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# Family Ties During Imprisonment: Important to Whom and For What?\*

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*This paper reviews research on the social functions of prisoner-family ties. Three areas are examined: the preservation of marital units and parent-child bonds; the individual well-being of prisoners, children and other family members; and the prisoner's post-release success. The literature indicates that the maintenance of family ties during imprisonment is desirable, but difficult. Benefits suggested by empirical findings include decreased rates of recidivism following imprisonment, improved mental health of inmates and other family members, and an increased probability of reunification of the family household following imprisonment. The paper concludes with the identification of an agenda to guide future policy and program-oriented research.*

Prisoners' family relationships and social networks outside the prison are emerging as a major corrections and social services issue. The strengthening of family ties is being promoted as a correctional treatment strategy (Bloom, 1987; Flanagan, 1982; Mustin, 1984; Policy Recommendations on Families of Adult Criminal Offenders, 1986; Showalter and Jones, 1980) and major changes in corrections communications policies support movement in that direction. Family-oriented services, almost nonexistent a decade ago, are developing in institutional and community settings (Family Resource Coalition, 1985; Fishman and Cassin, 1981; Hairston and Lockett, 1987; Howser and McDonald, 1982) and a range of services including children's centers in prison, private family visits, and visitors' hospitality houses, are being advocated. Families of prisoners (there are over 500,000 on any given day) are organizing to assure that the ability to communicate with imprisoned kin is enhanced

\*This paper is based on a presentation made at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Chicago, Illinois, August 1987.

and protected and that their rights as individuals and families are respected (Policy Recommendations on Families of Adult Criminal Offenders, 1986).

This paper reports the findings of a review of the scholarly literature undertaken to determine the empirical foundation for views about the importance of family ties during imprisonment. It contributes to the development of a knowledge base on families and corrections by specifying and integrating the findings of diverse research studies in three major areas. The purposes that prisoner family ties serve are presented and relevant research findings are examined. The paper concludes with the identification of key research questions to guide future study.

### The Functions of Family Ties

Family ties during imprisonment serve three important functions including the maintenance of the family unit, the enhancement of the well-being of individual family members, and the facilitation of the prisoner's post-release success. Although seldom the specific foci of research inquiry, these three functions often emerged from data gathered for other purposes. There are, no doubt, other purposes that are served by communication between prisoners and the world outside the prison. Communication between prisoners and outsiders provides, for example, for the flow of material goods, money, and information into and out of the prison. The presence of prison visitors, particularly members of the opposite sex, also normalizes the prison environment. These latter functions were rarely identified, however, as important reasons for strengthening prisoners' family ties.

### The Dissolution and Preservation of Family Units

Research indicates that both marital and parental relationships are particularly vulnerable during incarceration. Personal testimonies of couples separated by incarceration (Hedin, 1986) and empirical studies conducted by Bloom and Cohen (1981) Daniel and Barrett (1981), and Koenig (1985) support the view that incarceration places severe stress and strain on marriage. Marital couples are usually denied sexual intimacy and are

unable to engage in the day-to-day interactions, experiences, and sharing which sustain a marital relationship. Loneliness and missing each other repeatedly emerged as an issue in exploratory studies of prisoners' spouses done by Bloom and Cohen (1981) and Koenig (1985) and was cited as a problem by 90% of the couples studied by Daniel and Barrett (1981).

The extent of marital break-up during, or immediately following, incarceration is not known. There are no national statistics on changes in marital status during imprisonment, a fact that is not surprising given the general absence of family characteristics data in major criminal justice statistical documents. The *Source Book of Criminal Justice Statistics - 1986*, for example, does not report either the marital or parental status of prison inmates.

The available statistics do indicate a high divorce rate among imprisoned persons. Hairston (1987) reports that 31% of her sample of imprisoned males was divorced as compared to 16% married. Corresponding percentages for other male populations were 30 and 20 for Lanier (1987) and 20 and 20 for jail inmates as reported in the *Report to the Nation on Crime and Justice* (1985). It is not known how many of these divorces occurred after arrest and incarceration. There is evidence, however, that a substantial number of marital breakups are prison-related. Hairston (1987) found among a sample of participants in an in-prison related family program that 75% of the men who were married at the time of arrest were divorced by the time of the study.

A few studies provide some understanding of the phenomenon of marital break-up during imprisonment. When researchers have posed the question of whether couples plan to resume living together upon release of the imprisoned spouse, a substantial number reply in the affirmative. Swan (1981) reports that the maintenance of family ties and family unity was a matter of grave concern and interest to the women and men he studied. When the wives of 169 Black mail prisoners incarcerated in Tennessee and Alabama prisons were interviewed, 75% stated they expected to resume a shared relationship with the prisoner upon his release. Seventy-one percent indicated that they would be happy when the man returned home and another 5% stated that they wanted the man to return home

primarily for the children's sake. Ninety percent of the significant women (wives, mothers, lovers of inmates) interviewed by Curtis and Schulman (1984) similarly indicated that they looked forward to the inmate's return home.

Three of the seven prisoners' wives interviewed by Bakker, Morris and Janus (1978) were committed to maintaining their marriage; two had filed for divorce at the time of the study and two expressed ambivalence. All of the 20 women who participated in Koenig's (1985) study were maintaining their relationship with their husband/partner. Most had long-term relationships lasting three or more years. Some of the women indicated, however, they would feel torn in deciding whether or not to stay with their husbands during any other possible prison sentence they might incur.

Despite couples' good intentions to maintain their marriages, researchers have observed indicators of deteriorating marriages over the period of incarceration. Holt and Miller (1972) observed that only 53% of the married men who had served more than two years had wives who visited them compared with 79% of those who had served two years or less. Sapsford, as reported by Walker (1983), also observed a decline in the visiting patterns of wives of long-term prisoners and reported that by the seventh year wives, in contrast to other relatives, had ceased visiting and writing letters.

Using clinical assessments of taped inmate-family visits and correspondence, Brodsky (1975) found considerable deterioration in marital relationships over the first six months of confinement. He concluded that prisoners' relationships with wives and girlfriends were the most changeable and wrote, "Spouses showed a pattern of getting very close or very distant. Maintenance of the marriage on the same level was apparently difficult."

Although researchers have expressed interest in the general topic of family stability during imprisonment, (Brodsky, 1975; Schneller, 1976; Swan, 1981) and family contact during imprisonment is advocated as a method for preserving family units (Homer, 1979) the impact that prison visiting has on plans for reunification, or actual reunification, has been investigated by only one researcher. Burstein (1976) studied 20 prisoners who

had private overnight family visits while incarcerated and 20 who had visits in the regular prison visiting room. Twenty-two percent of the couples who had overnight family visits allowing privacy as well as sexual intimacy were divorced or experiencing serious marital difficulties one year after Burstein's initial interviews. This number compared with 64 percent of the men who had visits only in the regular prison visiting room.

There is little evidence that visiting between spouses during imprisonment is the critical factor that sustains marriages as the topic has seldom been studied. There is, on the other hand, evidence that many couples desire to maintain their marriages and live together as husband and wife upon release. These marriages are subject to severe stress, however, and the effort involved in maintaining relationships through visiting deteriorates over time.

### Parent-Child Relationships

Advocates for parenting programs in prison argue that imprisonment is deleterious to parent-child relationships and that the impact of separation can be lessened by efforts undertaken to strengthen communication between parents and children during this period (Barry, 1985; Fishman, 1982). They view such on-going communication as vital in maintaining parent-child attachment and in enabling mothers and fathers to maintain their parental roles and carry out their parental responsibilities and commitments.

The impact of communication between imprisoned parents and their children on parent-child attachment or family reunification after imprisonment has seldom been studied. Koban's (1983) comparative study of the effects of incarceration on men and women housed in Kentucky prisons is the only identified study comparing parent-child visiting during imprisonment and reunification. Koban asked subjects whether or not they planned to reunite with their children. She reports that frequency of visits was one of the most relevant factors in predicting whether a resident planned to reunite with his or her children. She failed, however, to provide the supporting data.

Koban's findings are supported by studies of visitation between separated parents and their children in cases of foster care

and divorce. After an extensive review of research on parental visiting of children in foster care, Hess (1987) wrote, "A statistically significant association has consistently been found between the frequency of parental visiting and the children's eventual discharge from care." One might reasonably assume that visiting is no less important for parents and children separated because of incarceration.

Most imprisoned mothers want to see their children and plan to regain custody upon release from prison. Baunach (1985) reports that 88% of her sample, 34% of the inmate mothers studied by Zalba (1964), two-thirds of those studied by Bonfanti (1974), and 78% of those studied by McGowan and Blumenthal (1978), planned to reunite with their children upon release.

Mothers find, however, that arranging visits for their children is problematic and depends on factors beyond their control. Fewer than one-half of Baunach's sample saw their children at least once a month. Most cited distance of the prison from the child's hometown as a major factor inhibiting visits. A third of Koban's (1983) mothers never saw their children. Distance from the prison and the prisoner's relationship with the child's caretaker was most often cited as the reasons for infrequent or no visits.

Studies by Lanier (1987) and Hairston (1987) indicate that fathers desire to maintain parent-child bonds but, like mothers, experience difficulty in seeing their children on a regular basis. Hairston (1987) studied 115 men incarcerated in a southeastern maximum security prison. Although most were serving long sentences of ten years or more, they expressed interest in family affairs and in improving their parenting knowledge and skills. Of the men who had children under the age of 18, only 38% saw their children regularly. Visitation was dependent on the prisoner's legal status with the child's mother. Sixty-two percent of the married fathers saw their children regularly as compared with 42% of the divorced or separated fathers and 20% of the single fathers.

Lanier (1987) interviewed 184 men incarcerated in a Northeastern maximum security prison. He reported that large numbers of the fathers were unable to maintain contact with their

children either through nonproximal or proximal means of communication. Reasons for noncontact included lack of transportation, distance of child's home from the prison, no telephone, or insufficient funds for visiting. However, interferences from the children's mothers was most often reported as a major factor in that 35% of the fathers said that the mother would not allow the children to see them under any conditions. Fifty percent said the mother would not allow the children to write to them.

Koban (1983) found that 54% of the fathers she surveyed never saw their children. Unlike the mothers in her study who attributed this to the caretakers, and unlike Lanier's sample, the majority (87%) of these fathers indicated that it was their choice that the child not visit.

Given the problems with visitation, the potential that plans for reunification will materialize does not appear to be nearly as positive as parents' plans. Twenty-one states consider failure to visit or communicate with children in foster care a basis for termination of parental rights (Smith, 1985). Parental rights may also be terminated solely on the basis of incarceration or because the nature of a crime is judged to prove a mother or father unfit to be a parent. Depending on state laws, child welfare agency practices (which promote or encourage visitation between the children in their care and imprisoned parents), and the actions of children's caretakers, incarceration may lead to permanent separation of parent and child. The numbers of incarcerated parents who lose permanent custody of their children is not known, though attorneys representing parents in prison report that such cases are common (Barry and Lennon, 1977). What is known is that there is a legal basis for the permanent severance of families and households and that a parent's maintenance of contact with children during imprisonment is critically important.

### Individual Well-being

The well-being of individual family members including the prisoner and his/her children, as well, is cited as a primary purpose for maintaining family ties during imprisonment. Several studies suggest the prisoner's mental health is dependent



on his contact with the outside world. Richards (1978) reports that as early as 1940 Donald Clemmer reasoned that the degree of prisonization the prisoner experienced depended on external ties. While one might reason that the concern with external ties decreases with the amount of time spent in prison, recent research shows this not to be the case. Based on a study of long-term prisoners' own experience of psychological stresses, Richards (1978) concludes that the preservation and development of communications with the outside is a central element in the management of the mental health of long-term prisoners. The problems of one group of men with life sentences who had served fewer than 18 months and another who had served at least eight years were quite similar. Both groups rated, as most severe, problems related to the deprivation of relationships with the outside. "Missing somebody" ranked as the most severe problem of both groups.

Flanagan's (1981) interviews with 59 long-term male inmates also identified the maintenance of family and other extraprison relationships as a principal deprivation. Inmates expressed fear that their family and friends would not "wait" for them and could not be expected to keep coming to see them forever. This did not make the loss any easier to sustain, particularly for prisoners with young children. There was great concern over the fact that these relationships with children would be irrevocably lost. The concern over maintaining contact with children was also noted by Harrison (1987) in her study of family relationships of fathers serving long prison sentences.

Stress related to external relationships are experienced by women as well as men. Fox (1982) identified separation from and concerns about their children as a common stress producing experience and circumstance among the imprisoned women he interviewed. He observed that such separation involved many painful feelings. Mothers described their inability to visit with their children as one of the most difficult and demoralizing experiences of confinement and viewed the loss of legal custody of one's children as a cause of depression, not only for the particular mother, but for other mothers imprisoned at the facility. Both McGowan and Blumenthal (1978), based on a national mail survey of women confined in 74 facilities, and Koban (1983),

based on interviews with women confined in a Kentucky facility, concluded that being stripped of the mother role was one of the most traumatic factors in women's adjustment to institutionalization.

The impact of the incarceration of a parent on his or her children has not been examined extensively. The studies which have been done, however, have concluded that children are deeply affected by the imprisonment of a parent. Among the problems found among children of imprisoned parents are poor school performance (Friedman and Esseltyn, 1965; Lowenstein, 1986; Stanton, 1980), aggressiveness and "acting-out" behavior (Lowenstein, 1986; Sacks, Seidler and Thomas, 1976), and emotional and interactional problems such as excessive crying and withdrawal (Koban, 1983; Lowenstein, 1986; Swan, 1980). Consistent with the shortcomings of studies of children of divorce, these studies focus on the parent's absence per se and fail, by and large, to look at parent-child relationships either before or during the parent's imprisonment.

When Swan (1981) examined parent-child relationships, he found a significant correlation between the amount of time the incarcerated father spent with the child prior to incarceration and the effect of incarceration on the child as judged by the mother. Those children who had spent the most time with their fathers prior to imprisonment were the ones most negatively impacted by the father's incarceration. Sack's (1977) research also indicates the importance of the parent-child relationship and the ability of the child to maintain that relationship as an important variable. He reports that the behavior of the children he was seeing in therapy improved considerably after they visited their father in prison. Sack's finding is consistent with studies of visiting in foster care and divorce which also show a relationship between a child's visiting with the noncustodial parent and the child's well-being (Hess, 1987).

The research on children and incarcerated parents indicates that children want and need to see their parents. Fifty-six of the 93 wives in Schneller's (1976) study indicated that their children were lonely as a result of their father's incarceration. Swan (1981) reports that the children he studied longed to see their father. Based on a review of studies conducted by former

students, Walker (1983) concluded likewise and Baunach (1985) also reached this conclusion following interviews with inmate mothers, prison officials, and foster parents.

Sacks (1977) and Stanton (1981) report that the children they studied worried about their parents and how they were being treated. Sacks notes that children feel rejected when they are unable to see the imprisoned parent and the parent makes no effort to communicate with them. He reasoned that seeing the parent assures them that the parent is okay and that he/she still loves the child irrespective of the criminal act that was committed.

This view that children want to see their imprisoned parents is supported by children of men with life sentences who were allowed to speak freely about their relationships with their parents and by the observations of volunteers working with prisoners' children. Jamie's (ten year old son of a prison inmate) comments are revealing.

When I day dream, I think how it could be with my father home. We need him around the house...If I had a chance to really talk to my father I would say how bad and terrible it is what I'm going through...I never have a chance to really talk to him (Children's Express, 1986).

There are, at the same time, reported negative findings with regard to children visiting their parents in prison. Baunach (1985) reports that several foster parents caring for imprisoned mothers' children indicated that the visits were disruptive and that the children misbehaved, were unruly, and hostile following a prison visit. The comments made by one child of a prison inmate also indicates some troubling aspects of the visit. The child stated, "After the visit is over, on the way home we feel sad because we are leaving our father at the prison" (Children's Express, 1986).

The well-being of family members other than children has also been found to be associated with communication with an imprisoned relative. Inability to communicate creates great worry and stress among family members (Hedin, 1986; Koenig, 1986; Schneller, 1976). They do not know and understand the criminal justice process, are concerned about the prisoner's

treatment, and find it difficult to obtain information about what is going on. Ferraro, Johnson, Gorgensen and Bolton (1983) report that 66% of parents and 80% of spouses listed inability to obtain information from the corrections department as one of the major problems experienced as a result of incarceration of a family member. Eighty-three percent of the wives and 74% of the parents also reported concern and uncertainty about the inmate's treatment as a moderate to severe problem. Women who saw their imprisoned spouses at least twice a week, however, did not experience this same level of anxiety and stress. Koenig (1985) also reported extreme worry among spouses about how their imprisoned relatives are faring and major problems in obtaining information from prison officials.

No doubt, some family members could not care less that a relative is in prison and others experience relief that they have little or no contact with the inmate. In some cases, there are probably social costs in maintaining ties that exceed social benefits and the family's stress level is heightened rather than lessened by prison visits and letters. Wives who had poor relationships with husbands prior to confinement sometimes state these feelings (Bakker, Morris and Janus, 1978). For individuals who do care about their imprisoned relatives, however, restricted communication produces fear and anxiety and generates a great sense of stress.

### Post-Release Success

The development of family-centered programs in corrections is advocated on the basis of the family's positive role in preventing recidivism (Bloom, 1987; FCN, 1986; Fishman and Cosseh, 1987; Homer, 1979; Mustin, 1984). Holt and Miller's (1972) research is used most often as the empirical basis for the family ties-recidivism argument. These researchers conducted a post-release follow-up study of 412 men who had been paroled from the California Southern Conservation Center for at least 12 months. Parole outcomes were compared with the number of different visitors the offender had had during the last year of imprisonment. Two percent of the men who had three or more different visitors during the year prior to parole were returned to prison within one year of their parole. This number

contrasts with 12 percent of those who had no contact with family or friends and the difference was statistically significant. When measures of post-release success other than recidivism were used, the influences of social ties on post-release success were more pronounced. Fifty percent of those who had no contacts with family or friends had no difficulties on parole as compared with 70% of those with three or more visitors.

Studies by Ohlin as cited in Glaser (1969), and Adams and Fischer (1976) also provide evidence of a positive relationship between the maintenance of family ties during imprisonment and post-release success. Each of these studies shows a correlation between frequency of visits or number of visitors during imprisonment and post-release arrests or reimprisonment. The higher the number of visits/visitors, the lower the number of arrests or reimprisonments.

Studies of family oriented programs also report a positive impact of family ties on recidivism. Howser and MacDonald (1982) and Leclair (1978) found a lower rate of recidivism among those who participated in family programs such as overnight family visits and temporary release when compared with releasees who did not participate in such programs. Burstein (1977) found no difference in the reimprisonment rate of overnight family visit participants and regular visit participants, but a noticeable difference in the general success rates of the two groups. Twenty-one percent of his sample who had participated in overnight family visits had parole problems (arrest and/or reimprisonment) as compared with 36% of the comparison groups.

Although the strength of the reported associations has been weak to modest, the family ties - lower recidivism relationship has been consistent across study populations, different periods of time, and different methodological procedures. In addition, results have held without regard to the perceived desirability of the visitors and without any attempts to alter negative family functioning through counseling, therapy, or education. More importantly, no study showing a negative influence of family ties on post-release behavior is reported in the scholarly literature. This is not to imply that some families do not have

a negative influence on their members but rather that, on the whole, prison inmates with family ties during imprisonment do better on release than those without them.

The family status and post-prison family environment has seldom been the focus of recidivism studies. This situation is somewhat surprising given the emphasis that criminal justice scholars (Fox, 1981) state is placed on the family environment in parole decisions. Limited research which has been done indicates that family variables influence post-release behavior and success. Married men do better than single men (Clarke and Crum, 1985; Glaser, 1969; Holt, 1986; NIJ, 1987). Men who live with their wives and children do better than those who live with their parents or alone (Curtis and Schulman, 1984). Those who experience marital harmony in the post-prison environmental do better than those experiencing serious marital discord (Burstein, 1977; Fishman, 1986) and those who have warm, supportive wives do better than those who do not have such wives (Fishman, 1986).

It is reasoned that family ties during imprisonment influence the nature of family ties and support available to the inmate upon release and this, in turn, impacts recidivism. There has not been, however, a direct investigation of this causal link. Burstein (1977) observed that overnight family visiting participants had less serious marital difficulties in the post-release period than regular visiting participants and that they also had fewer difficulties on parole. He failed, however, to take his analysis a step further and examine the causal relationship between family ties during imprisonment, marital conflict after imprisonment and recidivism.

### A Future Research Agenda

There is, as has been demonstrated here, a developing body of knowledge on prison-family relationships. There are, however, many gaps in knowledge and a need for increased understanding of several key issues. These key areas for future research are discussed here.

First of all, basic research on the nature, structure, and functions of prisoners' family ties and social networks outside the prison is needed. This literature review demonstrates that there

is little understanding of prisoners' family characteristics or relationships. Even basic statistical information such as marital status is not routinely collected and reported. Questions abound. What are the characteristics of prisoners' support systems and do they vary according to key variables such as race, age, sex and nature of the crime committed? What are prisoners' roles in these networks? How do prisoners' personal and family relationships develop and operate over the period of incarceration and post incarceration? The answers to these very basic questions are central to the development of a knowledge base that can inform the development of family-centered correctional policies.

Second, investigations should focus on the perceived and actual positive and negative effects of family contact during and after imprisonment on the prisoner and other family members. The areas addressed here have been the focus of only limited research and, consequently, much more understanding of the social functions of family ties is needed. In addition, answers to the basic question of the social, emotional, and material costs associated with maintaining family ties would provide a foundation for understanding deteriorating family relationships despite desires to maintain them. Given the controversial issues surrounding parent-child communication, the recent efforts to expand programs in this area specifically (Boudouris, 1985), this topic should be given priority. It is paramount to know under what conditions it is advisable or ill advised for children of incarcerated parents to maintain contact with their parents. It is equally important to determine the short and long-term effects of visiting or not visiting an incarcerated parent on children's development and well-being and on family reunification following imprisonment.

Third, studies should examine policies and programs designed to strengthen family ties and should assess organizational barriers to the maintenance of family bonds. There is a critical need for sound assessments of different prison visiting policies and practices, and scientific evaluations of current and new family-oriented programs such as in-prison family counseling services and parenting education activities. Studies should build on program assessments already conducted and should

be expanded to identify program elements and organizational factors that promote or inhibit the maintenance of family ties and functioning of family units and the subsequent impact on recidivism. Detailed documentation of program and policy implementation is necessary to enhance understanding of relevant variables and to guide future program intervention.

Fourth, research which employs the basic Holt and Miller (1970) approach of comparing communication patterns during imprisonment with recidivism should be carried out in several settings. The data should be comprehensive to allow comparisons among racial groups, age groups, institutional security levels, nature of the crime committed and length of sentence. Studies which build on this design should also be undertaken. These studies would assess the quality and meaning of family relationships as well as the quantity of family contacts. Additionally, they would explore the relationship between preprison, in-prison, and postprison family environment and relationships and the causal link with recidivism. Central to this area of research would be theoretical model which are either tested through empirical study or generated on the basis of the findings of empirical data. An understanding of why strong family ties during imprisonment is related to lower recidivism may identify areas for prevention as well as control of crime.

In summary, the maintenance of family relationships during imprisonment is important to family units, to individual family members, including the inmate and children, and to the general public. Family ties are instrumental in reducing the stress felt by individuals separated from their loved ones, in assuring families that their imprisoned relative is all right, in promoting the prisoner's mental health, in maintaining family bonds, in decreasing recidivism and increasing public safety. How and why family relationships are instrumental in these ways is not fully understood. How families can be used as an effective correctional resource is also not well defined. What is obvious, however, is that imprisonment affects more than the prisoner and includes his or her family as well. What is also understood is that family relationships cannot be overlooked either in the treatment of the individual or in a more fundamental look at the role and function of corrections. Concern about prisoner-family



relationships is gaining momentum and may become, if not a major correctional treatment strategy, one of the most pressing problems ever encountered in corrections.

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