



WE'RE ALL DOING TIME

by

Delbert D. Williams

The imprisonment of a parent can be one of the greatest stressors for a child, along with divorce or the death of a parent. The separation of a child from a parent can be an extremely devastating, traumatic experience that can have lasting effects into adulthood.

Children of incarcerated parents often feel abandoned by their parents, resulting in diminished self-esteem and questions of worth and lovability. Approximately 2.6 million American children have a parent in jail or prison at any given time. "We know that poor people and racial minorities are incarcerated at higher rates than the rest of the population, says Kristin Turney, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine (2014). Unfortunately, incarceration is cyclical in some impoverished families. Studies show that children with an incarcerated parent are more likely to act out in school, get detention, and be suspended or arrested. Statistics show these children are also more likely to end up in prison

themselves, says Turney.

Turney also asserts that the incarceration of a parent hinders the health and development of children who are already experiencing significant challenges. In other words, when children who are raised in dysfunctional families, and a parent is then incarcerated, the incarceration only exacerbates their plight.

In a land that prides itself on freedom, incarceration should be a last and ultimate resort. As a society, we have a choice, that very word is the crux of the issue. We Americans hold over 2 million of our citizens in modern dungeons. Half of those we have chosen to incarcerate have children under the age of 18. Thirty years ago 1 in 125 children had a parent incarcerated. Today its 1 in 28 (CBS, 2013).

Of course, parents have a choice to be law abiding or criminals, that must be emphasized. Yet not every crime should be defined as a crime. For instance, mental illness, and the actions of people clearly documented as mentally ill, are charged against them, despite their legally diminished capacity. This is where prisons -- that are not designed for people suffering from mentally illness -- do much more harm than good. The rigid rules often confuse the mentally ill, they are then severely sanctioned for breaking such rules, and then placed into isolation, which worsens their mental state. The stress of prison, much less solitary confinement, is hard on anyone. Frederick Hocking (1970), an expert in mental health says posits that "subjection to prolonged extreme stress results in the development of "neurotic" symptoms in virtually every person exposed to it."

Prisons are also ill-suited for the disease of substance abuse disorder",

yet we literally add injury to insult by filling up our prisons with poor people suffering from such vicious maladies. Indeed, this writer knows your choice in these matters is at best indirect. The real decision-makers in this indignity are the politicians, yet politicians who are acting in your voice, at your will. Eric Wright so correctly reminds us that "the punishment of crime is a political act." And every crime definition, and every criminal sanction, is a human construct.

As a society that strives to be just, free and humane, we must be pragmatic in how we utilize this ultimate of options: Prisons. California has 35 penitentiaries, more than any other state. The cost is exorbitant at \$15 billion annually (CDCR, 2020), more than higher education at \$11 billion a year (Legislative Counsel Digest, 2020).

By choosing to help the mentally ill, and people who are addicted to substances, we could decrease the prison population by over half, keeping families intact, and allowing parents to be parents while we assist them in getting their lives back on track. Not only is this simple social approach practical, it is also just and humane. As a society, we want to collectively heal, not harm. We want children, America's children -- our very future -- to grow and develop into fine, healthy, and contributing adults. And we want all our citizens to have a realistic shot at self-determination, which cannot be had if we continue to lock up masses of people who need our help, not a heavy hand.

Until we turn this juggernaut around, we're all doing time; we're all sentenced to the ravages of prison, paying one way or another.

Sources:

Hocking, Frederick (1970). "Extreme Environmental Stress and its Significance for Psychology," American Journal of Psychotherapy," 24: 4, 23

Legislative Counsel Digest, Assembly Resolution Concurrent, No. 186, March 10, 2020

Wright, Eric (1973). The Politics of Punishment: A Critical Analysis of Prisons in America (New York, NY, Harper Row), p. 22