

Big Brother *Philip Horner*

[We promise to pass] an anti-crime package including stronger truth-in-sentencing... and cuts in social spending from this summer's "crime bill" to fund prison construction.

Republican Party, Contract With America 1994

I remember sitting on my prison bunk listening to the 2004 State of the Union Address. It was pretty much what I expected. I found the President's mention of the needs of prisoners' children interesting. I was surprised to hear the Bush Administration announce a \$45.6 million federal grant to provide mentors for the children of prisoners. A decade ago the Department of Justice surveyed state prisoners. It found that 56 per cent of incarcerated men have minor children, with an average of 2 children per prisoner.¹ With over 2,000,000 American men incarcerated, there are at least 2,225,000 minor children with dads in prison. So, the federal grant amounts to \$20 per child.

The Administration should be concerned about prisoners' children. Parental incarceration, and the crime and arrests that precede it, produce some typical responses in children.² Kids of prisoners suffer from the trauma of separation from a parent, even one most would consider a poor caregiver. They mourn this loss in many ways. Aggression and withdrawal are common reactions. When a father gets sent to prison, the quality of life of his children declines dramatically, especially if he were the family wage earner. Many families end up on welfare.³ Kids feel the social stigma and shame of it all.

The children of prisoners are much more likely to get in trouble with the law. Children who live through the arrest and imprisonment of a parent develop a negative impression of the police and the criminal justice system.⁴ It's hard to continue to believe the policeman is your friend after he takes Daddy away. Older kids watch the workings of the courts and prisons and learn not to trust them.

My family is not immune. When my motion for a sentence reduction after four years in prison got denied, my teenaged daughter asked, "Doesn't the judge know that there are five young Americans growing up with no respect for the justice system because of decisions like this?". She misses her dad.

Here in New Hampshire the state's Big Brothers Big Sisters are getting \$135,000 of the federal grant. About 130 children of prisoners will get mentors. Jerry Grantham, Executive Director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Nashua says, "What we're looking at is providing the child with a resource - somebody they can share an experience with, feel comfortable talking with, about what's going on in their home life."

I am sure that Mr. Grantham is well-meaning. Many prisoner fathers are not overjoyed at the thought of some stranger becoming a surrogate parent to their children. When I spoke of it with the prisoner who leads the prison's Fathers Support Group, a look of anger crossed his face. "I don't want some guy I don't even know becoming a pal to my son", he said. "I want to be his father. I want to be his friend and confidant. How about spending that money on events that bring parents and children together?" He thinks of himself as a good father who has made some bad decisions in life. The state considers him a bad man who needs to be locked up for a long time. It wants to provide a mentor to share that experience with his boy.

Whether mentors for prisoners' kids are a good idea, boys need their fathers and want to be like them. I have seen it in my own sons. Last year I sent a wooden bench home that I had made in the prison's hobby shop. The next week, my wife found my six year old hammering away at an old plank. "What are you doing, James?" she asked. "Making a bench for Mary Rose," he told her. He wants to be like Dad. If the state says he's the devil's son, why shouldn't he want to grow up to be a devil, too?

America leads the world in the percentage of children whose parents are in prison. This doesn't seem to bother the current Administration. The Attorney General has pointed to the 2.2 million Americans in prison as proof that the system works, that it takes hard-core criminals off the streets. But, tough on crime laws are tough on kids, too. Rather than change these misguided policies, the Administration would rather offer the children of prisoners a \$20 Band-aid.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ United States Department of Justice, Survey of State Prison Inmates (Report No. NCJ - 13 7002), Washington, DC, 1993.
- ² Johnston, D. *Children of Offenders*. Pasadena, CA, 1993.
- ³ Mauer, M. and M. Chesney-Lind (editors) *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*, The New Press, New York, N.Y., 2002.
- ⁴ Stanton, A. *When Mothers go to Jail*. Lexington Books, Lexington, MA, 1980.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Horner (#29992) is a prisoner in the New Hampshire State Prison, Concord, New Hampshire. Previous contributions to the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* include “The Dilemma” (2006, Volume 14:2) and the cover art, “Buji – Free from Fear” (2006, Volume 15:1).