



Working with prisoners' families

A guide for practitioners on identifying families affected by imprisonment in a non-stigmatising way and the type of support they might need

Introduction

There is no obvious way to identify families affected by imprisonment as criminal justice services such as courts, probation, solicitors and prisons have no statutory obligation to tell health, education or employment services that someone has been sent to prison or received a community sentence. A teacher will not necessarily know a child has a family member in prison if the family choose not to let the school know. It is only if another statutory provider such as a social worker or the police has reason to contact a school that they may find out. Similarly a GP will not know if someone has a family member in prison unless there is some other intervention or the family chooses to mention it. So there is no easy answer as to how to identify the families of prisoners. Families have the right to confidentiality and to choose to cope by themselves. It is up to the organisations which provide services and support to make as wide an effort as possible to publicise their availability so that a family member can tap into them when and if they need to.

Why families don't talk about having a family member in prison

There is plenty of media interest in stories and issues about prisoners, from overcrowding to people being released who go on to reoffend and often commit very serious crimes.

What receives very little attention are the issues faced by prisoners as people with families and responsibilities outside the prison and the impact their imprisonment has on those close to them. Many families' lives become dominated by the effect of imprisonment. They have to live with the consequences. Stigma, shame, guilt, isolation, financial, social, psychological and environmental consequences are just some of the issues faced by all involved at different stages. The very reasons for

their needing help and support often prevent them from asking for it because of the stigma attached.

Prisoners' families don't ask for pity or preference in services, only the support and understanding to help them deal with the enormity of it all, and to allow them to begin the journey of rebuilding their lives and regaining their dignity.

The family need to develop and be part of their community, however the stigma attached to being a partner, family or friend of someone in prison can make life extremely difficult. As one prisoner's wife said, *"it's as if we all committed the crime and are paying for it"*.

There is no statutory body responsible for families of prisoners. However, working with children and families of people in the criminal justice system can be very complex and requires sensitive management. It is an agenda shared by many departments and agencies which require a joined-up approach to have any impact and ensure a positive outcome for those affected.

The importance of support

Family support is essential throughout the offender-families' journey: from the pre-arrest stage through to resettlement.

When a man or woman is sent to prison they are not the only one sentenced. While emphasis is placed upon the punishment, reform and rehabilitation of the convicted person there is still no official support for their family. Children, partners, siblings and parents are left to cope with the situation. Most families report there is a stigma attached to being a partner, family member or friend of someone in prison.

Identifying families does not just depend on the offender informing staff, either at the arrest stage or conviction and trial. At all stages practitioners should ensure that information sharing where allowed is carried out in order to identify children and families.

Some areas where families may face levels of stigma:

- offender's families often face exclusion when attempting to access financial services such as bank accounts, insurance and mortgages
- relocation/housing
- breakdown in family relationships – possibly due to the nature of the crime
- public perception is different to the reality faced by the family – rumours and speculation make the situation worse
- families often feel they are treated differently because of their situation and often judged guilty by association (this can be particularly evident when a serious crime has been committed, such as murder, rape or paedophile offences. Families may experience various emotions: they can feel extremely vulnerable and this may increase when they have to face their local community)
- children with an absent parent due to imprisonment can be less focussed at school, which in itself may lead to stigma and bullying.

Creating the right environment/ethos to allow people to talk

Prisoners' families are among the most excluded groups in society. They should be treated with respect and helped with appropriate information and support through the co-ordination of local services.

All aspects of diversity of need including black and minority ethnic, specific needs of women and disabilities should be taken into consideration. Service providers should work together to reduce the risk of poor outcomes for all involved.

For families this can be and often is the most daunting experience they have ever had to deal with. They are unsure of who to ask, what to ask, and if they do, who will provide the answers? Until recently it has been a subject that has not been discussed so openly and even still not always so readily.

Creating a better environment for families to feel comfortable and safe to talk requires an increased awareness of the issues they face. If the people are made more aware of these issues it may help to

reduce some of the isolating stigma.

In particular when working with children of offenders, child professionals and education staff need to be mindful of attitudes: stigma may easily be attached if children are singled out. Taking a proactive approach to teaching all children and young people about the impact of imprisonment upon families and communities, giving accurate information about life in prison may combat stigma and discrimination for affected children.

Information, whether leaflets, books or posters can be made available to all areas such as community centres, GP practices, schools and clinics, so that families can seek help if they need it. They will be aware that there is someone to talk to, a place to go to for help and support.

Visitors' centres are one of the most useful resources. Most prisons (though not all) have staffed centres which are there for families. They can sign-post them to services in their local area and talk about the visits.

Some centres run support groups for families where they are given the opportunity to express their concerns or just listen to others. Families who are part of these groups have stated that it's the most comfortable place to be, as everyone, no matter who they are or where they are from, is in the same situation.

Recently the Family Support Worker role in prisons has developed and this has improved the communication between prisoners and their family. The worker can alleviate some of the concerns and worries faced by families.

Advocacy workers are attached to area teams to promote support for the situation and issues families' face, in addition to developing services and improving facilities with a view to enhancing outcomes for families.

Prison staff are more aware of the needs of the family and Offender Management Unit staff work closely with services to involve all concerned. Action for Prisoners' Families and many local providers offer training called The Hidden Sentence. It is available to all services: public, statutory, voluntary and private. The training course aims to enable practitioners to gain the knowledge and understanding they need to develop services that better meet the needs of prisoners' families.

Practitioners and other service providers need to be non-judgemental: the child and family members have not committed the crime. Positive relationships with parents, carers and families can enable families to seek support and information.

The initial court appearance can be frightening. If there were help available to families at this stage it would help reduce some of the anxiety and stigma which they may have to deal with. Early intervention for families facing the imprisonment of a member helps families to cope.

The effect on the wider family

Who will look after the children?

When a father goes to prison his partner is faced with all the family responsibilities, including financial matters. This can be particularly difficult in families where the father is seen as head of the household – the person who makes key decisions or communicates with the outside world.

The imprisonment of a male partner can also leave the rest of the family vulnerable to threats and other pressures related to the offence. Imprisonment of a mother or primary carer usually brings greater upheaval in the family than the custody of a father or other family member. The mother's imprisonment can be particularly traumatic as she is usually the main carer and the person who often keeps the family together.

- Changes in the family structure can mean the father, partner or oldest sibling becomes the main carer.
- The child/children moves in with relatives or family friends: usually it's the grandparents that give the support .
- The child/children are taken into foster care and in extreme cases adopted.

Many difficulties can arise when parents don't agree about who should have care of the child or children. It is important that opinions are listened to and the decision made for the benefit of the child.

Whenever a parent goes to prison the lives of those left with the responsibilities of caring for their children are profoundly affected at a time when the carer may be least able to cope themselves.

To make the situation as stable as possible for their children carers will need to manage their own feelings as well as dealing with those of the children and the person in prison. As mentioned before it is often grandparents who take on the role of primary carers while a parent is in prison or has restricted license conditions. It may be at a time in their lives when they least expected to have to take on the role of full-time carer.

Some grandparents have to give up work retirement plans, and financially it can be a strain. There are support organisations available.

How to still be part of the family while in prison

Being separated from their family is one of the most painful emotions experienced by a prisoner – whether as parent, partner, sibling, grandparent or child. Prisoners have many issues to deal with in prison: basic adjustment and coping is enough, but separation from family, and talking about this to others can be stressful.

Subject to safeguarding needs, prisoners should be assisted in every way possible to maintain family, friends and community ties. Despite all the research and evidence-based statistics it is estimated that 45% of people lose contact with their family while in prison (*Bromley Briefings*, 2010). Often people in prison were being held, on average, over 50 miles away from their local community, which makes visiting difficult.

Children in particular face serious obstacles in maintaining a relationship with their parent in prison. While most parents in prison want to be a part of their children's lives they are completely reliant upon the support of others – including the child's carer, friends, family or professional – in maintaining any kind of parental role.

The imprisoned parents separated from their children and family often express feelings and emotions around bonding: they don't feel they have that role anymore, while some maintain their parenting role from a distance, in difficult circumstances in the best way they can.

Parental communication is restricted and can only be carried out by:

- letters/cards/drawings
- limited phone calls
- visits, if appropriate

Conditions and situations will vary from prison to prison and depending on the crime and length of sentence.

Presuming that a prisoner is able to keep in touch with their family, maintaining a relationship can be difficult and prove to be a huge challenge for all involved. It's not just their children prisoners lose touch with: many prisoners lose contact with their own parent, relatives and friends.

Some prisoners find it painful to keep in touch and can feel that it's best for families to get on with their lives without them – this can happen if people are separated for really long periods of time. However keeping in touch is good for families too, they need support to enable them to deal with and benefit from the limited contact.

The practical ways of keeping in touch have been mentioned previously. In addition to these, there are many courses available. These courses are structured to help prisoners maintain contact:

Get the most from a visit: be prepared, have some questions to ask, always show appreciation to them for them visiting you. Remember your family will probably want to see you.

How to communicate from prison: talking about feelings, clear communication, listen to each other. Remember when you call them they might be busy: don't be disappointed.

Coping with separation: being in a group and feeling safe to express concerns and fears, learning from others.

Dealing with realities of returning home: expectations from all involved. Things will have changed, and most importantly people will have changed.

How to write a letter: we all live in a culture of texts, email, Facebook etc, but in prison letters are a life-line – make the most of them. If there are literacy concerns there are classes to help – don't be frightened to ask. Some prisons offer "email a prisoner" facilities. Draw pictures/ cartoons to send out.

Child development: time apart – people change and children grow up. Learn about what their interests are at their particular age, what they are doing at school, read the same books.

Story book/dads/mums: ask in the library about this. You can record a story to send out so children can hear your voice regularly.

What to tell the children: In fact, do the children even know? Creating an environment and culture of secrecy can cause problems for the future. Each family has to deal with the situation the best they can.

What families need to know about visiting relatives in prison

How relationships change, what to expect when they visit

Prison visits can be something to really look forward to – relatives are going to see their loved one, perhaps for the first time in a long time. But prison visits can also be really hard. Relatives may be angry with the person they are visiting or they haven't been to a prison before and are nervous. They may feel strongly about whether they should take their children into prison or be unsure about whether to visit at all.

Thinking all this through can be tough, especially when families might feel under pressure (even if only from themselves) to visit someone in prison. It is important to know that for some people, not visiting or not receiving a visit can be as important as going or being visited. What is right for families will probably be the best thing for them to do. If they do decide to visit their loved one in prison, there are many things to bear in mind.

The visit can involve long journeys, stressful booking and clearance procedures that many people find really difficult. Visitors will be searched on entry to the prison and will usually not be allowed much physical contact with the person they are visiting. They will be watched and in a room with many others. This can be hard, especially if they are not used to it. Planning the journey and finding out about what will happen before they go can really help. Many of the organisations and resources in this booklet can help with this (see page 7).

Children (including babies) will be searched and sometimes, depending on the prison, dogs will be used. This can be distressing. Often, prison officers and support staff will help as much as possible and many visitors' centres provide excellent support and advice services.

For many people, especially men in prison, being able to express their emotions and to communicate freely about things with people they

care about becomes really difficult. In prison, men need to protect themselves, feel safe and secure, find ways of avoiding 'trouble' and of keeping people at a safe distance.

In prison, for many men, survival has to include putting up big barriers and blocking out feelings or emotional connections. This can mean conversation and communication becomes even harder. It can mean men seem uninterested or distracted. Many men are embarrassed or ashamed at being seen in prison and many will want to protect their family from the realities of their situation. Thinking about things to talk about and having some things to share can help families to feel more prepared and help fill the gaps if the person they are visiting doesn't talk much.

Some prisoners will want sympathy and some will expect relatives to make special efforts to help them through their sentence. Any and all of these possibilities may be true, and it may be that the person they are visiting is absolutely the same as they were before going to jail.

Relatives might find it hard to relax in a prison environment, and might feel there are things they do or don't want to know. The partner in prison may become increasingly worried about their relationship and often, feelings of jealousy and insecurity are emphasised when people are away and unable to know what is going on at home. Many people start to imagine all kinds of things and act as if they are real.

Dealing with any of this is very difficult. If there are also children who have their own feelings about a parent or sibling in prison, the situation can be overwhelming.

There are things families can do to cope and plan and prepare and they can make decisions before they go and even decide not to go. Families can write letters and make phone calls instead of and as well as visiting. They can access Family Support Workers and a wide range of other services.

Families can talk to other families and visitors and share experiences and fears, and go on training programmes, use counselling services and get all the help and support they need to help them get through this.

Having someone close to you in prison is never easy and the most important thing families can remember is that they are just as important. Feeling in control will be a really good way to help families get through the sentence.

Why it's important to support prisoners' families

When a family member goes to prison, it can put a significant strain on the whole family:

"Prisoners' families have to cope with the practical, emotional and physical consequences of a family member being in custody. Yet it is no one's responsibility to respond to their needs, either inside or outside of prison, before or after release". This quote, taken from the Social Exclusion Unit report in 2002 indicates how stressful the prison experience can be for the whole family and the lack of support available to these families.

Organisations such as Action for Prisoners' Families have lobbied hard to increase the available support for children and families of prisoners, which is often variable, dependent on individual prisons and the current Governor. In a positive move the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) is now actively supporting the relatively new role of a Family Support Worker (FSW), who operate from a selection of prisons and exist to offer support to both the prisoner and their family affected by their imprisonment. It is hoped and anticipated that there will be a FSW in each prison within the next two years.

Evidence shows that supporting prisoners' families while the prisoner is in custody, significantly increases the offender's chances of rehabilitation and resettlement back into the community. In fact research indicates that having family ties can reduce the likelihood of reoffending by 39% (*Bromley Briefings*, 2010). Therefore in the majority of cases, it is beneficial for the family, offender and the community if offenders and their families are supported during imprisonment.

Despite the statistics above, during their sentence 45% of people lose contact with their families and many separate from their partners (*Bromley Briefings*, 2010). Although it must be acknowledged that it is sometimes beneficial and appropriate for relationships to end, for many, the lack of a positive family relationship can have a detrimental impact on the prisoner's chances of successful resettlement and have a long lasting impact on the children and family in the community. This demonstrates why resources must be provided to support the prisoner and their family pre and post custody.

There are three predominant ways prisoners can keep in touch with their families; through phone calls, letters and visits, however they all present certain challenges. For some prisoners, low

literacy levels can make written correspondence challenging and writing letters can be a skill/task they are unfamiliar with. For others telephone calls can be expensive and can leave them feeling exposed when required to make the calls at the end of a wing, lacking the privacy we tend to be accustomed to. Visits are popular and an effective way to maintain family relationships but can be stressful for all involved, particularly for many families who are forced to travel long distances with their children, using public transport to often remote locations. On 8 May 2009, 32,126 people in prison were being held over 50 miles away from their normal place of residence (*Bromley Briefings* December 2010).

For many male prisoners it is often the mother of their children or their own mother who is left to cope on their own with little or no support. Prisoners' families, including their children, often experience increased financial, housing, emotional and health problems during a sentence. Children of prisoners have about three times the risk of mental health problems and the risk of anti-social behaviour compared to other children (*Bromley Briefings*, December 2010).

It is estimated that there are 160,000 children with a parent in prison each year, with more children affected by imprisonment of a parent than by divorce in the family (*Bromley Briefings*, December 2010).

It has been indicated that 65% of boys with a convicted parent, go on to offend: a statistic that demands attention and interrogation (*Bromley Briefings*, December 2010). Although this figure is startling, it must also be viewed with caution as it cannot be assumed that those children with a parent in prison will naturally follow in their parents' footsteps.

Families of offenders may need help and support from a range of professionals to help them cope with the absence of a family member caused by a prison sentence. For example this support may be provided from their children's schools, Social Services, counselling, peer support groups and finance, debt and accommodation services. However accessing professional support can be challenging; for many the stigma and embarrassment attached to having a family member in prison can prevent them from reaching out. For a child, telling people at school can be devastating and cause real fear of rejection or exclusion caused by peers and teachers alike.

Charles Clarke, when Home Secretary,

stressed the importance of family for successful resettlement: "As we consider the practical steps intended to equip offenders with the means to avoid offending we also need to remember the vital role of family, friends and community. I believe that we sometimes fail to give enough emphasis to the powerful impact of supportive relationships to prisoners – to realise that offenders often care deeply about letting down those closest to them, and want to show that they can change, but somehow never get there. An offender is much more likely to reoffend if he feels part of a family and community, from which he receives support as well as owes obligations" (*Bromley Briefings*, 2010).

References

Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, Prison Reform Trust, 2010.

Available online: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/uploads/documents/FactFileJuly2010.pdf

Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners, Social Exclusion Unit, July 2002

SAFE GROUND

Action
for Prisoners' Families
CELEBRATING 21 YEARS

This paper was written by Action for Prisoners' Families and Safe Ground.

Resources

Children of prisoners – maintaining family ties, Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2008

A guide aimed at anyone who works with families of prisoners either directly or indirectly.
www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide22/files/guide22.pdf

The Outsiders, Action for Prisoners Families

A series of informative booklets for the partners and families of prisoners. These survival guides outline the problems families are likely to face and provide practical information on how to cope while a relative or friend is in prison.

www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/publications

Working with prisoners' families

APF has produced a number of briefings for practitioners working with prisoners' families, aimed at professionals including magistrates, police, GPs, schools, and health visitors.

www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/Practice/Practice_-_Supporting_the_families_of_prisoners.aspx

Danny's Mum and Tommy's Dad: books for younger children about having a parent in prison.

www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk

What shall I tell the Children?, Ormiston

www.ormiston.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/What-shall-I-tell-the-children-re-branded.pdf

Helplines and Support Groups

National Domestic Violence Freephone Helpline:

24 hour, run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge
0800 2000 247

Offenders' Families Helpline: free helpline offering confidential support to offenders' families

0800 808 2003

PrisonChatUK: an online community giving support to those who have a loved one inside the British prison system.

www.prisonchatuk.com

Prisoners' Advice Service: provides legal advice and information to prisoners in England and Wales regarding their rights, particularly the application of the Prison Rules and conditions of imprisonment.

0845 430 8923

SHARP: offer free confidential help, advice and practical and emotional support to relatives and friends of prisoners.

01743 245365.

Email: info@sharp-uk.org

www.sharp-uk.org

Women in Prison: freephone helpline:

0800 953 0125 and referral service: 020 78414760

www.womeninprison.org.uk

Videos

Action for Prisoners' Families: you can watch clips from two DVDs – *Missing Out*, about a woman prisoner's family dilemmas, and *Family Business*, about inter-generational crime, on Youtube:

Missing Out

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7p9rG45AMB8>

Family Business

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCKU3gvQ5Us&NR=1>

Relevant organisations

Families Outside: Families Outside is a Scottish charity which helps hundreds of families each year. They have developed a good partnership with the Scottish Prison Service and work closely with the family contact and development officers in each prison.

0500 83 93 83

www.familiesoutside.org.uk

Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group (POPS):

POPS aims to provide a variety of services to support anyone who has a link with someone in prison, prisoners and other agencies.

www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk

Prison Advice and Care Trust: The Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT) is an independent charity that supports people affected by imprisonment.

www.prisonadvice.org.uk

Storybook Dads: uses digital technology to enable mothers and fathers to record stories for their children to listen to at home, with the aim of maintaining family ties and facilitating learning for prisoners and their children through the provision of story CDs.

www.storybookdads.org.uk