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Current Views of Inmate Visiting

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Current Views of Inmate Visiting

While there seems to be an acceptance of the value of family ties and visits with inmates (Holt and, Miller, 1972) there is a dearth of information about either what is going on in the prisons across the United States or what correctional administrators think about inmate visiting.

To obtain an estimate of what's currently happening in the field, all fifty states, four U.S. territories, the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the District of Columbia were surveyed.

Background Literature

A current review of the literature produced results very similar to the findings of past investigators - namely, there are very few studies available about inmate visits and the relationships of such visits to institutional adjustment, program participation, continuation of the marriage or general post-institutional adjustment. Most articles available tend to be descriptive and deal with either the assumed positive effects of visiting on inmate adjustment (e.g., Morris, 1965; Cobean & Power, 1978; Fox, 1981), the problems of the suffering of the family as the result of incarceration of the male breadwinner (e.g., Brodsky, 1975; Schneller, 1975; Hinds, 1981), or the difficulties encountered by families in obtaining services, especially visiting assistance (e.g., Fishman and Cassin, 1981). A now famous study, of Holt and Miller (1972) found that those who consistently received visits from relatives or friends tended to have a more favorable parole outcome. In fact, based on outcome during the first year following release, six times as many prisoners who had had no visitors had failed as compared to those who had frequent visits from at least three different relatives or friends. Similar findings had been reported earlier by Glaser (1964) which indicated a parole success rate of 74 percent for those with active and sustained visits from family as compared to 43 percent for those without visits. Parole violation rates were inversely related to the number of family visits in a study of 17,000 men paroled over a 20 year period (Ohlin, 1954), with the parole violation rate at 66% for those with no visits compared with 26% for those who had 2 or 3 visits per month.

All of these studies suggest a strong relationship between no visits and poor postinstitutional adjustment but, while showing a consistent trend, still only depict a correlational relationship. Causality cannot be determined from these studies. However, the work of "M-2" presents somewhat stronger evidence because they

approached the problem with the predictive hypothesis that providing visitors would have a positive impact. They started with the question, "Can anything be done about visits for those who would ordinarily not receive any"? "M-2" sponsors seemed to think so. Over a number of years, that organization has managed a program of recruiting and training volunteers to match with inmates who have limited social ties.

In the most recent study of their program (EMT, 1987), 622 inmates released to parole in California between July 1983 and June 1985 were evaluated at the 6-, 12- and 24 month follow-up periods. At each follow-up period the relationship between some visits vs. none and parole success was statistically significant. In addition, it was found that the number of visits played a vital role (at 12 months, for example, of those who had received 12 or more visits 68.5% had satisfactory outcomes as compared to 38.7% for those who had received no visits). Thus, it seems clear that there is a strong relationship between visits and parole outcome and between the degree of contact and parole success.

Conjugal or Private Family Visiting

The attitudes about conjugal visiting exhibit some strange turns. The positive view of such programs was early presented by Hopper (1969) while Johns (1971) felt that even the positive attitudes would not result in action and outlines the reasons for his belief. These include: 1) the negative attitudes of inmates who would be unable to participate; 2) facilities are not available and are not likely to be made available; 3) practical problems of administration - security, abuse of power, common-law relationships - would be too severe; 4) administrative support is not really very strong; 5) sexual nature of conjugal visits not in tune with the culture of the times - too degrading for the wife; and 6) possible additional children born to "inadequate families", requiring support from public welfare. Balough surveyed 52 wardens (1964) and found that only 13 percent approved. Shortly thereafter Vedder and Kind (1965) found nearly twice the percentage of positive responses from 49 directors of state or federal correctional operations.

In terms of studies of level of activity in this area, little objective information is available and that is quite dated (Markely, 1972; Burstein, 1977). Haynor (1972) reported that at the time of his contact two jurisdictions had operational private family visiting programs with two others in the planning stage.

More recently the Federal Bureau of Prisons investigated private family visiting (1981) via a task force. They looked at the operation of such programs in Minnesota, New York and California. They felt the program, despite the statements about the family,

placed too great an emphasis on sex, failed to serve long termers and that a furlough program would serve to meet the needs of those serving short periods of incarceration. The final recommendation from that effort was that private family visiting not replace nor supplement the home furlough of the Bureau, but suggested that family visiting might be tested on a well researched basis for those serving longer periods in prison.

Findings

The findings presented here are based upon responses from fifty-six jurisdictions representing some 895 institutions. A 100 per cent return was achieved for the survey, although a few call-backs were required for a few participants. Questionnaires were completed by directors of corrections in only a few cases; most were completed by central office staff members. Thus, attitudinal measures must be accepted with the assumption that subordinates completing the questionnaire reflect in a general way the values of departmental policies.

Importance of Inmate Visiting

Respondents were asked to rate their view of the importance of inmate visiting. Of the 54 responding to the item scaled from 1 to 10 with 10 being the highest, the ratings ranged from 5 through 10 with the median and mode at 10, with a mean of slightly over 9. Judging by the manner in which two respondents marked their questionnaire, some seemed to want to rate visiting at about 12 on a scale from 1 to 10. Thus it would appear that most departments of corrections place a high value on inmate visiting.

Attitudes Toward Private Family Visiting

Few respondents from jurisdictions which did not have private family visiting indicated any interest in exploring the development. Only one jurisdiction without a program expressed positive interest and that was an organization that had proposed a plan for the legislature but the issue was not pushed for budgetary reasons.

Each of the eight jurisdictions that had an operational program were asked to react to a list of specific gains that might be derived from the program. The items most endorsed were, "Improve inmate morale and attitude", and, "Reduce disciplinary problems", with seven positive responses. These were closely followed by,

"Better participation in institutional programs" and, "More positive planning for parole", with five and four endorsements. Only one jurisdiction reported the view that Private Family Visiting might reduce homosexuality while two departments indicated that they felt that such a program would strengthen family ties and result in fewer sexual assaults.

The Number and Nature of Private Family Visiting Programs

Eight jurisdictions have a program of private family visiting someplace in their department. "Private family visiting" as used here was defined as a man and a woman being alone with their family for a period of time, usually including overnight. It includes conjugal visits but might also include, in addition to children, other significant family members such as parents, aunts and uncles, etc. The level reported marks a major expansion over the level of a few years ago (some of these programs are in early start-up phases) but falls considerably below the level suggested by the information in the Directory published by the American Correctional Association (1987). From a quick review of that document one would conclude that 18 jurisdictions (16 states and 2 territories) had private family visits in at least one of their adult institutions. The difference would seem to be related to definitions of the program. Even with the seeming clarity of the definition presented above there were some ambiguous responses.

Historically two programs existed prior to 1970, three came into operation during the 1970-1980 decade while three have been initiated since 1980.

In all, some 43 correctional institutions seem to be involved. The number of visits during 1986 varied from an estimate of approximately 100 for one department to over 40,000 visits for another jurisdiction. Most seem to group in the 3,000-5,000 range with the most typical response being around 3,000.

Organizationally most programs place the responsibility at the institutional level and under treatment programs. One jurisdiction has the operation centralized under the jurisdiction of the religious department, which may be valuable in ameliorating any negative public reactions to the program.

Most programs are now a part of regular state budget appropriations although some were initiated with donations. Currently only two jurisdictions are heavily dependent on donations and one of those receives some budgetary support. One jurisdiction supports its program by charging a nominal rent for the facilities used.

The programs have not been without their problems. In responding to a check-list of possible problems, jurisdictions indicate that problems encountered have ranged from drugs, other contraband, to falsification of records (each indicated by four jurisdictions). One jurisdiction indicated no problems, one indicated escape problems while one jurisdiction with more extensive experience reported, "All of the above". Apparently these problems were appropriately dealt with through administrative and procedural adjustments as all presently active programs indicate a continuous operation since initiation.

Discussion and Conclusions

Inmate visiting continues to be of special concern to the correctional field with almost all respondents rating this program at the high end of a value scale. Reflecting this commitment, the vast majority of the jurisdictions, as noted in an earlier report (Bennett, 1987), have managed to maintain a fairly high level of support for inmate visiting, with length of time per week available for visits remaining the same or increasing in a vast majority of the jurisdictions responding. This was achieved despite tight budgets and ever increasing prison populations. Along similar lines most of the jurisdictions were able to increase the number of visits per month allowable per inmate over 1980 levels. However, since only 70% of the correctional systems were able to increase the space available for visiting at a pace matching the increase in inmate populations, one can only speculate that the increased number of visits are taking place in a somewhat more cramped situation. Support for this view is provided by the finding that of the 17 jurisdictions unable to keep up with space demands, 14 or 82% managed to maintain 1980 levels of length and frequency of visits.

The attitudes toward conjugal or Private Family Visiting is very positive for those who have operational programs but quite unaccepting by those without programs. The growth of such programs has been slow but steady with programs operational in only two jurisdictions prior to 1970, increasing to eight at the present time, an operational program being defined as a jurisdiction within which at least one institution has a program involving Private Family Visiting.

Despite the many reasons put forth as to why such programs cannot work (see for example Johns, 1971) those jurisdictions with programs seem to feel the values far outweigh the problems and inconveniences of such efforts. However, given the lack of interest on the part of those not participating it seems doubtful that the concept will expand rapidly beyond its present level.

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