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Family Ties During Imprisonment: Do They Influence Future Criminal Activity?

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ALTHOUGH THE idea that prisoners should be permitted to maintain contact with family and friends during imprisonment has a long history of support, family-centered programs are a relatively new phenomenon in corrections. Within the last decade, however, there has been an emerging interest in this area, and several programs have developed to promote the maintenance of family ties and to strengthen inmates' sense of family commitment and ability to assume family responsibilities. Whereas family-centered correction programs may be justified for a variety of humane—as well as practical—reasons, a major argument advanced by proponents is that strong family ties during imprisonment reduce the level of future criminal activity (Bloom, 1987; FCN, 1986; Mustin, 1984; Potler, 1986; West, 1985).

Investigation of any phenomenon which purports to prevent crime or reduce criminal recidivism is mandatory. The claim that prisoners' families, of which there are many, could be resources in enhancing public safety makes understanding of this phenomenon even more compelling. Unfortunately, little scientific knowledge about prisoners and their families has been collected. The topic has not been popular with corrections researchers as they have generally failed to take into account the fact that prisoners' social networks extend beyond prison walls. Similarly, few family researchers and social services professionals have identified the area as a priority for knowledge building or service delivery. Consequently, it is no surprise to find that few studies have examined the impact of the family on recidivism.

The Research Base

Five empirical studies focusing specifically on the family ties-post-release success relationship are reported in the post-1970 literature. The most extensive study, and the one cited most often in the literature advocating family services, was conducted by Holt and Miller (1972). These researchers conducted a post-release followup study of 412 men who had been paroled from the Southern Conservation Center (California) for at least 12 months as of February 1971 and who had appeared before the parole board in the fiscal year 1968-69. They compared offenders' parole outcomes with the number of different visitors offenders had had during the last year of imprisonment.

Adams and Fischer (1976) investigated the effects of prison residents' community contacts on recidivism. Their sample was comprised of 124 men paroled in 1969 and 1970 from the Hawaii State Prison, an institution housing minimum, medium, and maximum security offenders. They defined recidivism as being returned to prison for violation of parole or a new conviction within a 24-month period following release. The mean number of letters recidivists received during the year prior to their parole was compared with the mean number of letters nonrecidivists received. Visits for the two groups were compared in the same manner.

Leclair (1978) examined the recidivism rates of 878 inmates released from Massachusetts prisons in 1973 and 841 released in 1974. A total of 14 correctional institutions contributed to these samples including two maximum, one medium, and four minimum security institutions and seven prerelease centers. Recidivism was measured in terms of whether or not an offender was returned to prison for either parole violation or on a new conviction within 1 year of the release date from prison. Recidivism rates for participants in the furlough program were compared with the rates for nonparticipants.

Forty minimum security offenders, 20 who had private family visits lasting 44 hours every 4 to 6 weeks and 20 who saw their wives weekly or biweekly for regular visits lasting for 3 to 4 hours in a common visiting room, constituted Burstein's (1977) sample. He interviewed the men and their families during imprisonment and conducted followup 1 year after the initial interviews to determine parole outcomes for those who had been released and disciplinary infractions for those still imprisoned. He compared private family visit participants with regular visit participants.

Howser and McDonald (1982) conducted followup on the 540 inmates who had participated in New York's private family visiting (family reunion) program and had been released from prison. Their report

suggests that the post-prison period varied since all inmates who had been released as of February 1980 were included in the analysis. These researchers compared the recidivism rates of family reunion participants with the expected recidivism rate based on previous groups of releasees.

The major conclusion of these studies is that the maintenance of family and community ties during imprisonment is positively related to post-release success. McDonald (1980), for example, concludes in a summary describing the family reunion study:

> The primary implication of this finding is that the Department's family services are appropriately directed toward an area that appears to be related to reducing criminal recidivism.

Holt and Miller (1972) state:

> The central finding of this research is the discovery of a strong and consistently positive relationship between parole success and maintenance of strong family ties while in prison.

These researchers note that their conclusions are consistent with previous studies. Holt and Miller (1972), for example, refer to positive associations between family ties and post-release success found in Ohlin's study of men released from prison 1925-35, to Glaser's study of releasees from Federal prison in 1956, and to Glaser's study of men released from an Illinois penitentiary 1940-49.

Each study provides data to support the conclusion of a positive association between the maintenance of family ties during imprisonment and lower recidivism. Two percent of Holt and Miller's sample who had three or more different visitors during the year prior to parole were returned to prison within 1 year of their parole. This number contrasts with 12 percent of those who had no contact with family or friends, and the difference is statistically significant.

Adams and Fischer report that nonrecidivists had a higher mean number of letters and visitors than did recidivists during the year prior to parole, although the difference in the means for the two groups was not statistically significant. When they compared the mean number of visits and letters for recidivists and nonrecidivists across different types of outside contacts, i.e., wives, parents, children, friends, etc., 9 out of 12 observations favored the hypothesis.

The recidivism rate for Leclair's 1973 furlough participants was 16 percent and significantly lower than the rate of 27 percent for individuals released without furlough. For 1974 releasees, the rate was 16 percent for the furlough group and 31 percent for the nonfurlough sample. When base expectancy tables were used to control for selection factors in the process of granting furloughs, the recidivism rate of 16 percent for furlough participants was significantly lower than the 1973 projected rate of 25 percent and the 1974 projected rate of 24 percent.

Howser and McDonald's (1972) data also support the family ties-post-release success hypothesis. The return rate of family reunion program participants was 4 percent or 20 while the projected return rate based on the overall return rate of New York releasees was 59. The researchers indicated that the number of program participants returned was approximately 67 percent less than the expected number.

Of the five studies, only Burstein (1977) failed to show a difference between the groups studied. His 1-year followup revealed little difference in the recidivism rate for private family visit participants and regular visit participants. Seventeen percent of the family visit participants were recidivists or had disciplinary infractions, as compared with 20 percent of the regular visit group. Unlike the other investigators, Burstein did not compare men with regular or private family visits with those who had no or few visits.

When measures of post-release success other than return to prison are used, the influences of social ties on post-release success are more pronounced. Holt and Miller's data indicate that persons who have community contacts during imprisonment are less likely than those who have few or no contacts to have parole difficulties. Fifty percent of those who had no contacts with family or friends had no difficulties on parole as compared with 70 percent of those with three visitors and 66 percent with four visitors. Along the same line, 79 percent of Burstein's (1977) family visiting participants had no arrests or violations as compared with 60 percent of the regular visit participants.

The strength of the association between family ties and post-release success is consistent though modest. More importantly, the association has held despite the expectations of some that family contact will have a negative impact on prisoners and without programmatic efforts designed to correct or treat prisoners' families.

The Conceptual Foundation

Why should family ties during imprisonment make a difference? By and large, the studies cited here failed to address this critical issue. Research was carried out primarily for practical reasons and the development or testing of theory was not a major concern. Nevertheless, there are conceptual frameworks which provide plausible explanations for an association between family contacts during imprison-

ment and antisocial or criminal behavior upon release.

The social supports literature provides one such conceptual base. According to Kaplan, Cassell, and Gore (1977), the presence of a social network (as might be found among offenders' families) protects the individual from a variety of stressful stimuli. Such networks impact positively on the individual's ability to handle stress and foster his or her personal adjustment. Loss or alteration of social support by family and friends results in unmet needs and ultimately psychiatric and physical disability or social difficulties. It might, therefore, be expected, as found among institutionalized health patients, that the lack of support during imprisonment further discourages the offender in his or her faith that he or she can do better, resulting in social deterioration. Upon release from prison, the offender is even more impaired socially and emotionally than he or she was upon entering and has even fewer personal resources to draw upon in responding to stressful situations.

Prisoners' outside social networks also provide concrete aid and serve the more practical functions observed in other social networks. Families provide concrete resources such as money and clothing to the prisoner, influence his or her help-seeking behavior and use of prison programs and services, and provide him or her with information about life outside the walls and family activities. The ongoing maintenance of these networks mitigates the effects of the institution, sustain the prisoner during imprisonment, and support the transition from prison to community, another potentially stressful life event.

The prisoner may not only "change" during imprisonment through his or her use of prison resources, but also has less reason to engage (or continue to engage) in criminal activities to fulfill basic practical needs upon release. Families provide needed goods and services during imprisonment and a place to stay and food to eat upon the return home.

Theories on the provisions of social relationships also offer a plausible explanation for the impact of contact with families during imprisonment and post-release criminal activity. According to this line of reasoning, prisoner-family relationships are primary relationships and, unlike secondary relationships which are, for the most part, instrumental, are accompanied by warmth and commitment. They provide opportunities for nurturing and sustain morale and a sense of security and well-being. They provide a reassurance of worth and attest to an idividual's competence in a social role. Without a primary group affiliation, individuals become despairing and drift into a state of normlessness or anomie (Weiss, 1974).

One might reason using this conceptualization that when primary relationships remain intact, a prisoner is more then a convict or a number. He or she is a parent, a son, a brother. In so being, as attested to in on-going interactions with family and friends, the prisoner has some assurance that he or she is not as he or she is defined by the prison authorities. Having maintained these social roles during incarceration, the prisoner is more likely to be able to function in desirable social roles upon release. When these roles are not maintained, upon release the ex-prisoner functions in those roles ascribed to "convicts."

Both theories of primary relationships and social supports are consistent with points of view presented in the black family literature. This literature builds on cultural roles and expectations of family aid found among black families. Research indicates that individuals prefer to rely on families rather than external sources and that strong black families are those who have problems but rely on internal family resources for help in resolving them ("Strong Black Families: Research Findings," 1986). When family aid is not given, the effects on the individual are detrimental. This denial of aid denotes the loss of the prisoner's role as a family member and the denial of the family's obligations and commitments towards the prisoner. Realization of this nonmembership in the family provides little impetus for doing better when released. Loss of one's family verifies one's position of being nothing, of whom nothing is expected.

Each of the above frameworks provides a different explanation for the impact of family ties on imprisonment and post-prison behavior. They have in common the fact that they do not focus on family ties as a guarantee of success. Each reasons, on the other hand, that the absence of such ties increases the likelihood of failure.

The Practical Concerns

The corrections system is facing a severe problem. Prison populations continue to grow with both first-time offenders and veteran recidivists. Few programs have been successful in preventing crime, and the number of recidivists suggests that imprisonment itself does little to alter future criminal activity. It may even, as some charge, actually encourage and promote it. The seriousness of this situation demands that the system look for alternative solutions.

The notion that family services may provide an effective approach for addressing the problem of recidivism is appealing. Families constitute a large resource base. Services to them, when compared with

the cost of reimprisonment, are relatively inexpensive. Family-focused programs, could, in fact, represent one of the most significant criminal justice experiments ever undertaken.

How then can we use what we now know to effectively develop and assess this emerging new direction in criminal justice programming? How can this knowledge be used to improve corrections policies and practices while decreasing the probability that families will be blamed for corrections systems failures and deficiencies?

First of all, we must develop a more comprehensive knowledge base. Empirical studies and theoretical frameworks independently support the hypothesis of a positive association between the maintenance of family ties during imprisonment and post-release success. The convergence of these two ways of knowing has not yet been attempted. Research which examines the phenomenon using theoretical frameworks to pose and answer questions would increase significantly our understanding of the family role in recidivism. It would also contribute to the advancement of knowledge about the elements of successful family functioning and well-being during periods of individual and family stress. Research for the basic family ties, recidivism hypothesis, though consistent, is quite sparse. Even a basic research foundation requires more extensive studies to determine with whom, and under what conditions, this basic hypothesis holds. Such knowledge could provide the basis for predicting recidivism and could also be used to assess the need for special programs and supports.

With respect to family programs, there are a growing number of family-focused programs in institutions and in communities which claim the reduction of recidivism as a major intended program outcome. These programs run the full gamut of sponsorship, objectives, focus, and mission. Some concentrate on changing inmates through parent education, counseling, and self-help. Others, such as family support groups, work with families. Still others provide concrete assistance including transportation and overnight lodging to see that family communications are possible. Little is known about the effectiveness of these models in achieving their specific objectives, in contributing toward corrections' recidivism prevention goals, or in maintaining the quantity or quality of family ties either during or after imprisonment. In addition, the conceptual models upon which programs are built are not clearly articulated, and there is little understanding of why they do or don't work. No serious assessment of these program models has been undertaken, despite the fact of some growing interest in them. It is paramount to know which program models achieve what results, with which individuals and groups, at what costs and why if family programming is to become a serious corrections direction.

Finally, it would be a mistake to expect that isolated family programs can make a significant impact on recidivism without fundamental changes in corrections communication policies and practices. While such policies have become more relaxed in the last decade (Dickinson 1980), they still serve as major barriers to the maintenance of family ties (Hairston, 1987). If family programs prove successful, they will be successful in spite of, rather than as a result of, current policies and practices. Prison locations, visitation schedules, visiting conditions, and staff's treatment of visitors are primary in this regard. Without basic changes, a future "nothing works" attributed to family programs might be better phrased "nothing is permitted to work."

Limited evidence suggests that family ties make a difference. Empirical studies show and conceptual frameworks support the idea that the maintenance of strong family ties during imprisonment influences future criminal activity. Family-oriented corrections programs designed to enhance these ties can be justified for sound social, economic, and emotional reasons. Knowledge of their success or failure in fulfilling societal objectives of safer communities may lead to a significant, new direction in corrections.

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