PRISON ENVIRONMENTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON OLDER CITIZENS

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DESIGN ISSUE

The objective of this research was to study the influence of the prison environment on the health and welfare of older inmates.

BACKGROUND

This study built on previous research conducted by the author at the State Prison of Southern Michigan (SPSM) to study the influence of environmental factors on stress (the use of healthcare services by inmates was used as a surrogate measure for stress). The ensuing research was conducted at Ionia – a facility to which the older inmates were relocated. This paper presents an analysis of the changes in the welfare of these prisoners following relocation.

At SPSM the cell blocks were arranged in either a “spine” or “open” layout. In the “spine” configuration cells are located on a central spine with prisoners’ view looking outwards towards the exterior wall. In the “open” layout cells are arranged along the exterior wall facing each other across a central open space. Also, there were two types of segregation cell blocks, where prisoners were placed either as a punishment or for protection. The final type of cell block entailed an open design for model prisoners. As part of the prior research study, the author collected data on noise levels in each cell block, the frequency of visits to the clinic in a month, complaints at “sick call”, medical services rendered, demographics, and information about the prisoner’s cell. Analysis revealed that:

1) The greatest number of complaints pertained to skin or respiratory issues;
2) The majority of services requested were for medication;
3) The segregated cell blocks had the highest numbers of sick calls;
4) The model prisoner cell block had the least number of sick calls;
5) Fewer prisoners from cell blocks with views of farmland came to sick call.

The prison at Ionia was previously a secure mental health facility. With a capacity to hold between 80 and 112 men, it had been refurbished to accommodate prisoners who were chronic psychiatric patients, younger than 21 years, and the elderly. The physical environment at Ionia was quite different from SPSM and included dorms, individual rooms (with inmate control of window and heating), solid doors, toilets on each floor, dining room with an outside view, a yard exclusive for the elderly, dayrooms on each floor with recreational amenities, laundry and store facilities.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data were collected through structured interviews with forty-one inmates who had been relocated to Ionia from SPSM. These inmates were all over fifty years of age. The interviews were conducted privately in the inmates' rooms or an assigned office. The author also dined with inmates to experience the quality of food and dining environment, and to interact with other prisoners.

The interview was designed to gather data on demographics, incarceration, feelings about the relocation, degree of satisfaction vis-à-vis food, friends, activities, religion, staff, perception of health, and so forth, pertaining to both SPSM and Ionia. In addition to this, the author also collected health records of the prisoners both before and after the move.

FINDINGS

Analysis showed that the average inmate was 62 years old, had spent an average of two months at Ionia, needed intensive medical services, and had at least one chronic health condition. Following the relocation to Ionia, over two-thirds of the inmates experienced an improvement in their mood, while one-tenth felt a worsening of mood. After the move, about a quarter of inmates had fewer confrontations and over a third said that they had established friendships. Overall, 75% felt more satisfied after relocating to Ionia, while 17% felt less satisfied. Demands for healthcare services increased by 100% for inmates housed in rooms, but not very significantly for those in dorms.

Inmates' perception of their general environment changed, but not significantly. More specifically, no significant change was noted in satisfaction pertaining to job, in usage of spare time, in activities pursued, towards staff, and medical care received. There was an improvement in relationships with other inmates, perception of their privacy, and general satisfaction with their housing, although not at very significant levels. Inmates attended fewer religious activities at Ionia and the number of visits decreased.

In response to what they liked about Ionia, 63% associated aspects of the physical environment like arrangement of wards, doors, windows, and cleanliness to their satisfaction with the facility while 17% associated better food and 14% associated better staff.

At SPSM, 38% of inmates valued their trustee status and other privileges; not surprisingly, 55% of them disliked losing these at Ionia. 21% did not dislike anything about Ionia except for their imprisoned status.

36% associated their dislike of SPSM with physical aspects of the prison, like cell, filth, rats, and noise and 19% associated their dissatisfaction with being with younger inmates. 45% of the respondents liked being with men of their age and 16% felt safer and enjoyed the quiet environment of Ionia.

Overall, despite an increase in healthcare demand, all measures of inmate welfare improved after move to the newer environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN PRACTICE

For design teams embarking on a new or renovation prison project, the author suggested the following implications for design:

- Consider one-story living areas for safety and access.
- Consider space for medical examination and healthcare services.
- Consider rooms with doors for elderly prisoners to provide privacy, quiet, and a feeling of security.
- Consider space for gardening.
- Consider reduction of security measures for non-hostile elderly prisoners.
- Consider age-segregated housing units for elderly prisoners.
- Consider reduced number of inmates in housing units.

Owing to the special needs and challenges of older inmates, it may be prudent to provide prison environments that match their needs, which, in turn, might have a positive impact of operational costs.

LIMITATIONS

Data on both environments were collected after the move to Ionia. Ideally, SPSM data would have been collected before the move, but the timeline did not allow this. Thus, the robustness of SPSM data may have suffered from limitations due to memory and other biases.

Demand for healthcare was used as a surrogate measure for stress. However, the number of health-related visits may not accurately reflect mental and physical health status; it could, for example, reflect the greater availability of services.

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