

In Their Own Right: Support for families with a young person in secure accommodation

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in brief

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Introduction

When a young person is placed in a secure unit, the impact on the young person and their family can be considerable. A number of studies have highlighted the issues that can affect these young people; however very little attention has been given to the consequences that other family members may experience when a young person is placed in secure accommodation. In 2013, the Scottish Government commissioned Families Outside to oversee a study to identify the support available to families when a young person was placed in secure accommodation. The study examined the support available for families, considered whether the needs of families were being met appropriately, and identified gaps in support. The full report is available on the Families Outside website.

Key points

Families experienced a number of difficulties when a young person was placed in secure accommodation:

- Practical difficulties of access to secure units, which were often some distance from their homes;
- Loss of control over decision-making in relation to the young person;
- Stigma and a general lack of understanding of their needs;
- Separation issues for siblings;
- Challenges for support agencies in terms of time and resources to meet everyone's needs; and
- Lack of awareness of the supports available (where they existed).

Families would benefit from the input of an impartial agency that was knowledgeable about secure accommodation and Young Offender Institutions and could pass on information to families while also providing a 'listening ear'.

contents

Introduction

Key Points

Summary of Findings

Concerns for Families

Gaps in Provision

Support for Families

Summary and Conclusions

References

"You can never prepare a family for it.... I mean, even families that have been through the process, it's a horrendous experience for them which is often not seen...." (*secure unit worker*)

Summary of findings

The study was based on documentary analysis, statistical data, and semi-structured interviews. Thirty-four interviews were conducted with professionals, and four written responses to requests for information were received. Interviews were conducted with representatives of secure units, Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), social work services, and third sector agencies. Although considerable time and effort was given to securing the views of family members, the number that participated was small, with two semi-structured interviews and five questionnaire responses received from family members.

The study highlighted the difficulties that family members often experienced, in particular the anxiety and worry that could accompany the admission of a young person to secure accommodation. The Scottish Government has emphasised the importance of providing support to families across all policy areas, and professionals who took part in this study, across all sectors (statutory social work, third sector agencies, and secure units), were generally sympathetic to the needs of families and did what they could to provide support, both practical and emotional. However, these agencies were required, quite rightly, to prioritise the needs of the young person who was the focus of their intervention, and in this process, the needs of family members could often be overlooked or ignored.

Concerns for families

During the time a young person was in secure accommodation, families reported that they were often worried and anxious; uncertain about what was happening to their child; concerned for the young person's safety and the stigma of association with social work or the criminal justice system; and fear for their child's future. They may have experienced some degree of trauma surrounding the events leading to the secure admission and grief following the young person's removal from the home. A combination of feelings of relief that their child was finally in a safe place, and guilt resulted in emotional turbulence for some families.

Family members identified a need for advice and information, particularly at the point of the young person's admission to, and transition from, secure accommodation. Families also required emotional support, particularly an opportunity to discuss their worries and concerns with someone who understood the system. Family respondents highlighted the importance of having someone to talk to and noted the impact on their health and wellbeing when this was not available.

"I just needed somebody to talk to... Just to kind of rant at basically just to get things out in the open that you can't really say to people that are close to you... I just felt as if I had nobody to talk to...."



Support for families

Amongst professional respondents, there appeared to be some confusion between 'family intervention' and 'family support'. Although all agencies had responsibility for providing information to families, family support was often situated in relation to the needs of the young person. This could mean that the role of the family was considered in terms of the support other family members could contribute to work with the young person. In some cases, families were viewed as contributing to the difficulties that resulted in the young person being placed in secure accommodation. In other instances, families were viewed as peripheral to interventions undertaken with the young person.

"We focus on the young person, and at times you can lose sight of the wider picture and the impact that it's having on the family..."

Support for families... continued

The difficulties facing young people and families 'known' to social work confirmed the welfare needs and family problems which characterised experiences of young people who ended up in secure units and those in conflict with the law more generally. Goldson (2000) noted the disadvantage that characterised the experiences of many young people in the youth justice system. More recently, Jacobson et al. (2010) similarly found significant levels of disadvantage among children who entered the youth justice system in England and Wales. Policies that placed emphasis on 'parental deficit' were evident in England and Wales throughout the 1990s. This depiction was less evident in Scotland, where considerable emphasis had been placed in policy and practice on involving and supporting families.

However, this wider political agenda and general mistrust of statutory services may help explain the reluctance of many families in trouble to approach or engage with youth justice services.

"I am led to believe his stay will be short and his social worker suggested that I look into possible children's homes for my child. I feel this is something that I am unqualified to do and would not know where to start."

While workers from all agencies generally did their best to ensure that families were informed and involved in all work carried out with the young person, no specific agency had a remit to provide information and advice to families. Family participants outlined different experiences in seeking help from statutory services, and in some cases family members perceived the response as unhelpful. Families were often unsure who to ask for help, particularly if they did not have contact with social work services or involvement with a third sector agency. Secure unit staff were often the key contact for families in these circumstances and were considered by family respondents to be very supportive.

"... he was quite upset and I was quite upset so I went up to visit him that night so...the staff explained you know and I was shown about the place, they explained what would be happening so they kept me up to date."



Gaps in provision

The key gap in provision identified by this study was the need that families expressed, regardless of general circumstances, for independent advice and information. Gaps in current provision were evident in the absence of independent support for families (distinct from support services for young people). Workers generally attempted to provide support to both families and young people. Although their remit was the intervention with the young person, in the absence of other dedicated family support, this could extend to include the wider family. This appeared to be why family support and family intervention, as concepts, were so often confused in interviewee responses.

Practical and financial resources were sometimes available to assist families with travel costs to secure units when their income was limited. However, families were often unaware who to contact to access this and were not always informed that they could receive help. As this support was often drawn from the 'discretionary' budgets of local authorities or secure units, it was not always made available to families. Not knowing who to ask, or what support was available, undoubtedly precludes families who may require support from accessing it.

Families indicated that the opportunity to talk with other family members would be helpful, and there was some evidence that, where one secure unit had a dedicated support service for families, including a family group, family members viewed this favourably. Sharing practice in family support across secure units and ensuring that families could access advice and information with ease, ideally independently from the secure estate, would be beneficial.



Summary and Conclusions

Families face a number of difficulties when a young person is admitted to secure accommodation. In addition to the trauma of separation and disruption to family life, there were a number of costs for families in maintaining social ties which could be emotional and practical, including direct and indirect financial costs. Similarly, the differing needs of the families and of the young people in secure care often required some degree of balancing.

Gaps in current provision were evident in the absence of independent support for families (distinct from those for young people), and it appeared that the same workers often attempt to provide support to both families and young people (with their remit of intervention with the young person increasingly expanded, in the absence of other dedicated family support, to include the wider family). This meant that 'family support' and 'family intervention' were often confused. The key gap in provision appeared to be the existence of an impartial agency that was knowledgeable about the secure care and YOI system and could pass on information to families while also providing a 'listening ear'.

While workers from social work services, secure units, and third sector organisations did their best to support families as appropriate, gaps in provision resulted from the absence of any dedicated agency with responsibility for ensuring that families were able to access both practical and emotional support, should they require or desire it. Lawyers and Sheriffs may benefit from being more informed about secure units and the provision of information at court, i.e. providing information and details of an appropriate contact person/ agency would be beneficial.

Provision of support for siblings requires further consideration: although some secure units were aware of the importance of this need, the concerns and anxieties experienced by brothers and sisters were not fully addressed across the secure sector. The particular needs of young women and their families could also usefully be explored, given the concerns of some interviewees that this group of young people was often particularly isolated from family members.

"I was worried about my brother getting into fights. I was worried he would try to run away from there too. I was worried that this meant that he would end up in prison one day, and I worried about other people finding out."

Families often appeared to rely on support from secure unit staff after a young person had left secure accommodation, where there was no third sector support in place. This support was greatly appreciated, and families often retained links with secure units for some time after the young person had left. While supporting the young person's transition into the community is the responsibility of local authority social workers, the Whole System Approach may, in the future, provide opportunities to ensure increased support for families as well as identifying additional ways to involve them in care plans.

References

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Jacobson, J., Bhardwa, B., Gyateng, T., Hunter, G. Hough, M. (2010) *Punishing Disadvantage: a profile of children in custody*, London: Prison Reform Trust.

Families Outside is the only national charity in Scotland that works solely to support the families of people affected by imprisonment. 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.



The Scottish Government
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voicing the needs
of families affected
by imprisonment