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Chapter 42

The Impact of Mass Incarceration and Social Issues of Institutionalization on School Violence in Youths

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors examine the impact that mass incarceration has had upon children in the United States over the last several decades. Inherent in this examination is to discuss the impact of institutionalization on the propensity of committing violent acts by children. The authors also discuss the impact of these American phenomena on many aspects of juvenile delinquency and violence.

INTRODUCTION

While seemingly unrealized by most of the American public, 95% of all currently incarcerated individuals (Glaze and Kaeble, 2014) will eventually be released from their incarcerative sentences and one day return to their prior homes, jobs, and neighborhoods. With more than 2.2 million people incarcerated in the United States, the number of individuals returning daily to free society inherently will create a potentially heavy saturation of people (adults) bringing the behaviors that they learned and lived in prison back into their former lives (family and friends). Unfortunately, highlighted by intimidation and violence, the behaviors, habits, traits and activities learned by these individuals during incarceration are, in almost all cases, negative and unacceptable in any society. In regards to school violence and juvenile delinquency, these are often parents and guardians who may unintentionally create and/or increase violent and anti-social tendencies in the children of which they have intimate relationships. Moreover, given the

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natural inclination of children to emulate the actions of those they love and admire, the impact (positive or negative) that these former convicts and inmates have cannot be overstated.

This chapter attempts to examine the following:

First, the connection between increase in mass incarceration rates in America and the increase in the amount of school violence and disturbance. Second, the possible negative effects of incarceration on an individual who serves time and their eventual impact upon those closest to them.

Third, the impact of the conduct, behaviors, life, and traits learned in prisons that are infused into society upon release of inmates (specifically those having served sentences of length and in maximum/high-security prisons). Fourth, the impact that all of this has on the children/youth who take these into their personality development. More so, child development being subjected to these lesser standards on larger and larger levels of saturation in the community is creating a society of intimidation and violence.

THE NUMBERS

Studies at year end 2013 (Glaze and Kaeble, 2014) found that an estimated 6,899,000 people were under the supervision of adult correctional systems in the United States. Of that, 2.2 million were incarcerated. Essentially this means that 910 in every 100,000 U.S. adults or 1 in every 110 Americans was incarcerated at that time, these numbers are unprecedented throughout American history. While the greater number of incarcerated (an estimated 2/3 of the U.S. prison population) are categorized/classified as “non-violent,” they are routinely housed in medium/maximum-security prisons with violent offenders. This mix of non-violent with violent offenders is one of the main reasons there is so much violence in American prisons.

While many professionals and scholars blame the war-on-drugs for the high volume of incarcerated in the United States, it is not the cause of conviction and incarceration but the social changes and behavioral modifications during said sentence which will be relevant. With the violent traits being transferred to non-violent offenders and then, again, into the youth of society via release, the saturation of moral and ethical standards decline and the use of violence as a means to an end increases.

95% of all incarcerated felons are eventually released. In 2001, alone, more than 570,000 men and women were released from prison. 15 years ago, a half million people were released into society after serving incarcerative sentences, and the number has not decreased. As prison populations have increased in almost every year since, it is difficult to say which is worse – the fact that roughly 600,000 people per year continue to enter the prison population or that more than 500,000 are coming out. Either way, the two figures factor into an ugly equation that starts with record numbers of prisoners in the United States and ends with record numbers of ex-prisoners returning to communities and neighborhoods across the country.

THE “BUSTIN-A-SAG” EXAMPLE

Before entering the discussion of prison life, there is an example of how prison can bleed its way into society.

Many can easily remember the start of the ongoing popular fashion trait of “bustin-a-sag” in which an astounding number of youth (and a frightening number of adults) would pull their pants down on

their rear-ends/buttocks. This fad drove many parents absolutely crazy as they screamed at their children to “pull your pants up.” Of course, this would only be resolved long enough for the children to get to an out-of-sight distance and, then, the pants would come down again.

What too few people knew is that this fashion statement actually began in American prison systems. Its origin was to let other inmates know that the wearer was an “available” homosexual willing to consider suitors. Two (2) points to be made in this: (1) it is easy to remember how incredibly wide-spread this fad became across the United States; and (2) to mimic an action or statement, the young do not necessarily know or understand the origin or meaning of something. In many cases, people will simply do something because they see it in someone else that they want to be. That is especially with children who want to emulate adults.

Currently, 2.7 million under the age of 18 have a parent in prison or jail (Owens, 2013). That number, 2.7 million, are the children of the incarcerated. That number, however, instantly increases when considering the released felons also have nephews, nieces, sons and daughters of best friends and neighbors, step-children, and all other sorts of relatives and community-based youth. Millions upon millions of children are, in some way, connected to released felons. Thus, directly or indirectly being influenced by the American correctional system.

WHAT HAPPENS IN PRISON *DOES NOT* STAY IN PRISON

There are countless movies, books, television shows, magazines and other forms of media that attempt to show and/or explain life in an American prison. The very simple truth is that if one has not experienced prison then there is essentially nothing else that can truly help one to have a full appreciation for its impact upon a human’s life.

The common opinion of most is that prison is not meant to be comfortable and that people should remember that “If you can’t do the time, don’t do the crime”. Thus, “prison is not supposed to be a party.” The list of opinions that come from people in regards to what prison should and should not be can be endless. And, essentially, they are correct in their views that crime should never go unpunished. However, it must be remembered that very often a criminal conviction and service of a correctional sentence may create an individual that is more likely to reoffend upon their release.

Research consistently (Haney, 2001) demonstrates that a large number of those who leave prison are exponentially more violent than when he/she entered. Many have become programmed to act against the rules, laws, and policies and procedures of “normal” society. These individuals are much more likely to continue to engage and pass along to others violent and anti-social traits and behaviors they have learned on to others. Again, many of these individuals are parents and guardians of K-12 age children.

In order to provide a brief overview of some of the negative/anti-social traits mentioned in this chapter, the following is offered. While incarcerated, many live under what has become to be known as the “convict code” (Clear, Cole, and Resig, 2006). Most clubs, groups, organizations, and professions live by some kind of “code”. These codes can become the very backbone of who and what one is in their lives (whether temporarily or lifelong). For those in prison, most have the choice to either live or die by the code.

The following is a brief overview of some of the main characteristics of the “inmate code”. The reader is encouraged to consider how these “traits”, if practiced, would help or hinder an individual in

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contemporary American society. How would these traits affect a child if they practice them in the average K-12 school environment?

There are many behaviors which are expected and encouraged for one to survive in any American prison:

- **Mind your own business:** This is the main rule that any inmate must live by. In prison, the ONLY business that matters is one's own.
- **Be careful of what you say:** This is two-fold. Concerning other convicts, you need to not ask questions. Again, one must mind their own business. One must never discuss what the next man did, does, is doing, or might do. If another convict is getting ready to stab someone, it is no one's business but their own. If one knows who stole this, that, or the other, it is not their business. Where correctional officers (C.O.'s) are concerned, one does not share anything with them at all.
- **Be loyal to the population:** The code is simple. There are convicts and there are correctional officers. As a convict, there are no two sides. One does not get to leave at the end of the day. One does not get to kiss their wife, children, girlfriend, or family. One is in prison. If one is not loyal to the population, the population will not be loyal to them.
- **Be honorable:** One must never lie to the population. On the street, a liar gets called "a liar" and people may no longer trust them. In prison, a lie will get one stabbed, beaten, and/or killed. If one will lie about this, then one will lie about that. When the population cannot trust a member, they do not want anything further to do with that individual. Inherent in this is that one must not cheat, steal, or even attempt to con other convicts. Obviously, what one wishes to do to a correctional officer or staff member is another story. The code applies to other convicts, not to anyone else.
- **Be your own convict:** This covers a great deal, including how one must live throughout their sentence. Prison is, at its very core, survival of the fittest. The code says "Do not steal," but it does not say that one cannot "Beat a weak man and take his canteen" (*i.e.*, items bought from the institutional store) or other possessions. The fact is that there are a very large number of men in prison who get absolutely no support of any kind. These men never accept their circumstances. Life in prison is meant to be miserable, that is what society wants, but society needs to realize that a miserable convict is not going to accept that lot and will act out accordingly. Obviously prisons are largely self-contained cities. They are filled with violence and built on hierarchies of strength and fear. Gangs control the social climate and create the inner policies of each unit. If not gangs, than cliques of convicts control things by using the threat of collective violence upon anyone that fails to meet their wishes.
- **Stand strong:** Nobody likes a crybaby. Nobody wants to deal with a complainer, especially not the prison staff. Once one learns the rules and understand the pros and cons of prison life, one simply lives the way that they can survive best. The best way to avoid problems is to keep to oneself or stick to a small group of friends. If one chooses to join the fray by gambling, playing sports, gathering in heavy populated areas, they soon realize that they have chosen an extremely dangerous path.

There are also many things that one does not do in prison:

- **Snitch on another convict:** No matter what one sees or knows about any other inmate, one must never tell anyone. This is one of the important rules that may save one's life in prison but is con-

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sidered to be completely unacceptable in society. To an inmate, there is no acceptable reasoning for snitching. If one sees/knows another inmate steals, does drugs, stabs, rapes or even kills someone in prison, the best thing to understand is that they see/know nothing. Stealing occurs every single day in prison. Drugs are always in prison. People get beaten, stabbed and raped constantly in prison. Murders also occur more often than one would think. The “code” that inmates “learn” is to say nothing, and that is what they do.

- **Lose control:** No matter what is going on, no matter who is involved, an inmate must never lose control. When one is unlucky enough to be in an area where one of those negative things is occurring (beating, stabbing, drugs, rape, murder, etc.), one must maintain their composure and leave the area. Again, in society, this would be an instance in which calling attention to oneself or others is considered the good or “right” thing to do. In prison, it will get one killed.
- **Break your word:** In prison, one must never break their word to another convict. One does what they say they are going to do. There is a common saying in prison, “Your word is all you have.” Even the gangs know that their control is allowed by security to a certain extent. Shakedowns can take possessions of any kind. Any freedoms can be lost with the lock of a cell door. The only thing inmates control is their word.

As can be seen by a simple review of the very “code” that convicts live by, the learned and accepted behaviors are almost entirely anti-social and completely unacceptable by societal standards. Essentially, the rules to live by, or die by, which incarcerated individuals absorb and adopt are contradictory to established decency. It is extremely important to understand that if one breaks one of these rules, the result is violence dealt upon them by the entire population. People do not just get upset or remind another or tell them what you did “wrong”. To break these rules, depending on which one and to what extent, will get one beaten, stabbed or even killed. When the behavior is that important, it is no longer just something one does in order to get by and gain friends and support. It is something that keeps one alive. No matter how much one may disagree, no matter how repulsive the thought may be, one follows the code.

The use of violence is at the heart of the code and is paramount. On any given day, every man and woman in prison is constantly aware of the presence and possibility of being beaten, stabbed, raped and/or killed. This is a 24 hour a day, 7 day a week, and 365 days a year awareness. It might be that they are just in the line when one guy decides to go after another and they end up, innocently, in the middle of the fight or at the end of a blade. One may drop their attention and not make 100% sure their cell door closes before the unit “pervert” strikes them from behind and incapacitates them to sexually assault them. Sadly, this is not an understatement, nor an exaggeration; this is life in prison.

On average (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014), most correctional institutions house 1500+ men/women, 85% of whom are violent offenders. These individuals are sentenced to incarceration and housed 2-3 each in 7x11’ cells. These men and women must live each and every day letting every other inmate and correctional officer know exactly where they stand and, most importantly, exactly what they are made of as a human being. This is done through demonstrations of strength, intimidation, violence, cunning, and for lack of a better term – evil.

There are some instances of decency, kindness and good behavior, but these are the rarity and not the norm. Positives and kindness stand out because they are so few in number. In fact, it is not the violence or the intimidation that ends up affecting a person. These things become second nature to most. Although, this is where this phenomenon becomes so frightening. Newly incarcerated individuals may walk into prisons as offenders but not necessarily having ever committed any form of violence. Living in such a

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world as has been described, it makes that individual realize that to live, violence 24/7/365 may be the life they have to accept and allow to become first-hand nature to them.

In prison survival is the goal, and nothing else matters. Morals, ethics, decency, and kindness, none of that is at risk anymore to the individual. It is violence that will come, and it is violence that will keep one alive. Nothing will help one learn and nothing will help one live a certain way better than when violence and the actual possibility of death is the motivator.

In free society, someone bumping into another usually is followed by the verbal statement, “excuse me.” In prison, if someone bumps into another, the response generally must be, “What the f---, watch where you are going you [blank-blank-blank].” The reason for this is that inmates soon realize that the minute they let one person invade their space, everyone will. That is how life is in prison and it becomes a trait, belief, and behavior they bring back into their lives once released from prison. It would seem obvious that these traits and behaviors will be shared, even if unconsciously, with others in that person’s life. Many in these person’s lives are school age children.

The use of violence as an initial response to any situation is the lesson taught. It is a rule in prison that is even expected and understood by officers and staff. Convicts use violence, threat, intimidation and strength as the number one means to signify and solidify their place in the population. Otherwise, they will be immediately labeled, whether spoken or not, as a “bitch...wimp...punk...etc...” If another inmate knows they can cut in front of another, take what they have, make them do what they want, or even violate them; they are going to do it when it is either convenient or necessary. Living this way creates conditioned responses in which the inmates become so used to their responses to people and events that they become automatic; the reaction becomes directly connected to the event itself.

Likewise, inmates that spend so much time together actually begin to form familial bonds. They learn to react in certain ways to numbers of the group (family) and even staff. Eventually, these reactions begin to shape a role that they adopt as their own personality. This is especially true under the constantly high-stress situations of everyday prison life.

THE LUCIFER EFFECT

None of this is new or unheard of in American society. The landmark “Stanford Prison Experiment,” created by Philip Zimbardo and chronicled in his book “The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil” (2008), provided unbelievable evidence of the aggressive, violent and “evil” behavior that can be developed by the power of social events and situations rather than the mere “disposition” of people. By taking 24 middle-class American college students and making 12 guards and 12 prisoners and placing them in a basement-turned-cell-block at Stanford University (CA), the experiment lasted only 6 days of a scheduled greater length of days when guards abused their powers to aggressive and abusive levels and prisoners rebelled.

In the book, Zimbardo noted that (2008):

Any deed that any human being has ever done, however horrible, is possible for any of us to do – under the right or wrong situational pressures. (p. 45)

He further stated (p. 58):

Motives and needs that ordinarily serve us well can lead us astray when they are aroused, amplified, or manipulated by situational forces that we fail to recognize as potent. This is why evil is so pervasive. Its temptation is just a small turn away, a slight detour on the path of life, a blur in our side view mirror, leading to disaster. (p.96)

And, so, over 2 million people are in prisons in the United States living these violent existences every single day. They enter prison, some violent bust most non-violent, but they live a never ending existence of violence while incarcerated. To live in prison for a period of three (3) years or more can create behavioral and/or character changes that all lead toward violence.

FROM PRISON TO HOME TO CHILDREN TO SCHOOLS

As discussed earlier, with over a half of a million people leaving the confines of American correctional institutions and entering back into society, all of the negative behaviors and traits they have gained will come back with them. There is no switch that an inmate can turn on or off while crossing the final line from inmate to member of society. Years of serving a sentence and living the life of intimidation and violence cannot be erased with a return to freedom. These offenders, as stated previously, often return to the same homes, neighborhoods, communities, and families. Sadly, many of America's communities do not see prison sentences and incarceration with the same distaste and disgust they once did. Many now see prison as a rite of passage or something that "odds-are" will probably happen to them or someone in their lives at least once. Returning offenders are often either seen as beloved members of their family already by children or they become idolized and/or sensationalized as "tough men" that survived prison. This is where the issue begins.

What comes next is what is of most importance.

As these adults reintegrate into society, they use the intimidation and violence from prison, often unknowingly, to assert their presence, dominance, position and hierarchy in the familial and community groups. Children are always watching and learning from the interactions of adults, and as they see (and learn) that these otherwise unacceptable actions tend to bring wanted results, the choice is more often to mimic and emulate these conducts.

Albert Bandura (1976) studied how childhood aggression can be developed as a learned behavior. He hypothesized that children can learn violence and aggression by observing and imitating the violent acts of the adults around them, particularly family members.

In Bandura's "bobo doll" experiment (1976), 36 boys and 36 girls were selected from a local nursery school. They were then divided into three (3) groups of 24, each group with 12 boys and 12 girls. Each group had an inflatable blow-up doll in their room, one which would return to a stand up position when punched or kicked.

The first group, which did not have any adult role model, was the control group. The second group was then placed in a situation in which they observed an adult using aggressive and violent behaviors toward the bobo doll. The third group was exposed to an adult that showed no forms of aggression but, instead, maintained a passive approach to the situation.

The adult in the second group showed physical and verbal aggression in front of each child by pummeling the large inflatable toy with a mallet, flinging it in the air, beating it, and throwing it down on the floor. When the children were later left alone in the room with the bobo doll and other toys, each

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went on to imitate many of the same aggressive acts performed by the adult and also created their own acts of violence upon the bobo doll.

According to the reports and conclusions (1976), the children in this group were also found to be less inhibited than the children in either of the other groups, and they showed an increase attraction to guns even though the adult had showed no activity toward playing with the guns. It was Bandura's belief (1976) that people learned not through reinforcement (rewards and punishments), but observing others, that this at the heart of social learning theory.

Inmates fall into a situation in which both of these are a factor. In prison, the use of intimidation and violence are almost always reward-based. There is not a great deal of violence just for the sake of violence. It is done to achieve something, whether that be possessions, drugs or money, hierarchy positioning, or something else. Therefore, when children are watching these released felons, their parents, guardians, or family members, in their acts of intimidation, violence or institutionalization, the acts result in some form of accomplishment or reward. This makes the learning process two-fold in its processes of value and reward. Bandura's theory suggests that children learn by observing adult behaviors, mentally rehearsing them, and then imitating those actions.

If the aforementioned is true, the children and neighborhood youth of some 600,000 released felons are learning the behaviors, characteristics, and traits of institutionalized men and women across the United States. Couple this with the reward and/or dominance (alpha) factor that comes into the equation, and children beginning their lives are, in fact, beginning with the highly-contradictory and unacceptable ideals of prison life.

While behaviorism states that it is environmental circumstances entirely determine behavior, Bandura went on to theorize in something called "Reciprocal Determinism." This is the idea that a person influences the environment just as the environment influences the person.

The question becomes, what happens when their children bring what they have learned in to the K-12 American school system?

CONCLUSION

People become who they are through their interaction and involvement with others. As children, people learn through others what is "right" and "wrong", what is morally good and bad, and/or ethically appropriate or inappropriate. These "others" are their parents, family members, peers, and guardians.

More than a half of a million men and women are now leaving prison every year and bringing that life into American society. As has been said, "You've got more people doing time, they're doing worse time, and there is less rehabilitation" (Clear, 1994).

If these numbers continue, with no changes to the American correctional system, the concentration of these behaviors, characteristics and traits will only increase to a point that the values, morals, ethics and activities of prison society may become the values, morals, ethics and activities of free society. It is beginning already in the youth who are learning from parents, family, friends and neighbors released from prison every year.

There are and always have been answers to this epidemic (Crews, Montgomery, and Garris, 1996). Review of the United States' drug laws that currently place so many non-violent drug offenders in prison and create mass incarceration levels. This combined with the review of classification/custody policies in the correction's departments across the United States, both state and federal. More importantly,

implementing those policies that are already in place and operate on step-down philosophies so that the reward system can show offenders a means of working away from institutionalization and violence and into respectable society.

Finally, the issue of reintegration of ex-offenders back into American society can never be discussed enough. There is an enormous need for structured counseling in prison for inmates and upon release for inmates and their families.

Stopping the violence and making sure children know it is unacceptable is the key. Otherwise, 2.4 million incarcerated will continue to teach 2.7 million children a world of violence and intimidation.

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