

# Sonoma County Jail and Mental Health

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Sociology 336 Investigative Sociology

### Acknowledgments

The research group would like to thank Sonoma State University and Professor Peter Philips for providing this course and allowing this team to investigate the social issue at hand.

This research project could not have been actualized without the efforts and cooperation of the interviewees. The group acknowledged that recounting their experiences with incarceration can be triggering and for that bravery, the interviewees showed we graciously thank you all.

We would also like to thank our advisor for this project, Jerry Treet, for providing us with guidance and encouragement in finishing this project and sharing our work with the community.

Last but not least, this project could not have been possible without the time, effort, and cooperation of the group members.

### Abstract

The investigative sociology report conducted by Sonoma State University's sociology students reveals the relationship between the Sonoma County Jail environment and mental health. Through conducting multiple interviews with inmates and staff the research group was able to conclude the findings stated below. The findings of this research show that inmates and staff from the Sonoma County Jail desire better services relating to mental health as well as an overall better environment.

## Introduction

In the year 2020 there were approximately 1.8 million people incarcerated in the United States. Of those incarcerated, approximately 20 percent of inmates in jails and 15 percent of inmates in state prisons were found to have a serious mental illness. This specific research team is focusing on the relationship between the jail environment and the overall mental health of inmates and staff. Sonoma County Jails and Prisons currently house 16,404 inmates and serve an area of 1,576 square miles. In addition, the Sonoma County Jails and Prisons are rated number 45 out of 58 counties in jails and prisons per capita. Although this may seem like a good rating compared to the grand scope of jails and prisons, the inmates and staff have different takes on the manner. Incarceration along with mental health are currently two very pressing topics of interest in a large portion of the United States.

The Sonoma State Investigative Sociology students have conducted various interviews with staff and inmates who were once incarcerated at the facilities. The interviews touched on how they were treated while incarcerated and how they considered their mental health during this time. The research group feels it is important that staff and inmates share their experiences while incarcerated so that a new conversation can be actualized around mental health.

## Literature Review

### Article 1: Gender Issues in New Generation Jail

Focus must be brought to the article “Gender Issues in New Generation Jail” written by Patrick G. Jackson and Cindy A. Sterns, two professors at Sonoma State University. This research article closes in on women in jail and the “new generation” in particular. The study is based on the six months before the inmates arrived at the facilities and six months after they had been released. These new generation facility jails are seen more positively by men as there has been a reduction of assaults, graffiti, and contraband. Although, women are having a harder time adapting to the new generation facilities compared to men. After transferring from the old jail, women-only saw improvements in two of six categories: safety and privacy. There was a decline in women's social stimulation, emotional feedback, and activity. Women were found to be more stressed out than men after arriving at the new facility, as there was a decline in their daily interactions with other inmates. Women have a hard time adjusting to the new generation jail facility due to various reasons. In the old facility, women could wear makeup and jewelry, their families could visit, and they were provided with better clothes. But when they transferred to the new facility, they lost many of those privileges. This study displays the ways in which men and women being treated equally within the jail has shown to have a negative effect on women.

### Article 2: Sonoma County Jail Inmates Call for More Contact with the Outside World

About 20 inmates at the Sonoma County Jail have refused to eat facility-cooked meals for the past two weeks because the inmates want more contact with the outside world. In addition to more contact with family, inmates want more access to work assignments. The strike began in January, which involved 21 inmates in a single module at the Sonoma County Jail. These 21

inmates told the correctional officers they refuse to eat any meals provided by the jail until their demands are met. These specific inmates wanted free phone calls, video calls, and access to outside work, which would allow them more contact with the outside world. These inmates still have access to food sold through the jail commissary, and it is believed that these inmates bought a large amount of food at the jail commissary before their strike. These demands resulted from families no longer being able to visit inmates because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although, inmates still have access to phone calls with their family members. It was mentioned by a staff member named Valencia that “Some of the stuff is out of our reach, A third-party vendor owns the phones inside the facility, so that’s not something we can give away for free. The video visitation, that’s an infrastructure project, which we don’t have the money for.” These inmates are choosing to protest because they feel as if they are being removed from relations with the outside world, but the jail shared they have no way of changing these circumstances at the moment. In relation to our research, it is important to add that each of these 21 inmates who are protesting get medical check-ups daily.

### Article 3: Sonoma County Jail Manager Confident Coronavirus Outbreak Contained

A week before Sonoma County implemented the mask protocol, Sonoma County Jail had all their staff wearing a mask while working. Also, everyone’s temperature was checked before the staff stepped foot into the facility. Inmates who committed minor crimes were released from jail to prevent overcrowding in the main jail facility. Inmates who tested positive for COVID-19 had to be separated and put into lockdown for at least seven days. It is also shocking to consider that Sonoma County Jail had very low rates of COVID-19 cases. It was found that the detention facility with the highest number of COVID- 19 cases was San Quentin State Prison.

#### Article 4: Coronavirus and Sonoma County Jail

Around 200 inmates awaiting trial for misdemeanor charges were released from jail to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Some non-violent offenders were released from prison to keep the COVID-19 from spreading out of the county's two jail facilities. Sonoma County Public Defender Kathleen Pozzi said the county's superior court judges released about 200 non-violent offenders who were awaiting trials on misdemeanor offenses, and they will return to court at a later date, Pozzi said. As of Thursday, none of the inmates or the officers tested positive for Covid, according to Pozzi. District Attorney Jill Ravitch released 25 prisoners who were already sentenced to non-violent offenses who had less than 60 days left to serve. Ravitch also directed law enforcement officers to arrest, cite and release offenders charged with most misdemeanors unless they were charged with domestic violence, Pozzi said.

Amongst the article, "Sonoma County Inmate Population Drops Sharply Amid Shut-down, New Bail Rules" by Nashelly Chavez, we can connect similar viewpoints regarding the research question at hand. The problem indicated is how coronavirus has affected the jail system in Sonoma County. Regarding this article, the main subjectivity is that the Sonoma County Jail system has issued an order to release inmates for the safety of the inmates and guards because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Around 500 inmates including those who have yet to be booked into the jail were set free because of safety regulations in the Sonoma County Jail. With this method of safety and security, everyone that has been tested in the two Sonoma County Jails came back negative for coronavirus. This indicates the success of their action and process towards the problem at hand.

The issues regarding COVID-19 and the Sonoma County Jail system in the article, "Sonoma County Jail Reports Surge in COVID-19 Cases" displays the effects the pandemic has

had on inmates and what precautions have been taken for inmate safety. On November 30th, 2020 there were a few positive cases of COVID-19 in the Sonoma County Jail, with inmates and guards shown to have been infected. By December, the results of positive COVID-19 cases continued to grow amongst the jail. With this news, precautions were put into effect. All incoming inmates needed to test negative for COVID-19 in order to enter and be sentenced into the jail. The goal is to eliminate COVID-19 cases in the jail, and to keep inmates and guards safe. Although, their course of action is limited since the pandemic is new and there is not a lot of information on how to stop the spread fully. The jail is valuing sign-in sheets and the testing outcomes as it is their only lead to track the infected and possibly stopping it from spreading within the Sonoma County Jail system.

The precautions and assistance discussed in, “Health Officials Assist Sonoma County Jail In Addressing Increasing Coronavirus Cases” by the Press release from the Sonoma County Government, was very informative as well as beneficial when considering the research question at hand. Since there has been a surge of COVID-19 cases within the Jail system their course of action is to supplement regular testing. The work ethic the jail system is taking into account is to “Detect and Isolate.” Through methods of detecting, they have found the source of the majority of COVID-19 causes in the jail, and where they are originating from. It was found that the “Ventura Avenue facility in Santa Rosa” was where many cases came from. With that knowledge, the Sonoma County Jail system is taking more precautionary measures from anyone associated or coming from the Ventura Avenue facility and isolating any current inmates until they test negative for COVID-19. Lastly, the article takes into account the list of new procedures that are directed to the prevention of COVID-19, such as wearing face masks, air filtration, and disinfecting surfaces.

The support and trust our community has with one another is beneficial as we consider the findings in this article, “Sonoma County Jail Employees Pitch in To Help Local Restaurants During Coronavirus Shelter-in-place” by Lori A. Carter. Sonoma County Jail Sgt. Amanda Lee decided to give back to the community, specifically restaurants, during this time of crisis. In the past, restaurants donated food and support to Sonoma County Jail in times of need. In the previous years when Sonoma County faced fires, droughts, power outages, etc, restaurants came to their aid. So in return, since COVID-19 has affected local businesses such as restaurants, they are helping these small businesses by ordering food weekly. This article comes to terms with COVID-19 and the Sonoma County Jail, as well as the trustable bond within Sonoma County.

### Research Method

#### Overview of Research Methods:

To get a full understanding of the issues surrounding mental health in jails, we explore all options regarding the causation of poor mental health within the jail. This was conducted through interviews with both deputies and inmates within the jail. This provides us with the opportunity to view different perspectives about the issues, which are brought on by poor mental health within employees and inmates.

We took several approaches and avenues to gain as much knowledge on the topic as possible. Detailed interviews with both deputies and guards were conducted in the field to obtain accurate information regarding common practices within jails affecting mental health. Both inmates and deputies were interviewed to find out what directly causes poor mental health and how inmates can cope with it.

### Research Topics:

The aforementioned interviews will be conducted by asking personal mental health questions. Moreover, coping techniques, priorities relating to mental health, and common practices concerning policy will be reviewed to fully understand the systemic approaches to rehabilitation and how they are successful or unsuccessful. The personal experiences of inmates during their stay at the jail will be evaluated and we will look to find common occurrences and patterns related to mental health issues. The interview questions were formulated after reviewing several pieces of scholarly research. The interview questions were also meant to encompass individual issues brought on by a bigger flaw within the criminal justice system.

### Accurate Research:

To ensure the most accurate information possible, we conducted the interviews by admonishing all of the participants informing them that their answers will be 100% confidential. The admonishment also included a time estimation to ensure that the information obtained from the participants would be accurate without room to be misconstrued by half of a statement being provided. The participants were also given opportunities to clarify their statements or add information to the interview.

### Research Restrictions:

Due to the current climate with COVID-19, our research availability was slightly hindered. We were not allowed to enter any jails, as all visitations were closed at the time of our interviews. We were able to acquire interviews by word of mouth, stemming from individual

interviews of ex-inmates and current guards. The aforementioned interviews took place with people who were incarcerated before and during COVID-19. Due to the fact the interviews were confidential, we were ultimately unable to further pursue statements and investigatory leads.

As stated above, our research methods were conducted to obtain accurate information from people who were in the criminal justice system. Our goal was to identify patterns regarding mental health, which were identified by both guards and inmates alike.

## Results:

Introduction: With conducting a series of in-depth interviews with multiple inmates, previous inmates and staff members that previously worked or are current workers at Sonoma county jail, there have been common themes that have been viewed such and patterns we recognized. The aid that the inmates have received, the law enforcement treatment, and the feelings and emotions that the inmates have from their experiences in Sonoma County Jails.

### I. Patterns observed

During our research process, we found many similarities in responses of those that we interviewed. Some of those similarities were access to medication and mental health professionals, feelings towards mental health, and things that inmates would change about the Sonoma County Jail system. Most of the inmates that we spoke to were dealing with some sort of mental health issue when incarcerated. There was an overwhelming sense that the mental health professionals were hard to access, and when they were able to access them most inmates stated that the care they received was not adequate. A source even described their interactions with mental health professionals as “asking you to survey how much you liked the burger at Burger

King, there was no emotion behind it”. There was also an overwhelming response of how difficult it was to access medication. In addition, it was found that if medication was given, the dosages caused some inmates to be incoherent. According to a source “Once someone is a problem they get over-medicated to the point that they are docile or just not conscious most of the day”. This shows how the mental health system in Sonoma County is lacking in-depth care for those who are incarcerated and mentally ill. Ultimately, the jails' solution to “help” inmates is to medicate them to the point of them barely being there mentally.

Another commonality we found within the Sonoma County Jail system is the inmates’ feelings towards mental health. There is a stigma to outsiders that having a mental health crisis while incarcerated makes you seem weak or lesser to other inmates, but thankfully that is not what we found. Although there were some former inmates that stated that it could be considered a sign of weakness, most stated that for them it was not the case. This allowed them to better bond with their cellmates and people around them. One person even stated that his cellmate taught him everything he would need to know, and methods of helping him get him through his time in jail without a problem. He gave examples like knowing how to eat, interact with other inmates, and staying out of trouble to hopefully get out sooner. Other inmates stated that there was a sense of comradery because they were all in the same place dealing with the issue of needing to change their lives for the better. Many of our sources found more help from other inmates than they did from the mental health system.

The final similarity that we found between inmates from Sonoma County jail is what they would change about the mental health system for those who are incarcerated. Many former inmates stated that they were locked in their cells for 23 hours a day. The inmates only had access to a small fenced in courtyard where they could play with deflated basketballs or just walk

around in circles, “I think I would give more time out of your cell. Just to help cope with the insanity of being locked up in a box. More time out of your cell to do activities like exercise and get your endorphins going.” stated a source. They also addressed how there are few resources to use as outlets to help keep their sanity. There was access to a television but he explained that groups have control over what is played on the TV and was mostly in languages he did not speak. Although the jail does offer some programs like CHOICES, the response from those we interviewed was to have more outlet programs that aid with mental health as well as programs outside of the jail to help the homeless population. An inmate stated that “A lot of people like to stay in jail because they have stability and resources while in there; homeless people don’t have anyone or any resources when they get out.”, this shows that there is a homelessness crisis here in Sonoma county and it needs to be addressed since it is more costly to house these people in jail than it would be to create a bigger budget for homelessness resources.

Although jail is not supposed to be a happy experience, those incarcerated are still humans that deserve the care and attention they would receive on the outside. Bettering the mental health system from inside the jail allows for more rehabilitation so these negative behaviors are not repeated again by the same person. It also enables some to address their mental health issues they may have needed help with before being incarcerated.

#### Law Enforcement Treatment:

The findings of how inmates in the jails were treated by law enforcement, led us to consider a common definition of being good and bad. First, we had a former inmate who was jailed for driving under the influence. This former inmate described his interaction with the guards as having “good cops and bad cops, honestly a mixture of the two”. This inmate

furthermore states how his experience in jail depended on the people who were around him, as well as how the guards would react each day. He states that some of his interactions were a good experience but some of the guards were disrespectful. This type of interaction was found to be experienced by various inmates we interviewed. To continue, a former inmate we interviewed has had previous encounters with the process in Sonoma County jails. At the time of the interview, she had recently got out of prison after her third DUI. She also states that her experiences regarding treatment by guards was good and bad as well. Claiming that there were behaviors by the officers that were “unacceptable”. She mentioned she did encounter kind and caring officers, but that others were extremely rude and demeaning. She even shared that the dull treatment received by officers caused her to feel worthless and mentally unstable.

This interviewee furthermore stated that the staff members did not make her uncomfortable besides when they were either aggressive, or intimidating. She expressed the treatment amongst the officers to other inmates as well and how that was frightening. She did not want to experience that sort of treatment at all. She mentions that it would scare her how everyday was based on the moods of the officers, if the officers were in a bad mood, the day would most likely be a rough one, and vice versa.

The next former inmate we conducted an in-depth interview with was a 18 year old woman who was jailed in 2011. We found that she also considered the treatment to be “awful”. She stated the staff would do “random checks to see if the inmates had any drugs on them. They would make inmates stand against the wall, or the staff would sometimes force them against the wall while they search for any contraband. They would also strip search before inmates would attend court.”

To continue with the results of our interviews, we received information from another woman who was jailed for DUI charge. This woman discusses how the staff was not initially nice, but as they got to know an inmate they would become nicer with time. She stated that at times the staff would “downplay and be rude to other inmates. It affected her because she felt like people should not be treated that way. It made her have compassion for the people who were being mistreated”. Furthermore, another interview was with a former inmate who was 15 years old when he was first incarcerated. At the time of the interview he was 32 years old and he shared vital information with us. He discussed how when he was first arrested he was evaluated by a mental health professional, a standard procedure when first getting booked. Later on, he shares that when he was 23 years old, he already had three DUI’s. He mentions having to do the same mental health screening every time he was booked into jail. With his time incarcerated, he encountered guards messing with other inmates along with guards who had malicious intent during encounters with inmates. This interviewee also stated that guards would target inmates that were more challenged as well.

Lastly, another experience we would like to include was a man who was in the jail from February of 2014 to October of 2014. This inmate describes his treatment to have affected him both mentally and physically with the “lack of food they give you, you feel constantly hungry. They work you too, they make you do physical labor all the time and your lunch is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. It’s not great, you feel constantly tired. Just the constant knowing of being watched causes stress and getting out of that takes a while.”

## II. Feelings and Emotions

The other type of phenomena that we found from our in depth interviews was the feelings and emotions that were associated with each former inmate. This was found to be in direct

relation to how their sanity and mental state was in Sonoma County Jail. To begin, some emotions people have expressed from being in Sonoma County Jail includes the description from an inmate that was jailed in 2018 for a DUI charge. He mentions that, “It took me a few weeks to adapt to it all; Mainly spent those days thinking about how I can get out to see my daughter”. Another inmate previously mentioned who had received three DUIs described her feelings about being in jail once again, as she shared how she dealt with the time she spent there. She stated that, “I read books. Books were an escape. Books and writing was the thing that kept my sanity while in jail.”

Another description of the feelings and emotions of inmates included the inmate who went to jail at the age of 18 back in 2011. She discussed how her mental stability was “awful”, and she did not get to leave her cell very often. When she did get out, it was only for 1-2 times a day for about an hour. Furthermore, she mentions that there wasn't much to do while in her cell. The next description is from a former inmate who discussed his first time being incarcerated by describing it as “nerve racking; locked up, get a hold of my stuff and had to control my mental stability.” and “No way to prepare for it; only thought positive thoughts to get through it; Can’t control life at that point”. The last interviewee we would like to include is a former inmate that was jailed due to drug charges, he also describes his feelings in jail as being “all over the place, when I first got there I was withdrawing from opioids. So my mental state was all over the place, from being depressed, sad, and angry. As time went on, it got easier-ish. I guess mostly because I’ve been in jails before so I kinda knew what to expect”

In conclusion, there has been consistency between the experiences of each inmate and how they considered their mental state to be while in Sonoma County Jail. Some interviewees had better experiences than others, but overall their experiences seemed to be somewhat rough.

Through conducting various interviews regarding the research topic, we can consider how being in jail actually affects the mental health of the inmates being incarcerated.

### Discussion of the Results

Throughout the interviews, there were commonalities that people shared in regards to the time that they spent in the Sonoma County jail. Both inmates and staff shared what is typically done when dealing with mental health. Most of the people that end up coming to the jails already have some kind of mental health issues that they have to deal with, but on top of that, they have to be able to cope with the conditions while they are in jail. The jail has to provide people with the proper resources to be able to maintain their sanity.

To begin with, staff members need to be prepared at any given time to respond to situations that occur in the jail. One staff member claimed, we are not a mental health institution but we have to be that for these people. It may not be in their hiring description, but they are trained to a certain extent on how to deal when these situations do arise. This same staff member also stated that they do not have the correct amount of resources to be able to help the inmates when they need it. For example, the inmates may not be able to get help for as long as months after they ask for it. The lack of resources can be detrimental to people that go into jail with preexisting mental health conditions, and although some staff members do their best to be able to keep everything in check, it gets hard when there is not much activity to do at the jail for inmates to take their minds off being incarcerated.

To continue, according to the inmates, they are only able to come out of their cells for one hour a day. They have to be able to find other alternatives to be able to preserve their mental health when the help is not being explicitly provided. For example, some seek to build

connections with other inmates, some read books, and others focus on when they are going to be out of jail. Mental health was sometimes seen as a weakness, but people would mostly rely on others for a social bond and as a guide to be able to get through the days. With being stuck in a cell for extended periods, inmates need to adjust to the conditions that they are in.

Not only do people that go into jail have to be able to find ways to get through the day, but some purposefully try to go to jail to have to access the necessities of life. According to a point-in-time census done in Sonoma County, as of 2020, there are 2,745 homeless people with 1,524 being from Santa Rosa. With these people not having a place where they can obtain the necessities like food and shelter, some opt to be sent to jail where they will get their needs met. This can be seen when both a staff member and a jail inmate claim that people purposely get arrested because they have stability and resources that they may not have before. With the homeless population being so big, there needs to be a change in the overall infrastructure of the system to be able to reduce the number of people that are going to jail. Also, there needs to be a way to get inmates and staff members the proper resources to make the jail a place that can be used for rehabilitation. For example, adding more medical staff and having people be evaluated more often. This in turn will help the staff have fewer issues with the inmates.

The jail system is currently not operating properly. It is not providing inmates the proper tools needed to be able to be successful when they get released into the community. Although they do have programs that the inmates can participate in, they have to actively seek help to be able to attain it. Not only this, but the staff has to take on a role that they did not sign up for. One staff member claimed they are adult babysitters because they have to be constantly checking in and making sure that they are not harming themselves or others. Both inmates and staff need to be given the proper tools to be able to be successful.

## Conclusion

Our research group was tasked with investigating the issues that persist in the Sonoma County Jail, specifically with regards to human rights. We believed through copious amounts of research that there was a problem with the overall mental health of the inmates during their time in the Sonoma County Jail. We saw the trend continuously pop up throughout our interview process. This was now being treated in the jail and had affected the wellbeing of the inmates. We had concluded that the sanity of the inmates had a direct correlation to the Sonoma County Jail.

As we constructed our literature review, we found a lot of information that backed up our research. Multiple articles were about the mistreatment of inmates in the jail. There were cases of abuse, mistreatment, etc. As for the research aspect of our paper, we found the answers that were given to us by our interviewees had various similarities. This led us to conclude that previous inmates had struggled with their mental health while being incarcerated. Neglect of intervention from the workers at the jail led to various amounts of issues for inmates. The officers in the jail would become violent with inmates at random times, this made some of the interviewees feel degraded as human beings. This made our research team believe there is a serious issue within the jail system. The lack of care the jail has for the inmate's wellbeing was put into question throughout our research process.

What we took away from all of our findings, was that the jail is not adequately set to monitor and assist the inmates if they are having mental health issues. This is something that is very challenging for guards and officers to do. Along with the other issues that were found to be happening inside the Sonoma County Jail, we felt that the evidence we had found through our research was in accordance with our theory.

## Interview Guide

Hello, and thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with us today. This interview will take up to 10- 20 minutes. We are researching the topic of Sonoma County Jail and Human Rights. Most specifically, we are interested in the relationship between being in jail and how it affects the mental health of inmates. Some examples being: depression, thoughts of suicide, mental clarity, emotional distress, etc. The information you share with us will be kept confidential. If you have any questions after this interview, please feel free to contact our professor, Peter Phillips, at [peter.phillips@sonoma.edu](mailto:peter.phillips@sonoma.edu).

We may decide to jot some notes down during this interview as you are talking.

Do you have any questions before we continue?

### **Questions for interviewing inmates:**

- What can you tell us about your mental stability while in jail?
- What are some ways in which people are helped to preserve their sanity?
- Did you have access to prescription medication that you were either on before entering or were placed on while inside?
- How would you describe the treatment you have received while being in the Sonoma County Jail? Would you say you were affected physically or mentally? And Why?
- In what ways do you think the jail could better house those who are mentally ill?
- What barriers, if any, has COVID-19 created amongst the inmates?
- Is mental health considered a priority amongst the community of inmates or is mental health a sign of weakness?
- Did any staff members make you feel uncomfortable in any way?

- If there is one thing you could change about the Sonoma County Jail system what would it be?
- What differences did you see when the jail switched mental health practices?

**Questions for interviewing staff:**

- Can you tell us about your most significant experience or issues that you've faced in regards to mental health in the jail?
- How often do you deal with inmates that have episodes?
- Is the mental health of the inmates important to the staff?
- What barriers, if any, has COVID-19 created amongst staff?
- Do you feel that time in jail is beneficial or detrimental to the inmates mental health?
- Do you believe that there should be some type of reform in the ways Sonoma County Jails handle mental health? Or are the protocols you guys follow enough for the mental health of inmates?
- How often do prisoners go get help from medical professionals?
- Are there any demands, if any, that inmates who are mentally ill commonly request from your staff?
- Can you tell us about your most significant experience or issues that you've faced in regards to mental health in the prison ?
- What differences did you see when the jail switched mental health practices?

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