

**‘Prison Without Bars’:  
Needs, support, and good practice for work with Prisoners’ Families**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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***Background***

The profile of prisoners’ families in Scotland remains partial, fragmented, and inadequate as a basis for a coherent, strategic response to their needs. However, recognition of the diversity of these families, their different needs, and the need for an integrated approach to meeting these is essential. New responsibilities for Local Authorities in relation to these families as part of criminal justice throughcare strategies stimulated discussion between the Tayside Criminal Justice Partnership, the Childcare Division of Dundee City Council, and Families Outside for further research. As the first stage of more in-depth work on addressing the needs of prisoners’ families in practice, these groups commissioned a review of the existing literature and services available for prisoners’ families both locally and internationally. The findings of that review are summarised here.

***The impact of imprisonment***

Imprisonment is a family experience. For prisoners, separation from loved ones is often 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, anti-social behaviour by children in distress, and shame. An estimated 13,500 children a year in Scotland are separated from an imprisoned parent. The family takes on the characteristics of single parent

families, with a likely increase in poverty, unemployment, isolation, and deterioration in physical and mental health.

Children of prisoners are at higher risk of imprisonment themselves in later life. Physical symptoms, mental health problems, and regressive behaviour such as bed-wetting can also begin with the incarceration of a parent or other family member. Children of female prisoners are likely to face the additional disruption of multiple care arrangements during their mother's imprisonment. Many parents choose not to tell children 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 cost of transport and distance to the prison affect the whole family. Visiting times may be inconvenient for families who work or for children in school. Almost half of prisoners' families in Scotland spend between five and twelve hours to make the entire journey to a prison for a visit. Relations between partners often break down when one is in custody. Much of the damage is caused by the arrest and imprisonment itself, regardless of the length of time a prisoner spends in custody.

Overall the effects of imprisonment on prisoners' families include stigma and fear of disclosure; deterioration of health; maternal depression; reduction of income; increased demands from the imprisoned partner such as material help or more problematic requests such as drug supply; and strains on the quality of care to children. In living the life in effect of a single parent and spending all free time in travel and visits to prison, partners of prisoners have described their own lives as "living in a prison without bars" (Christiensen 2001: 85).

### ***Key pressure points***

Initial incarceration, ongoing issues such as visits, and release and resettlement all place tremendous strain on prisoners' families. Imprisonment, even if arrest is anticipated, is usually a sudden event. Before imprisonment, families are not likely to have had an opportunity to discuss issues such as childcare, housing, or income with the prisoner. If the primary carer is taken into custody, urgent arrangements must be made for childcare. For children and young people, the period immediately following the arrest is the worst period for them, not least because of the

sudden change of circumstances, a sense of powerlessness, lack of information, and possible uncertainty in care arrangements.

Lack of information about visits and visiting procedures, inconvenient visiting times and booking systems, perceptions of staff attitudes, the prison environment, and drug detection procedures all act as disincentives to prison visits. Children show signs of stress both before and after visits, including sickness, irritability, and excessive quietness or over-excitement prior to visits, restlessness and argumentative behaviour during visits, and sadness or withdrawn behaviour afterwards. Visits themselves brought a range of both positive and negative emotions. Children get bored during visits, which both prisoners and carers have identified as one of the most difficult aspects of prison visiting.

Families are rarely included in a prisoner's preparation for release from custody, despite the fact that it 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. Top priorities for partners of prisoners are material assistance, support, and advice throughout the period of imprisonment, regardless of its duration.

### ***Existing resources***

In Scotland, Families Outside is the only organisation that works exclusively on behalf of children, parents, spouses, partners, and other family members of people in custody. In England and Wales, Action for Prisoners' Families acts as the main umbrella organisation, with a remit similar to that of Families Outside. Other organisations provide designated services for prisoners' families in the UK as part of a wider remit. A number of more general organisations can be useful in the support of prisoners' families, but their remits do not identify prisoners' families specifically as a target group.

No single organisation is responsible for the direct coordination and provision of services to prisoners' families in the UK. Further, the failure of so many general support services to recognise and plan specifically for prisoners' families as part of their remit seems to be a glaring oversight.

The work of a number of organisations in and out of the UK is highlighted in the full report. Leaflets and internet sites are becoming increasingly available for prisoners' families and those who work with them. The literature internationally shows a clear need for specific provision of information and support for young people with family members in prison.

#### *Facilities for family contact*

Prison Services throughout the UK have made substantial progress towards improving family contact in recent years. Play facilities, Visitors' Centres, Family Days, and separate parent/child visits stand out among these. A number of prisons in Scotland and elsewhere have developed the post of Family Contact Development Officer (FCDO). Even more liberal provision is evident in other countries, such as the systems of Private Family Visits over a 72-hour period in Canada, France, and Spain.

#### *Gaps in provision*

Few organisations formally acknowledge prisoners' families as a distinct group within the remit of their work. Only once the existence of this (very hidden) group is acknowledged and identified can specific work be done to address their needs. Even with Family Support staff in prisons, a specific 'voice' or advocate for children is virtually non-existent. The need for information in courts, prior to imprisonment, is another obvious gap in information for families. Preparation for release, better linkages with community-based social structures, and support services need further development.

Often the need is not so much to fill gaps as to strengthen the resources already available. Resources for schools and information on visiting prisons are obvious examples. Important areas for development include support groups, parenting programmes, Visitors' Centres, more consultation with families, trained volunteers for family support, rebuilding relationships as part of a prison's pre-release scheme, and improved play provision. Information and support for carers, young people, and professionals is a further area for development.

#### *Failure to access existing resources*

A number of factors may inhibit prisoners' families from accessing the information and support they need. Stigma, feelings of shame, and fear of prison can be strong initial obstacles for the

whole family. Some families fear that their children may be taken from them. Visitors may also hesitate to ask questions or complain for fear of negative consequences for the prisoner. Visitors do not 'demand' services, but lack of 'demand' does not equate to lack of need.

As yet no statutory obligation is in place to provide families with information to help them cope with imprisonment and to prepare for release. Families are often left to gather information in any way they can. The lack of structure and clear responsibility in the provision of information to families means that many people will not know what supports are available. Some families may not access formal resources because they get support informally from family and friends. Formal support services should therefore become much more integrated with families and their informal supports both during and after sentence to ensure comprehensive assistance when and where families need it.

### ***What works?***

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. This type of support is difficult, if not impossible, to measure in quantitative terms. The relative lack of 'hard' data does not mean, however, that initiatives are not worthwhile.

Good visits are essential to good relations and maintenance of family ties. Play provision should be available for children in prison visiting areas. Provision for extended family visits and parent/child visits further enhances the quality of visits. Some provision already exists in Scottish prisons and should be encouraged. Families should have information about visits in advance of their arrival at a prison, and families with particular needs, such as for information in other languages or facilities for the deaf, should have access to these. Family induction schemes are an ideal opportunity to provide comprehensive information to families and, importantly, to give them an opportunity to ask questions.

### *Visitors' Centres*

Negative feelings surrounding visits tended to be most acute before and after the visits themselves. Supporting visits through something like a Visitors' Centre is a logical means of maintaining a prisoner's family ties or other links with the outside world. Staff in Visitors' Centres must be a consistent and dedicated team of staff with a thorough understanding of the needs of visitors to prisons and an ability to tap into those needs. Lack of a prison Visitors' Centre often creates difficulty for organisations in accessing prisoners' families.

### *Family Support staff*

Family Support work such as that of FCDOs in Scotland shows great potential for addressing the needs of prisoners' families. Prisoners' families are in great need of support which prison staff are ideally placed to provide. The work of Family Support staff shows repeated evidence of benefits to families and equally to prison regimes and security: where families, prisoners, and staff are able to break down barriers, the rewards will be evident through the increased communication and reduced tension in virtually every aspect of prison life. Family Support is therefore a job worth doing well.

### *Information*

Grimshaw and King's review of resources for prisoners' families internationally uncovered vast quantities of information available to this group. However, they also noted that different types of information are more effective in different types of formats. Target audiences must be considered carefully, and information should specify priorities. Resources should also be up to date, ideally linked to sources on the internet. The dissemination of information is at least as important as the information itself.

### *Programmes and support projects*

Support groups are key for helping families. Parenting programmes have also shown some success, and specific supports for young people show great potential. Support services and programmes in prisons must have the backing of prison managers and staff, though the limited 'hard' measures of success of such projects means both staff support and funding can be in short supply. The positive feedback and overwhelming weight of experience of people and organisations that work in this area shows, however, that such work is highly valuable.

## ***Conclusions***

The imprisonment of a family member clearly has a significant impact on those left outside. The evidence in this report shows that maintaining family ties between children during imprisonment is of great importance to all concerned. A number of positive initiatives currently exist to support prisoners' families, but many schemes depend largely on the initiative and enthusiasm of a few dedicated staff. Factors such as fear of stigma or lack of awareness often prevent families from accessing the supports that exist for them. 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 organisations outside, if they are to target their work appropriately and effectively.

Many support services have been developed in recent years, and examples of good practice are in evidence internationally. However, the vast majority of literature for this report came from outside Scotland. While general needs and examples of good practice are likely to apply here as well, a clear gap is evident in what locally based families and service users need and want. Tayside Criminal Justice Partnership and Families Outside call for urgent consultation with families and existing organisations to recognise and address the needs of this group, too easily hidden in a 'prison without bars'.

Christiensen, E. (2001) "Imprisoned Parents and their Families: What Can We Do to Minimise Harmful Effects to Children?" *Journal of Child Centred Practice*, 84-85.