

Lost Voices of the Carceral State: The Importance of Family Narratives and History

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In American culture, criminogenic origins are predominantly conceptualized as a family affair and, either by nature or nurture, many leading criminological theories focus on family upbringing or biological failures of the gene pool to explain crime. The more severe the crime, the more keen the interest on family as purveyors of defective blood or poor psychological development. Despite this interest the families as the focal point of research, they remain the lost voices of criminological literature. The core of this research will explore how families develop narratives and stories to understand criminal offenses, manage stigma, and construct resistive identities. Narrative approaches to understanding human behavior have expanded in the social sciences sparking increased scholarship in anthropology, psychology, and social work. More recently narrative approaches are an emergent, albeit limited, subset of criminological theory. This research extends the narrative criminological approaches applied by Presser, Sandberg and others specifically to intra/intergenerational family members. Crime in this framework is then visualized as a family story, even when not publically addressed or defined as such. So in fitting with narrative criminology, the unique narratives, the importance of storytelling in management of stigma, and common themes that develop in these families offers a rich and ignored point of social analysis. Through this methodological approach, criminological literature can develop a greater appreciation of these family stories within the context of growing carceral state.