

Victims' Issues:
An Inside View of Prison Life
L. Wayne Carlson

We all accept that there are many different kinds of abuse in our Canadian society, including sexual, social, physical, emotional, psychological, financial, drugs/alcohol and more that we as individuals put ourselves and others through in the course of our lives. We also accept that where there is an abuse victim there is the very real danger that the victim will, in all likelihood, make victims of others over time if interventions do not take place. Abuse has that kind of long-lasting, far-reaching effect on the lives of people who have suffered it. We have learned from written accounts that victims try to find solace in drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, and solace in the act of abusing others after they have suffered. The victim suffers long after the event(s) of abuse and consequently, sometimes there arises a feeling that it is now their turn to do to others what has been done to them. For it seems through abusing someone else some of their lost self esteem, self worth, and human dignity is somehow restored. This distorted form of thinking and feeling leads abuse victims to act out destructive behaviour in various ways. Many find themselves placed in prison at a young age, and, once so placed, they find themselves released only to return, again and again. Although there have been reasons advanced for this cycle of criminal behaviour, most of the reasoning has been focused on the cycle itself as indicative and demonstrative evidence of the individual's inability to change. The focus of the public today has taken the form of condemning the individual law breaker as being wholly and innately criminal, and therefore wholly responsible for his actions. In this perspective the criminalized should be locked up for the duration of their sentences.

In my opinion the advocates of the 'lock'em up throw away the key' philosophy have no real idea of what prison does to the hearts, minds, and souls of the prisoners. There has been little information gathered on the long term effects of the prison environment on the people (prisoners and staff) involved in the punishment process; daily prison life remains as mysterious as if it were life on the dark side of the moon. Therefore there is even considerable doubt in the public mind whether prisons actually punish offenders. The focus of my argument is that contrary to public opinion, prisons are not only places of punishment, but also serve to victimize both prisoners undergoing punishment and staff members delivering that punishment. This writer further suggests that a close

examination of prison environments across the nation should be carried out to ascertain the extent of their detrimental effects.

People who believe prisoners are not being punished, point with disdain to a colour television set and a ghettoblaster in a prison cell to support their arguments. To them, it appears that physical, emotional and psychological pain that one can see with the naked eye is the only real form of punishment. Likewise, there are parents who punish their children by physical beatings because they believe anything short of physical pain will not be effective. I suggest the same applies to some guards in their daily treatment of prisoners. If the prisoner is not in obvious pain and anguish, if he is not being made to visibly suffer, punishment is not being properly administered. Still, any person who has suffered long-term emotional and psychological abuse would be horrified that anyone would be so lacking in insight and understanding that they would point to radios, television sets, and a soft bed as evidence that real punishment under the law is not being carried out.

Under a close examination of a prisoner's daily life an argument could be advanced that putting the prisoner through daily, superficial contact with those things he holds most dear is, in fact, punishment. Television is one subtle way of allowing prisoners to see the world outside the walls and fences which, while constantly reminding the prisoner of the freedom he has lost, remains just out of his reach for years. Contact visits and private family visits are a major source of subtle punishment. Even in the pleasure of the contact lies the knowledge that soon that contact must inevitably end. In the ending of the contact lies the pain and the punishment of the separation.

The Greeks used Sisyphus as an example of a punishment that goes on forever, but even as he rolls his own rock up his own hill he believes he will, this time, be successful in getting it to balance once he reaches the top. He fails, and as the rock rolls back down he pauses in disappointment, but in a moment he begins another attempt. He climbs and pushes his uphill burden and according to the myth he will do so forever. The prisoner, like Sisyphus, feels compelled to put himself through the psychological and emotional pain of the visiting-separation cycle. The prisoner and his family embrace, and for a short time life is close to normal, but too soon the hands of the prison clock move and the visit is at its end. The prisoner must return to his cell and his family must return home, and both the prisoner and the family focus now on the pain of the separation. The prisoner watches helplessly while the people he

loves suffer and his own punishment is compounded. In addition the prisoner is reminded daily that he must carry the responsibility, through his acts, for his family's suffering.

The conversations of the older prisoners reflect the idea that open visits and socials' where the prisoners are allowed to have full contact with their families is a greater form of punishment today than what they had to endure years ago.

"My daughter doesn't understand why I can't go home with her," says the young con. He sits in the yard with an older man and has been explaining how difficult it is to re-adjust to the prison environment following a private family visit.

"The only way to do time is to do time," suggests an older con.

"What do you mean?" asks the young man.

"In the old days we had few visits, no television sets, no radios in the cells, we didn't have to go through the emotional bullshit we go through today, and it was easier," he answers.

"I love my kids," defends the younger man.

"Sure you do," says the older prisoner, "but you go through this pain of separation each time you see them."

"Yeah, that's true."

"Having private visits is like being hungry all the time, and though you cannot have what you want you are brought out of your cell to see, smell, and even touch those things, but you are not allowed to actually have them."

"You mean if it's not in front of your face all the time it's easier to do without?"

"That's it kid, if it's not in front of your face all the time it's easier to do without. People don't understand that. Today doing time is like being buried up to the neck in the middle of the street; we can see life flow around us but we can't get up to take part in it."

However, punishment is not abuse per se. It is when the people who are charged with administering punishment go beyond their mandate that they become abusers. It is here that the punishment itself becomes abusive, and it is here too that prisoners become victims and the line between punishment and abuse is a thin one.

Prisons have a mandate to keep the prisoner confined and protect society, and in Canada today it is in the act of the confinement itself that punishment occurs. Most people, particularly parents, recognize confinement (the loss of freedom to move about), as punishment, and

many of them choose this form of discipline for their children. So, too, do some of the rational and sensible members of the legal community, the prison community, and the community at large. Many others do not and they believe that physical, emotional, and psychological pain must be administered in conjunction with the confinement to be effective and just.

"I haven't seen you in the Unit for a month, where have you been?" a prisoner asks a female staff member. She is sitting in an office with the door open adjacent to the security bubble.

"I've been working in the hole," she answers.

"Yeah?"

"I don't like it."

"I'm not surprised - it's been a beautiful summer."

"They got it easy down there."

"Easy?" the prisoner answers, surprised. He thought she meant she didn't like working in the hole because she didn't like to see the suffering of the men.

"Yes -- easy. They're there for punishment, not for a good time."

"But they have nothing there, no TVs, no radios, they just sit in those cells."

"They get out of their cells too much."

"An hour a day?"

"Yeah an hour a day is too much."

One can easily imagine that she would have a difficult time being fair minded to those under her care and control.

The fact that physical punishment is currently outlawed means there are emotional and psychological ways to injure (looks, body language, and tone of voice) and these are adopted by staff. In the penitentiary there is a constant personal exchange between prisoners and staff and both groups have members who are very adept at using this method to abuse one another. The men and women who are serving time, or working in the penitentiary environment, do so for many years.

The system itself recognizes the danger of Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) staff abusing prisoners under their care and control, and it has incorporated strict rules and guidelines in its Mission Statement, including a CSC code of ethics which governs the behaviour of staff. However, experience has shown that one or two abusive staff members on a shift of eight will bring a negative change in the behaviour of their colleagues. Then, too, seldom will a staff member support a prisoner's claim against a staff member. Peer pressure works on everyone in a prison

environment and this includes staff members. Of course prisoners themselves, many of whom are caught like helpless flies in their personal web of abuse, play their role in perpetuating the cycle of prison abuse.

It has become clear that in general, people have difficulty sympathizing or empathizing with prisoners, unless of course they are being punished for a crime they did not commit, which does happen. Likewise, on the whole prisoners are generally insensitive to the way their victims feel. If they are made victims themselves the retribution is swift, and brutal. An example of this is the manner in which jail-house thieves are dealt with in the prison system.

Stealing from another prisoner is dealt with harshly, there are no second chances, and there are no excuses for ripping somebody off. Though we ask for and hope for forgiveness for our crimes, if we become victims ourselves we do not readily forgive, nor do we forget. As perpetrators we expect our victims to understand our rationalizations and accept us in their midst, sometimes again and again. To be able to bridge the gap between those in the community who cry for blood, and those among us who think they should be instantly forgiven for the harm they cause, would be a serious accomplishment indeed.

Many prisoners do not feel their victims are in fact victims at all. They appear to instead believe the community owes them something. Prisoners and offenders seem able to convince themselves that when they commit a crime they are simply taking what they are rightfully due. On one hand it is altruism (prisoners appear altruistic when talking about how others should treat them), and it is egoism on the other (how they should be allowed to treat others around them).

Recently I was sitting on a bench in one of those waiting rooms where prisoners wait to see someone in management about committee or group business. In my case I was there waiting for a signature on a disbursement to buy paper for my job. Sitting beside me was a man who has been here for some time, and though we are not friends we are acquaintances and generally cordial when we meet. He is in his forties, he's a bright man, and he is serving a life sentence for second degree murder. From previous encounters I knew he was about to either go in front of the parole board or had already been there. I was aware that he had been looking for an unescorted temporary absence (UTA) program which would lead him into to a day parole situation. The last time I talked to him I suggested his chances were quite good. Today I initiated the conversation.

"You must be almost out the door," I offered.

"Yes, I'm on UTAs." He was curt in his response. Like he was having a bad day.

"So you made it?"

"Yeah, *finally*."

"I remember saying last time we talked that I thought you're chances were good."

"I was on escorted temporary absences' (ETA's) for a year and a half - *you* and *everybody* else thought it was *good*." He was upset about something, but I didn't take it to be me.

"Well, you seemed to have done alright."

"Alright? *Alright!*? I've been waiting for a year and half - they made *me* do a year and a half of ETAs!" It was his attitude that got me going, like he truly deserved something, because he was special.

"How much time have you got in?" I kept my voice neutral, but it wasn't easy.

"Eight years," he replied.

"Eight years on life ten?"

"Yeah."

"Well, from what I see in the newspapers and on the television news they are trying to keep lifers in prison for a lot longer than that - it could be worse," I reasoned.

"That's only *rapists* and *child molesters*" he said. There was an arrogant air about him, and now there was underlying contempt in his tone of voice. I didn't like it.

"No, that's not true. I know men who have served more time than you for bank robbery, and even property offences. If there were a couple of people carrying signs with your name on them in front of the parole office, you might be doing more time as well." I admit to being a little angry with the man.

"Signs?"

"Oh, yes, it's happening all over. The victims' families are coming forward to demand longer periods of punishment for the ones they lost." He was called by the receptionist into one of the offices and I never had an opportunity to finish telling him that I thought he was a fortunate man.

He was soon released on his parole. One day I noticed I had not seen him for some time, then someone I was walking with commented that he was in a halfway house. But I did not miss him at all.

My point is the man no doubt has some good qualities (why else would the the parole board release him so early?) but his attitude made it difficult for me to feel anything for him. He gave the distinct impression he *deserved* to be free, after eight years. He was *important*, he was *different*, and *he* was hard-done by (as if he was the victim); pay no mind to the life he took, ignore the grief and anguish of the family of the victim, and give no thought to other men around him (in his mind if other men did more time than he it was because they somehow deserved it). Furthermore, if a prisoner is unable to feel gratitude for the kindness shown him (and to be released on life parole for murder is surely an act of kindness on the part of the parole system), he can easily be defined as immoral and undeserving.

Statistics compiled by CSC suggest that almost all staff members initially believe they can help people when they join the correctional service. This was suggested in a comprehensive survey *Attitudes of Correctional Officers Towards Offenders*, Research Division, Correctional Services Canada, (1996), by Michel Lariviere and David Robinson. "There is evidence in the literature suggesting that attitudes change rather quickly in a CO's career. At nine months after induction training, CSC CO's had become more punishment oriented and less supportive of prisoners rights. There was increased agreement with items such as "physical punishment is necessary in dealing with criminals," "harsher punishments will deter people from committing crimes," and "federal prisoners do not deserve any civil rights." During a second follow-up study nine months later, the researchers found that attitudes had stabilized at these more negative levels (see also, Plecas and Maxim, 1987). I suggest it follows that there is something in their short, nine months of experience which brings about a change of opinion. Again, I suggest abuse is at the core of this change of heart and it is the prison and prisoners themselves who must certainly bear some of the responsibility for it.

Prisoners who are caught in the cycle of abuse will abuse others, including their families and even the most open, well intentioned and productive staff members are not seen as such by abusive prisoners. Guards are guards and prisoners are prisoners and there is very little, if any, common ground between these two groups of people. A staff member who extends his hand quickly learns that he may well pull back a bloody stump and, as a consequence, over a brief period of time he or she is not only less likely to extend a helping hand in future, but the once burned and

twice shy staff member will remember the pain. The natural human reaction is to dislike and distrust those we perceive as wanting to do the same to us again. New staff are simultaneously socialized into a staff viewpoint and cultural attitude that encourages defining such unpleasant prisoner-staff encounters as representative of all prisoners and all prisoner-staff relations. That staff need to justify their involvement in penal practices that brutalize and dehumanize prisoners, is evident in their negative, all encompassing stereotype of prisoners as worthless and deserving of harsh punitive treatment. The cycle of abuse and violence is reproduced amongst staff as well as prisoners.

While it is true the prisoners have the current grievance procedures to right the wrongs they feel are done them, there are only a handful of prisoners with the writing skills to properly utilize these grievance procedures. An abusive prison situation, like an abusive family situation, relies on threats, intimidation and on a cloak of secrecy to shield the abuser from scrutiny and accountability. Abused family members live within the family structure for many, many years and though the abused do have access to telephones, to self help groups, and others in the community who would gladly help them, in many instances the abused members do not come forward. Many prisoners lack either the ability to express their grievances or, if they do have the ability and the skills to express and act, they choose not to do so out of fear of retaliation. A prisoner quickly comes to understand that a prison consists of men and women who have worked together within it for many years. There are husbands and wives, fathers and sons and siblings who not only work together, but also socialize together, sometimes for generations; they are the prison staff community.

If one accepts the statistics that a great many prisoners are uneducated, one can accept that the abused prisoner does not have the conventional tools to stand up for himself. Some prisoners feel compelled to do something, but the only thing that appears open to them is shouts, curses, and sometimes even violence to make their points. The abusive guard uses this to good advantage, as he or she can abuse at will, and if and when the abused prisoner reacts it will be in an unacceptable fashion that results in further punishment to the prisoner himself. For the abusers (prisoner and staff) prison is the most perfect situation: staff can abuse people daily for years and not be held accountable for their actions; prisoners can abuse staff and each other and receive positive feedback from other abusers with a like mind.

Any writer who attempts to place responsibility on either penitentiary staff or prisoner will find themselves embroiled in the age-old argument of 'What came first, the chicken or the egg'? However, if one looks at the whole, and sees the chicken and the egg as one entity, it may well emerge, as this writer suggests, that the cycle of prison abuse is a natural human reaction in both the keeper and the kept. Until such time that the effects of prison life are thoroughly examined and clearly understood, prisons will continue to reinforce and perpetuate victimization and the community will continue to suffer the effects.

REFERENCES

- Lariviere, M. and Robinson, D. (1996). *Attributes of Correctional Officers Towards Offenders*. Research Division: Correctional Service of Canada.
- Plecas, P.S. and Maxim, D.B. (1997). *Correctional Officer Development Study: Recruit Survey*. Correctional Service of Canada: Research Division
-

WAYNE CARLSON IS A LONG-TERM OFFENDER NOW WORKING IN THE COMMUNITY WITH THE THE SAMARITANS OF SOUTHERN ALBERTA, AS THE ADMINISTRATOR OF THE SAMARITAN PRISONER BEFRIENDING PROGRAM ("SAMS").

THE SAMARITAN PRISONER BEFRIENDING PROGRAM IN CANADA IS A MEMBER OF BEFRIENDERS INTERNATIONAL, THE UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION OF 350 BEFRIENDING CENTRES IN 41 COUNTRIES, WORLDWIDE. THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE DRUMHELLER INSTITUTION WAS THE FIRST TO EMBARK ON THIS PROGRESSIVE NEW PROGRAM IN SUICIDE PREVENTION, BECAUSE INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS ARE IDENTIFIED AS HIGH RISK FOR SUICIDE.

SUPPORTED BY THE SUICIDE PREVENTION SOCIETY OF THE SAMARITANS OF SOUTHERN ALBERTA (A VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATION OPERATING A 24 HOUR CRISIS LINE THROUGHOUT SOUTHERN ALBERTA), THE VOLUNTEER INMATES, (SAMS) HAVE UNDERGONE A COMPREHENSIVE TRAINING PROGRAM EMPHASIZING CONFIDENTIAL, NON-JUDGMENTAL LISTENING SKILLS, DEPRESSION, GRIEF AND LOSS, SUBSTANCE ABUSE, AND SUICIDE PREVENTION STRATEGIES. THIS TRAINING IS SIMILAR TO THAT OF A TELEPHONE CRISIS LINE VOLUNTEER.

A COMPONENT OF THE PROGRAM IS A COLLABORATION OF THE SAMARITANS, PRISON STAFF, HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS AND THE SAMS WHO, TOGETHER, DEVELOP STRATEGIES IN CARING FOR THE DEPRESSED AND SUICIDAL IN CUSTODY. THIS WHOLISTIC APPROACH TO SUICIDE PREVENTION ALSO SEEKS TO ALLEVIATE THE STRESSFUL IMPACT ON OTHER PRISONERS, AND STAFF IN DEALING WITH DISTRESSED, DESPAIRING, AND SUICIDAL INMATES. THE TRAINED SAMS ARE AVAILABLE TO PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT, SUICIDE PREVENTION AND ALSO PROVIDE REFERRAL TO THEIR CONTACTS OF EXISTING PROFESSIONAL CARE SERVICES OFFERED BY THE INSTITUTION.