

Appendix E

General Characteristics of Incarcerated Men and Women

Who are the people you will meet in prison? In many ways, they are people like you . . . people with families, dreams, past hurts, and joys. Too often, the nightly news and movies give us the idea that the men and women in prison are “abnormal,” or evil people to be feared and shunned. The greatest compliment you can pay someone in prison is to treat him or her as an individual, precious person, created in the image of God.

While these men and women may be much like you in some ways, their backgrounds and the environments they were brought up in may be very different from yours. And while each person is unique, certain backgrounds, thoughts, feelings, and patterns of behavior are common among those in prison.

Of course, a disadvantaged background does not give anyone a license to commit a crime. Understanding a person better does not mean that you are excusing his or her behavior.

We are all responsible for the good and bad choices we make. But knowing about the general patterns among people in prison may help you address their needs with effectiveness and sensitivity.

Some common characteristics of people in prison (remember each person is unique!):

Abusive childhoods

Studies show that as many as four out of five people in prison were abused as children—physically, sexually, or emotionally. Such abuse can leave deep wounds and anger. Someone who grows up experiencing violence as the usual response to stress often responds the same way. People who suffered ongoing abuse usually have shattered self-esteem.

Dysfunctional families

Most who are in prison come from families with serious shortcomings. Many had parents who abused themselves with drugs and/or alcohol. Many had parents who committed crimes. About 95% of all men in prison had no loving, male role model in their homes. As a result, many prisoners desperately need a flesh-and-blood expression of Christ’s love—from a volunteer just like you!

Low self-worth

For many in prison, failure has been a way of life—in school, jobs, relationships. The only “success” they can point to is their criminal activity or maybe their “thick skin.”

People who think of themselves as worthless often see others that way too. Mistreating people—such as by stealing their property or assaulting them—may be seen as something “worthless” people deserve.

People with low self-esteem may also hunger for attention so they can feel that they matter to someone. Even negative attention may seem better than none at all.

Racial minorities

African-Americans make up about 12 percent of the U.S. population. But they make up nearly 50 percent of the prison population. There is also a dispro-

portionate number of Hispanics in prison.

This does not mean that minorities are more prone to crime. Many factors may contribute to this racial imbalance, including discrimination in the judicial system. Many minorities lived at poverty levels before arrest and could not afford a good, private lawyer. Studies show that African-Americans and Hispanics are sentenced to longer sentences than are whites convicted of similar crimes.

Suspicious nature

Experience has taught most prisoners not to trust others. Many have been harmed by people they cared about, such as family members. Some have been conned by people inside and outside prison. As a result, these men and women may look suspiciously at coaches and wonder, "What's their motive for coming here?" "What's in it for them?"

Do not expect trust to develop right away. And do not pretend to be something you're not. Most people will see through that right away. But as you honestly express God's love and care for them, you will begin to break down walls.

Alcohol and drug abuse

More than half of the people in federal prisons are drug offenders. Many men and women in prison committed crimes to support their drug or alcohol habits, which often started in their teenage years.

Poor reading skills

The U.S. Bureau of Justice estimates that almost 70 percent of all those incarcerated cannot read above a fifth-grade level. Some studies put the figure at 80 percent. This does not mean that these men and women are stupid. Many people who can't read are very creative and intelligent. But their poor reading skills limit the kinds of jobs they get and how well they get along in society. It can also affect their self-esteem.

Prisoners may be very embarrassed that they cannot read, so you should never call on anyone to read during a group discussion. *Always ask for volunteers.*

Look, listen, learn

As you go into prison, observe everything and everyone carefully. Learn as much as you can. Look for feelings and attitudes among prisoners, prison officials, and coaches.

Look for the effects of prison on everyone. Try to read from people's faces and body language what is going on inside them. Listen carefully to everything that is said. This will help you to become more aware and sensitive to people's needs.

Of course, you will not be able to meet all the needs you observe or hear about. For many coaches, the quantity and depth of people's needs become overwhelming. You are already meeting a number of needs through your player-coach responsibilities. Other needs may require expert, professional attention, while still other needs can be redirected to other people or churches that can provide assistance.