
Oildale: Assimilation of Convicted Felons

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The ability to assimilate is often thought to be a simple matter of rejoining society after incarceration, however, for those who are convicted felons, it is anything but. There are many factors that make assimilation difficult and/or impossible. This research takes a dive into individual experiences and stories that give explanations of the difficulties encountered by ex-offenders attempting to assimilate into their home community of Oildale, a small town in central California.

Introduction

Assimilation back into society is generally expected of citizens who have experienced incarceration. There is an expectation that they will conform to specific ideas and behaviors, regardless of different backgrounds, experiences, or paths of life. These different paths include cultural backgrounds, familial units, education and incarceration. The rules of assimilation are set by the society in which we live, but may or may not make it easy for previously incarcerated individuals to rejoin their communities.

Oildale, California is a small town with a high incarceration rate. Kern County, to which Oildale belongs, has a total of 27 jails and prisons and has some of the highest crime rates in the state of California (Kern County 2022).

According to the World Bank, the state of California has a population of over 39 million people (The World Bank 2020). Out of this population, over 2.3 million people are incarcerated in 1,833 state prisons, 110 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,134 local jails, 218 immigration facilities and 80 Indian Country jails (Sawyer and Wagner 2020). There are also military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals and prisons located in the US territories (von Hindenburg 2022, 2).

With this information, are previously incarcerated individuals, specifically those who have been convicted of felonies, given the chance to assimilate?, or do they have the opportunity to assimilate back into the society that convicted them in the first place?

California is the most populated state in America, with plenty of financial and service resources and yet this group is marginalized and underserved. They are marked for life for crimes they have committed in the past and are not given many opportunities or tools to assimilate back into society once they have completed their prison sentence. The United States is a country that brings together people from any and every background and offers freedoms and opportunities that are not available in other countries around the world, and yet, for a myriad of reasons, we are failing these individuals. Their ability to assimilate is assumed, so they are not given considerations and tools that take into account the larger circumstances from which they hail. Without this knowledge and understanding, we, as a society, are setting previously incarcerated convicted felons up for failure.

Human beings are emotional and complex. Our social systems are messy with our rules and expectations. The point of this ethnography is to find out if convicted felons can assimilate after they have returned to the place where they were convicted. In order to understand their situation, there are numerous factors that need to be considered. The considerations range from socio-economic, familial and cultural factors, to addictions, abuse, gangs, lack of education, violence, medical issues, and generational habits that perpetuate the cycle (von Hindenburg 2022, 57).

Abuse

Abuse comes in many forms and is complicated. Out of the 22 interviews I conducted with ex-offenders in Oildale, 6 admitted to being directly exposed to abuse. This childhood exposure to abuse has proven to lead to higher arrest rates (Widom 2017, 188). It also leads to a diminished ability to function and a lack of problem-solving skills (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2019, 3). Childhood exposure to abuse also manifests in the way the victims seek out attention as adults.

Many of the interviews conducted for this project highlighted the consequences of abuse. The interview with Dan and Nikki was one of the more difficult ones. My intention was not to interview these two together. I had planned on interviewing them separately, but this was not how it worked out. Dan and Nikki are a couple and have been together for two years. Dan is quite controlling and Nikki abides by his rules.

Dan and Nikki both grew up in Oildale. Dan grew up in a happy home but was always restless and defensive, aggressive. He always felt like an outcast, even though he was never excluded. Even during the interview with me, he was quite aggressive. He is not a very large man but he is willing to fight for whatever he believes in, whether he is right or wrong. He has been convicted on many charges: assault and battery, domestic abuse, drugs and weapons. He doesn't have legal employment because he currently has a warrant out for his arrest.

Nikki did not have a stable home. Her home life was very fractured. Her father sexually abused her, and when her mother found out she immediately called the police and pressed charges. Nikki speaks very highly of her mother and holds no grudges or blame towards her. It was a huge blow when her mother died from cancer around the time when she was 12. Nikki and her siblings moved around until they settled with her grandmother. While the living quarters and money was tight, love was limitless. Nikki never got into drugs, but she did enjoy drinking and partying. One night after a party, she drove her car into someone's house and was convicted. Nikki did not do any time in prison, but was required to go to rehab and complete many, many hours of community service. She no longer drinks and is now a substance abuse counselor. She has been able to have her record expunged, which opens up more doors for her future.

When I asked what the future held for these two, there were very different reactions. Nikki is simple.

She wants a loving home with a lot of kids. Dan however, has kids and does not want any more. During the interview, I could see the defeat Nikki felt after this conversation. Her eyes were watery and a black eye was starting to show through her fading makeup. The entire interview was completely controlled by Dan. He cut Nikki off and spoke for her. When Nikki did answer or speak, she sought his approval after every answer.

The interview had a significant effect on me: "This is the one interview that broke my heart. It's the one that I wanted to stop in the middle and scream at Dan and steal Nikki away. I wanted to shake her and tell her that she deserves better. That she's worth more than he tells her or allows her to know or feel. I wanted to scream and tell her there are programs to help her and there is someone out there who would fulfill her dream of family and love, and that Dan is not that man. However, I didn't. This is where compartmentalization comes in and this is the part of the process that can be quite difficult" (von Hindenburg 2022, 40).

As is the case with many people who have experienced childhood abuse on some level, all attention is welcome whether it is negative or positive, and these social difficulties coupled with posttraumatic stress are linked to criminal behavior in adults (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2019, 4).

Social Ties

Criminal activities and gangs go hand-in-hand. The relationships with gangs lead to social ties that are often strong but dangerous. The draw to gangs generally comes from a lack of trust in the governmental systems, protection agencies and the fear of victimization (Ross and Jang 2000, 405). Many who are drawn to gangs are also drawn to the camaraderie and to the bonds that are difficult to gain but easily broken.

The first interview I conducted was with a man named Mark. I let him take the lead, and absolutely nothing went as planned. Mark is a small man with a personality that's larger than life. He has an infectious laugh and knows how to draw people in with his exaggerated movements. He talked about his childhood and about how he was drawn to a life of crime. He came from a fractured home and struggles with drug and alcohol addiction.

"He was introduced to crime and gangs from the beginning and never imagined that he would be able to take another path. He felt this was the journey God had given him. Although he's not necessarily a

religious man, he does believe that no matter what, God will always accept him. By the end of the interview, Mark had told me that he was heading back to prison. He was expected to turn himself in to complete an 8-year sentence for a weapons charge. He broke his parole and now has to go back to prison. When I asked him how he felt about it, he just shrugged and stated how ‘that’s life.’ There was no emotion behind it at all. Only acceptance” (von Hindenburg 2022, 20).

I learned that Mark had started in YA (Youth Authority) at the age of 12 and went down for an attempted murder charge by the age of 18. Mark was out for 14 months before going back. He is currently back in prison.

Out of the 22 interviewees, 3 were associated with gangs. All 3 interviewees joined gangs because they wanted to be a part of something where they felt worthy and loved. Even though these 3 interviewees logically understood gangs could lead to a life of crime, the family-like camaraderie meant that they belonged somewhere and meant something to someone.

Drugs and Alcohol

Substance abuse and addiction is often linked to criminal activities and rates (Miller et al. 2006, 333). Out of the 22 interviewees, 21 stated that they struggled with addiction and/or substance abuse issues. Drugs and alcohol are often used to bring people together, and yet they can be quite destructive if the boundaries are crossed into addiction and abuse (Winlow 2007, 373).

“While conducting interviews, every single person mentioned how drugs and/or alcohol brought people together and [bonded them]. It does not mean the best decisions were made but it helped to give a bond to people who felt they had no ties to anyone. There was a mutual feeling of a lack of love and appreciation and these joint activities gave meaning. ‘The use of intoxicants or stimulants is so widespread that it must be regarded as part of normal society. Caffeine is clearly addictive, but it is hard to imagine any culture giving up coffee, Coca-Cola or chocolate. The line between normal social activity and substance misuse cannot be drawn on purely scientific grounds: it depends on social norms’ (Guha 2009)” (von Hindenburg 2022, 61).

The interviews with Burt and Kate were not done jointly one, but their stories are intertwined so I wrote them up together. They’ve been married for 10 years

and clean from hard drugs for 4 years. Unlike Dan and Nikki, there were no problematic issues between them.

Kate was the first woman I interviewed. She is a tiny woman, maybe topping the scales at 110 pounds. Her small face is taken over by her huge almond shaped eyes and loud and infectious laugh. Her eyes hide nothing. She is a very happy woman and can laugh over the smallest thing. Burt is a tall man with a huge bald melon head and large eyes that are set deep in his face. He’s also full of jokes and laughter, very animated.

They were both willing to share anything and everything. For any question I asked, there was an answer. Both Kate and Burt grew up in Oildale and got involved into drugs at a young age. Kate had a more stable childhood, where Burt did not. He got involved in crimes and drugs early on. They didn’t get involved in drugs together but it was something that brought them together as a couple. Kate trafficked drugs across state and country borders and was a high-end prostitute. That’s how she met Burt. It was an instant attraction for both of them.

Both Kate and Burt are convicted felons. Kate was convicted for drug trafficking and Burt was convicted for drugs, violence and gang related crimes. They both struggle with addiction and they both have found solace in rehab and church. According to Kate, “Addiction is tough. Once you’re an addict, you’ll always be an addict. You just replace one addiction with another. It doesn’t matter what it is. It could be working out or diet soda. Addiction is exactly that” (von Hindenburg 2022, 49).

Eventually, they both cleaned up their lives. They had two kids and Kate was been the driving force with the ultimatums. She wanted to do better not only for their future but for the future of their children as well. While both Kate and Burt were happy, they yearned for more. Kate wanted to go back to school to finish the requirements for her drugs and alcohol counseling certificate and Burt wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to do next but he knew he wanted something more. Overall, the both of them felt blessed to be able to get out of the cycle of drug usage, instability and crime.

Sadly, a few months after this interview, Burt is using drugs again and has been abusive towards Kate. She pressed charges against him and is filing for divorce. Kate seems to be doing well and wants no part of the cycle that has consumed so much of their lives.

Education

For this research, I broke education down into two categories. One category being high school and higher education and the second category being those who had earned certificates.

“There are many reasons as to why education is important. Not only does it help give a person stability but it helps to hone in on skills like critical thinking and it helps to build and reach goals we set for ourselves” (von Hindenburg 2022, 61).

When it came to the completion of high school 16 out of the 22 interviewees had accomplished this and 4 went on to higher education and/or certificates. The thing I found interesting about the correlation between level of education and crime rates was that as a whole, there isn't much research available, while on the individual scale, there was usable data.

The scale of education with the 22 interviews was inconsistent, with no correlation between education and partaking in criminal activities. However, it did get me thinking about zero-tolerance policies in the education system and the school-to-prison pipeline that so many kids from marginalized communities end up becoming a part of.

Zero-tolerance policies are based on pre-determined punishments or consequences to a behavior regardless of the severity of the offense. Even though the initial intent of zero-tolerance policies were aimed at preventing violence and other problematic behaviors, in many cases zero-tolerance policies have been inappropriately implemented as students are removed from school for relatively inconsequential infractions. (Palmer 2019, n.p.)

This was not something I tackled in this ethnography, but there is a well known association between being raised in a marginalized community and ending up in prison, whether it's because of economic status, familial ties or color of their skin.

I had one interviewee who had access to advanced education. Sam is someone I have known for many years. Sam's story is quite interesting. He is currently in his 50s and happily married with many children. Sam comes from a very supportive family and he has an advanced education. His parents paid for his college education and paid for him to travel the world. However, Sam was exposed to drugs in college and found himself drawn in. When I asked Sam about his

college experience he stated, “I was so doped out, I don't remember much. Even on the day of graduation I would sneak away for quick bumps of coke” (von Hindenburg 2022, 28).

Sam's life quickly spiraled out of control after college. It started with drugs charges and escalated to drugs and weapons. In the beginning, his parents bailed him out of trouble by hiring lawyers and paying the bail to get him out of jail, however, lessons were not learned and charges kept coming, and finally Sam's parents put an end to their support.

Fast forward to today and Sam is doing well. He is 12 years clean. He hasn't even had a traffic ticket. He is happily married with loads of kids. His wife works while he stays home with the kids. He is very proud of his House Husband status. After years of difficulties, Sam has done well to forge a path that is completely different than his previous life. He has a loving and supportive wife, parents who are still a major support system, and a whole gaggle of kids who are loud and happy and bring much joy to his life.

Again, there does not seem to be a real correlation between education level and a life of crime. Sam had all the cards stacked in his favor and yet he was drawn to a life that was completely opposite of what he had been shown.

Family

When it came to the familial background of the interviewees, the scale bounced around from loving and supportive homes to fractured homes and time spent in foster homes and youth authority. Fifty percent of the interviewees came from fractured and/or abusive homes. This doesn't indicate a strong correlation between family and criminal activities.

There are two interviews that have similar outcomes and yet their family lives are drastically different: Carrie and Frank. Carrie mentioned that her childhood and homelife growing up was perfect. Her father worked in the oilfields and her mom was a homemaker so there were never any issues of abandonment. She has three siblings and was never abused. She grew up in a supportive and loving home but struggled with many things from early on. Like her father, she struggles with alcohol addiction. She also struggles with her ability to build and maintain relationships of any kind and she mentioned that she has mental illness issues, but didn't elaborate. When Carrie is sober, she is the kindest, gentlest and friendliest person. When she drinks, she is loud and

aggressive. Carrie is a large woman standing at 6'0" tall and topping the scale at 250 pounds, and she uses that size as a tool to intimidate others. Carrie has been charged with multiple DUIs, assault, and threatening to kill others. She has spent time in prison for these convictions and her addiction issues combined with her mental health issues have made for disastrous results. In prison, she received no type of help, and on the outside she struggles with her ability to trust the professionals who are meant to assist with her needs.

On the other hand, Frank grew up in a completely different manner. Frank has never had stability or a life without crime. He was raised in the foster care system with no knowledge of who his biological father is and no connection with his biological mother. Frank states that he's never been abused, nor has he been loved or supported. Frank committed his first crime (robbery and assault) at the age of 11 and was sent to Youth Authority (YA). From there he was introduced to drugs and gangs and this set the course of his life. He has battled with addiction and crime throughout his life and sees no change in the future. Frank states that, "even though gangs help with connections, no one cares about you and this makes you not give a shit about yourself. Who cares if I die? No one" (von Hindenburg 2022, 23).

These are two examples of different familial backgrounds and yet the outcome is similar. There does not seem to be a direct connection between familial support and crime. Carrie had a supportive and loving home and Frank did not, and yet their lives somewhat mirrored one another. Family influence is definitely on a case-by-case basis.

Poverty

Poverty and crime tend to go hand-in-hand. However, for this ethnography the sample size is too small to make that judgement. Still, according to other research, "being poor put youth at a higher risk for delinquent activities and childhood family poverty and neighborhood poverty put youth at a higher risk of delinquent behavior which leads to being arrested as an adult" (Widom 2017, 189). Both familial and neighborhood poverty leads to a negative effect on psycho-social adjustments (Berti and Pivetti 2019, 124). This in turn can lead to someone seeking out camaraderie and companionship on any level available, which may draw them to affiliations with criminal activities" (von Hindenburg 2022, 63).

Again, it is camaraderie and bonding that we seek as emotionally driven creatures. If we know others who have the same struggles, it's easy to fall in line with certain lifestyle choices. According to Mark, "when you grow up with the bare minimum, you want things. You want all things. You want the best of the best and you'll do whatever you can to get that" (von Hindenburg 2022, 19).

Life in the System

Only 4 out of the 22 spent their youth in the system on some level, to include the foster care system and Youth Authority. For those raised in the system, there does seem to be some amount of dependency on the state, as it was forced onto them as children, and at the same time there is a large amount of distrust because of the lack of consistency between the different agencies.

As mentioned previously, Frank who is 29 years of age has spent only about 3 years from the age of 11 to 29 out of the system. He was placed in YA when he was 11 and has continued his dependency on the system, in some way, shape, or form. He sees it as a sort of safety net. The rules are simple and he knows what to expect when he gets locked up again. The question is never if he'll be locked up, it's only a matter of when. Since he was introduced to a life of crime at such a young age, this is the path he feels he was meant to be on. Frank doesn't necessarily trust the system, but since it's all he's known for most of his life there's a level of comfort that isn't available elsewhere.

Violence

I expected this number to be higher. Ten out of the twenty-two interviewees had been exposed to violence as children and it came in many forms. The main forms were either they were abused themselves or they were exposed to domestic violence (of someone else), but usually it was a combination of both. According to Widom, exposure to neglect and childhood abuse helps to promote the continuation of the cycle of abuse in adults (Widom 2017, 187).

"According to the ten interviewees, there was a continuous insecurity in feeling unloved and/or unwanted and with this, they sought out attention in any way they could find it. Often times the attention that was received was negative. When there is a cycle of abuse, any attention is better than no attention at all. Childhood victimization can lead to post traumatic

stress disorder (PTSD), other health and mental issues and instabilities, substance abuse and further incarceration as adults (Greene et al., 2014, 1570)” (von Hindenburg 2022, 64).

This was apparent in many of the interviews. In the case of Dan and Nikki, she remained loyal to the Dan and the attention she received from him because any attention is a validation that she was seen. The makeup covered black eye and tense atmosphere was frustrating to me as an outsider but it made me realize that abuse is a major factor in the choices that are made.

The Ability to Assimilate

Each of the nine issues stated impact a persons’ ability to assimilate.

“To assimilate is to become part of a different group, to adapt and/or adjust. These adaptations or adjustments are not necessarily what has happened. Out of the twenty-two interviewees, fifteen have assimilated to life outside of prison and for a majority of the fifteen this assimilation has happened back in their old stomping ground in Oildale. This is not to say that they are law abiding citizens, this simply means that they are doing enough to not get caught breaking the law so they are not sent back to prison” (von Hindenburg 2022, 64). Much like most things in life, assimilation is not a black and white issue. It is a gray area with multiple layers.

Anna had her first child by the age of 14 and came from an abusive home. She had never been in trouble or caused any issues, but things never came easy for her. She had multiple children by multiple men. She barely made it through high school, but has always been a hard worker. This all changed around the age of 26. According to Anna,

I was out partying and I was wasted. I was off from work for the weekend and I was taking advantage of my time off. All my kids were being taken care of so I decided to let loose. I was at a friend’s house so I thought I was safe. I ended up hooking up with a random guy and next thing I know, I’m so wasted I’m allowing him to slam me up with dope. At this time, I had never done anything more than smoke weed and drink. That was it. I became addicted. Next thing you know I’m turning tricks and doing shit I never imagined. I’m trafficking drugs and weapons. I lost the kids I had and the kids I would end up having. I was arrested and charged and now

I’m a goddamn felon all for what? Fucking drugs. Now, I see my kids periodically and I’m dealing with addiction. I’ve been clean for a few years but damn, it’s a disaster how quick my life spiraled out of control. I now live in a dumpy apartment and my ability to earn a living is limited. I also continue to surround myself with dirtbags. I can’t seem to get away from it. When I’m around people who don’t live this lifestyle, I feel as if I’m being judged. (von Hindenburg 2022, 21)

Anna has relentlessly tried to move forward but she continually feels as if she simply can’t. Her education is limited, as is her work history. Anna feels as if her past is dictating her future and she cannot cut ties with Oildale, so the vicious cycle continues. This interview encompasses so many of the aspects mentioned in this research. Anna has assimilated in her own way and is able to do what she needs to do to make ends meet and to stay off the radar of the authoritative agencies. But she is far from doing well in her personal and family life.

Another example of the complexity of assimilation is my interview with Jason. Jason was my final interview and one that is extremely personal. It was the one interview that I was a bit reluctant to take part in. Jason and I have an entire lifetime of friendship, and I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to compartmentalize. However, I also felt this connection would work well to get the point across. I am taking this entire interview from the original source:

As I’m standing in line at the grocery store, I hear my name being bellowed across the store. I know that voice. I would know that voice anywhere. I look over and there he is. All 6’6” and 300 lbs. of him. He has tattoos on his face, neck, arms, hands and most of his body. He is loud and happy, always laughing and joking. He has a damaged body. One that has years of drugs, fights and abuse written all over it. He has a partial plate of teeth since he lost some of his in fights. All 300 lbs. runs up to me and hugs me. He picks me up and laughs from excitement. It’s Jason. Jason and I haven’t seen each other in a few years but we’ve always kept in touch. Jason and I have known each other since we were about 5 years old. He was a fat, shy kid. One that was a bit insecure. I, on the other hand, have always been a bit more on the extrovert side and we meshed together from day one. We were always friends. There was never any question about it. His

dad, like a majority of male figures in The Dale, worked in the oilfields. His mom worked in retail and eventually opened her own fishing shop. We were always welcomed at each other's houses and treated like siblings. We grew up fairly close to one another. We could walk to each others' house. His brother was a few years younger than us so he was always forced on us. We laugh about that now, but when Jason and I were kids, it would annoy us. Jason began to change once we hit high school. As I mentioned before, he was always a bigger guy and shy. He did get picked on a bit and as we hit high school, he was done with it. Jason turned to The Dale and started getting into trouble. He began getting into trouble and running with kids who were into drugs. Jason's parents tried everything to change his path and he just refused the help. This led to a very long journey into incarceration and drugs. (von Hindenburg 2022, 50-51)

As I mentioned previously, I was not planning on interviewing Jason. I felt the connection was too close and personal. However, when I told Jason about this project, he jumped at the chance. He seems to think our connection will make it even better since I'm not an outsider. I figured, why not?

Jason: Whatchu wanna know, sis? Hell, you can probably answer any question you have with your own answers. Your Dalian [from Oildale, or The Dale] ass is from here. You know how and what it is.

Me: No, I know things from my perspective. I don't know anything from your perspective. We grew up together but we've led very different lives. I can't tell you what you know or feel. That's for you to tell.

Jason: Damn sis, look at that college education! Haha! Dalians aren't supposed to be smart.

Me: Haha! You're a clown! Let's go!

Jason: Okay, okay. I'm an open book for ya sis.

Me: Righty-O! Tell me, why you chose to drop out of school and hang with the "bad kids"? I mean, you had a bit more of an opportunity than the rest of us.

Jason: You know my parents were quite tough on us. My mom, all 5'0" of her, had no issue beating the living shit out of us. You know, both of my parents were really tough on us. There was no affection. We were boys, it was a different time. Tough love and all that.

Me: But your dad worked very long hours, so it was your mom who was the disciplinarian.

Jason: Yeah, all of us had households like that. There was no affection, just discipline. It was normal. We were all abused in some way. Hell sis, your house was no different.

Me: Yeah, all of us Dalians had similar childhoods. But what was the catalyst? Why did you veer the way you did?

Jason: I was just looking for acceptance. The drugs scene and the druggies in the scene are quick to accept especially if you're doing the same dumb shit. I always had friends and I wasn't lonely.

Me: Did you ever feel like the friends you had in these circles were really your friends?

Jason: They were my friends at the moment. Hell, I'm clean now and I couldn't tell you where these people are. I cut everyone off to stay clean too.

Me: I'm so glad you're clean and doing better.

Jason: Who are you tellin'? I lost everything in that world. I couldn't be happier now.

Me: You're now gone from The Dale. Would it have been possible to stay clean and sober here?

Jason: Hell no. I tried numerous times over the years to clean up and go straight. I would have successful times. I worked in the patch [oilfields] with my dad and was a bigger presence in my daughter's life but I would always go back to it. Hell, I couldn't even raise my daughter. She got screwed. Her mom and I were both complete screwups. Good thing my mom stepped up to raise her or she would've been lost in the system going through who knows what.

Me: Why did you leave? What was the final straw?

Jason: Sis, you know what happened.

Me: Nope, you need to tell me in your own words. This is your story.

Jason: Okay, well I was living in this doublewide trailer with some girl that was my "wife". She was h-bombed out [heroin addicted/high on heroin] and the place was a mess. I never did heroin, but I was doing meth and pills and drinking. I wasn't doing any better than her. Next thing I know the cops are busting through the damn door. I knew I was going down for this. I'm already a convicted felon. I haven't been to prison but I've spent some time in county. My parents have always helped me with lawyers and all that so I've always been lucky. But damn, not this time. They got all the agencies out there to bust my ass. I'm compliant because what the

hell else am I gonna do? I call my parents and my dad tells me that he's done. I'm 35 years old and I need to figure it out. I'm about to go down for drugs and weapons and I got some chick h-bombed out on my couch. I got dogs barking and screeching in front of the trailer and my life is a goddamn mess. I know, this is it for me. I gotta get clean and get the hell outta here. So they take me to county and my parents, brother and my so-called friends are not responding to me at all. I tried to call you but you were out of the country so I called your mom. She came to county and was just there for me.

Me: I know, she told me a bit of what was going on. I then called your parents and told them what she had told me. They told me they had washed their hands of you. They were done with cleaning up your messes.

Jason: That is what finished me. Even though they didn't agree with my lifestyle, they had always been there. There was only a few of you left so this was the moment I was done with all of it. So anyway, I was charged and I got a really light sentence. I don't know how. I thought for sure I was going down. I was sentenced to four years and only served one and half years. God was looking out for me, that's for damn sure. I had six months of parole to finish out. During this time, I stayed at my parents and didn't go anywhere unless I was with one of them. Can you imagine that crap? Almost 40 years old and having my parents escort me everywhere because I have no control. I've seen so many die and get eaten alive, I had to get out and get away.

Me: So, how did you decide on where to go? And how to get there?

Jason: We all spent our childhoods hunting and fishing. Our dads were out there, you were out there. This is how we spent our childhoods and it's something that's enjoyable. I had been a few times to Idaho to hunt and fish and I really enjoyed it, so I chose to go there. I came up with a plan and talked to my parents about it. I worked for my dad to save up the money and my dad made a few connections in the area so I was able to find work fairly easy. The money is good and the work is consistent. It keeps me busy and I love it. I can hunt and fish, there are actual seasons and the people are nice.

Me: Do you think you'll ever move back?

Jason: [At this point, Jason looks at me like I've got snakes coming out of my head.] What in the hell do you think sis? It's bad enough I have to come back to visit my family. I'm trying to get my daughter

and dad to come live up there with me. My dad wants to come up as soon as he retires and my daughter is 18, so she's all over the place. Since mom died, dad is selling the house and he's ready to get things in order to go. I'm shocked you came back to be honest.

Me: Life throws curve balls. You just gotta roll with them. What are your next steps?

Jason: I'm staying in Idaho. I ain't never moving back. Even my visits are less and less. I'm hoping dad moves up, but we will see. Right now, I'm happy in my life. I'm clean and have been for 5 years. I have a good job, money and a girlfriend who is not the same type of girl I dated here. She has her own career. The best way to describe her is she's nice and caring. No drama.

Me: It's such a huge difference from before and I'm so proud of you. You've really done well. It's nice to see you happy and successful in your life. There are no more late-night hospital calls or calls from lockup.

Jason: Don't be gettin' all sappy on me sis! Haha!

Me: Haha! Ohhh lord! Thanks for telling me your story, Jason. I really appreciate you opening up.

Jason: Well, you know all this but you're welcome. (von Hindenburg 2022, 55)

California has a recidivism rate of 50% (State Recidivism Comparison 2022). This means that 50% of convicted criminals relapse and reoffend, or repeat crimes from their past. In order to break this cycle, they need support from multiple avenues (Widom 2017, 193). However, if they are returning to the same area where their criminal activities took place, then they are not likely to receive what they need to stay out of trouble. Difficulties with navigating the legal system along with a subculture riddled with crime make it hard to get away from a previous lifestyle. So, to the question: Is it possible to assimilate back into society if this is where the crimes have been committed? The answer is, yes, however the meaning of assimilation may vary and much support is needed.

The Role of Religion

As previously mentioned, human beings are emotional and complex. All the various factors that I investigated were inconclusive in terms of predicting who would and would not end up on a criminal path. Moreover, the meaning of assimilation varied. Still, there is another factor to consider, that of religion.

Religious beliefs or ethics were mentioned a few times during the interviews but not in an exact manner. There were mentions of God and church, but nothing too extensive. For instance, two interviewees, Kate and Jason, felt more at ease when they were connected to a higher power, but did not say much more than that.

“When it comes to their belonging and attendance to a church, they tend to gravitate to what I like to call outlying churches. These churches tend to be Christian churches, but they are not as strict as some of the more populated churches, for example, Catholicism. These outlying churches have a higher population of attendees who have rediscovered religion or discovered a new belief system for the first time. There may be a high number of recovering addicts, a high number of people who have been incarcerated, or who are looking for belonging and acceptance without outrageous expectations. They are also extremely involved with rehabilitation and outreach programs” (von Hindenburg 2022, 68).

In Oildale, these churches set up services that cater to the community. They have hygiene services, food kitchens, medical services and other types of outreach programs that may offer opportunities for betterment for the future. These churches tend to have a higher level of acceptance without judgment in comparison to the more mainstream stricter churches. There are levels of forgiveness and understanding of the difficulties that so many people struggle with in life.

Conclusion

As I previously mentioned, the information gathered through this ethnographic research surprised me despite having grown up in Oildale myself. The various personal journeys of my informants were all enlightening and meaningful to me because they described different pathways emerging out of the same societal context. In terms of my own pathway,

“I grew up in Oildale. I am quite familiar with the negative aspects that are associated with The Dale. Although I never got involved with drugs or crime, most of the people I grew up with and knew did get involved and I did witness the devastating consequences because of these actions. I am also aware of the subculture of The Dale. There is a multigenerational reliance on social programs while, at the same time, there is also the attitude that is anti-government, anti-police and anti-authority. It’s an interesting combination. I am also quite familiar with the poverty that so many of us grew up with. Crime,

drugs and low socioeconomic status are often times associated with one another” (von Hindenburg 2022, 72).

One thing I did learn from the experience of doing this research was that we all crave support. We all want to be part of something. This is what allowed me to make different decisions from those I grew up with. I had familial support to take different chances and to forge my own path. A majority of the interviewees did not have this kind of support.

In addition, my idea of assimilation changed throughout this project. It is situational as well as individualized in subcultures such as this one, and the number of factors that need to be considered seems endless. It’s easy to sit back and judge and make comments about how things could have been done differently, however that is not always possible for everyone. Assimilation is a process. It’s one that requires patience and understanding and allowance for errors. As a society, we have completely failed this marginalized community. Without support, the right kind of support, those in difficulty in Oildale cannot move forward in life. Societies are meant to be inclusive, not exclusive. If support is not offered and opportunities are not available, then we will continue to perpetuate the cycle of exclusion which results in devastating consequences for those excluded.

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