrations. Boys who have experienced domestic violence are more likely to share the view that "aggressive behavior can enhance an individual's reputation or self-image. Boys who had witnessed domestic violence were more likely than girls to identify with violence. Possible explanations for this are that the abusers the boys witnessed were male and that the boys were more likely to condone or emulate the behavior. They may also be more likely to become perpetrators of domestic violence as adults. Divorce can be a difficult time for a family, with their children facing the crisis and challenge of adapting to a new parental environment, normally broken and cruel. Research shows that parental divorce or separation increases the risk of adjustment problems in children and adolescents, including academic difficulties (significantly lower academic performance or even dropping out of school), disruptive behaviors (including character as well as object destruction) and depressed mood. Children of divorced/separated parents are also more likely to engage in high-risk sexual behaviors. Living in poverty, the families they grow up to form are often unstable as well. These young people, even when they appear healthy, can be deeply distressed and helpless in certain situations: especially in intimate relationships, their unstable psychological state is particularly vulnerable and easily exposed.

3. Root Causes: Formation of Social Resentment during Epidemic

Social emotion is the sum of individual emotions with certain common characteristics. It is a barometer of whether a society is functioning well or not, harmonious or not. In this information age, technology in various fields is developing rapidly, information is pouring in like an explosion, and the influence of new media has penetrated into all aspects of society. Social emotions are generated, spread and explode, and individual negative emotions develop into social negative emotions, including group resentment. The widespread use of new media has become a medium and catalyst for the formation of group resentment itself and the various destructive forces and phenomena it causes. This was even more prevalent in the era of the epidemic. Because of quarantine policies, enclosed and segregated spaces appear on a large scale. Most individuals were isolated from society and had a hard time communicating with those around them in real life. Their only contact is in the virtual world, the Internet, which is where new media comes into play.

New media is, relative to traditional media, a new media form developed after traditional media such as newspaper, radio and television. It can use digital technology, network technology, mobile technology, through the Internet, wireless communication network, cable network and other channels, as well as computers, cell phones, digital TV sets and other terminals, to provide users with information and entertainment in the form of communication and media forms, such as digital

magazines, digital newspapers, digital radio, cell phone SMS, mobile TV, Internet, desktop windows, digital TV, digital movies, touch media, etc.. It is characterized by interactivity and immediacy, mass and sharing, multimedia and hypertext, personalization and community. As new technologies such as digital technology and network technology are widely used and the impact of new media on social life is increasingly evident, it is safe to say that society has entered the new media era in the sense of communication science.

Negative emotions and resentment cannot be spread and disseminated without a certain carrier and medium. Throughout all aspects of the communication process - the infection of emotions, the dissemination of information, the amplification of events, etc. - the role of new media is inseparable. When sensational social events occur, especially social outrage events that reveal some social instability, their participants and onlookers are able to disseminate information about them first through new media. They generally spread real information, or misinformation, or false information through various means such as cell phone text messages, major social networking platforms, blogs, emails, live chat tools, and other websites. Through this information, irrational, mostly negative emotions are quickly spread, exaggerated and fermented; the state of affairs is unavoidably distorted and exaggerated. New media that is convenient and quick, but also has a wide impact, gathering a large audience in a short period of time and rapidly expanding its influence. Once this interaction of information is transferred from the real world to the online world, it can easily cause serious consequences. New media that is convenient and quick, but also has a wide impact, gathering a large audience in a short period of time and rapidly expanding its influence. Once this interaction of information is transferred from the real world to mostly the online world, it can easily cause serious consequences. People's emotions tend to become extreme: ecstasy, distraught, rage, resentment are more easily intensified, and reason becomes more difficult to control emotions. This can lead to the phenomenon described in the previous section and eventually lead to further social instability.

The new media has broken through the original social interaction and greatly expanded the scope and impact of interpersonal interaction. Before the Internet, cell phones and other new media, people's interactions were limited to physical networks linked by blood, geographical, professional and fun relationships, in which scope was limited. But through the new media, people can break through the limitations of the original social network and spread various information and opinions to other groups and regions. Moreover, in the process of online communication, the three-dimensional information display and interactive methods such as pictures, videos and comments are more likely to cause people's psychological resonance. Under such circumstance, collective mind will form, triggering collective actions, usually more extreme and powerful compared to individual actions, that are quite different from those individual ones. The square effect refers to the fact that in public places where crowds gather, people tend to show words and actions that are very different from or even completely opposite to their daily lives, and this mentality most of the time makes the group morality of the masses lower than that of individuals. The openness, share-ability, interactivity and anonymity of new media have all the conditions for the square effect to happen. In fact, the new media represented by the Internet itself is a huge, borderless square and public space. They can provide all people who can reach the new technology with the opportunity to participate, so that participants can speak and express themselves "freely" in an anonymous state without high threshold and with fewer restrictions. In this process, people abandon the shackles of social roles and norms in real life, and can even express words that break through moral and legal boundaries. Therefore, the Internet and other new media has become a collection and distribution center for all kinds of irrational and negative social emotions and a source of dissemination. It strengthens the resentment mentality, easily causes psychological resonance and behavioral imitation, and promotes the transformation of resentment from a psychological phenomenon to actual action, which in turn triggers destructive actions and results.

4. Conclusion

Today, mental health in the United States is worsening among all age groups. Symptoms of mental illness include extreme mood changes, paranoia or hallucinations, social difficulties, substance abuse, and intense anger, hostility or violence that may lead to criminal behaviors. Studies find greater psychopathology among violent offenders and higher rates of violence among those with mental illness. What is beyond doubt is that more people committing crimes will lead to greater incarceration rates. An unfortunate and pressing fact must be addressed: increasing poverty, domestic violence and divorce rates in 2020 give rise to mental illness, which will increase the incarceration rate in the United States.

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