TOC

Electronic Journal: To print this article select pages 46-49.

# Losing a Loved One to Incarceration: The Effect of Imprisonment on Family Members

SUSAN HOFFMAN FISHMAN

Thousands of women experience a critical loss each year as a result of the incarceration of a husband, boyfriend or son.[1] In 1978 alone, there were 294,648 men in federal or state institutions as well as 158,000 male inmates in county jails or workhouses (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1979). In most instances, when these men were sent away to prison, their loved ones "lost" their means of financial and emotional support, their personal privacy, and their reputations in the community. They were faced with the task of raising children entirely by themselves and coping with unfamiliar and often frightening court and prison systems to maintain contact with the offender.

Despite the prevalence of this pressing problem and the seriousness of its effect on families, it has historically been overlooked by social workers and other social service professionals (Weintraub, 1976). Schwartz and Weintraub (1974) note that even correctional literature, programs, and legislation neglect to give serious attention to the problems of the offender's family.

In 1972, Holt and Miller published the results of a study revealing that inmates who maintain stable family ties while in prison have a better chance of remaining out of prison after their release. It is the implication of this research and subsequent literature (Adams & Fischer, 1976; Cobean & Power, 1978; Homer, 1979) that family members can play a positive and important role in the reintegration of the offender to community life. Because family members themselves experience emotional turmoil and practical difficulties, they are not necessarily able to offer an offender the vital support and security he needs until they receive assistance in dealing with their own valid concerns and fears (Fishman & Alissi, 1979).

This article examines the effect of the loss experienced by family members whose loved ones are incarcerated and describes a successful service model currently in existence that assists families of offenders in Hartford, Connecticut. Such information and practical guidance can have major implications for counselors, social workers, and others in the helping professions who may encounter clients and their children suffering from a critical loss of this nature.

## THE LOSS AND ITS EFFECTS

Four specific points of crisis have been identified as periods of great stress and difficulty for families experiencing a loss as a result of the incarceration of a loved one. These crisis periods correspond to the process the accused and convicted offender encounters as he passes through the criminal justice system: presentencing, sentencing, initial incarceration, and pre/post release (Weintraub, 1976).

### PRESENTENCING

The first period of crisis for families of offenders occurs when the accused loved one is actually arrested and separated from the family for the first time. This period of pretrial or presentencing is often one of confusion, pressure, and emotional stress for the family members involved. They are shocked and often refuse to believe that the husband, son, et cetera, is really guilty and could really be imprisoned for committing the specific crime (Cobean & Power, 1978). Most family members (and accused offenders, for that matter) do not understand the complexity of the court process and find it almost impossible to acquire appropriate answers to the scores of questions they have each day (Schwartz & Weintraub, 1974). They must rely on scanty information gained second hand through the loved one or from a busy defense attorney. If the accused offender remains incarcerated because he does not have the money for bail, the family member is under constant pressure to find the necessary financial resources. Family members who cannot raise the money are burdened with a sense of guilt and frustration.

Because the time between the arrest and the final disposition of a case can be from several months to a year or more, the emotional drain of waiting is a constant source of stress to both the accused and the family. Neither the man nor his loved ones can make any concrete plans for their future, and as a result, live in a state of "limbo" (Schwartz & Weintraub, 1974).

### SENTENCING DAY

Regardless of the severity of the crime for which the man is accused or the likelihood of his eventual imprisonment, most family members are totally unprepared for the sentencing and display symptoms of shock in court when it actually happens (Fishman & Alissi, 1979). I have seen family members so com-

[1]Because only about 4% of incarcerated individuals in prisons or jail are women, this study will concentrate on the family members of male inmates.

*SUSAN HOFFMAN FISHMAN is the executive director of Women in Crisis, Hartford, Connecticut.*

pletely surprised on sentencing day that they have actually had to retrieve car keys from the sentenced person in the courtroom so they could drive themselves home from court. When the reality of what has happened finally descends on a woman in court, she is suddenly aware of all the critical preparations she has neglected to consider. Her unanswered questions can be overwhelming: Where is this institution? What are the visiting hours? How will she get there? Can she write a letter today? Can she bring her children? Will he be okay? Will she be okay? Because the court personnel must proceed with the next case and the attorney is usually unfamiliar with prison procedures, the woman is left to deal with these questions and concerns alone.

### Initial Incarceration

The period after the initial incarceration is laden with problems for the family members at home. Financial loss and its ramifications are among the most practical of considerations the family must face (Bakker, Morris, & Janus, 1978; Schneller, 1975). The emotional trauma experienced by the family during this period has been compared with the problems encountered by families who have felt the pain of losing a loved one to death (Schwartz & Weintraub, 1974). A wife, mother, or other "relative" feels conflicting emotions of anger and love as well as ambivalence and a fierce loyalty to the memory of the "departed." She may also need to assume new roles as a single parent and a single head of the household.

Despite some apparent similarities between these two life situations, striking and important differences exist that set the experiences of an offender's family apart from those of a deceased individual's family. Probably the most obvious difference is that the offender is alive and accessible even though he faces severe restrictions in his involvement with the family. In addition, because the offender has committed an act which is socially unacceptable, his family members are often thought of as criminals, too (Bakker et al., 1978; Schneller, 1975), and as a result, are denied normal social outlets for grieving (Schwartz & Weintraub, 1974). Instead of receiving the kind support of close friends and relatives, families of offenders are often confronted with suggestions from them to "leave the bum" or with implications that it "was all your fault he turned bad anyway" (Schwartz & Weintraub, 1974).

During the initial incarceration period, women must also decide what and how they will tell their children about the man in prison. Many parents choose to avoid the issue by claiming the father is somewhere other than where he actually is ("in the hospital," "in California," "in the army," "at sea," etc.) (Morris, 1967; Wilmer, Marks, & Pogue, 1966). Pauline Morris concluded in her study of 447 families in England that 38% of the mothers she interviewed reported their children knew nothing about their father's whereabouts (Morris, 1965). In a later article she suggests that this deception is designed by parents to maintain a positive image of the father and can be a reaction to the father's fear of being rejected by the child (Morris, 1967). Morris concludes that the loss of a father to incarceration is such a traumatic experience that few children, with or without knowledge of their father's situation, can live through it and avoid serious consequences (Morris, 1967).

Children of inmates suffer from feelings of rejection and guilt (Wilmer et al., 1966), exhibit discipline problems (Sack, 1977), and often fail to maintain previous performance levels in school (Friedman & Esselstyn, 1965). The parents of these children are often so involved with their own emotions and problems that they do not notice or acknowledge the child's distress, even when he or she displays overt symptoms such as eating problems, insomnia, and clinging, (Morris, 1967). Some children of inmates go so far as to involve themselves in delinquent activities to identify with the "lost" father in prison (Sack, 1977).

Maintaining contact with the offender in prison is probably one of the most difficult problems that families of offenders struggle to overcome. The first visit to the institution is particularly important in determining attitudes toward subsequent visits (Fishman & Alissi, 1979). It is during the first visit that the family is confronted with the precise visiting regulations that will govern their relationship and the structured environment in which they will be forced to express personal feelings and concerns (Fishman & Alissi, 1979). The distance and location of the prison from the family's home can be an overwhelming obstacle if the family members do not have access to private transportation. Because inmates are unable to actively assist their families with practical difficulties at home, many women are reluctant to discuss their most pressing concerns with the man (Freedman & Rice, 1977). Fearing they will only add to the frustrations the inmate already encounters in prison, these family members try to "put on a good face" during regular visits. In his study of prison visiting regulations across the country, Schafer, (1978) acknowledged a real need for an increase in visiting hours, length of visits, and frequency of visits so that family members and inmates could relate in a more effective manner.

### Pre-/Post Release

Chaiklin (1972) and others (Cobean & Power, 1978; Fishman & Alissi, 1979; Hobbs & Osman, 1967; Weintraub, 1976) have identified pre/post release as an especially bewildering and traumatic period of time for families of offenders. As the inmate's release date approaches, family members often express feelings of anxiety and fear (Cobean & Power, 1978). Ironically, some of the difficulties they conquered during the initial incarceration now return to plague them in a very different way. Their new found sense of independence gained through the assumption of new responsibilities and new roles can be very threatening to the inmate whose life skills have remained static (Chaiklin, 1972) and who expects to resume the same patterns of existence with his family after his release. The woman, on the other hand, is often pleased with her growth and unwilling to return to former roles (Cobean & Power, 1978). Because the man's release symbolizes his transition to a "brand new life," both the inmate and his family may have expectations about the future that are truly unrealistic.

Given the dramatic effect of incarceration on family members left "outside," it is evident that services provided to them during the four critical stages of pretrial, sentencing, initial incarceration, and prerelease are necessary and important. Because families of offenders are often cynical about traditional social service agencies and counselors (Morris, 1965) as a result of previous negative experiences with them, the manner in which services are offered is also extremely important.

## SERVICE MODEL

Women in Crisis is a private, nonprofit program in Hartford, Connecticut, that has developed an effective service model based on the use of trained women volunteers as primary service providers to clients. Women in Crisis uses volunteers because they project a sense of human concern; they have the time and motivation to act as friends to women who may have lost the support of their own families; their involvement can have a positive impact on the criminal justice system in general; and their participation enables the agency to operate in a cost-effective manner.

In September 1978, a study measuring the impact of the program on all client participants during the first eight months of the agency's existence was completed under the supervision of the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. Twenty-two out of a sample of 40 clients were interviewed by a researcher who had methodically pretested and developed the questionnaires; 16 additional clients could not be reached, and 2 refused to participate. Volunteers who had been matched with responding clients were also interviewed. The study supported the following general conclusions:

*1* Women in Crisis clients react positively to informed volunteers regardless of differences in race or social background.

*2* Although volunteers tend to minimize the support they provide, clients rate the services very highly and indicate that it is extremely helpful to them during initial periods of crisis. (Women in Crisis, 1978).

### Sentencing Day/Court Outreach Project

Originally, when Women in Crisis was established in March 1977, it offered assistance to families of offenders only on sentencing day and during the initial incarceration period of the inmates. Volunteers, under the supervision of a court liaison/staff person, were present in court each sentencing day to provide immediate information and support to families whose loved ones had just been sentenced to prison for the first time. The reaction of clients to this court service has been extremely positive; 89% of clients interviewed as part of the evaluation study thought that it was very important to have had a caring and capable person in court from whom they could gather necessary facts and with whom they could express some of their most pressing concerns (Women in Crisis, 1978).

### Services During Initial Incarceration Period

During the initial incarceration period immediately following sentencing day, clients were matched with their own individual volunteer who was responsible for helping them during a 6- to 8-week adjustment period. As part of her job requirements, a volunteer was expected to accompany the family member on her first visit to the institution so that the woman could experience a relatively smooth introduction to procedures which would become a very important part of her new life. The volunteer did not go into the visiting room, but sat in a waiting area until the visit was over. Of the women responding to the Women in Crisis Evaluation study, 85% admitted that they relied heavily on the presence of their volunteers during and after the trip to the institution.

In addition to the specific assistance provided in court and at the first visit, volunteers were required to maintain regular contact with their clients during the two-month adjustment period. Contact could involve telephone conversations, home visits, or specific activities, depending on the needs of the client herself. Services provided by volunteers have included helping the family relocate to a new apartment, arranging scholarships to vocational training programs, providing guidance on child care techniques, coordinating efforts between the woman and staff members at the correctional institution, and explaining visiting regulations or prison procedures. The response of one client to her volunteer is recorded below. Although it specifically describes an individual woman's experiences and feelings, it is typical, in many ways, of most Women in Crisis clients:

> Being in this position isn't easy, and the chance to realize you are not alone and that others who are not in the same boat do care and want to understand is a big factor in getting through that period of adjustment. . . . My concern and growth in communication is open more than ever now and I'll continue to be in touch with you. Now for the first time in my life, I know I'm a whole person all by myself and not half bad at that.

In the past three years since the establishment of the agency, Women in Crisis has continued its court/sentencing and initial incarceration projects. It has also expanded its services to include program components that assist families of accused offenders who remain incarcerated before sentencing, inmates who are preparing to be released from correctional institutions and their families, and children of incarcerated offenders.

### Pretrial Project

The Women in Crisis pretrial project uses volunteers in much the same way that the court and initial incarceration projects do. Trained volunteers are matched with individual family members in order to support and assist them during this frustrating and confusing period of adjustment. Volunteers have the time and patience to sit with family members and thoroughly explain the complicated court process to them. The volunteers are instructed to avoid expressing personal opinions concerning the guilt or innocence of the accused offender. The role of the volun-

teer in this project, as in all Women in Crisis programs, is to act as an objective, informative, and supportive listener.

### The Return to Community Project

The Women in Crisis return to community project provides formal family counseling to inmates who are preparing to leave local correctional institutions, and their families. Women in Crisis has found that families need professional assistance at this time to reorganize their lives and prepare for the return home of the offender. This preparation may require long conversations and negotiations between the family member and inmate so that realistic and appropriate agreements/arrangements can be made.

Some inmates need to reestablish relationships that have been broken off completely. Others require assistance in relating to children who may have become "strangers" during their absence. The counselor will meet individually with an inmate in the institution approximately six weeks before his release to determine his individual concerns. She then meets individually with the appropriate family member(s) to assess her (their) needs as well. Joint sessions are held from that point on with the counselor acting as a "facilitator" between the inmate and his family. Sessions continue until the family has determined that its goals have been achieved. The following case study describes an example of family counseling intervention offered through the Return to Community Project.

L called into the Women in Crisis office and expressed an interest in receiving some counseling. Her husband had recently returned home after serving time in prison for a sexual offense. Although neither of them had anticipated any problems with their relationship, they were now having difficulties and were fearful that their marriage was no longer working. When the counselor met with the couple, they spoke of their individual feelings during the arrest, court appearance, incarceration, and return home of the offender. As time went on, they were able to identify specific issues that were anxiety provoking for each of them. The counselor was able to help them recognize the man's drinking problem and referred each of them to appropriate support groups. The couple has assessed their individual needs and expectations of one another and, together, they have worked out specific areas of responsibility concerning the children, finances, and so on. Their patterns of communication have taken on a new and healthier direction.

### The Sesame Street Play Group Project for Children of Inmates

The Sesame Street Play Group Project is an educational program for children of inmates whose fathers or other male relatives are incarcerated in the state's maximum security prison. Based on a concept devised by Children's Television Workshop, the originators of the popular Sesame Street television program, the project provides a playroom that is designed to alleviate congestion in the visiting room, give parents the opportunity to communicate without the constant interruptions of young children, provide the children with an accepting environment in which to express their feelings about the prison, and enable a select group of inmates to interact with young children so that they can learn to be more effective parents themselves.

Seven inmates completed an extensive training program and qualified to act as child-care workers under the supervision of an early childhood specialist. Participating children visit with their own relatives until they become restless. They are escorted from the visiting room to the playroom by community volunteers and are greeted by the inmates, who have prepared activities, games, and educational lessons for them. In the six months since the establishment of the project, inmates, children, and institutional staff members have shown remarkable changes in attitudes toward the prison and one another. Parents report that their sons and daughters are now eager to visit; correctional officers are pleased to observe inmates in positive roles vastly different from those they normally associate them with; and the offenders themselves are expressing pride in their accomplishments with the youngsters. One inmate wrote:

> This experience has supplied a tremendous boost in reestablishing my self worth. . . . Working with these children is the ultimate experience. They are so warm and trustworthy. Working with them I am not only making a small contribution to our social structure, but it is also helping myself to become a better person because it is assisting me in developing those parental skills that will make me a good parent and father to my own children.

## CONCLUSION

It is impossible to deny that family members of offenders suffer immensely from the loss of a loved one to incarceration. Although the problems of offenders' families are complicated, appropriate, simple, and cost-effective services can be provided, in large part by volunteers, so that the family can remain independent and avoid permanent injury to family relationships. The skills these individuals learn and the successes they achieve can serve as a source of support to their loved ones in prison as well as a means of survival for themselves.