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# Our House or the Big House? It's Parents or Prisons

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For a hauntingly large number of young Americans, prison has become a substitute for parents. Writing in *Policy Review*, Jennifer Roback Morse argued just a few years ago that this “apparent overstatement” is sustained by two realities. As she explains:

*First, without parents — two of them, married to each other, working together as a team — a child is more likely to end up in the criminal justice system at some point in his life. Without parents, prison becomes a greater probability in the child's life.*

*Second, if a child finds himself in the criminal justice system, either in his youth or adulthood, the prison will perform the parental function of supervising and controlling that person's behavior.*

The statistics do tell the story. Young males raised without fathers are far more likely than their peers to be involved in anti-social behavior and far more likely to spend time in prison. For some of these young men, prison is the first place they meet an authority they cannot manipulate, a voice they cannot defy, and a consequence they cannot avoid.

Morse asserts that most people in prison are there because they did not learn self-control, personal responsibility, and the necessity of following rules. To this list we can add the fact that these young people did not learn (or did not learn adequately) how to respect authority and understand the consequences of their behaviors.

“A free society needs people with consciences,” Morse argues. These are people who obey the laws voluntarily. Without a majority of such citizens, a society soon disintegrates. Writ large, this means the death of nations. On a smaller scale, this explains the disastrous breakdown of order in some neighborhoods.

When parents fail to inculcate these values and commitments in their offspring (or when parents are not present), the children are headed for big trouble. Many will end up in the criminal justice system. An amazingly large number find themselves in juvenile courts even before they reach adulthood. Nevertheless, prisons are not an adequate substitute for parents.

As Morse explains:

*Of course, prison is a pathetic substitute for genuine parents. Incarceration provides extreme, tightly controlled supervision that children typically outgrow in their toddler years and does so with none of the love and affection that characterize normal parental care of small children. But that is what is happening: The person has failed to internalize the self-command necessary for living in a reasonably free and open society at the age most people do. Since he cannot control himself, someone else must control him. If he becomes too much for his parents, the criminal justice system takes over:*

*These necessary societal interventions do not repair the loss the child has sustained by the loss of a relationship with his parents. By the time the penal system steps in, the state is engaged in damage control. A child without a conscience, a child without self-control, is a lifelong problem for the rest of society.*

Families are best suited to fulfill this role. As a matter of fact, parents can do what no institutionalized authority can do, and that is to nurture and discipline their children within the relationship of love and trust.

More:

*The basic self-control and reciprocity that a free society takes for granted do not develop automatically. Conscience development takes place in childhood. Children need to develop empathy so they will care whether they hurt someone or whether they treat others fairly. They need to develop self-control so they can follow through on these impulses and do the right thing even if it might benefit them to do otherwise.*

*All this development takes place inside the family. Children attach to the rest of the human race through their first relationships with their parents. They learn reciprocity, trust, and empathy from these primal relationships. Disrupting those foundational relations has a major negative impact on children as well as on the people around them. In particular, children of single parents — or completely absent parents — are more likely to commit crimes.*

Jennifer Roback Morse is so very right when she explains that “a family is a little society.” Indeed, that little society is the most important context for so much of what the larger society depends upon. When parents and families fail in the task of preparing the young for the responsibilities of life, other authorities step in. None of these is up to the task. This phenomenon explains why the public schools are now asked to raise many children, as well as to educate them.

Tragically, many of these young people — especially young males — will end up in prison. In this context they will confront what has been missing in their lives, but even as prison may be a form of reality therapy for these teenagers and young adults, the prison cannot make up for missing or inattentive parents.

When you consider the importance of the family — of intact families with both mother and father in the home — consider this choice. It so often comes down to parents or prisons.

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