Chapter 8
The Spiral Effect of Incarceration: Bridging the Gap between Inmates and Families

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ABSTRACT

The discussions surrounding imprisonment in response to crime in society has traditionally been on deterrent. A latent function of incarceration is the impact that a prison sentence has on the family of prisoners. Not much attention has been given to the spiral effect on families during incarceration. For example, in the United States, with increasingly harsh sentences being served in prisons in remote locations, severe hardships fall upon inmates and their families. The present study explores the ways in which Finland has sought to reduce the negative impact of a prison sentence on both inmate and family members. The study is based on one year of participant observation in an “open prison” in Finland, and interviews and observations with inmates and their families (numbers of inmates and families observed). Two questions that guide this research are: 1) What problems arise due to the incarceration of a family member?
INTRODUCTION

For an imprisoned parent, one of the greatest punishments of incarceration is the separation from their children and their spouses. As one father in a Finnish prison put it:

*I can do the time alone, OK. But it’s not knowing what’s happening to my son that hurts most, my mother is on her sick bed, but luckily I was transferred to be close to them.*

As this quote suggests, when parents are incarcerated, “what’s happening” to their children is a great concern. It is also a concern for the Finnish policy makers as well, whose goals constantly revolve around examining the impact of parental incarceration on children’s well-being and development, to determine just what is happening to these children.

Nearly all prison sentences deprive a family of one of its members, and sometimes of its bread winner, thus inflicting undeserved deprivations on spouses and children. The enforced separation is not always a tragedy: a short – or even a long – rest from the offender is sometimes beneficial for the family. Social workers’ efforts to prevent the break-up of families are not always in the interest of the wife and children, but with or without such efforts, it is not surprising that a lot of marriages are destroyed by long prison sentences.

In Finland, a social network called the “Family Work in Finnish Prisons” (FWFP) was created to help tackle some of these problems. The “Family Work” groups that operate in all prisons in Finland has crucially alleviated some of the worries of inmates regarding their family situations and also strives to prevent new crime upon the inmate’s release from prison. These working groups’ find the maintenance of family relationships during imprisonment very important and work in co-operation with school social workers, physiologists, etc. in dealing with the problems of children on the outside. The FWFP provides to the prisoners a comprehensive assistance to lead crime free lives, including the improvement of parenting skills and reduction of partner violence.
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