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## Reviewing Aspects of the Criminal Legal System: A Focus on Rural Health, Substance Use, and Systemic Bias

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## **Reviewing Aspects of the Criminal Legal System: A Focus on Rural Health, Substance Use, and Systemic Bias**

This volume of the *Mid-Southern Journal of Criminal Justice* offers articles that the reader may find informative and interesting. The topics are timely, and the content may spur thoughtful insights and ideas about useful applications and models of counseling, education, and mental health programming as well as further important conversations about the intersections of race, gender, class, and the legal system. The articles in this volume present two relevant themes with regards to needed reforms. First, the articles encourage readers to identify the need for further reform to both criminal legal and social programming to assist persons with mental and physical health challenges. Second, they support the need for the justice system to address systemic issues that disproportionately effect various communities.

As noted by two of the authors, several issues still face the justice system with regards to providing adequate mental and substance abuse care. That is, arguments are made that the system has a moral obligation to improve on the types of programming. Improvements and reforms to existing programs not only impact recidivism rates but also support the improvement of the quality of life for those who encounter the system. By introducing and further funding harm reduction programs like medicated assisted therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy, the justice system can improve the healing of individuals while also allowing communities to take on larger roles in addressing crime.

Nutter (2022) addresses the need for these changes in programs through her work on substance use in rural areas. Her article addresses this issue with the goal of advising the needed changes in care and treatment. The article provides a glance at policies and procedures currently being implemented to reduce fatal overdoses from both legal and illegal substances while also focusing on needed changes to treatment practices to curtail substance abuse in rural areas.

Barry (2020) continues the conversation on needed policy reform through a nuanced discussion of the effects the criminal justice system has on treating individuals with mental health conditions. Weaving research and statistics, this article discusses the magnitude of the incarceration rates of those suffering from mental health issues while also asking the question as to whether current programming is enough to support the ending of this phenomenon. As Barry points out, historically mental health programming in the justice system has lacked. However, the system is an era of change as a growing body of literature supports a renewed focus on medical and cognitive behavioral therapies.

The final article in the issue, by Withrow (2022), asks us to take a macro look at how the criminal legal system needs to continue to address the systemic issues of bias at the intersections of race, gender, and class that harm specific communities. Drawing on prominent scholars like Michelle Alexander and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Withrow walks us through a detailed discussion on systemic racism and her application of the *deja'vu* effect communities of color face in what she calls the "Groundhog Day Time Loop." Using the "War on Drugs" as the central example, the article discusses the history of disproportionate targeting and treatment of communities of color by the justice system. By addressing the creation of various moral panics since the end of slavery, the article outlines that even though several reforms have occurred, the overall disproportionate treatment of communities of color remains eerily the same.

Each of the three articles, in unique ways, requires that we actively seek more positive changes in the criminal legal system. By pointing out that not all programs are effective, they express a sense of hope that future changes and adoptions of programming may result in significant reform. By admitting the harmful aspects of the history of the system and focusing on comprehensive services to support the whole person, the justice system can find better success

by ultimately reducing disproportionate contact, incarceration, and recidivism rates for impacted communities.

Using programs like community harm reduction, counseling, and educational programming could potentially have positive outcomes for persons struggling with mental and physical challenges, especially in rural areas. Additionally, programs focused on cognitive behavior therapy, counseling, motivational interviewing, and residential substance abuse therapy (RSAT) models show significant promise in supporting a drastic decrease in the number of mental health cases tied to the justice system. However, to accomplish any of these goals, we must address the systemic issues inherent in so many pieces of the system. Correcting these systemic issues will create a cascading effect of providing more support for all populations.

We hope that you enjoy reading the articles in this volume and contemplate additional ways of meeting the many challenges facing the justice system and society. Remember that our journal is an open access journal catered towards students, faculty, and professionals alike. Please contact one or both editors if you are interested in submitting a manuscript for publication. Thank you.

Your Editors,

Cassandra B. Whyte, Ed.D. and Stephen Young, PhD

Note: The West Virginia Criminal Justice Educators' Association, as a professional organization, is proud to offer opportunities for students and professionals to publish up-to-date information on salient topics in the field of Criminal Justice. Providing reviewed information can potentially help readers identify ways to make a difference in the dilemmas presented. Sharing and professional dialogue are also crucial to making progress toward societal challenges. Therefore, the WVCJEA and this Journal's staff also are committed to offering some valuable information about criminal justice topics as well. We hope you enjoy the papers in this volume.