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Shock Incarceration – An Alternative for First Offenders?

Introduction

Commonly known as "boot camp prisons" due to their military-style orientation, shock incarceration programs are designed to confine inmates for a short period of time (90 to 180 days) in a highly regimented program of strict discipline, military drill and ceremony, and physical exercise. The program is intended primarily for young, non-violent adult offenders with no record of adult incarceration.

Shock incarceration programs generally operate as separate entities within larger correctional institutions. It is intended that brief confinement in the program will "shock" participants into realizing the harsh reality of prison life without subjecting them to long prison sentences and direct contact with hardened offenders. A program assumption is that physical exertion and military-style discipline will both improve the physical condition of offenders and instill order and discipline in their lives. Most shock incarceration programs also offer additional programs such as counseling and adult education, which are further seen as improving offenders' chances following release.

In a recently completed review of these programs, Dale G. Parent, a researcher for Abt Associates, Inc., reports that at the end of 1987, 13 shock incarceration programs were operating in 7 States (Georgia, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, New York, and Florida) and programs were being developed in 5 other States (Michigan, North Carolina, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Kansas). In addition, nine States were considering such programs. Parent also notes that the "shock incarceration" approach has received strong support from the public, legislative bodies, and the judiciary.

Parent cautions that the program's popularity does not guarantee its success in achieving the goals attributed to shock incarceration, namely, (1) improved resource management, (2) enhanced prison discipline, and (3) improved effectiveness of correctional intervention. He observes that reduction of prison crowding (and, consequently, improved resource management) will occur only if shock incarceration participants are drawn from among those who would otherwise have received long prison sentences. He then notes that many current program participants appear to be individuals who otherwise would have been on probation.

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The program's ability to facilitate enhanced discipline in prison appears to depend on its administration — whether consistent limit-setting is established or the program is harshly and irregularly administered. With respect to goal three, improved effectiveness of correctional intervention, Parent finds that data from two States suggest that, at best, shock incarceration graduates return to prison at about the same rate as similar offenders given other sanctions, and, at worst, they may return to prison at higher rates."

Examples of Shock Incarceration

Georgia: Special Alternative Incarceration Programs

Georgia's Special Alternative Incarceration (SAI) Programs are intended for younger, first-time offenders between the ages of 17 and 26. SAI's operating philosophy calls for an "intensified, rigid atmosphere" where "high standards of self-discipline, appearance, and commitment are called for."

The programs are located at the Dodge Correctional Institution in Chester and at the Burruss Correctional Institution near Macon. Each unit contains 100 beds. The Dodge program has 12 staff — 1 probation officer, 1 counselor, 1 lieutenant, and 9 correctional officers. The Burruss program has 20 staff due to the fact that offenders are housed in 4 living units instead of the 2 used at Dodge.

Each month, 32 offenders enter the program at Dodge. Program candidates, selected by the court, must agree to participate and must meet strict medical fitness criteria. Once admitted to the program, participants are confined for a 90-day mandatory period in a program of "strenuous manual labor and exercise and harsh physical conditions." Upon completion, they are placed on probation supervision to complete their sentences.

An evaluation of the Dodge Unit (Flowers, 1986) found the following:

1. Of the 260 offenders admitted to the program in 1984, 239 (92 percent) successfully completed the training.
2. Of those who completed the program, 21.3 percent went to prison within 1 year of completion. This compares to a failure rate (return to prison) of 18.4 percent for releasees from a youthful offender institution and 23.9 percent for prison releasees. Among probation programs, the failure rate (probation revocation) on regular probation was 7.5 percent, for Intensive Probation Supervision (IPS) cases (a special program with emphasis on surveillance) the rate was 18.8 percent, and for Diversion Center cases (a 120-day residential program of work, community service, and family contact) the rate was 23.4 percent.

3. Estimated annual per capita cost of the various programs were:

Prison/Youth Center	\$11,107
Diversion Center (plus regular probation)	2,896
Georgia's SAI programs (plus regular probation)	2,586
IPS (plus regular probation)	1,266
Regular Probation	274

New York: Camp Monterey Incarceration Facility

Camp Monterey is a 250-bed facility located in Beaver Dams, New York. The camp has 131 staff, 83 of whom are custodial. Of the total staff, 26 were added following the camp's conversion in 1987 to a shock incarceration facility. Operating costs are about \$460,000 more per year than the standard New York prison camp. Inmates spend 180 days at the camp, where they work 8 hours a day, receive physical training and military drill, and receive other programs such as Adult Basic Education and individual counseling.

Compared to other shock incarceration programs, Camp Monterey has several features which make it more or less unique:

- It is a "stand-alone" institution; that is, it is not part of a large correctional facility.
- Correctional staff select inmate-participants following the latter's sentencing by the court. Thus, the court is not involved in the selection process and program placement cannot be part of a plea-bargaining arrangement.
- While inmates selected for the program are persons confined for the first time, many have been held at Rikers Island for 4 to 6 months and, consequently, have experienced prison life. Perhaps because of this, a higher number of inmates than usual (around 50 percent) refuse to volunteer for the program. Parent notes that many corrections professionals believe shock incarceration will work only with first offenders because inmates with prior confinement records will not tolerate a military-style program. Parent sees the experience of Camp Monterey as dispelling this notion, but the fact that nearly half of those asked to participate refused suggests that limits exist in the applicability of shock incarceration. In this regard, it should be emphasized that a primary inducement to participate in these programs is that participants spend less time in prison than they would have otherwise; absent this inducement, it is unlikely that such programs could survive on their own merits. With respect to the New York program, for example, prison officials estimate that the average inmate completing the shock incarceration program serves 12 to 18 months less than he would have had he not been in the program.
- Unlike most programs where staff are specially selected for positions in the program, the State of New York started by converting an existing institution to a shock incarceration facility. Existing staff were given the opportunity to stay and were provided a 2-week training program for the new operation. Most staff chose to stay, but some transferred or took early retirement.

Parent indicates that most prison officials believe that job stress is much greater for staff involved in shock incarceration programs than for those who are not involved and that staff turnover is greater as a result. He noted this could create problems for the New York program in the future.

Comparison of Existing Programs

Attached are two tables taken from the Parent report that summarize information regarding existing shock incarceration programs. Table 1 (page 5) presents information on eligibility criteria for participation in shock incarceration programs in eight jurisdictions, and table 2 (page 6) conveys the types of components that are provided as part of each jurisdiction's shock incarceration approach.

Of the eight jurisdictions reflected in the tables, seven require some sort of medical clearance to participate in shock incarceration. These programs require physical labor and exercise, and some stress running and jogging as well. Parent notes that two people have died during physical training sessions despite their medical clearances and he cautions about the need for inmate consent forms and possible liability issues.

Enabling Legislation. According to Parent, of the eight jurisdictions operating shock incarceration programs at the time of his study, six required special enabling legislation and two used existing authority to initiate their programs.

Staff/Inmate Relations. Parent advises that staff in some shock incarceration programs subject inmates to intense verbal confrontation when they first arrive. He said that in programs using a confrontational approach and frequent use of summary punishments, tensions are high and hostility toward staff is considerable, while a more positive climate exists where this approach is not used.

In-Program Failure and Withdrawals. Parent reports that some shock incarceration programs allow inmates to withdraw from the program at least during certain periods of time and that in one program the withdrawal rate is around 40 percent (mostly during the first week or two). Oklahoma, on the other hand, does not allow any withdrawals and will place serious or persistent rule violators in isolation for the duration of the program (120 days), if necessary, to ensure that this "no-easy-out" policy is maintained.

Most programs also provide for removal of inmates for rule violations. Parent reports that among the programs he visited, the expulsion rate was between 5 and 20 percent. Some programs also have established minimum performance levels, which inmates are expected to maintain, and provide special attention to those whose performance is marginal.

Use of Summary Punishment. Parent reports that all programs allow staff to impose summary punishment (push-ups, extra duty, etc.) for some minor rule violations and cautions about possible abuses. As a case in point, a recent newspaper article (July 7, 1988) reported that the Regimented Inmate Discipline (RID) program in Mississippi used former Army and Marine instructors, some of whom, quoting an internal Corrections Department memorandum, had "pushed, kicked, slapped and poked with batons" inmates in the program. It also stated that some offenders had also been forced to "crawl over gravel and asphalt, thus causing blisters on their hands and knees" and "dive into, wade and crawl through a mud hole." As a result of these charges, new instructors were brought into the program and other steps were taken to avoid possible abuses.

Table 1

Shock Incarceration Eligibility Criteria

Jurisdiction	Offender age limits	Limit on type of current offense	Must have no prior prison sentence	Limit on current sentence	Must have no physical or mental impairment	Offender must volunteer	Other
Georgia	17-25	none	yes	1-5 years	yes	yes	
Oklahoma	18-22	non-violent	yes	none	yes	yes	
Mississippi	none	non-violent	yes	none	no	yes	
Orleans Parish	none	non-violent	yes	≤7 years	yes	yes	
Louisiana	none	parole eligible	must be first felony conviction	≤7 years	yes	yes	Division of Probation and Parole must recommend; court must recommend; DOC must find offender particularly likely to respond favorably
South Carolina	17-24	non-violent	yes	≤5 years	yes	yes	
New York	16-24	non-violent	yes	indeterminate	yes	yes	No prior indeterminate sentence; eligible for parole within 3 years
Florida	none	none	yes	none	yes	yes	

Source: Parent, Dale G., *Shock Incarceration: An Assessment of Existing Programs*, p. 19.

Table 2

Shock Incarceration Treatment Components

Jurisdiction	Drug/ Alcohol counsel- ing	Reality therapy	Relaxation therapy	Individual counseling	Recreation therapy	Therapeutic community
Georgia*						
Oklahoma	X	X	X	X	X	
Mississippi		X	X	X		
Orleans Parish	X			X		
Louisiana	X	X		X		
South Carolina	X				X	
New York	X	X		X	X	X
Florida	X	X	X			

* Georgia's program offers none of these particular treatment components.

Source: Parent, Dale G., *Shock Incarceration: An Assessment of Existing Programs*, p. 51

Such abuses do not appear to be widespread; however, the potential for abuse remains and, consequently, it is essential to select staff carefully and monitor staff actions in these programs.

Concluding Comments

Shock incarceration has proven to be very popular with the public, elected officials, and many criminal justice professionals. Its effectiveness in achieving correctional goals, however, remains unproven.

At the Federal level, the Government Accounting Office (GAO) estimates that during 1986 there were 1,224 Federal offenders sent to prison who met the typical criteria for shock incarceration programs — for example, they were under age 25, had no previous adult incarceration, and were convicted for a non-violent offense. GAO further estimates that under the new Federal Sentencing Guidelines, which became effective in November 1987, this number will likely increase. This provides a large pool of eligibles for a shock incarceration program even if many would decline to participate or would fail the necessary physical examination.

However, the GAO's estimate of eligible offenders far exceeds Bureau of Prisons computations. Using criteria of no prior commitments, no listing of violence or escape, and a low-severity instant offense, and the restriction that participants be under age 25, fewer than 100 Federal offenders would currently be eligible to participate in a shock incarceration program.

References

1. Branson, Reed, "Memo: Inmates in RID programs abused." Jackson, Mississippi: *The Clarion-Ledger*, July 9, 1988.
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3. General Accounting Office. *Prison Boot Camps: Too Early to Measure Effectiveness*. Washington, D.C.: September, 1988.
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