

## "Father Alert"

One of the most effective systems which we have today to locate missing or abducted children is the Amber Alert. Though the use of the national system rose out of tragedy, its current use has facilitated the return of countless children. In a way, we are facing a similar problem: missing fathers. And maybe it is time to create a Father Alert system. I know where we can begin to implement such a system - U.S. prisons.

The U.S. prison system houses millions of men; millions more are caught up in the system through probation, parole, half-way houses, etc. One of the few studies on incarcerated fathers found that 93 percent of men in prison are parents. Let me say that again: 93 percent. While much effort has been placed on maintaining a bond during imprisonment for women with their children, next to nothing has been <sup>done</sup> for incarcerated fathers.

A vasectomy is a rather straight-forward surgical procedure which prevents further progeny. This is a responsible, circumspect decision, and never reached lightly. Very often the procedure is not reversible. One would consider the full gamut of social, economic, cultural, religious, and personal factors. One would necessarily consider a spouse or partner in the decision-making process - or try to contemplate the needs of a future partner, not to mention the product of sexual relations should an unforeseen pregnancy arise. (If only every decision we make in life could be made in such a way.) Prison for fathers is the polar opposite of vasectomies.

When a father is sent to prison, all those responsibilities, be they economic or social, are left undone. No thinking or little occurs

concerning the long-term consequences of specific actions which will ultimately land them in prison, thus straining or completely destroying the familial bonds. Experts in the field seem to agree that these men lack the insight to view their world and their place in it clearly. Only after the fact do most begin to feel the full weight of their actions. By that time it is far too late, with fatherhood consisting of short monitored visits and collect calls home. And that is in the very best of circumstances. For many, fatherhood will cease to exist outside a distant memory or fantasy of the mind.

This is why I see vasectomies and prison as perfect opposites with respect to children. Where vasectomies prevent relationships and obligations with children you do not wish to have, prison prevents those relationships and obligations with those children that you already have. So, when we discuss the missing father, we should include this ever-growing subset: incarcerated fathers.

When a prison sentence is handed down, we rightly consider the victims directly affected and their respective families. But, for a moment, let's do something unseemly. Let us consider the other victims <sup>in-</sup> directly affected: 1) the children of the convict, who have now lost access to a father, 2) a spouse or partner, who must raise the children on her own without the much-needed assistance and participation of the father, and 3) the incarcerated father, who statistically is not only a product of abuse, poverty, violence, and addiction, but will now be thrown into prison where years of violence, abuse, disease, and isolation will take their toll - not to mention

a diminution of an already scant list of legal employment opportunities. Few of which offer a living wage.

It is always unpopular to address issues like these from every angle. Just ask any criminologist, social worker, psychologist, or social activist. Yet, when we discuss true recovery and healing, we must include all pertinent points of view. In doing so we can not only heal victims, but also the "other" victims, and possibly begin to address the larger problem : mass imprisonment and its effects.

The number one indicator for future imprisonment is having an incarcerated parent or familial role model. In this way, prison is a self-perpetuating reality, like a gene passed on generation after generation. The idea of a parent in prison is often painful, confusing, and frightening for children. Removal of the father creates an increased burden in <sup>these affected</sup> families which by-in-large exist in impoverished communities. These children often find themselves caught in the criminal justice system during adolescence.

Though their crimes are always before them, convicts do not see themselves in purely criminological terms. Incarcerated fathers self-identify as parents, though removed from the family unit, and rank the value of the relationships at an extremely high level. This identity is extremely important for these men, particularly those who with no wealth, no property, no education, and no viable employment opportunities waiting for them upon release. Right or wrong, having children validates incarcerated fathers where few other attributes exist.

Difficulties maintaining these relationships are obvious.

Far-flung and costly travel on already constrained family budgets and limited transportation options, brief visits in tightly-controlled conditions, cards and letters with their intrinsic limitations, and expensive collect calls, all added together do little to keep the family together. They in fact have quite the opposite effect. The inclusion of another male role model, usually supplanting the father for brief periods of time, often adds to the confusion and overall difficulties. The rates of anxiety and depression for the incarcerated fathers and their children are high.

On visits to prison, incarcerated fathers ravenously devour the attention of their children, as if they could absorb the lost years of ball games, family outings, and other innumerable shared moments in a one or two hour long visit. The children cling to their fathers as well, with the younger children often attempting to drag their dads home from the visiting area once and for all. I have seen their pained, flustered expressions as they are carried away, reaching out one last time until the next visit, months or years away.

Aggressive, hardcore convicts morph into extremely paternal and loving men during phone calls home to their kids. One can hear in their voices a sincere desire to connect on some deeper level with their sons and daughters. They spend hours decorating cards and building crafts to send home, as if these things could substitute for the real closeness and intimacy which they desire. But there is little else to do, and something, anything, is better than nothing.

Sadly, these limited means are often extinguished to men

who have acrimonious relationships with the mother or guardian of their children. Many men do not realize that they and their children have a legal right to this relationship as long as maintaining that relationship does not pose a risk to the children. Being in prison does not bar the relationship; it only places obstacles.

As stated, men entering prison statistically are under-educated or functionally-illiterate, come from impoverished communities, and have few marketable skills. As such, the fact that they will often leave prison with five, ten, twenty, or more years of back child support, and can expect little more than a minimum wage job does more than complicate the problem. Prison fulminates disease and dysfunction which often began well before prison - then add a criminal record. Where are these men to work now when they could hardly have found work before? If they had a livable wage, would they have spent half the night on the street corner to sell only ten or twenty dollars worth of dope, or robbed the local convenience store? No, ofcourse not. If they try to go "straight," they can expect the state to take up to half of their take home wages. If the minimum wage is not a livable wage, then what is half of it? The result is clear: men trying to make it, filled with anger, frustration, and hopelessness, often returning to prison for non-support or for simply returning to the activities which got them locked-up in the first place.

None of this is meant to diminish an incarcerated father's responsibility for his actions. Quite the opposite. Let us understand it all. Let us not only understand why he did what

he did, or who is generally affected, or even how we might help him and his family heal. In addressing these needs, let us understand the problem in its totality. Which means its historical, economic, political, and social origins as well. We must ask ourselves if we too have bought into the idea that the prisons are filled with sub-human monsters hell-bent on violence and destruction or are merely inferior moral degenerates, or are these people, who have made decisions based on limited choices and inadequate information and societal forces much greater than they could appreciate. The prisons do consist of persons overwhelmingly from impoverished communities which are disproportionately made up of ethnic minorities, but research demonstrates conclusively that addiction and crime occur in all socioeconomic strata. Yet, it is the poor who go to prison.

This is not a pleasant idea. Nor is it palatable to most to consider that media, politics, and business all have an interest in presenting the idea of the criminal in a certain light. Today, due to the continuing criminalization of addiction and the use of habitual offender laws, we can find men and women serving 25 to life for simple drug possession. Of course, the middle-class and wealthy usually do not usually get arrested or prosecuted for these crimes, and almost never go to prison. The upper classes go to treatment, while the poor can expect to endure long traumatic years behind razor-wire. While politicians and the media have sold us on the idea of a worsening crime problem in this country, private companies with a vested interest in prison expansion have raked in the profits funded by taxes and rural communities desperate for commerce have sought more and more prison construction.

I will admit it. I often imagine how much health care, education, housing, transportation, research, and so on and so forth we could have bought with all the money it took to expand our prisons from 200,000 to 2.3 million. It only took one generation and the bulk of this growth was non-violent drug offenses. How much treatment could we have bought? Instead, we took those from our poorest communities with the least amount of quality health care and education, and made their situation even worse through enforcement of laws which lack proportionality and which focus on the the most marginalized of our society. "Tough on Crime" laws have been repeatedly referred to as "Tough on the Poor" with families suffering. I truly believe that when we begin to promote laws and programs which take into consideration all of these factors and appreciate the many and varied ill-effects, then and only then can we begin to seek recovery, healing, and prevention.

This may sound all so very academic as one reads this from the comfort of a living room or subway ride to work, but for millions of fathers and children it is desperately real. Either one mistake or a series of them, usually due to a lack of insight and large societal forces, have destroyed these families. On Father's Day 2008, President Obama, then on the campaign trail, gave a stern remonstrance against the absent father, particularly African-Americans. White, middle-class voters rallied around these words, but I was left with this: There's much pain, grief, anger, and remorse tied up in the realization that your one chance to be a father to your children has been wiped away. I have seen men try to stuff their emotions and

live off of hate to just get through the day. Most are left embittered, hostile, and maladjusted. The Black <sup>Community</sup> has been hit worse. It is hard not to be an absent father when you are in prison. With only 12 percent of the U.S. population African-American, it is shocking to hear that over 50% of the prison population is Black. That means that about one out of three African-American males should expect to serve time in prison. The numbers for Hispanics are little better at one out of six, while white males are looking at one out of every 17. All groups commit crimes, and the "white collar" crimes of the upper classes such as tax evasion, price fixing, employee theft, etc., affect a much greater overall societal burden - and yet it is through inadequate legal representation, police targeting, ease with which "street" crimes are detected, differing outcomes due to judicial discretion, etc., that the poor, predominantly ethnic minorities, are incarcerated. The families of these communities are left in pieces.

These walls that hold incarcerated fathers are much higher and broader than the mere concrete and metal which you see. Many of these fathers are not much more than children themselves. With little education and disturbing childhoods, I often understand why it is so much easier to vilify them than try to understand and help them. Maybe we need a "Father Alert" program for these men and their families. The Amber Alert works due to the fact that 1) specific information about the lost child is known and made available, and 2) people work in concert to find and bring the child home. This is exactly how we need to approach our Father Alert system. Information and delivery.

Those fathers who go to prison are overwhelmingly drawn



from the most marginalized of our society. They enter prison under-educated, under-employed, addicted, abused, and unhealthy for the most part, and they leave even worse as a consequence of many years of violence, abuse, isolation, and difficult living conditions. Their families suffer, and often a cycle of imprisonment is continued within the next generation. Many young men have only spent time with their fathers on visit or as cellmates. Though this knowledge does not excuse criminal action per se, it does give therapists, social workers, psychologists, etc., an insight and direction necessary to treat and develop programs to meet the needs of incarcerated fathers and their families. Beyond this, we must become socially-active and promote commonsense laws which include proportionality and allow for diversion to treatment where applicable. We must also demand quality effective rehabilitation within prisons which offer much of what these fathers never had prior to imprisonment: safe housing, medical education, vocational training, addiction treatment, family planning, and a variety of psychotherapeutic programs which offer more than the rote nonsense proffered by former guards promoted to administer "treatment." We should demand a livable wage to all citizens and do more than just tell ex-cons "good luck going straight." We should make prison after-care a priority. We should begin to shrink the U.S. prison population and begin to spend adequately with respect to the much-needed social programs of impoverished communities. <sup>That's true crime prevention.</sup> We should re-evaluate how we target, arrest, and prosecute in this country.

I know most would rather blame incarcerated fathers. It would certainly be much easier than understanding the problems and seek solutions. But we are of an age where all of this is

truly possible. I believe that we must do more than merely claim to be a just society. We must act. Those of us who truly believe in recovery and healing have special insight. We can do more. Yes, it has been elusive thus far, but we can inculcate them with the insight which we have to help them out of prison, keep them out, change this venal system, improve our communities, and prevent the next generation of fathers from going missing due to incarceration. It is far from easy, but it is a task which we are uniquely able to do. And the very foundation of our Father Alert program should be those various therapies, programs, and interventions, be they legal, social, or psychotherapeutic/psychological, which reconnect incarcerated fathers with their children, their families, and their true potentials - yes, a sort of reverse vasectomy.

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