

Lost time, stigma, and adaptation: the experiences of long-term prisoners' partners

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in brief

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Key Points

- No previous research on families of long-term prisoners in the UK has been conducted, and little is known about their lived experiences.
- Key problems prisoners' partners face include making sense of the often overwhelming length of the sentence; sustaining emotional closeness with the person in prison over this time; and stigma.
- More opportunities for frequent, meaningful contact, and development of coping mechanisms such as short-term planning, would ensure that the needs of these partners are better met.
- Stigma must be reduced if the needs of prisoners' families are to be met, especially with families of long-term prisoners. Perceived institutional stigmatisation can lead to negative perceptions of the criminal justice system.

Background

The problems prisoners' families face have been well-documented and include reduction in income, the practical and financial challenges of visiting (Morris 1965), emotions such as grief and loneliness, and stigma (Condry 2007). Yet despite Condry's work on serious offenders' families, suggesting that long sentences could exacerbate these problems, very little research has been conducted on long-term prisoners' families. This study explored the extent to which this was true for long-term prisoners' partners.

“Many of the difficulties faced by prisoners' families in general are magnified for the relatives of serious offenders, by the seriousness and stigmatising impact of the offence itself and by the severity of the consequences, which often include a long prison sentence.” Condry (2007: 3 – emphasis added)

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The research project

This paper summarises a three-year project conducted at the University of Oxford which explored the extent to which 33 partners of long-term prisoners experienced 'pains of imprisonment' similar to those actually imprisoned. These pains include deprivation of autonomy, liberty, security, intimate relationships, and goods and services (Sykes 1956). It also explored how partners made sense of, and coped with, the length of the sentence, the passage of time, and stigma. Overall, most of the women had, prior to their partners' imprisonment, lived ordinary, untroubled lives, with little to no prior experience of the criminal justice system.

As well as the interviews, this paper draws upon one particular case study to illustrate the issues the sample of women faced: Casey (not her real name) was a white British woman in her 20s, and her partner was one year into a life sentence for murder. Casey was confident he did not commit the offence, as the brawl had involved numerous people, and to her, it was clear he had not dealt the fatal blow. Prior to his imprisonment, they had lived comparatively normal lives, and Casey was about to graduate from university when her partner was arrested. They were planning to get married and have children.

The pains of imprisonment

Confirming earlier research (Comfort 2008), all the women in this study described experiencing the same pains of imprisonment prisoners do, albeit in a muted and temporary manner.

When visiting prisons, they were acutely aware of their freedom and autonomy being very limited. They had to sit in designated chairs, and their physical contact with the people they were visiting was very limited and controlled. This could be especially significant for partners of long-term prisoners, as such prisoners are likely to be held at higher security prisons, where visits are subject to rigorous regulations.

Likewise, some women experienced a deprivation of security and felt unsafe when visiting, aware that prisoners in general could be dangerous individuals. Moreover, some women felt intimidated by other visitors, whom they perceived as "rough".

Imprisonment also had a serious financial impact. Some of the women, like Casey, either lost their partners' incomes after imprisonment and/or lost their jobs due to stigma. Casey lost her job, and, as a result, her house, after her partner was imprisoned and her boss stopped giving her shifts.

Moreover, some partners described visiting and financially supporting a prisoner as an "additional bill": Casey and other friends and family pooled money in order to be able to send her partner some funds. Visiting, especially, was expensive if the prisoner was located in a prison that required a long journey.

Finally, some women described being deprived of intimate contact with their partners. The UK does not allow conjugal visits, and physical contact was often very regimented. Some women resented being told that they could only have one hug and kiss at the beginning and at the end of the visit. However, the loss of emotional intimacy was described as being most distressing. Casey spoke about this poignantly, stating that she had "lost everything" when her partner was imprisoned. They had spent so much time together that she described feeling lost and alone – as if "everything that [they'd shared] was just ripped apart. It was just gone."

Over time, a degree of distance developed between some people in prison and their partners. Both society at large and the participants themselves changed as time went on, while people in prison were "frozen in time". The participants started new jobs, made new friends, and their children grew up. The prisoners were not there to see and live these changes, and some women said they did not speak about things their imprisoned partners did not know much about (such as new friends or colleagues) because there was little point in doing so. Casey said she did not like to share too much about her life with her partner because he could not be a part of it.

These pains of imprisonment have long been documented in the literature on prisoners' families. Interestingly these pains did not seem to become less painful over time. Although the women got used to the practicalities of visiting and the prison rules, the pains remained painful. Yet over time, they became a part of the women's existence to the extent that the women themselves found it difficult to recognise whether they were suffering.

"I don't actually know if I am still suffering as much or whether I've just got used to it [her partner's imprisonment]. It is difficult. I do know, deep down, that I am suffering. You know, I am suffering with depression, I can't sleep... [...] I think it's happened for so long I'm just sort of just getting used to it." (Casey)

- Support for prisoners' families needs to be ongoing and long-term.
- There needs to be greater focus on sustaining familial closeness over a long sentence.
- Schemes need to be developed that would help long-term prisoners and their families share details of their daily lives and the changes that occur in their lives, but also have more opportunities to build a familial history during the long sentence.

Coping with a long sentence

A partner receiving a long sentence was in itself distressing for many of the women. One reason was because it was difficult to make sense of or rationalise the length of the sentence. The sentence represented a large portion of the participants' lives. They realized that prison was going to be a quasi-permanent feature of their lives, and some found this distressing. Moreover, a long sentence represented an interruption of their life courses.

Casey had to postpone the wedding she had planned, and motherhood, too, was forcibly delayed for her. She said she did not want to be "pushing 40 and having children" and feared she might never be able to have children due to the length of the sentence.

Since thinking about the entire sentence was often overwhelming, the majority of the women coped with the sentence length by segmenting it into shorter "chunks" of time. One participant used the analogy of long-distance running to describe how she coped:

"He used to do a lot of long-distance running, I did one or two races with him. Around the Peak District, 40 miles. The way you get through that is breaking it down into little bits. You think of the whole course, you think – 'I can't run that!'. But break it down to five miles, then another five miles, to this landmark and this landmark, becomes possible. Right now, I was discussing the landmark I want to focus on – next year, with any luck, we may be able to transfer him to mainland prison." (Elsa)

Others diverted their energies into other aspects of their lives. This could be work, childcare, religion, or hobbies. It helped them live 'in the now' and, again, drew attention away from thinking about the long sentence and becoming overwhelmed. It also meant that they could focus on something other than prison-related problems. For example, Elizabeth was preoccupied with finding a new job after losing her previous one, Gemma went for long walks with her neighbour, Anne was planning to travel with her stepdaughter, and so on. These mechanisms helped the women to regain a sense of normality in their lives.

- Some coping mechanisms that could be used by long-term prisoners' families include segmenting time and focusing on other aspects of their lives. Practitioners could help families use these mechanisms as appropriate.

Social and institutional stigma

Almost all of the participants described fearing stigmatisation, even when nothing had been said or done to stigmatise them. This may have been a strong theme because the offences in question were serious, and the women were very aware of this. One woman, whose friends and family were on the whole very supportive and who had not experienced any overt stigma, said the fear of stigma constantly followed her:

"So I've been very lucky in that sense but the longer it goes, the more it's gonna happen, by numbers, statistically, that someone is gonna have a bad reaction. I'm sure it's gonna happen." (Cara)

A minority of the participants described experiencing overt stigmatisation. Casey said her partner's father's house was petrol-bombed. This was, of course, very distressing, but also resulted in financial and practical costs. Such experiences also served to reinforce the fear of future stigmatisation – Casey said the experience was one reason why she went to live with relatives, as she now feared living alone. Others described their houses being graffiti-ed and car tyres being slashed repeatedly.

An important finding from this study relates to institutional stigma. Many of the women felt stigmatised when they visited their partners or otherwise interacted with the criminal justice system.

Casey said officers in one prison would treat her "like an inmate", though those in the prison where her husband was at the time of the interview were much friendlier. Abruptness, perceived lack of politeness, and inattention were often deemed to be a sign that the officer in question saw her as a bad person, undeserving of their attention. This is not to say that prison officers deliberately intended to stigmatise visitors, but this was certainly how some of the women perceived officers' behaviour.

Critically, this perceived institutional stigma resulted in some women, over time, coming to form very negative views of the criminal justice system. Whereas some said that they had been brought up to trust the police and other officials, they spoke about having lost that trust as a result of how they and their partners were treated within the prison system. Individual interactions built up over time and shaped the women's perceptions of the justice system as a whole.

"When you go [to visit]... Well, if you haven't got any change [for lockers] – 'hard luck!', from the wardens. I feel it's the most uninteresting and uninspiring job that anyone can do, because that's how it comes over. They're there for punishment, they're not there to help anyone." (Isabella)

- Further training is needed to improve officer-visitor interactions. Officers need to be more aware that visitors could be highly sensitised to the manner, tone, and language officers use. Even a look can be interpreted as being judgemental.

Conclusion

The study outlined here is the first on families of long-term prisoners in the UK. Although it focused on partners specifically, many of the findings could apply to other relatives, though more research on extended families and children of long-term prisoners is needed. This study shows that the pains and deprivations associated with imprisonment may not become less painful for families of long-term prisoners. They may thus require long-term, ongoing support. It also highlights some effective coping mechanisms (segmenting the sentence, diverting emotions to other aspects of their lives) that could be drawn upon by practitioners.

The findings also highlight the need for further officer training. Many of the women interpreted officers' behaviour as being stigmatising, even when it may not have been intended as such. This is critical as, over time, small individual interactions can build up and create a negative image of the prison system in the family member's mind.

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For additional references and the full version of this report, contact Families Outside.

Families Outside is the only national charity that works solely to support the families of people affected by imprisonment in Scotland. Our purpose is to improve outcomes for children and families affected by imprisonment so they can live healthy, active lives free from stigma and impediment.



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