

## DEAF STUDIES

# Hearing Loss in Prison Populations

by Lela Lanier

The purpose of this project paper is to discuss hearing loss in prison populations, reflecting on scientific research of prison inmates and their subjective hearing loss as well as considering the social aspects of deafness in correctional facilities. Prison populations are often ignored. After one enters a prison, their life is ultimately defined by the time they spend locked within four walls, and society tends to forget their existence. However, this judgment is problematic, and society needs to remember that while these people are imprisoned they are in fact still people. Not only is residing in prison a traumatic experience, but specific characteristics such as having hearing loss or being Deaf in prison becomes tremendously more isolating and debilitating. This text highlights the importance of understanding the effects hearing loss poses in a population society tends to forget. One article demonstrates an optimistic perspective applied to prison life at San Quentin located in California. This publisher promotes inmate journalism and as such provides a first-person view into what large and established prisons can provide for their Deaf and hard of hearing inmates. Hicks (2021) describes a place of acceptance and learning where the facility offers American Sign Language classes, interpreters, and special areas for inmates with hearing loss to convene. However, the article also mentions disparities between normal hearing inmates and those with hearing loss: "Deaf people may serve longer prison terms than their hearing counterparts because they are not able to equally access educational and rehabilitative programming," and many correctional officers need better training in regulations from the American with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Another article explains the trauma Deaf and Hard of Hearing people experience in jails. The Horror of being Deaf and in Prison

(Vernon, 2010) excellently reports the difficulties that those imprisoned with hearing loss face. The article mentions instances of rape, assault and other violent offenses being committed against Deaf victims. Moreover, the complete violations against ADA regulations also helps victimize the prisoners; many of those Deaf in prison are uneducated and are therefore placed at an even greater disadvantage in the criminal justice system. These individuals are often unable to understand what is happening to them throughout the process where interpreters are not widely provided, and there is a lack of safe spaces for those with similar abilities. Finally, the author suggests various ways to improve conditions, e.g., by making safe spaces for Deaf individuals, enforcing ADA regulations, and providing interpreting services.

A research study conducted at the Prince Georges County Jail located in Maryland focused on hearing loss in jail populations and demographic factors related to those incarcerated (Jensema, 2019). Participants completed a questionnaire of family and medical history, communication difficulties and exposure to loud noises. A hearing screening was performed via headphones at frequencies 1000 Hz, 2000 Hz, and 4000 Hz at 20 dB. The screening was administered twice to participants who did not respond to any tone. If there was a lack of response to the second attempt, the test was marked as a "fail." Of those tested, 35% had failed which "far exceeded the incidence rate... anticipated for the general population," estimated at less than 10%. It was also declared that in correlation to other studies high rates of hearing loss, along with subsequent communication difficulties are reported in jails. Following commands in prisons saturated by loud noise is essential but can be extremely difficult for an inmate with only minimal hearing loss. Though the articles vary vastly in content, each provided a different perspective to the same issue. Hicks' article showed an optimistic outlook to living in a prison with an established Deaf space but outlined some areas of improvement with following ADA regulations (2021). On the other hand, Vernon discussed the underbelly of the criminal justice system in accordance with handling disabilities; even though big

prisons are somewhat providing for their inmates, small jails are letting those imprisoned fall victim to their circumstances, and the realities of being Deaf in a place that already abandons many basic human rights and principles are alarming (2010). Lastly, the research study acts as a middle ground providing scientific evidence of hearing loss with an unbiased review of the logistics of jails which need to be changed to benefit their populations (Jensema, 2019). All three articles shaped an understanding of how hearing loss can have detrimental social consequences if not properly accommodated, and that hearing loss is quite prevalent in the prison population.

Having hearing loss in prison puts one at an even greater disadvantage than those without hearing loss who are also incarcerated. Those who have hearing loss are prone to more dangerous incidents because of their inability to understand what is happening in their environment at any point in the criminal justice system which can be prevented. There is a lack of current statistics for hearing loss prevalence in the prison population. It is almost certain prevalence has shifted during these last few decades and possible assistive devices have been administered to those who elect to have them; however, it is not known. Moreover, there needs to be regulated monitoring of the conditions persisting in jails, especially for those requiring ADA accommodations. In conclusion, further investigation needs to be done on hearing loss in prison populations, how prisons are dealing with people who experience hearing loss, and there should be more reporting about the real conditions of jails and their treatment to those incarcerated.

Lela Lanier wrote this article for her Deaf Studies 311 class during the spring of 2022