

Winter 1939

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Recommended Citation

Negley K. Teeters, Role of Prison Visiting in the Penal Program, 30 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 485 (1939-1940)

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THE ROLE OF PRISON VISITING IN THE PENAL PROGRAM

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Rapid strides in the institutional treatment of offenders have been made in the past decade, especially in certain states where coordinated penal programs have been developed. The personality of the individual prisoner is being carefully scrutinized by specialists in practically every conceivable field which claims to deal with behavior problems. Some states have intricate classification clinics, under control of the custodial staff in some cases, while in others, certain types of specialists are in charge. Some states boast of clinical psychological hierarchies, some admit of domination by psychiatrists, while still others place their faith in a strictly sociological technique. Obviously, the ultimate objective is the same, that of attempting to understand the individual inmate. But as one surveys the forty-eight states, he finds many that are either not attempting any such service or are offering some pretense in this field which results in a more or less innocuous program of rehabilitation. It is a bewildering picture, not only to the layman, but to the prisoners as well. It is probably true also that the wardens and guards are a little befogged by it all.

The goal in each case is essentially the same, namely, preparation for release. The hackneyed word *rehabilitation* covers a very wide field, so consequently it is beginning to come into disrepute. No satisfactory term has yet been found. One sees *adjustment* in some of the literature these days and perhaps as a word it is as good as any. Part of the quarantine period (usually a thirty day interval) is spent by the prisoner in being interviewed by a wide variety of specialists, the attempt being made to "place" him in the institutional program. All this is familiar to anyone connected with the modern adult prison. There are the psychologist, the psychiatrist, the medical examiner, the director of industries and training, the teacher or educational director, the deputy warden or his representative, the identification officer, the social worker, the

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chaplain, and in some prisons, the sociologist. It would probably be not unusual to find the football coach taking advantage of this quarantine period to pick out likely candidates for his institution team. When the befuddled prisoner runs through this battery of experts one wonders if any phase of this specimen is possibly overlooked. These initial interviews presumably have three purposes in mind: (1) to attempt to evaluate the individual's capacities and training so that he may be placed in the institution where he "belongs," that is, a minimum, medium, or maximum security type of institution; (2) to start preparation for parole, however feeble this start may be, (3) to help the inmate adjust himself to institutional life and to assist him with his various personality problems.

It would not be fair to state that these interviews during this short period of one month, usually, terminate the consideration of the individual. In many prisons an honest attempt is made to follow up this initial evaluation. The least that is probably done in every institution is to check up through correspondence the various statements made by the prisoner. But regardless of the most conscientious efforts made by the clinical staff to evaluate the inmate's potentialities, it is still obvious that he is given a number and becomes relatively lost in the endless shuffle of humanity which is the modern prison. It is not the purpose here to evaluate or pass judgment on what is being accomplished in prisons where classification clinics are operating. But where they are being used efficiently and effectively, it is sadly true that the individual is still neglected. It is rather the purpose of this discussion to explore the possibilities of a service which, where it is not being tried, might be adopted, and where it is in operation, might be expanded. It is prison visiting.

Prison visiting is not new. It has been in operation in prisons for many years, but usually in a most haphazard manner. It has been merely tolerated by most prison officials while some have definitely frowned on it. But it continues to persist. Consequently, it seems that it should be capitalized and made more effective than it now is in assisting the officials enumerated above to gain their objective in inmate adjustment.

There are three types of prison visitors. All may be helpful, or harmful, depending on (a) their relationships to the inmate, and (b) their personnel. An examination of these three types is in order.

THE PRISONER'S RELATIVES AND FRIENDS

When thinking of prison visitors the average person immediately thinks of those who are closest to the inmate. Parents, children, wives, buddies, relatives and others definitely known to and closely identified with the man before his incarceration. They bring him news from home. They pitifully try to bridge the gap between the free community he once knew and his lonely spirit temporarily enmeshed in problems they can know so very superficially. Prison visits of this sort have always been pathetic to contemplate due to the emotional content involved and also because they are so inadequate. It has been traditional in prisons that such visits should be rigidly regulated. They are limited as to number and as to the time of each visit. They are closely supervised by guards. They usually take place between finely meshed screens so that contraband articles may not be smuggled into the prison. Those who have witnessed a visiting day in a prison must agree that the bedlam due to several visitors talking loudly, the better to be heard, sometimes in several dialects and languages, with a certain amount of gesticulation, is not a very wholesome picture. To the everlasting credit of some wardens, this madhouse type of visitation has been modified at least by providing desks or tables or, in unusually progressive institutions, small cubicles, where visitors may sit comfortably and talk with their loved ones without the abominable screens or the too close scrutiny of the ubiquitous guards. No one would accuse the guards of actual eavesdropping on conversations but the effect of their presence on the visitors is the same as if this were true.

The selection of visitors to prisoners might more carefully be considered. The prisoner may choose his own but some preparation might well be undertaken by prison officials so that where a selection is possible, those who might conceivably have a wholesome effect could be encouraged to call on the inmate. There are cases where a parent visiting his son might do more harm than an older brother or sister. This selection of relatives or friends for visitation has scarcely been touched in most, if not all, penal institutions. Rather, a negative selection has been emphasized instead of one more positive. It would seem, therefore, that if this field is to be explored, an extra-mural specialist should be added to the staff whose duty it would be to carefully cull out those who might, by their very presence in the prison visiting gallery, do the prisoner a disservice, and encourage those to visit who will have a whole-

some effect. This is no easy task but it seems obvious that it is worth some effort.

THE PROFESSIONAL VISITOR

The second type of visitor might be called the professional. In this category would be included representatives of various community agencies whose purpose is more or less humanitarian. The personnel of such agencies run the gamut from sentimentalists to objective case workers. Staff workers of organizations such as the Salvation Army, prison welfare societies, churches and missions all feel that they are making a definite contribution to the well being of the prisoner. It is not the purpose here to evaluate the work done by such groups but it is not out of place to suggest that it would be a wise procedure on the part of the prison management to call for periodic reports from such visitors. It is conceivable that much harm can be done the individual prisoner by promiscuous unsupervised visitors from such organizations, regardless of their humanitarian motives. Tactless remarks regarding religion, or appealing sentimentally to "loved ones at home" may develop emotional states within the immured inmate which may be downright harmful. Tampering with the personality of an individual is dangerous business and the least the management can do is to insist on a closer supervision of all who come within this category. Those who represent a more scientific approach to adjustment may be encouraged and those whose technique is questionable by any reputable standards gradually eliminated. It is no secret that many institutions in the country are bedeviled by this problem. Again, as in the previous type of visiting, the so-called extra-mural specialist can perform the spade work in developing standards of visiting which must come eventually. This definitely opens up an untouched field of service which will pay big dividends in the field of adjustment.

THE LAY PRISON VISITOR

The third type of visitor is the layman. There is nothing new about lay prison visiting. Probably the most famous of them all was Elizabeth Fry, if John Howard cannot be included in this category. Mrs. Fry was not connected with any professional organization. She was motivated by a strong desire to be of service to the unfortunate women of Newgate. Aside from her religious work she served as teacher to the illiterate, imparted knowledge

of hygiene, needlework and other skills that seemed most needed by her charges. That she brought about reforms within the institution is well known. Her personality was stimulating not only to the wretched inmates but to the custodial staff of the early English prisons as well. Her work served as a challenge to those on this side of the Atlantic and, in Philadelphia certainly, her example was followed as early as 1823 by the members of the Society of Woman Friends.¹

However, friendly prison visiting to male prisoners by laymen was instituted earlier than this. As soon as the old Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons² was founded in 1787, prominent citizens of the Quaker City made it their business to enter Walnut Street Jail in order to be as helpful as possible to the inmates. While there is no record that they identified themselves with specific cases, there is plenty of evidence that the physical needs of the prisoners were attended to. The old Minute Books of the Society are full of reports made by the Visiting Committees. Even the famous Dr. Benjamin Rush set down in his diary that he visited the prison and gave the inmates, on one occasion, some watermelons, and on another, some turkeys for their Christmas dinner.

But lay prison visiting gained a decided momentum when the Eastern Penitentiary was opened in Philadelphia in 1829. Established on the philosophy of separate (not solitary) confinement, the keystone of the system was *prison visiting by laymen*. Accordingly, the Prison Society took special measures to develop an elaborate system of visiting. This is a familiar story to penologists.³ However, the work done by these representative citizens has been taken too lightly by critics of the Pennsylvania System. Granted that their approach was too often sentimental, that their emphasis was too frequently religious and of a consequence were hoodwinked by the wily inmates,⁴ it is quite significant that a fact of tremendous moment was established, namely, that there reside within the community untapped resources for the rehabilitation of prisoners; that these resources consist of sympathetic, socially conscious citizens who are eager to assume the role of friendly visitors. A

¹ Teeters, Negley K., "They Were in Prison," pp. 249 f., Philadelphia, 1937.

² Now known as the Pennsylvania Prison Society.

³ Teeters, N. K., *Op. cit.*, Chap. XIII.

⁴ As reported by Charles Dickens in his "American Notes." See the author's account of this and its subsequent refutation by prominent Philadelphians, *Ibid.*, Chap. VII.

penal program that does not capitalize on this community asset is not taking advantage of its opportunity and therefore is not rendering a complete service to its clients, the prisoners. If the modern penal institution is really concerned with treatment rather than with repressive discipline, it must explore the possibilities in lay prison visiting.

The lay visitor must first of all be acceptable to the inmate. The initial suggestion for a visitor might conceivably come from the administration but the client must be afforded the opportunity to feel free to reject the service. If he accepts and later finds the relationship personally unsatisfactory, he must be permitted to terminate it. Such action should not impair his chances for parole and in no degree whatsoever should it militate against his institutional record. Only in a genuinely free relationship can the tenuous threads of adjustment be woven. A selection of cases for this type of service might at the outset be based on the prisoner's lack of friends or relatives in the immediate vicinity. Inmates convicted in a strange state would conceivably fall in this category.

Since lay prison visiting serves the function of bridging the gap between the institution and the community, a careful selection of potential visitors is essential. Only genuinely interested individuals should be approached. A cross-section of citizens might include salesmen, insurance men, mature students, artisans and mechanics, lawyers and other professional men and, in short, any person who is socially mature enough to appreciate the responsibility of the service to be rendered. As this is a new development in therapy, or at best, represents a refining process in an old technique, there is little data available to chart a course of procedure. For instance, the advisability of rules for visitors is debatable. What topics of conversation are to be included, what topics to be tabooed? At present, those who have given some thought to this fascinating subject agree that the fewer rules set up to restrict the free interplay of personalities, the better. Individual skills used by the lay visitor must come from his own previous experiences in dealing with other personalities. Tact, graciousness, good taste and dignity accrue to the individual only through training and experience. Obviously all these virtues must reside within the visitor to some degree. While it is not expected that such visitors will all establish rapport with their respective clients on the initial visit, it may be assumed that the majority of them will make some impression. It has been reported by one prison administrator who has encouraged

lay visiting that one inmate cynically acquiesced to a visitor by stating that "he would try anything once." He probably reasoned that he had nothing to lose and perhaps might gain thereby. Certainly in such a case an understanding layman might see potentialities in this challenge.

A first visit by a lay visitor may be a little awkward to both participants. Conversation must revolve around some topic of mutual interest. The visitor may find himself confronted by an "ear bender," one who has an institutional reputation of pouring out his troubles to anyone who will listen. In such a case the visitor must again exercise his skill. However, the visitor should have the same privilege of rejecting his client as the inmate has of selecting his visitor. Some sort of clearing-house should eventually be established where this selecting process can be developed. First visits may tend to be stilted but those who have participated in this activity report that it is worth carrying further. Inmates interviewed also agree in this hope. What may eventually grow out of these relationships cannot be predicted. It can be agreed that they are at least wholesome. It is quite possible that they can and may ripen into real friendships. Lay visiting has never been eliminated from the old Eastern Penitentiary at Philadelphia. But there has been no supervision or coordination for years. Under a new interpretation such therapy may develop into a real service in the process of adjustment. At present it is being watched in this embryonic stage with considerable interest and hope by both the members of the administrative staff and the volunteer visitors.