



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Mothers haunted by murder

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Mother's Day is a joyous holiday for most women with children, but certainly not all. On this day, my thoughts are with the countless mothers for who today is a reminder of tragedy and loss. My heart goes out to those whose children cannot be by their side or even send a card with expressions of love because of the awful fact that they were murdered.

It is often said that mothers are not supposed to outlive their offspring and are not supposed to bury a child. But that loss can be fused with anger and bitterness when the child's death was the result, not of accident or illness, but the intentional act of another.

As a criminologist who has focused on homicide for nearly three decades, I've witnessed these emotions in many grief-stricken mothers of murdered children. I sat in court with one mother during the trial of her son's killer, and watched her bear the agony of hearing witnesses describe over and over again the last few moments of his life. As a member of a Florida serial murder investigation team, I served as a source of information and comfort for a woman whose daughter had been raped and butchered by a yet unidentified sexual sadist.

The other side of the murder equation also keeps mothers from their children--separated not by death but by incarceration of a son or daughter convicted of murder. These mothers must endure not only the loss, but also the blame. In the court of public opinion, these parents are held accountable for all the mistakes that they may have made in raising a child who did the unthinkable.

Several years ago, while writing about an infamous string of murders in Los Angeles, I talked with a woman whose daughter had been raped and strangled to death. This woman, after hearing that I had also been in contact with the mother of her child's killer, had many probing questions about her maternal counterpart and the effect her son's crimes had had on her life. After a while,

this victim's mother admitted that, if given the awful choice, she would not want to trade places with the perpetrator's mom.

We seem to have tremendous compassion--and rightly so--for parents of murdered children, but not always and not so much for those whose children have been the culprit. Mothers of convicted killers, even though able to pay visits in prison, must confront blame from within and without. Not only do they suffer from public scorn and shame, but also struggle with their own sense of guilt that maybe they did something wrong in raising a monster, even if there was nothing at all.

When it comes to mothers saddled with guilt, I have seen few who compare in terms of the degree of self-doubt and regret that burdens Iris Weaver of Roxbury. A few years ago, her teenage son Kentel was prosecuted as an adult under the state's youthful offender statute, was convicted of first degree murder, and was subsequently sentenced to the mandatory term of life without parole.

Iris's nightmare began one August day in 2003 when her son, then aged 16, admitted to her that he had been one of several youngsters involved in an unsolved murder of a 15-year-old boy. She immediately dragged her child down to the police station to tell his story, unaware of the devastating consequences. Without much money in the bank, this was the only way Iris knew to get her son a lawyer. And, to this devoutly religious woman, confessing was just the right thing to do in order to square things with society and with God.

What Iris Weaver did not realize until it was too late was that her effort to do the right thing would result in losing her son to prison forever. After becoming painfully aware of the automatic life provision of Massachusetts law, Iris Weaver second-guessed her instincts. Should she have been smarter in protecting her son from that runaway train of juvenile injustice? For her and for her son, was honesty the best policy?

At the time of Iris Weaver's decision to come forward with her son and his confession, then Boston Police Commissioner Kathy O'Toole and others around the city were actively campaigning against the frustrating and impervious "don't snitch" code of the street. O'Toole had explicitly encouraged parents to "step up" and do the right thing by turning their children over to the police when they are in trouble, suggesting that it would be best for them in the long run.

After her experience, Iris Weaver found it hard to see the benefit from having turned in her kid. To her, O'Toole's advice seemed like a cruel joke, if not outright hypocritical.

So today, I wish all a Happy Mother's Day, or at least a day filled with memories of better times.