

BEHAVIOR

Study urges cut in prison populations

The growing pains of crowded prisons should be treated by reducing their populations sharply rather than building new facilities. That is the conclusion of a \$1.5 million study completed by ABT Associates Inc. of Cambridge, Mass., for the National Institute of Justice, a Justice Department agency. The report says states must take steps to establish prisoner space limitations and accelerate releases from crowded prisons that violate many prisoners' constitutional rights. While saying that consideration of public safety should outweigh other factors, the report does recommend more paroles, commutations and time off for good behavior. In addition, it asks that prison population reports be sent to judges, who could then use jail capacity as an aid in determining sentences.

The report, based on a 1978 study of 559 federal and state prisons, 3,500 local jails and 400 halfway houses, says that increasing prison capacity sufficiently would cost at least \$8 billion, a figure it terms "unaffordable." Building more facilities, the report concludes, "... may, at best, provide short-lived reductions in crowding and, at worst, may result in absolute increases in the number of prisoners held in substandard conditions."

Making sense of autistics' senses

Clinical observations of autistic children have indicated that they prefer proximal (touch, taste) to distal (sight, hearing) stimulation. John P. Kootz, Beth Marinelli and Donald J. Cohen of the Child Study Center at Yale University report that this preference for touch and taste probably results from a failure in the normal maturation of behavior rather than in any abnormalities of the children's sensitivities to different sensations. The research, described in the March ARCHIVES OF GENERAL PSYCHIATRY, measured the response times of autistic and normal children to auditory, visual and tactile stimulation. Response times were significantly affected by mental age, with autistic youngsters' responses being much slower than those of normal children. But autistic and normal children had the same pattern, responding fastest to auditory stimuli and slowest to tactile stimuli. Thus, say the researchers, reports of autistics' greater tactile sensitivity are probably due to the potency of human contact on children who try to avoid social interaction.

Aftermath for Vietnam combat vets

Veterans who were involved in heavy combat in Vietnam suffered psychological wounds that are now coming to light. An eight-year study done for the Veterans Administration by the Center for Policy Research in New York concludes that "heavy combat" veterans abuse alcohol and drugs more often after returning to civilian life and are arrested more often than veterans who were not in combat or who did not serve in Vietnam. The research center defined "heavy combat" veterans as those who had been in firefights, been ambushed or were under steady sniper and patrol fire. Of 1,340 veterans questioned, 842 were white, 415 were black and 83 were Hispanic. Whites who experienced heavy combat had a higher arrest rate after the war than did blacks or Hispanics, and the whites also abused alcohol more than did the other two groups. Blacks and Hispanics had a higher rate of drug abuse than did whites and were arrested more often for possession and sale of drugs. Veterans in heavy combat were far more likely to suffer symptoms of long-term stress, such as dizziness, anxiety, headaches, stomach trouble, loss of memory, depression and repeated nightmares. Many found it hard to return to pre-war careers or to resume their education.

BIOMEDICINE

The newborn's first hour

The first hour of life is believed to be especially crucial for the formation of mother-infant bonds, but in this critical hour can infants reciprocate and interact with their mothers? The answer is yes, whether the infant is delivered conventionally or by the Leboyer method, but only if the mother received little or no medication prior to delivery, according to a study reported in the March 15 AMERICAN JOURNAL OF OBSTETRICS AND GYNECOLOGY by Saroj Saigal and colleagues of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Saigal and his co-workers made minute-by-minute observations of the first hour after birth of 18 infants delivered conventionally (in which the umbilical cord was clamped within one minute of birth and the infant was dried, wrapped in a towel and handed to the mother) and of 18 infants delivered by the Leboyer method (in which the infant was placed on the mother's abdomen; cord clamping was delayed until the cord no longer pulsed and the infant was then given a warm bath). None of the mothers had had drugs to help them through labor (the drugs are known to make infants drowsy after birth), and only four of the 36 had epidural anesthetics to ease the pain of delivery.

Infants in both groups, Saigal and his team found, spent the first minutes of life crying or being irritable but then became quiet and alert for most of the rest of the hour—a median of 41.5 minutes for Leboyer-delivered infants and a median of 35 minutes for conventionally delivered infants. So the first hour of life can be used to promote parent-infant interactions.

Help for tension headaches

Are tension headaches due to excessive muscle activity in the forehead? Some past studies have suggested so. However, a study reported in the March HEADACHE by Cathy D. Anderson and Ronald D. Frank of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver does not confirm this hypothesis. They measured forehead muscle activity in 10 tension headache sufferers and in 10 control subjects under conditions of relaxation, mild stress and recovery from stress. The researchers were unable to find any major differences in forehead muscle activity between the two groups under these various circumstances.

Regardless of the cause or causes of tension headaches, a drug successful in relieving chronic tension headaches is reported in the same journal by Seymour Diamond and Jose L. Medina of Chicago Medical School. It is zomepirac sodium and already is available by prescription for relief of mild to moderately severe pain. Because zomepirac sodium is not a narcotic, Diamond and Medina believe that it will be safer for tension headache patients than are tranquilizers and barbiturates; the latter are effective against tension headaches but also likely to lead to drug dependence and drug abuse.

Diamond and Medina gave 80 patients with recurrent tension headaches either zomepirac sodium or a placebo and had the patients record their reactions to the medications over a range of four headache episodes. Zomepirac sodium was found to be significantly superior to placebo in relieving tension headaches and also not to cause any adverse effects.

Abortion statistics

According to a survey conducted by the Alan Guttmacher Institute of health institutions and private physicians providing abortion services in the United States and reported in the January/February FAMILY PLANNING PERSPECTIVES, fewer than a third of all pregnancies in 1978 and 1979 ended in abortion. Between 1967, when the first states liberalized abortion laws, and 1979, 7.4 million women obtained some 9.4 million legal abortions.