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Returning Inmates and Their Families: Public Policy Issues for Successful Prisoner Reentry

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Abstract

Children are the most important beings in any parent's life. Therefore, to be physically cut off creates a deep and enduring pain when a parent is incarcerated and unable to be with their children. Children and families are well known to be among the most reliable predictors in desistance from future crime upon returning to society. Returning home after incarceration presents many difficulties, but re-connecting with families and children is the most daunting, if not most, difficult to achieve. We discuss the problems and issues facing returning inmates in consideration of the public policies for families and children.

Keywords: prisoner reentry, prison, families, children, public policy

Introduction

Entering prison means leaving behind children, family, and friends. Prison conditions are harsh, violent, and potentially deadly. Parents leave behind children and relatives and may potentially not see them ever again. Even after leaving prison, the long-term psychological and mental effects it has on an individual can be extremely unforgiving, and ex-inmates may spend years learning and re-learning how to adjust to society, especially with their family. Family is the one bond that, while not broken entirely in prison, is likely the one that can be most damaged and in need of repair.

Reuniting Ex-Inmates with Children: A Disconnection

Johnston (1993) found that reconnecting with families and other relatives when returning from prison is extremely difficult and frustrating, but never more so when trying to reconnect with one's children. In some cases, children may be born while the inmate is behind bars and may never see them in person until decades later. There is an incredibly rich field of psychological, sociological, and criminological research providing evidence of the variety of trauma that children may undergo when reuniting with their parents (Johnston, 1991).

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Travis (2005) wrote about the increase in our prison population beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the 1990s. He also correlated the rise in parents in prison who had children waiting for them outside from 1 million to 1.5 million. Mumola (2004) found that 1 in 45 minors had a parent in prison.

The most anxiety-provoking and frustrating aspect of being a parent incarcerated must be simply not being present around their children. Depending on the type of crime parents are incarcerated for, they may not see their children for a long time (Mumola, 2004). Especially if the incarcerated is a single parent with no relatives to provide childcare assistance, the children may likely end in a foster home that brings a new set of anxieties for the incarcerated parent. These potential fears that parents have only served to exacerbate the worries and anxieties throughout their prison sentence.

Sometimes incarcerated parents can be reliving a similar cycle of incarceration experienced by their parents or guardians. With their behind bars when they were kids, they probably ended up in foster homes. While they were in the care of others, unpleasant experiences on top of the shock of being separated from their family and friends could leave them with possible lifelong trauma after their time in foster care (Travis, 2005). Children may experience confusion when they reunite with their parents and may not even know their parents during the time they spent in prison.

Travis (2005) found that most children are generally not around when the parent is arrested, and often, the arrested parent may not inform the police about their children at the time of their arrest. Additionally, the children living with family members or other guardians are reluctant to discuss why the parent was arrested and incarcerated (Mumola, 2004).

Gifford et al. (2019) found that parents incarcerated produced long-term psychological effects on their children. Their seven-year cohort study of 1,420 children and young adults found increased propensity of anxiety disorders, felony charges, time in jail, dropping out of high school, having a child before turning 18, and becoming more socially isolated compared with their peers who did not have a parent in prison. These long-term effects could be inter-generational that can expand the cycle of poverty and negative interactions with the criminal justice system.

Wright and Seymour (2000) research found that children who have parents in prison experience a sense of loss and view the incarceration of a parent as a life-changing, traumatic event. Additionally, negative emotions such as stress, depression, and anger in adolescents could often lead to antisocial behaviors. Some children can withdraw within themselves and develop coping mechanisms to avoid any conversation or questions about their parents in prison, even ignoring or pretending the situation occurred (Braman, 2002).

Even among neighborhoods with high incarceration rates, families are reluctant to discuss with children the cause(s) that led to a parent's incarceration (Braman, 2002). No matter what group or culture, there is a stigma and shame surrounding incarceration. It is difficult to shield children from the embarrassment and humiliation associated with the incarceration of a parent. These experiences can have adverse psychological outcomes that can lead to dysfunctions, such as extreme stress that can morph into more severe mental and behavioral problems at home and in school. There is also the potential stigma and subtle disapproval from people outside the child's family, such as a child's teachers, school peers, and others in the neighborhood.

Most prisons have a narrow definition of what defines a "family member" for visitation purposes and control the flow of visitors to the prison (Travis 2005). Ostensibly this is for more effective security and a more comfortable work environment for the correctional officers. There are other reasons for restrictions placed on visitors, such as the smuggling of contraband. In Michigan, the Department of Corrections allows visits to inmates by minor children (under 18) but restricts the minors to biological, legal, stepchildren, grandchildren, or siblings of the inmate (Travis, 2005). A child must be accompanied by an adult who must be his legal guardian or an immediate family member of the incarcerated individual. These restrictions become problematic as in our increasingly liberal society, gender roles and different living situations make prison interactions difficult between children and their incarcerated parents. For example, children raised by a girlfriend or boyfriend would not be able to bring the inmate's minor children for visitation.

There is no differentiation between a minimum or maximum-security prison criteria for admitting the types of visitors, nor are there any selective and favoritism criteria for prisoners with good behavior records. However, providing a few concessions as a reward for prisoners with good behavior records can make them targets for attacks. Most researchers would agree that too broad and strict regulations promulgated by prisons do more harm than good, especially when research shows that a strong bond and connection with family assist inmates while in prison and when they return to society. For an inmate, being able to see and meet with loved ones, relatives, and friends, even when sporadically, provide joy and is necessary while behind bars. Loeber and Farringon (1998) researched cohesive family units, including children who can influence and persuade inmates not to engage in crime once they return to society. Yocum and Nath (2011) found that fathers returning to society had even higher expectations than mothers. All the children in their research were enthusiastic about having a relationship with their fathers after their release. One 10-year old girl explained:

He's back in our lives. He's not going- he's not far, far away from us. He's right in this house. And if we need him all we have to do is call his name and he'll hear us. We don't have to actually wait, wait, wait for him to call or go to see him.

Children who had a pre-prison positive relationship with their father often wanted to rekindle and regain that relationship (Yocum & Nath, 2011). Even those children who had had difficult relationships with their father before he went to prison wanted to see if they could improve their relationship when the father returned from prison (Yocum & Nath, 2011). As a 14-year old boy explained it to the researchers:

Well, right now I think of him as a dad, not an actual father. I'm hoping that I'll be able to build that relationship to where I can be able to call him my father and a father figure that I would be able to look at and say, 'That's my father. That's the man I want to be when I grow up.'

Children who had fathers in prison upon their return wanted to do just everyday things such as eating meals together, watching television, or just being asked how their day went. Children often verbalized that they needed the father around for more emotional and disciplinary guidance than financial, although economic support also ranked high in their expectations.

Children's aspirations also extended to the hope that the desires and destructive, antisocial behaviors that landed their father in prison would not re-occur. Children also expressed their hopes that their fathers would adopt more positive behaviors in their post-prison life to avoid returning to prison again. One 10-year old girl, when asked how confident she was that her father would remain out of prison, responded without hesitation, "A hundred (percent)" (Yocum & Nath, 2011).

Marriage: A Strain Behind Bars

It is a difficult challenge and a source of stress and ongoing trauma when spouses try to remain connected while one of them is behind bars (Braman, 2002). Often prisoners are transported to a faraway location and could be hundreds if not thousands of miles away from their spouses. The distance and other restrictions drastically reduce the possibility of meeting regularly. While incarcerated, there are also potential issues of divorce and infidelity between spouses, making their relationship and that with their children more complicated (Travis, 2005). Both married men and women lose their mutual trust and shared commitment once imprisonment, and lengthy sentences remove the sense of normalcy from their relationship.

A strong marriage remains the best predictor for deferring potential future criminal activity once the inmate is released and resides or is in close contact with the spouse and family (Horney, Osgood & Marshall, 1995). Expectations that a father will start providing financial and emotional support are high among mothers interviewed in a study (Yocum & Nath, 2011).

Keeping Connected Behind Bars: Further Disconnections

Telephone conversations while behind bars can be challenging and remain problematic due to several reasons. Many states have exclusive telephone deals with companies with whom they sign an agreement and earn a percentage of the profits. Most prisons only allow inmates to make collect calls charged to their families (Travis, 2005). Petersilia (2003) found that collect calls out of prison range from $1-$3 a minute, although outside the prison walls, most phone calls are nowhere near that expensive, especially with cell-phone unlimited plans. There are also expensive connection fees ranging anywhere between $1.50 and $4 a minute. Once again, no such fees exist in the outside world (Travis, 2005). In 2001, the California Department of Corrections added $35 million to its budget with these phone contracts (Travis, 2005). These types of fees (among others) become part of the general budget of corrections departments throughout the nation. Politicians and corrections officials rarely oppose these measures because of the argument that they save taxpayers money. Arguably, there is now less money being asked by corrections departments from the state legislatures. Too often, however, cost-savings for taxpayers end up being costly to the inmate's family.

These exclusive deals with phone companies can end up being financially exorbitant and costly for the family to bear. While states may benefit financially, families who are already struggling with bills are punished further. The financial strain from paying for these phone calls can strain and harm the relationship further, leading to a lack of communication. Moreover, in a cruel twist, the families and children of inmates are enlarging the state corrections budgets through these telephone call fees.

The Florida House of Representatives Corrections Committee found that families admitted to spending almost $70 a month for collect phone calls from prison (Travis, 2005). Ultimately, some family members had to remove their names from the accepted calling phone list because they could not afford to talk to their relatives in prison even though they wanted to maintain contact. Finances shape the personal decisions of families who have to decide if they need to put food on the table or continue to spend money communicating with someone who is not around and may never return from prison.

With these hard choices made for communication, families, and children remain and continue to remain disconnected from the inmate. Without healthy communication from the outside world, inmates can become discouraged, unhappy, and further disengaged from the outside world. In some cases, prisoners can become very depressed and may even consider suicide. The family is the strongest, most reliable support system an inmate can have, and to have that relationship harmed by a lack of communication ultimately harms our society as well. With the decline in family and friend ties and bonds, there is less commitment to returning to society and becoming a productive member.

Besides problems with telephone communications, inmates face another issue while trying to maintain communication and bonds with their loved ones to be able just to see them in person. Unfortunately, this type of needed connection can also be costly for families as well because often, prisons are located far away from home, and travel can be both expensive on time and money. Mumola (2000) found that 62% of state prisons were located more than 100 miles from inmates' homes. Hagan and Coleman (2001) found that because there is a paucity of women's prisons, families are separated by an average of 160 miles. Only 10% of inmates serving time in prisons are women (Travis, 2005).

With the physical distance separating them and being behind bars, it becomes increasingly difficult to overcome barriers to maintaining a relationship with families and inmates. Mumola (2000) found that a majority of inmates might not even see their children the entire time they are in prison. Travis (2005) produced research showing that more than half of all mothers and 57% of fathers never spent a single moment with their children while behind bars. Other research has shown that even when the initial contact with inmates and their families, as time goes by and the prison sentence lengthens with time, there is a decrease in contact (Lynch and Sabol, 2001). While an inmate is serving time as a punishment by society, the punishment should not include family and friends.

Finally, in addition to phone calls fees, connection charges, and travel costs, inmates also have other fees added. For example, each prison has a commissary or a canteen where inmates can buy snacks, hygiene products, pens, and other necessities while in prison (Travis, 2005). Inmates can ask for family or friends to contribute to their prison commissary fund or earn money by working in prison if they can work. Depositing money into an inmate's account means paying a fee to the corrections department or, more likely, a private company administering the prison inmates' accounts. Inmates also have to pay for doctor visits and needed medication from their commissary account. There are also companies, which contract with the prison and charge a fee for sending care packages to inmates by friends or family. Criticisms abound as to the necessities not being met as reported by Vox:

"Family members also complain that they're often forced to buy their loved ones basic necessities that should be provided by the prison. Jennifer Gross of Livonia, Michigan, says she sent her boyfriend, an inmate in the Michigan Department of Corrections, a care package containing toilet paper after he told her he had gone without for four days. "We don't expect for all our loves to be freed," she said. "We just want them to have the basic needs and nutrition they deserve" (Eldridge, 2017).

Additionally, there have been charges of inflated prices or price gouging. After all, if the commissary is the only place to buy Ramen noodles, for example, inmates will pay the inflated price.

"Price is another issue. Relatives say that some goods sold in prison-approved catalogs cost more than they would in a store. At the very least, the pricing of items can be unpredictable. At Franklin County Jail in Pennsylvania, for example, a radio from Access Securepak costs $22, but in Custer County, Nebraska, the program sells that same radio for just under $13. At Arrendale State Prison in Georgia, a wire-free bra from Union Supply Direct is $13.80; at Northeast Correctional Complex in Tennessee, the company sells the same bra for $25.95" (Eldridge, 2017).

Conclusion

Prisons are not "fun" environments. No one deliberately chooses to be incarcerated, but the costly and expensive prison environment wears down on a family, especially for parents and children. Phone calls, care packages, and other expenses add to the point where some families have to cut off all contact with loved ones in prison. No family should have to choose between shelter and food for themselves and communicate with their family member in prison, yet families of inmates are continually making these hard choices.

The fewer contact inmates have with their family and friends, the less prepared they will be when they return to society. Travis (2005) found that 95% of inmates eventually return to society, almost 650,000 individuals are dumped back into their communities each year, often with nothing more than a bus ticket and $20. Consequently, how exactly can reentering inmates be successful enough not to return to prison without adequate social bonds and networks? Statistically, almost 73% of returning inmates will eventually be returned to prison within just three years (Travis, 2005). Reintegration must be made more accessible, not harder. Although our mass incarceration machine is slowing down, we have a long road to travel on before we can be a more compassionate and humane society. Public policies must be re-designed to provide a genuine second chance that can significantly reduce the high levels of recidivism in this country.

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