The Impact of Incarceration on Family: Reflections by a Prisoner

Dependent upon the nature of crime—whether blue-collar or white, violent compared to non-violent, or drugs versus sex offenses—attitudes from society and family range in a breadth of responses. I have experienced tolerance, rejection, and acceptance. With crime, a positive consequence does exist. Jobs become necessitated with hiring police, judges, lawyers, prison staff, and probation-parole officers. On the other hand, negative results also parallel the positive. Taxes that will generate payroll burdens society. Also, depreciation of property value by crime harms neighborhood growth. Therefore, society feels the impact of incarceration. Neighbors, friends, work, church, and family face decisions about relations towards the prisoner by either negative, neutral, or positive reactions. The aim of my presentation here remains to show the impact of incarceration on family as personally observed. "All human cultures have families.... Anthropologist find that in most cultures one can identify a 'nucleus' of mother, father, and child--what the Hindu extended family call 'the divine triangle'" (Heins & Seiden, 1987, p. 5). Family inclusion I use throughout this paper consists of parents, siblings, spouses, and children of the prisoner.

Although it remains beyond my scope of this essay to represent a complete synthesis of behavioral and psychosocial development theories, there exists several points reviewed for clarity and support. A survey of psychosocial development of family reveals three possible structures, as addressed by Balswick and Balswick (2014) on page 36. First, enmeshed families experience such a co-dependency that the impact of incarceration can lead to negative outcomes. Second, disengaged families lack an intimacy and closeness that keeps an individual in identity with family. Lastly, a differentiated family member represents the creative and resilient type of person, which usually results in positive outcomes.

These three familial structures find further definition with the Prodigal Son parable of the New Testament (Lk. 15:11-32 [New
International Version]). In summary, the youngest son, who runs off with his inheritance early and blows his fortune, exemplifies disengagement characteristics by his being disentangled from family identity. He becomes indifferent to family, friends, and self; only to end up poor and returning home to face two different responses. On one hand, the eldest son (brother of the Prodigal) through enmeshment and his overly cohesiveness toward family resulted in a lack of separate identity outside of home. Also, the lack of flexibility led to rejection of the Prodigal (Balswick & Balswick, op. cit., p. 77). However, on the other hand, the father represents the positive, being differentiated by his resilience to accept and love his son. Although this parable focuses not on jail these responses do exist within families impacted by incarceration. Upon review of incarceration on family three consequences toward relations with the imprisoned exists: (1) ruin, (2) remaining indifferent, and (3) renewal.

My survey begins with a look into ruin. Although specific family members will find address, several common damaging factors effect all. One includes financial burdens. Court fines, bail, lawyers and monetary support of those jailed adds up. "The inmate of prison suffer various deprivations...poverty is a part of prison policy," states The Encyclopedia Britannica (2007) (Imprisonment, p. 814). Also, emotional duress from travelling long distances to visit, enduring court, and separation erodes healthy family ties.

Enmeshed parents of the prisoner starts the look at specific family members. For some parents, especially in the Far East and stern religious cultures, jail brings dishonor. Ruin ensues as mothers and fathers search for or refuse understanding. Also, because of self-blame or deflecting fault onto their child for criminal behavior negativity threatens their health. Prisoners report abandonment, breakdowns, and parental suicides as an impact of incarceration on family. "In rigid families patterns of behavior and communication are fixed, leaving little room for negotiation or a search for creative solutions when conflicts arise" (Balswick & Balswick, op. cit., p. 268).

Next, sibling also endure the impact of ruin. They too face questions about a sibling's criminal behavior. Dishonor, loss of
trust, and not knowing how to process imprisonment leads to rejection. The Prodigal Son example above shows the elder brother in ruin towards family. Although the father held a feast to welcome home the prodigal, the elder brother "became angry and refused to go in" (Lk. 15:28). Instead of reconciliation, there remained no repair because of enmeshment's negative impact from imprisonment.

Moving forward, spouses in enmeshed marriages experience derailment. The loss of a closely interdependent partner creates adverse situations. The spouse assumes added responsibilities of chores, budgeting, maintaining the household, and working outside the home; perhaps for the first time (Heins & Seiden, op. cit., p. 771). Due to lack of personal identity outside of family in overly cohesive marriages the separation devastates the bond of husband and wife. All to often, it is not uncommon for inmates to receive divorce papers. Enmeshed couples lack perception and boundaries, finding prosperity as long as their needs are met. Yet, as soon as one finds a deficiency of their needs, wants, or desires a divorce ensues (Witte & Ellison, 2005, p. 239).

Finally, the impact on children comes under review. Regardless of age, incarceration of a parent affects the child. Of course, the younger the child the more negative the effect. "Prison existence is hard on families. Rarely do they survive lengthy terms of confinement. Sometimes, due to bitter break ups, children are reared never knowing their father's love" (Canfield, Henson, & Lagana, 2000, p. 37). All too damaging are the effects of an absentee parent, teasing by peers, and turmoil emotionally. Also, one parent cannot meet all the needs of the child. As a result, the child may develop slowly, school work wanes, and possibly he or she mirrors the deviant parent in behavior (Heins & Seiden, op. cit., p. 771). Continuing, The New Encyclopedia Britannica (2007) offers that children who are directly impacted by the crime--victims of sexual abuse by the parent--face further ruin in relationship with the parent, for the courts may revoke the abusive parent's authority (Imprisonment, p. 815). Evidently, there exists no such thing as a victimless crime as seen by the negative impacts of incarceration on family.
Closing out, an example reveals what ruin looks like. A prisoner tells about the relationship he and his sister shared growing up. Born a year apart to the day (he being the younger), they grew up close. Church, school, and friendships ran interlinked. As adults each offered the other financial, familial, and emotional support. Yet, after the man's imprisonment a schism developed. Phone calls became unaccepted, letters went unanswered, and cards found no response. Several years passed with only silence. The inmate concedes he does not even know what he would say if they talked again. Ruin exists as one impact on family.

A second impact involves the decision to remain indifferent. Although both enmeshed (covered above) and disengaged families (covered here) experience co-existence, the latter lack full involvement and identity with family. Due to loose interconnections, when facing personal crisis these family members remain half-hearted and even lukewarm (Balswick & Balswick, op. cit., p. 36). Also, they amend behaviors to adapt but never deal with uncomfortable situations. Continuing, they respond in old familiar ways. "These old ways will likely be inadequate and the family will remain stuck... rather than motivated" (Ibid., p. 28). Thus, the family remains neutral.

Indifferent parents of prisoners begins a look at specific family members. Disengaged parents often write, visit, and send money. Yet, this contact remains mundane. Perhaps to them the imprisonment of their son or daughter fails to carry loss of honor, stress, or other negative impacts. Often, indifferent parents simply continue their lives, going on without ruin or renewal of relations.

Next, siblings also endure the impact of disengagement. Here, brothers and sisters of these families experience no deep intimate connection with the inmate. It is as if impacts of incarceration hardly creates a scandal. In addition, disentwined siblings focus on their own lives. Any relationship with the imprisoned consists of mere formality, vacant of ruin or renewal.

Moving forward, spouses of disengaged marriages include neutral impacts. Although, because of imprisonment a husband or
wife has to assume the other's role, the indifferent marriage finds neither construction or destruction (Lynn, 2016, p. 22). For example, a spouse visits out of an expectation (meaning it is simply expected of them), not out of a sense of commitment. Also, a spouse waits patiently for a partner's release, anticipating a return to normal. "In disengaged families, the bond between members may be so weak there is little direct confrontation when conflict arises. Conflict is most likely dealt with by ignoring it and hoping it will go away" (Balswick & Balswick, op. cit., p. 269).

Finally, the impact of disengaged children comes under review. They too face the impact of incarceration, and in younger children they cannot commit to ruin or renewal by lack of their experiences, except those values taught by others. As products of parenting they learn coping skills from their indifferent parents. Thus, they lack cohesive existence, but disengaged indentity that finds a neutral impact.

Closing up, an example of what indifference looks like. An inmate shares about his relationship with his wife. Although married over forty years, they spent their spare time away from one another with separate careers and hobbies. Joined in holy matrimony each maintains their own identity and schedules. However, they partook in specific family activities and interdependent in child-rearing. The inmate admits that in ten years of incarceration they chose to remain married. Although the wife visits, sends in his favorite books, and writes their relationship continues on as before. He does the prison thing, while she travels the world. They walk alone together.

A third, and final, impact involves the decision to renew relations. The band Need To Breathe (2017) reminds listeners, "Sometimes you leave the ones you love, but if it's love they won't give up." This type of differentiated family finds the ability to adapt to new ways of thinking. Thus, they act in positive ways towards an imprisoned family member. "In resilient families members are able to communicate feelings, opinions, wishes, and desires in a forthright and unambiguous manner" (Balswick & Balswick, op. cit., p. 40). The following excerpt exemplifies the positive attributes found where abandonment becomes replaced with acceptance:
Unfortunately, family members left behind are the second victims of the crimes committed by inmates. [However,] It is not unusual for women to drive to prison hundreds of miles away in desolate places, just to spend a few hours with their loved ones.... Many times the families pay a great price for the crime than the incarcerated. The hands-on decisions and responsibilities are transferred from the inmate to the ones they leave behind.... They are called upon to accomplish unfamiliar tasks (Canfield, et. al., op. cit., p. 37).

Yet, regardless of perceived negative consequences, prevalent in family dynamics exists the ability to become stronger. Strength is found even when one becomes weak. Thus, hope is created and found in decision to renew relations with those jailed.

Differentiated parents begins a look at specific family members renewing relations. A Proverb offers, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Prov. 22:6). However, resilient parents understand a child has freewill and no amount of parental authority removes freedom to choose. Should a son or daughter go astray as a result of peer pressure, a fallen society, or other factors (like the impatience of the young prodigal son) flexible parents do not abandon continual training up of their offspring; deciding instead to mimic the accepting father of the Prodigal Son parable--by renewing relations.

Next, siblings also endure the impact of renewal. These adaptable brothers and sisters reinforce relations with the imprisoned by heeding the call to offer moral support, financial assistance, and emotional encouragement. "In resilient families, the members are differentiated... and have a strong sense of belonging (a healthy degree of connection and interdependence)" (Balswick & Balswick, op. cit., p. 35). As noted, these siblings co-exist with the prisoner in a balance of support. Moving forward, spouses of resilient marriages often experience renewal. They find upon imprisonment of their significant other a passion to keep the spark of commitment, love and honor toward marital vows. Also, each finds an ability to
express personal and intimate feelings. Again quoting Chicken Soup For The Prisoner's Soul, one wife whose husband serves prison time captures the essence of positive impacts of jail on their marriage:

While in prison, my husband wrote and told me he was grateful I never gave up on him. He was glad I saw something in him he couldn't see in himself. Through him I learned that not all people in prison are bad. In fact many are misunderstood, and the majority just need someone to have faith in them, to help them gain the strength to change directions (Canfield, et. al., op. cit., p. 223).

Finally, the impact on children comes under review. Although children learn how to behave by observing the consequences of behavior of others, they also learn coping techniques through others responding toward the impact of incarceration. "In the maturation process, children learn a value system.... Primarily, children learn values through the way things are done within family" (Lynn, op. cit., pp. 39-40). Keeping with freewill, they can choose renewal of relationship toward an imprisoned parent.

Closing out, an example reveals what renewal looks like. I share the following reunion with my own father. Growing up he and I experienced a strained relationship. Arguments ensued over goals, friends, and career choices. I followed the path of rebellion and eventually landed myself in prison on a 5-year bid. Although stoic for the first several years, my father never expressing intimate or vulnerable feelings, he did eventually open up. With a year from release I received a card from my dad, who poured his heart out and offered desires to renew our relationship; to the point of asking if I would come home to live with him upon release. The impact of jail on my family led to a positive result.

In conclusion, upon examination of the impact of incarceration on family three responses toward relations with the imprisoned exists as either ruin, remaining indifferent, or renewal. Relations live in flux. At times family experiencing negativity find the incarceration rueful. Yet, these families may find strength to reverse impacts into positives. An enmeshed family may become indifferent, or may move to differentiation. Then again, other
times, strength wanes and can lead to ruin. "All families fall on a continuum between hurting and healing behaviors" (Balswick & Balswick, op. cit., pp. 19-20). Culture, religion, and traditional views of imprisonment affects reaction. Yet, each family through education, experiences and freewill chooses how to respond to negative, neutral, and positive impacts of incarceration on family.
References
Need To Breathe (2017). "Happiness." Hardlove. CD.