

The Tayside Family Project

Dr. Nancy Loucks

on behalf of

Tayside Criminal Justice Partnership and Families Outside¹

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Background

1.1 While some research has been conducted on the needs of prisoners and their families, and on the benefits to people in custody of maintaining family ties, little work has been done on prisoners' families as a distinct group in need of support in their own right. At the end of 2003, the Tayside Criminal Justice Partnership and Families Outside embarked upon research into the specific needs of prisoners' families. They began by commissioning a review of the literature internationally on research and practice specifically relating to prisoners' families, following this with a scoping study of families' needs in the Tayside area. The project was aimed at discovering what services would best support local families in maintaining contact with prisoners with a view to the prisoners' eventual resettlement and rehabilitation.

1.2 The review of the literature (Loucks 2004) outlines the main issues people face when a partner or other family member enters custody as well as some of the initiatives available to support them. This report, on the other hand, describes the second phase of the project, namely the findings from families in the Tayside area. In this phase, a questionnaire was designed based on the findings from the literature review. These were distributed to visitors during visits to the prisons in Tayside (HMPs Perth, Castle Huntly, and Noranside), through the Visitors' Centre at HMP Perth, through prisoners known to be from the Tayside area at the three establishments as well as at HMYOI Polmont and HMPI Cornton Vale, and through

¹ Many thanks to the staff in the Scottish Prison Service who made this research possible, not least the officers and governors at HMPs Perth, Castle Huntly, Noranside, Polmont, and Cornton Vale, and to Lorraine at the Visitors' Centre at HMP Perth. Thanks also to Clive Fairweather for his assistance with the field work and to

postal contact for families known to local social work offices. This was unlikely to provide a representative sample of families, but it was the only known means of making contact with families from a specific area in a very short period of time.² Respondents who were willing were then followed up with more in-depth telephone interviews or through participation in a group discussion.

1.3 In total, 50 family members returned completed questionnaires. Six took part in a two-hour group discussion, and a further 13 engaged in interviews over the telephone. This paper summarises these findings.

Results

Respondents

2.1 Three-quarters of the people who responded to the questionnaires were female (36, or 72%), and most were partners (16/33.3%) or parents (16/33.3%) of the people inside. Respondents had an average of at least two other family members living with them, ranging in age from 6 weeks - 84 years old. Of the 31 people who said they had another family member living with them, 29 of these family members were under age 18, ten of whom were under age 10.

Prisoners

2.2 The research was targeted at families of sentenced prisoners, as the funding available to develop services in Tayside is for sentenced prisoners, especially those serving longer terms. Indeed, families of sentenced prisoners made up 92% of respondents (46 people). Sentences varied from three months to life. Not including life sentences, the average sentence length was just over five years. Just over a tenth (11.4%) of the sentenced prisoners mentioned in the sample were serving life sentences. About half of the prisoners had been in custody before (26, or 52%), ranging from one to ten times with an average of just over three previous periods of custody. The vast majority of prisoners in the sample were at HMP Perth (36, or 75%), with the remainder spread across Peterhead (4, or 8.3%), Castle Huntly (2, or 4.2%), Noranside (4.2%), Glenochil (2.1%), Polmont, (2.1%), or 'other' (4.2%). None were at HMPI Cornton Vale.

Maeve Kenny for her collation and analysis of the data from the questionnaires. Last but not least, we are grateful to the many family members who took the time to share their experiences and their views.

² All of the questionnaires were distributed and collected over a two month period from March - May 2004.

Impact of Imprisonment

2.3 A series of questions asked about how the families' lives had changed since the prisoner went into custody. Figure 1a below shows how the person completing the questionnaire felt things were for them personally now compared to before the imprisonment of their family member:

Figure 1a: Improvements and setbacks for prisoners' families after custody -

Personal experience of respondents

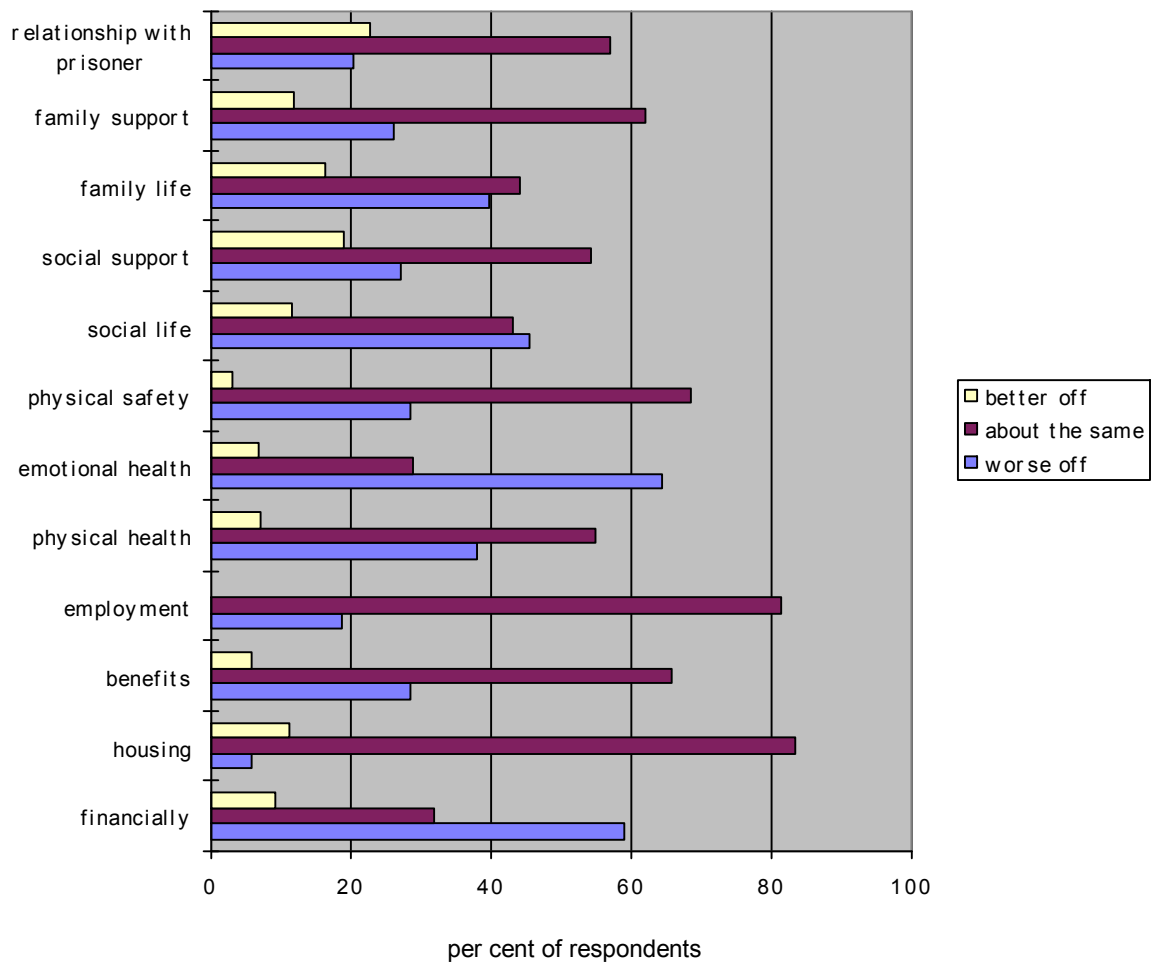
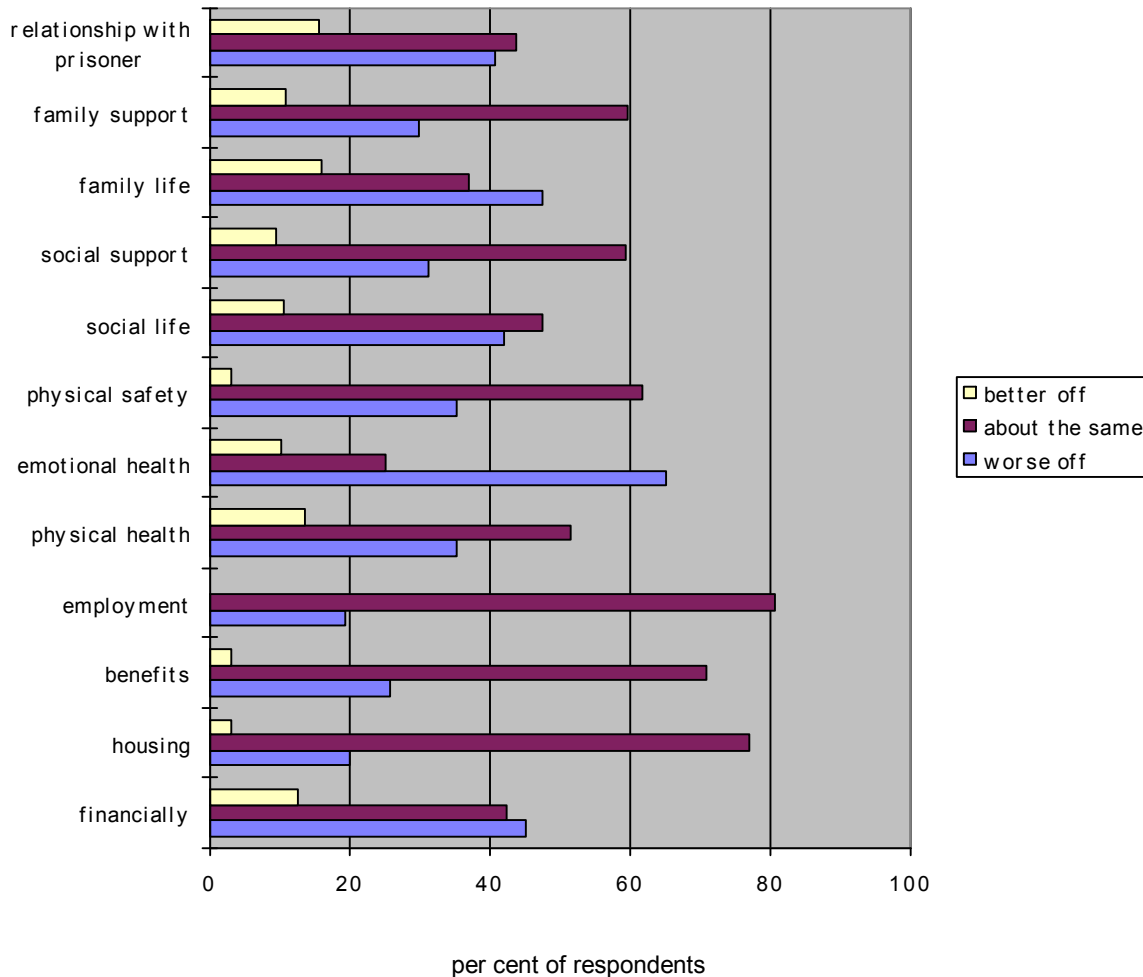


Figure 1b looks at the same issues for the rest of the family:

Figure 1b: Improvements and setbacks for prisoners’ families after custody -
Experience of other family members



2.4 As the figures show, the most damage to families following imprisonment appears to be to their emotional health: about two-thirds believed the emotional well-being of themselves (64.4%) and their family (65.0%) was worse off. Sentiments of their own sense of imprisonment were not uncommon: “you feel like you’re in gaol yourself”; “I feel *I’m* paying the price for his mistake.” Almost as many people believed they had suffered financially due to the imprisonment (59.1% for themselves, and 45.0% for other family members). Although the proportions are not as large, significant numbers also reported being worse off in terms of their physical health and safety, 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 (40.6%), though interestingly many people believed that relationship had improved for themselves (22.7%).

2.5 A number of respondents explained in more detail the impact imprisonment of a family member has had on their lives:

“[I have had] no support from [family] as they think I should just have walked away. I understand this but feel a bit let down as I have been there for them when they had bad times in their lives.”

“My family and friends don’t agree with me standing by my partner, therefore I don’t have any support.”

“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.”

“My son is full of good ideas and intentions when he phones me from prison but when he is home for the weekend visits all his good intentions go out the window. It can be stressful.”

Imprisonment could have extreme consequences on families:

“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.”

2.6 A few were under threat from victims or the victim’s friends and family, to the extent they had to change their routine or even move away from the area. In one case the council took 18 months to move a lady and her two-year old daughter who were being threatened on the street and had stab-marks left in their door. Some had lost businesses: one family was living on a quarter of the income they had had previously due to loss of their (legitimate) business, plus the family faced potential homelessness from a law suit regarding alleged income from the proceeds of crime. The family had no experience of the criminal justice system and were completely unaware of the offending: “We didn’t live in a world that even considered that sort of thing.”

2.7 Such experiences were evident in the group discussion as well. Families spoke of the heavy weight of responsibility they felt towards the offender and the fear that contact “would gradually slip away or diminish over the years”. Families had the major burdens of child care, payment of bills and sometimes the offender’s debts, and travel costs to prisons often a substantial distance away. One mother said that the rest of the family will not talk about her son’s imprisonment, and that his children are not allowed to talk about it at home. The responsibility has therefore fallen on her to take her grandchildren to visit and to offer what support she can. The children have had reports from school noting changes in their behaviour, and the one-hour visits sessions are not long enough for them to open up and discuss their feelings or concerns with their father. She herself feels isolated and unsupported and did not know who to go to for advice.

2.8 The questionnaires then asked respondents to prioritise what they believed were the most difficult aspects of imprisonment for themselves and their families. In order of frequency, Table 1 sets these out below:

Table 1: Most difficult aspects of imprisonment for families

<u>issue for concern</u>	<u>per cent of respondents</u>
worry about the prisoner	87.5%
separation from the prisoner	77.1
worry about what will happen after release	60.4
cost of travel for visits	56.3
lack of information	43.8
lack of support	39.6
transportation to the prison	37.5
timing of visits	37.5
what to tell others	37.5
financial problems	33.3
worry about the family	22.9
housing	22.9

media attention	18.8
loss of friends	16.7
employment	6.3

While families clearly experience a number of difficulties, 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. Some families worried about the implications this could have for the prisoner's ability to adjust on release, especially where home circumstances have changed during imprisonment:

“I was pregnant when my partner was taken into custody, now that I've had my child I worry that my partner will not have the same bond with him as he should have. I also worry about how my partner will react on his release now that there is a child in the house that wasn't there before.”

2.9 The group discussion emphasised many of these points. The cost of travel was an issue, with some noting that any kind of work seems to count against claims through the APVU, even if this was part-time work for minimum wage. Another family mentioned that the cost of travel for children who were not the prisoner's own children could not be claimed, which had caused difficulty for them. Costs also had to be claimed retrospectively in many cases, which could pose further financial strain upon the family. Provision of transport was thought to be virtually non-existent for people who live outwith the Glasgow or Edinburgh areas.

2.10 Support upon release was another concern. One woman had heard of a mentoring system for young prisoners in England upon their release and suggested this would be of benefit for newly-released prisoners of all ages. During a telephone interview one mother believed that her son would not have been recalled to prison had adequate support been in place. She mentioned that he was due to see a psychiatrist upon release, but that none was available to him for a full year. A number of families expressed general disillusionment about the opportunities for rehabilitation available for the prisoner both inside and after release. Negative feelings about the criminal justice system also came out: “the law is one thing, justice

is another”. These sentiments were not universal, however, and a number of family members believed their loved ones had benefited from the time in custody.

2.11 Finally, the issue of access to information led to extensive discussion in the group. None of the families had heard of Families Outside prior to receiving the questionnaire, or of the Scottish Prisoners’ Families Helpline. One, who had been in contact with the Samaritans, said the Samaritans had been unable to refer her to anyone and had not said anything about Families Outside or the Helpline. None of the families - not even the one who said he had had extensive contact with the prison - appeared to have heard of an FCDO. Access to information was crucial: the participants 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.

2.12 A minority view, but an important one nonetheless, was from the families who felt they were better off following the prisoner’s incarceration. Contrary to saying imprisonment had put a strain on their lives, one parent said it was “a holiday” to be relieved from the regular threats and violence from their heroin-addicted son. One or two other families had also been subject to constant manipulation or financial demands, usually to feed addictions, from family members now in custody. Concerns about release in such cases were not just about the prisoner’s welfare, but about their own financial stability and even their physical safety. The fear from one or two participants was tangible.

Support for families

2.13 The next series of questions asked families who they had turned to for support and what their experience with this was. By far the most common avenues of support were family (69.0%) and friends (59.5%). Over a quarter of respondents (26.2%) had sought help from the Visitors’ Centre at HMP Perth, while smaller proportions had looked for support from prison staff (11.9%), solicitors (11.9%), social workers (7.1%), or other sources.

2.14 Of the possible sources of support, people had found families and friends to be the most helpful (63.0% and 47.8%, respectively), though a high proportion also spoke positively of the Visitors’ Centre (30.4%) and of prison staff (17.4%). In this area, families often appeared simply to be looking for someone willing to listen to them and to talk with them.

Comments such as “Just having someone to talk to about how I feel”, “Friends to speak to”, and “Talking about experiences, sharing attitudes, etc. People that have been through the same as you” appeared regularly in their responses. Family and friends may be more able to provide the timely support the respondents need: “... friends understood what was happening but all the other areas we tried for help were too long winded. We needed the help at the time we asked for it and it wasn’t there.”

2.15 Families most commonly found prison staff to be the least useful for support, with 66.7% saying this was the case. Frequent criticisms were that staff were difficult to approach or were unable to answer their questions. Attitudes of some officers were also called into question:

“The prison staff treat me like a prisoner. It was my partner that made the mistake and I don’t feel I should be treated the same as him.”

Families in the group discussion usually did not sense a lack of support from prison staff 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; only one participant had had any success with this. One participant in a telephone interview said families were “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.” Another said she “felt like [she] was banging [her] head off a brick wall”.

2.16 Families which had had positive contact with prison staff appreciated this. Some were beginning to notice more provision of information in the prison during recent visits. The mother of a young child said she had received a lot of support from the Family Contact staff at HMP Shotts and that the Father/Child visits and Family Days were greatly appreciated. Their child was, however, having difficulty adjusting to the return to the more conventional (and therefore more restrictive) visits at Perth, where Father/Child visits were not an option for the prisoner.

2.17 Social workers (20.0%) and solicitors (20.0%) also came under criticism:

“I felt as if I was getting treated as a criminal as well as my partner.” [regarding social work and Benefits Agency]

“I had no contact with social work until they came to see me 7 weeks after my husband was imprisoned. When the solicitor was asked how we went about visiting etc., we were told to ‘phone the prison’. Apart from informing me he had been to see my husband re: an appeal, I have had no contact.”

“Solicitor made a mess of the trial and didn’t let me know what was happening and what things meant as that was all new to me.”

“Because [solicitors] don’t seem to listen I had to ask them so many times when he was in remand to visit and explain certain things. They promised they would be there but left him for weeks without any contact. I went into the office two months to ask for some papers to be sent to my husband, [and] they have still not arrived.”

Such problems were also evident from the group discussion and telephone interviews. Participants in the group discussion noted that social workers could be supportive, but that they have little direct contact with the prisoner. Social workers who were responsible for the prisoner seemed to act entirely for the prisoner and offered little support or advice to the families. Families appreciated those workers who took the time to explain things to them and to inquire after their welfare as well as that of the prisoner.

2.18 Respondents were looking for support in a number of areas. Table 2 outlines these below, in order of frequency:

Table 2: Issues in need of further support

<u>issue for support</u>	<u>per cent of respondents</u>
preparation for release	63.6%
information about parole/non-parole licences	59.1
information about what organisations can do for ex-prisoners	59.1
more information about the prisoner	54.5
advice about how to keep the prisoner out of trouble in the future	50.0
better quality of contact	47.7
information about what social work staff can offer to ex-prisoners	47.7
more contact with the person inside	43.2
more information about the prison	40.9
someone to talk to	34.1
financial help and advice	31.8
more support for children	25.0
help with child care	11.4
advice on what to tell others	9.1
housing	9.1

Clearly families would appreciate assistance on a wide range of issues. 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:

“I would like it if my partner could spend more quality time with his son. His actions should not punish the rest of the family. I don’t think it’s right that an innocent child should have to pay.”

Good quality contact included a need to feel that the prison took an interest in them as people and were considerate of their feelings: one mother described a visit in which the seats had been

washed shortly before, leaving all of the prisoners and visitors soaked by the end of their time together.

2.19 Participants in the group session discussed the issue of information at length and looked into ways of making families aware of the support available. One suggested advertisements in the local newspaper. Another suggestion was to have listings in local telephone directories and Yellow Pages, which we found were non-existent; indeed, nothing was listed under ‘prisons’ in the Yellow Pages at all. Information on notice boards was helpful to a degree, though some suggested that giving such information to prisoners to pass on to their families may be more so. Automatic contact with the next of kin upon entry to a prison was another suggestion, such as through a letter containing information about visits and avenues of support. Some queried whether the onus should be on solicitors or courts to ensure families had the information they need.

2.20 We then asked who families would be most willing to approach for support, other than family and friends. Top amongst these was social work staff, with over a third of respondents (38.1%) saying they would be most willing to talk to them if they needed help. Family Contact Officers in the prison (Family Contact and Development Officers, or FCDOs) were the next most favoured option (33.3%), though many family members in the group discussion and telephone interviews said they were unaware of the existence of such staff. A fifth of respondents said they would go to a GP, confidential helpline, or voluntary organisation for assistance. Other prison staff, prison chaplains, and solicitors were also mentioned (14.3% each). An oversight in the design of the questionnaire meant that the Visitors’ Centre was left out as one of the options for this question, but four family members (9.6%) wrote this in as a further preferred option for support. One partner suggested that information about support for families be available to prisoners to pass on – that this would make prisoners feel as though they could help.

2.21 The range of responses implies that families are willing to turn to most sources of support available if they are aware of them and if they believe these sources can provide the help they need.

2.22 A number of respondents to the questionnaires mentioned a desire to talk with other people in the same situation. This theme emerged more strongly in the group discussion, in which the participants said one of the reasons they took part was to make contact with others in similar circumstances. Families wanted contact with locally-based support from people - possibly volunteers - who would listen, advise, or possibly even advocate for them if necessary. These needed to be people who understood their position and ideally had been in the same situation themselves. They suggested that events such as Family Days in prisons would be good not only to maintain contact with the prisoner but also to create links between families. They agreed that some sort of locally-based Family Support Group would be helpful. Indeed, more involvement of families in the prison generally seemed popular.

2.23 In terms of the type of support they thought would be the most useful for them to support the prisoner upon release, two-thirds (64.1%) believed assistance with employment would be of most benefit:

“I know my partner found it hard to adapt to life outside prison the last time, because there was no employment opportunities for someone in his situation, which then put a strain on our relationship.”

Half (51.3%) thought financial assistance would be the most use, while 43.6% cited support with housing as the most beneficial. Housing could be an issue both for the prisoner upon release and indeed for the family:

“As we are both retired we just want to enjoy the rest of our lives in peace. We have a lovely home but my husband does not think he can come back to stay here, which is going to be hard for us. [The most useful help would be in] Selling up and finding somewhere else to live.”

Other support families believed would be useful upon the prisoner’s release included addiction support (30.8%), state benefits (23.1%), and relationships counselling (23.1%).

2.24 One respondent mentioned a desire for some sort of ‘buddy’ service or mentoring programme for prisoners upon release. Again, this idea attracted support in the group

discussion and emerged during some of the telephone interviews as well. One respondent said locally-based support of any kind would be a welcome improvement.

2.25 One of the questions during the telephone interviews was whether any particular point of imprisonment was more difficult than others. One partner said the very beginning was the most difficult simply because families may know nothing about the system and have no idea who to contact for information. Another said just past mid-way through the sentence was the most difficult for her personally:

“At the beginning you have so many things going on, you just have to get on with it. Once things have settled, you really begin to feel lost.... It’s difficult to describe.... You know the end is in sight, but it might still be a long while off. You’re stuck between the two; everything gets you down, weighs upon you. And just before release – though this passes more quickly because you’re so wound up about the release – getting things ready at home.”

A third simply said families need support throughout the time in custody, not just at particular stages.

Conclusion

3.1 Imprisonment places a burden on many people other than the prisoner. 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.

3.2 The findings of this report underline those from the wider research internationally. The immediate and ongoing material pressures on prisoners’ families as well as the (often greater) emotional impact ensures that families serve a ‘sentence’ of their own. The findings suggest that people in the Tayside area would benefit from:

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