Research Involving Prisoners

Under which circumstances should we use prisoners in research? What precautions should be taken to ensure the safety of prisoners? Will prisoners subject themselves to harmful research just because of their circumstance? These are all important questions that must be considered when contemplating doing research on prisoners. Oftentimes, answers to these questions are not as straightforward as they may seem. Still, a careful evaluation of the methods and consequences of research conducted on prisoners is important. Although it may be problematic, outcomes of research conducted on prisoners have potential to benefit society, as well as the prisoners, in many regards.

Prior to 1976, research conducted on prisoners was not formally regulated. Oftentimes, prisons were viewed as institutions in which questionable experiments can be performed. The life and well-being of inmates were held with little regard. Effectively, prisoners were viewed as a “pseudospecies” of humans. Instead of carefully designing experiments with regard for the well-being of the study’s participants, researchers were careless about the adverse effects their research may have on participants of the study.

In one experiment sponsored by the governor of Alabama in 1914, 12 inmates were subjected to extremely inhumane conditions. In an effort combat the rising death toll in Alabama due to pellagra, 12 inmates were chosen to live in a hospital for six months during which researchers attempted to induce pellagra. Study participants were forced to remain on a strict diet high in carbohydrates and void of protein. Researchers
were successfully able to induce pellagra and their suspicion that a lack of protein causes the disease was confirmed. All study participants were granted a pardon, but not surprisingly, due to the harshness of the study, one inmate reported that he would “rather endure 100 hellish deaths than go through the experiment again.”

Today, there are many restrictions on research involving prisoners. Any research being conducted on prisoners must be approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB reviews the humanity and appropriateness of any study proposed to be conducted on prisoners. The majority of the IRB must not be associated with the prison, but at least one member of the IRB must be a prisoner. Also, today research conducted on prisons must study either the prison environment itself or present a possible positive therapeutic effect on each of the subjects. In addition, the study must be of minimal risk to participants and no placebo groups can be used. This is done to ensure that any participant of the study would actually receive benefits from their participation.

Collectively, today research involving prisoners is much safer than in the past.

Research in prisons can provide many benefits to the incarcerated participants. Prisoners can benefit by being able to give back to society by contributing to a study that can benefit others. They also have the benefit of knowing that the study has been approved by the IRB. Furthermore, they can reap the potential health benefits of participating in the study.

Researchers also can greatly benefit from conducting their research in prisons. The prison environment is unique in that it provides a controlled and observable environment. Also, studies conducted in prisons are generally cost effective. Finally, prisoners with lengthy sentences are easy to track for long-term studies.
Still, there is controversy surrounding research on prisoners. Whether or not a prisoner can truly give consent to participate in a study may be problematic. Prisoners may be easily influenced by guards or other inmates to participate in a study. Also, prisoners may feel as though they have no other options, and may participate in a study solely for the purpose of a change in routine. Motivation for participating in a study must be carefully considered. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the IRB is not infallible.

Regardless of the controversy, there are many benefits for both prisoners and researchers when research is conducted in a prison environment. Each research proposal must be considered individually and thought-out carefully. With proper care and attention, the negative aspects of research on prisoners can be avoided and a beneficial situation for all can be created.
References