Statement and Analysis of the Problem

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**Statement of the Problem**

As the largest prison in Chicago and one of the country’s biggest single-site jails, the Cook County Jail has, most of the time, held more inmates than its capacity allows. Statistics show that, on average, while the annual circulation of around 100,000 individuals, the jail's daily population is approximately 6,100 inmates. In fact, it once had a population of about 10,000 detainees and, thus, overcrowded (Jimenez, 2020). As of the beginning of March, 2,430 individuals going through electronic monitoring (on community supervision under the Sheriff’s custody), and 5,700 inmates were being held in this jail. According to the Civic Federation (2020), because jails and prisons, particularly this one, provided optimal conditions in which COVID-19 could spread, advocates had been asking leaders to release some individuals.

As such, the criminal justice issue identified relates to the excess number of inmates that results in overcrowding in this prison. It implies that the Cook County jail does not meet the desired officer-to-inmate ratio. Further, the criminal justice issue also relates to the incidence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which acts as a health risk to the wellbeing of inmates, especially due to the high number of inmates. Williams and Ivory (2020) explain that coronavirus found its way into the jail when two inmates tested positive for COVID-19 on March 23. As a result of the virus being highly contagious, more than 350 inmates and employees had been infected in a little over two weeks. As such, although arising from different perspectives, these matters encompass the criminal justice issue identified in the city of Chicago, Illinois.

Nonetheless, as the infection numbers surged in the jail, steps that included releasing a portion of selected inmates have been taken to curb the spread of COVID-19. As elaborated by Jimenez, as the offices of the State's Attorney, Public Defender, and Cook County Sheriff focused on setting free low-level, nonviolent offenders and those awaiting trial, the jail has released another 1,300 inmates, which has reduced the number to around 4,200 over April. However, this reduction is directly attributable to the incidence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Otherwise, due to a high number of inmates, overcrowding has been the primary criminal justice issue that has been a significant aspect of mass incarceration, which has been an issue of growing debate in major prisons in the country.

Statistics indicate that due to factors such as changes in economic growth and depressions, war and peace, and rising and falling crime rates, there has been an increase in the population of prisons in the U.S. every year over the past several decades. According to Frost and Clear (2018), statistics have shown that since 2002, the population of inmates prisons and jails in the U.S. has exceeded the two million mark every year. This means that about 25% of the country’s population is currently incarcerated. Accordingly, as explained by Frost and Clear, the phrase “mass incarceration” is now being used invariably to describe what used to be known as incarceration. Those who go in and how long they stay there solely determine the size of jail and prison populations (Frost & Clear, 2018).

Consequently, scholars have taken diverse theoretical perspectives in an attempt to provide insights behind the idea of mass incarceration. For instance, in their book, Frost and Clear (2018) present five dominant theories coined by various scholars in a bid to explain and disentangle the problem of mass incarceration. The first theory casts mass incarceration as a rational response to crime increase. Frost and Clear explain that through the 1960s to the start of marked rises in incarceration, the increases in social unrest and crime is a straightforward explanation for the growth in mass incarceration.

The second theory revolves around mass incarceration, politics, and public opinion. The theorists behind this view argue that the punitive turn in the criminal justice policy, public opinion, and politics, which are the causes of mass incarceration, are significantly tied together (Frost & Clear, 2018). For instance, as explained by Frost and Clear, they hold that the growth in mass incarceration has been fueled by, based on arising perspectives, politicians’ response to public opinion regarding crime and the fear of crime, instead of the real crime itself.

The third theory casts mass incarceration as a vehicle for controlling marginal populations. Frost and Clear (2018) explain that various scholars have argued that the resulting rise in incarceration rates and early increases in punitive measures among largely marginalized Americans were, through the 1970s and 1980s, driven by the pairing of images of welfare and crime. As such, Frost and Clear say, “incarceration rates have always been higher for the poor and people of color” (p. 112). Technically, this is the reason behind the theoretical perspective that incarceration is a device for controlling marginal subgroups that make insignificant contributions to the contemporary economy.

In the fourth one, theorists view mass incarceration as the new Jim Crow. Here, theorists argue that in any discussion related to the causes or outcomes of mass incarceration, disparate racial impacts should be the dominant focus (Frost & Clear, 2018). Frost and Clear add that generally, it has been agreed that the movement branded “tough-on-crime,” which pave the way for unprecedented incarceration levels was, extensively, part of a political strategy and some fundamental cultural, political, and social shifts in the 1960s can be attributed to the punitive twist in American penal policy. However, it is also essential to note that, as explained by Frost and Clear, the supporters of this theoretical perspective also recognize the significant role of the war on drugs in the growth of inmate populations.

Finally, the last theoretical perspective casts mass incarceration as a grand social experiment. This view primarily arises from the ideology behind America’s long and popular practice of grand experimentation in social policy (Frost & Clear, 2018). In earlier work, Frost and Clear identified several notable attributes that qualify mass incarceration as a grand social experiment. For instance, the emergence of such experiments revolves around what is growingly opinionated to be an incessantly social problem necessitating a transformative type of solution, while the second attribute is the political will and public alarm that start coalescing around a new approach and understanding of the social issue (Frost & Clear, 2018). Further, as a new approach to address the issue based on a shift on how people perceive the problem, the emergence of a new idea that gains momentum is the third attribute of a grand social experiment (Frost & Clear, 2018) and because mass incarceration possesses all these attributes and, thus, qualifies to be one.

Other scholars have also formulated more theories on the same. For example, Pfaff (2017) argues against a fundamentally misguided view regarding the current account of how mass incarceration has reached where it is today. Pfaff also argues that views that include an increasing reliance on private prisons, draconian sentencing laws, and the failed “War on Drugs” provide insufficient insights into the problem of mass incarceration. As such, Pfaff offers other theoretical perspectives. For instance, over the period between the 1990s and 2000s, the count of prosecutors has grown with over 10,000 individuals, while crime rates have reduced. As such, Pfaff argues that while this additional number kept themselves busy and put their learning into practice, incarceration rates have significantly increased. Another theory is that in a bid to attract promotion and jobs in higher offices, the hopes of employing a “tough-on-crime” reputation more aggressively may have grown invariably among prosecutors.

**Analysis of the Problem**

As already mentioned, while the annual circulation of inmates is around 100,000 individuals, the daily population in the Cook County jail is approximately 6,100 inmates. Statistics show that in the past, the jail had once a population of about 10,000 detainees and, thus, it has been, like most other prisons and jails, overcrowded. In a 2012 publication on the characteristics of inmates and population dynamics in this jail, Olson and Taheri (2012) note that in 2011, the average daily population of the jail was 8896. With the average being 9199 inmates in March, this number has often been persistently high, which provides insight into the criminal justice issue, especially based on the theoretical perspective presented above.

According to Olson and Taheri (2012), represented by a percentage of 66.9% (86.5% of that number being males between 21 and 30 years of age), African-Americans comprised the largest group of inmates in Cook County jail in 2011. Most of these individuals were from the west and south of Chicago (Olson & Taheri, 2012). The fact that 66.9% of the inmates were African-Americans helps inform and support the theoretical view that mass incarceration as a vehicle for controlling marginal populations. Notably, as elaborated by Olson and Taheri, in relation to all general classification of crimes that included driving-related offenses (with the inclusion of DUI (driving under influence) property offenses, drug-law violations, and violent crimes, distribution of charges in terms of was 15.4%, 17.9%, 26.9%, and 28.7%, respectively. However, the statistics also showed that one out of every seven inmates committed the domestic battery by 2011, representing 12.7% (Olson & Taheri, 2012).

In conclusion, with the jail having a massive number of inmates, the situation does not seem to have changed much since 2011. According to a report published in April by the Sherriff’s office, the jail population was 7214, which comprised 4567 and 2647 inmates in jail and community corrections, respectively. Among those in confinement and in community corrections, 94.5% and 92.9%, respectively, were males. Notably, in the two groups, 74.0% and 70.4% comprised of blacks only, which shows a significant disparity since the group that followed was Latino, representing less than 25% of all those jailed and in community corrections. Notably, crime is a major reason behind the high incarceration rates, which might have been the root problem. Furthermore, one of the theoretical perspectives that mass incarceration as a rational response to crime increase plays a significant role in providing insights into the probable cause of mass incarceration in this jail.

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