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Innocent Families of Wrongdoers Hurt

THE campaign for leniency being waged by families of former county commissioners convicted of accepting bribes and kickbacks shows how innocent people suffer even from non-violent crimes.

The fact that county commissioners were elected by voters who probably believed them to be honest and reliable men reflects their standing in their communities. Families of public officials share in whatever prestige the offices may afford.

Families also probably shared in higher living standards that the kickbacks made possible, very likely without asking or knowing how those things were available on a commissioner's salary.

Family members unknowingly participated in the loot but they are very conscious of their share of the shame and ignominy resulting from imprisonment of those who violated the public trust.

This is regrettable but it does not alleviate the wrongfulness of the stealing that went on. Neither do claims that "everybody was doing it" and that kickbacks were a tradi-

tional way of doing business.

Much of the argument the families offer for leniency for the commissioners is based upon discrepancies in degree of punishment imposed by courts and juries.

Such discrimination has been a public problem ever since laws were enacted to deter wrongdoing by appropriate punishment. Lawyers used to have a saying about how much easier it was to convict a poor man than a rich one but civil rights rulings have just about made it impossible to get either to serve his full time now.

Back in the 1930s when I was reporting for The Ada News a jury imposed a sentence of five years on a convicted murderer. Another jury in the same term of court recommended a 25-year sentence for a bootlegger who was convicted of hijacking a rival bootlegger of his illegal whiskey. Similar inequities occur frequently.

Just as each person ought to be rewarded for the good he or she may do, so each is responsible for deliberate wrongs that may be commit-

ted. Our system of law enforcement admittedly frees known criminals on legal technicalities, trades off punishment by suspended sentences and plea bargaining, and uses a "revolving door" procedure for premature release of those wrongdoers who are sent to prison.

These weaknesses should not provide license for other individuals to commit murder, steal public funds, rob homes or stores, or commit other "white collar crimes" or crimes of violence.

Those contemplating a crime ought to consider possible results of their misdeeds in advance. Chances are they nearly always figure they won't be caught and if caught, they won't be punished.

They should ponder the possibility that they could receive realistic punishment. They also should meditate upon effects their acts could have on parents, children and others who trust them.

There is no such thing as a victimless crime. Far too often victims are persons that wrongdoers have no intention of hurting.