

Prison Without Bars: The Experiences of Families Affected by Imprisonment

in brief

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Key Points

- Imprisonment is a family experience
- An estimated 13,500 children a year in Scotland are separated from an imprisoned parent
- Much of the damage to the families is caused by the arrest and imprisonment itself, regardless of the length of time a prisoner spends in custody
- Families need recognition and support for their own needs in the community and for their role in supporting their relative in prison and on release

The evidence base

Research now recognises that families can play an important part in helping prisoners through their sentences and in contributing to sentence management and prison regimes. Prisoners with family support cope better during imprisonment and are less likely to reoffend upon release than those who do not. What is less clear is what support and intervention is helpful for families of people in prison.

At the end of 2003, the Tayside Criminal Justice Partnership and Families Outside embarked upon research into the specific needs of prisoners' families. After commissioning a review of the literature internationally, they conducted a scoping study of the needs of families in the Tayside area who maintain contact with their relative in prison. Fifty families took part in the research, 13 of whom took part in more depth with telephone interviews and a further 6 in a group discussion.

This briefing summarises the findings from both parts of the project.

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The imprisonment of a family member clearly has a significant impact on those left outside. Families are unwilling participants in a system they find intimidating, disempowering, and utterly frustrating; they may have no experience, no control, and no voice. Some may in turn become victims themselves through circumstances which they cannot control and are no fault of their own.

The impact of imprisonment

For prisoners, separation from family can be the most painful consequence of incarceration. Families suffer the pain of separation but also feel the impact of imprisonment in other ways, such as loss of income, loss of home, shame, problems with transport¹ and anti-social behaviour by children in distress.

There is significant international evidence of the short, medium and long term impact on children and young people who lose a parent or carer to imprisonment with damage to their emotional, social and educational development. Older children may have to take on additional family responsibilities – perhaps for younger children – as the remaining adult struggles to cope.

Many parents choose not to tell children (or the school) about the imprisonment of a family member, but children often realise it themselves or hear about the imprisonment from another source before they have the opportunity to understand about it or to ask questions. The experience of loss has been compared to that of an unresolved grief for children.

Children of imprisoned parents are themselves at higher risk of imprisonment in later life.

All families suffer the impact of imprisonment whether they maintain contact with their relative inside or not. For families who do maintain contact, the lack of information about visits and visiting procedures, inconvenient visiting times, perceptions of staff attitudes, the prison environment, and drug detection procedures can all act as disincentives to prison visits. Families are rarely included in a prisoner's preparation for release from custody, despite the fact that release can be a particularly stressful and frightening period. The likely difficulty in finding employment, financial problems, learning to live together again as a couple, sexual anxieties, and worries about relationships with children emphasise the need for support for prisoners and their families at the pre-release stage, especially for sentenced prisoners.

The overall picture is that most families need material assistance and support for their own needs in their own right throughout the period of imprisonment, regardless of its duration.

Most difficult aspects of imprisonment for families

The Tayside families views:

worry about the prisoner

88%

separation from the prisoner

77%

worry about what will happen after release

60%

cost of travel for visits

56%

lack of information

44%

lack of support

40%

what to tell others

38%

transportation to the prison

38%

The emotional and financial costs

Most damage to families following imprisonment appears to be to their emotional health: in the Tayside research, about two-thirds believed the emotional well-being of themselves and their family was worse off. (Some research points to 33% of children affected by imprisonment suffering a mental health problem by contrast to 10% in the general population). Almost as many people believed they had suffered financially due to the imprisonment (59% for themselves, and 45% for other family members). Significant numbers also reported being worse off in terms of their physical health and safety (a number of families were under threat from victims or the victim's friends and family), social and family life, state benefits, and family support. The relationship with the person they were visiting was a particular concern with regard to others in the family (41%), though 23% believed that the relationship had improved for themselves.

“I don't feel that I get enough time to spend with my partner as I would like. I think it would be a good idea if he had less visits but more time on one visit as I cannot afford to travel all the time, and he can't afford to phone me a lot.”

1. Transport survey: A Review of Services for Families Accessing Scottish Prisons, Families Outside 2003

“My family has been torn apart, my wife and I have separated, my daughter and her family’s relationship with myself is very strained and her relationship with her mother is over.”

What families want

Families clearly experience a number of difficulties, but the majority of responses suggest that the direct impact of imprisonment – namely separation from a loved one and barriers to contact with that person – is the most trying for them. Better provision of information, particularly with regard to release and preparation for this, stood out as a priority. Family contact, especially good quality contact, was also a prominent request.

By far the most common avenues of support for families in Tayside were family (69%) and friends (59%). Other resources such as Visitors’ Centres were used where these were available, but often families were frustrated with more formal avenues of support. Families did not necessarily sense a lack of support from such groups so much as the fact that families did not know who to turn to at initial custody, during imprisonment, and in preparation for release. The quest for information seemed to be a constant battle for them.

“just left completely in the dark ... (it’s) always ‘pass the buck, pass the buck’, put on to someone else ... just like a vicious circle ... like nobody cares.”

Access to information was crucial, but the families agreed that they just needed to know where they could go for information, at which point they could decide for themselves what they wanted to do.

Information is needed at all stages of the Criminal Justice process from arrest through to release. It needs to be age appropriate and an overall strategy must encompass:

- factual information on criminal justice processes and procedures;
- access to specific information on the relative;
- access to information relating to the family situation e.g. benefits, housing, social welfare issues.

Beyond basic information families want support and understanding for their own stressful situation, help for children in distress, financial and practical support.

Families in the Tayside Project identified gaps such as:

- a network of more locally based support such as a Family Support Group;
- more awareness of existing support such as prison based Family Contact Development Officers, Families Outside and the Scottish Prisoners’ Families Helpline;
- more participation in prison-based activities, sentence planning, and resettlement.

Needs for support The Tayside families views:

.....
preparation for release
64%

.....
information about support for the prisoner after release
60%

.....
more information about the prisoner
55%

.....
advice about how to keep the prisoner out of trouble in the future
50%

.....
better quality of contact
48%

.....
more contact with the person inside
43%

.....
more information about the prison
41%

.....
someone to talk to
34%

Examples of good practice are in evidence internationally and prison services throughout the UK have made progress towards improving family contact in recent years eg play facilities in visits halls/Visitors' Centres although provision remains patchy and many schemes depend largely on the initiative and enthusiasm of a few dedicated staff.

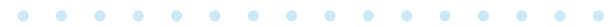
In addition a number of organisations both within and outwith the criminal justice system can be useful in the support of prisoners' families, but their remits do not usually identify prisoners' families specifically as a target group. The failure of so many general support services to recognise and plan specifically for prisoners' families as part of their remit seems to be an important oversight.

Often the need is not so much to fill gaps as to strengthen the resources already available and make it accessible as fear of stigma or lack of awareness often prevent families from accessing the supports that do exist.

In conclusion

Both parts of the Tayside Families project point to the same conclusion, as it is eloquently articulated by the family member of a prisoner in Denmark, the experience of losing a family member to imprisonment is akin to being in a "Prison Without Bars".

The individual, family and social costs are clear. As a matter of urgency, assistance in the maintenance of family ties and support for prisoners' families should become a standard part of the regime in prisons as well as an acknowledged remit of a range of organisations outside.



This briefing is based on the following reports available from Families Outside:

Loucks, N. (2004) 'Prison Without Bars': Needs, support, and good practice for work with Prisoners' Families.

Loucks, N. (2004) The Tayside Family Project.



This publication has been produced by Families Outside with the support of the Tayside Criminal Justice Partnership

Families Outside provide a free confidential national Helpline available to anyone who has a family member or friend in custody in Scotland which enables and empowers families by offering information, support and a signposting service.

We undertake research, development and deliver training independently and in partnership with a range of agencies which have a role to play in meeting the needs of families affected by imprisonment. We work positively with the Scottish Prison Service, Scottish Executive, Local Authorities and other statutory and voluntary bodies in order to achieve positive change for families affected by imprisonment.

Scottish Prisoners Families Helpline
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