

Prisoners' Families: The Value of Family Support Work

with Dr Liz Brutus

in brief

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Key points

- Individual support for families of prisoners continues to show benefits and to demonstrate a need for this work.
- Poor emotional and mental wellbeing are prominent concerns for families of prisoners.
- In most cases, families of prisoners do not otherwise access support.
- Children and families continue to be difficult for workers to identify and access unless structured means for this are in place.
- Wider opportunities for engagement with families are available, though these are likely to require informed and proactive support.

Background

In 2006, In Brief 3 from Families Outside highlighted the positive support that the Lighthouse Foundation and HOPE provided to families of prisoners. The briefing showed that support was clearly of value to those who received it and that families accessed support for issues they had often never discussed with anyone before. Access to such support was patchy, but the need for it was clear.

Since then, support for families has expanded considerably. Notably, Circle has had remarkable success in their 'whole family' approach to support for prisoners and their families. Other locally-based projects have also commenced in recent years, such as the Inside Out project in Lanarkshire and the Positive Relationships Programme at HMP Barlinnie (commissioned for Routes Out Of Prison (ROOP) and delivered jointly by the prison and Relationships Scotland). The Lighthouse Foundation has also added two children's counsellors to their services for families.

In 2008, Families Outside began delivering direct support to families affected by imprisonment to fill the gaps in provision. The addition of two more workers in 2010 means that direct support is now available to families of prisoners throughout Scotland.

This briefing paper draws on the findings from the first two years of Families Outside's direct support to families. It highlights the reasons families need support, the type of support offered and how families access that support. It also draws on research by Dr Liz Brutus for Families Outside into the benefits of support to families of prisoners. The briefing then concludes with proposals for ways of supporting and involving children and families further in future.

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"I am very grateful for all the support you have given me and for listening to me. You have no idea how much it helps me."

Why families need support

Families of prisoners seek support for a variety of reasons, the most common of which is emotional support – more specifically for poor emotional and mental wellbeing, or “feeling unable to cope anymore”. Issues relating to children and families are also prevalent, as are queries about prison issues, visits, finances, housing and substance misuse. Almost half of families who receive direct support from Families Outside report issues relating to either physical or mental health and wellbeing, including emotional difficulties, bereavement, self-harm and substance misuse.

Despite the range of issues, families of prisoners tend not to access support on their own. Pugh and Lanskey (2011) found that 72% of families visiting prisons were not receiving support from any outside agency, despite the many issues they faced as a result of their family member’s imprisonment. In addition, the social isolation of these families meant that almost half (43%) had no one they could turn to for help (Smith et al. 2007).

Families of prisoners clearly struggle to engage with community-based supports, whether due to lack of awareness of these supports, difficulty pinpointing their own needs, or fear to seek support due to the stigma of having a family member in prison. Family support workers therefore create connections for families to agencies best placed to support them. Such agencies are as diverse as the National Autistic Society, Women’s Aid and Royal National Institute for the Blind as well as health services and GPs, Community Addiction and mental health teams, Financial Fitness, Child Contact Centres and many more.

“You are the first person who has ever asked me how I am and how I have coped with what has happened, who has actually listened to how I am feeling and what I have to say. I wasn’t the one who [committed the crime], but I am being made to pay the price, and it never ends. I just want some peace.”



Support offered to families

Family Support Staff at Families Outside aim to ensure that families have:

- increased awareness about the criminal justice process;
- improved access to practical support; and
- increased ability to cope.

Family Support staff work with families in a number of ways. Face-to face and telephone contact are the most common ways of addressing the needs of families, followed by support through liaison or contact with other agencies on their behalf or signposting to an appropriate service. In most cases such approaches are enough to resolve the issues families faced, though some families’ issues are long standing and not likely to be resolved in the short term.

Each referral receives one-to-one tailored support, determined by the needs of the family. While many issues can be resolved through provision of information or links with specialist services, support can easily be more complex and long-term. This has included accompanying under-age visitors into prison; attending court, case conferences and Children’s Hearings with families; and assistance with housing, application forms for training courses and Benefits.

Even where this support does not resolve long-standing or deeply embedded issues such as mental health, it can improve a family’s situation enough to make it more bearable. One family member in Brutus’ research rated her mental health as ‘very bad’ but said this was an improvement over the previous year, when she had been suicidal. For her, the Family Support Worker was “Like a fairy godmother. She doesn’t tell me what to do but advises on what’s available.”

“ I have worked all my life and always paid my own way, and now I am in a position where it is costing me to go to work! Thank you so much for the money [Hardship Fund]. I can’t tell you how much this means to me. I know this is not a lot of money to some people, but right now to me it’s like I’ve won the lottery.”

Support is offered more broadly to families as well, such as through Family Induction or information sessions on processes such as Integrated Case Management and Home Detention Curfew.

As staff build relations with the families they support, they also gain a fuller picture of the help their clients need. Dr Brutus' research found, for example, that families reported adverse impacts on their mental health and wellbeing due to the imprisonment but that they had not recognised this as a health issue or realised that they could access support for it.

Access to support

Families of prisoners do not readily seek support due to the stigma attached to having a family member in prison as well as lack of awareness or trust of available supports. Accessing families to offer support can consequently prove very challenging.

Prison visitors' centres provide a crucial means of identifying people who have a family member in prison, even if this only identifies those who are willing and able to visit. Importantly such centres also reduce the barriers of stigma and shame, as families do not need to explain why they are there. In these cases most referrals come from the families themselves, from staff at the visitors' centre, or from the prison's Family Contact Officers.

Where such centres do not exist, referrals come from the Families Outside Support & Information Helpline or from other agencies. In recent years, the ROOP partnership has been a key source of referrals, through prisoners who sign up for ROOP and, more recently, through prisoner induction sessions upon entry to custody.

Of interest is that the issues for which families seek support reflects the source of referral. Referrals from prison visitors' centres are more frequently for prison-based issues and information, followed by emotional support, questions regarding visits and financial help for this, housing, and concerns for children or other family-related issues. Referrals through ROOP, in contrast, are predominantly about concerns for family and children. This is most likely because these referrals come from (ex) prisoners and the life coaches working with them, neither of whom deal with the more day-to-day issues families face in maintaining contact with someone in prison.

“I brought my grandson up, and I was completely devastated when he was sent to prison; it was like a death in the family. I can't tell you what your support means to me. Just having someone to talk to helps me sort things out in my head and cope a little better.”



Potential for development

Support for families affected by imprisonment has only recently extended throughout Scotland and still has scope for development. Identifying and sustaining regular sources of referral would be a huge improvement in view of the difficulty in accessing families to offer the support they need. Referral should not have to depend on requests for this from prisoners, or even on a family member's attendance at prison visits.

The impact of support for families in difficult circumstances can be difficult to 'measure' in any meaningful way.

The Family Support Workers at Families Outside developed a template to chart 'distance travelled' on a range of issues for the families they support. Such a template is only of use to families who require support over a longer period, however, which is the case for only a small proportion of clients.

Brutus noted that the high proportion of needs relating to mental health and wellbeing suggests that routine assessment of impact on health and wellbeing may be useful.

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The prevalence of mental health issues amongst families shows a need for ongoing training and supervision of Family Support Workers to assist them in their role. Dr Brutus' work recommended routine training in counselling and motivational interviewing skills and/or Mental Health First Aid. She also recommended training for Family Support staff in community development to empower families to be more proactive in seeking support and in calling for wider change from their communities and Government.

Conclusions

Families affected by imprisonment do not readily seek support, though the need for such support is clearly evident. The multiple issues these families face as a result of the imprisonment and due to longer-standing problems means that targeted support for them is of tremendous benefit, especially as most fail to access support from other sources. The infrastructure to promote referrals of families to support is lacking and remains an essential part of reaching families who otherwise remain socially isolated.

Direct support work with families of prisoners is relatively new in Scotland, with a small but growing number of agencies engaging in this work. As such, the work has scope for development, particularly in terms of sustainability through community development and empowerment of families to support themselves and others and to call for change.

“ I don't know why [J's] behaviours were not recognised at an earlier age! I had no idea that all this support was out there, and I feel that a burden has been lifted and that I am no longer on my own. I have always known that [J] had difficulties, and now I feel that there is something there (support) for us both. As a result of support from [the Family Support Worker], I have received more help than at any other time in [J's] life, as I have had to fight for everything for us both.”

References

Brutus, L. (2011) "A tool to tackle health inequalities in the families of people in prison? Evaluating the Families Outside Family Support Worker role from a health perspective." Edinburgh: NHS Lothian and Families Outside.

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Smith, R., Grimshaw, R., Romeo, R. and Knapp, M. (2007) Poverty and Disadvantage among Prisoners' Families. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

For additional information and references, please contact Families Outside.

Families Outside is the only national charity in Scotland that works solely to support the families of people involved in the criminal justice system. We work to mitigate the effects of imprisonment on children and families - and consequently to reduce the likelihood of reoffending - through support and information for families and for the people who work with them.

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voicing the needs
of families affected
by imprisonment