

Prisoners' Families: The "Forgotten Victims"

Helen Codd explores the main issues facing prisoners' families and the vital role of voluntary sector groups in supporting them. She examines the reasons for the relatively low priority given to such work by the Probation Service, and considers how it may be able to provide greater assistance to families within existing resource limitations.

The desirability of maintaining relationship ties between a prison inmate and his or her family is largely undisputed (Woolf, 1991; Richards and McWilliams, 1996). Justifications for supporting prisoners' families range from a liberal humanist perspective, which argues that a caring society is one which supports those of its members who are suffering, to pragmatic justifications based on crime reduction (Light, 1993).

In an article published in 1993, Roy Light identifies three elements in which family ties can be linked to crime reduction. First, improved provision for the maintenance of family ties can help prisons to maintain good order and operate positive regimes. Second, there is strong evidence that the nature of a prisoner's relationship with his or her family will be an important factor in determining whether he or she will succeed in leading a useful and law-abiding life on return to the community. Third, disruption of family life can lead to children of imprisoned parents being more likely to offend themselves in later life. However, a growing body of research has

explored just how difficult maintaining these relationships can be for those outside "serving the second sentence". The experiences of prisoners' families have been recognised and explored by practitioners and academics, often working together and seeking to formulate suggestions for reform (Hardwick, 1986).

Developments during the 1990s

Ten years ago, a conference held in Bristol recommended that prisons introduce better communication facilities, that a network of properly funded support groups be established across the country, and that a national co-ordinating agency for these support groups also be established (Light, 1989). Some progress has been made towards meeting these recommendations. In 1990, The Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups was established, and the work of the Federation, along with

campaigning by groups such as the Save the Children Fund, has raised awareness of the importance of contact between prisoners and their families. In addition, a number of institutions have developed new facilities and initiatives to enable prisoners to maintain contact with their partners and children. Contact has been encouraged through the provision of access to telephones for most inmates.

Some prisons have developed special projects to maintain family relationships, especially with children, through extended visits or 'family days' (see Lloyd, 1992). Many of these projects involve voluntary organisations working alongside statutory bodies and penal establishments. For example, a new visitors' centre opened at HMP Holloway in January 1998. This centre is managed by the Prisoners' Wives and Families Society, which also runs a visitor's centre at HMP Pentonville. A recent article about this centre stressed that despite inevitable conflicts, steps have been taken to promote and develop an effective working relationship with prison staff (Rimington, 1998).

It is still the case, however, that there is no one statutory body which is responsible directly for assisting prisoners' families, neither is there any easily-identifiable voluntary sector organisation to which referrals can be made by the Police and other relevant bodies. Although victims of offences are referred by the Police to Victim Support, there is no similar provision for prisoners' families. Instead, prisoners' families find themselves largely unguided in their search for information and support, having to 'pick and mix' services and support from a range of official and voluntary sources. The vision of a national network of properly funded support groups has not been realised: the annual reports of organisations working with families indicate that they are still experiencing serious funding difficulties and have to rely largely on grants from charitable trusts and voluntary donations (e.g. POPS, 1996, PFAFS, 1996).

Sources of Support for Families

The challenges of coping with a partner's imprisonment have been well-documented elsewhere. Prisoners' partners may face a variety of difficulties and challenges as a result of imprisonment, including feelings of loneliness and isolation; fear and stigma; financial difficulties; housing problems and the challenges of caring for children (e.g. Shaw, 1992 and 1987; Light, 1992). Less widely discussed are the coping strategies utilised by family members in order to cope in their partner's absence, and maintain relationships until their partner's release. The Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders argues that although the practical and emotional problems identified by prisoners' partners are, by and large, the same for most families, the way people respond to these problems depends on a number of factors, including the reaction of relations, friends and the community, and whether or not this is the first offence for which the offender has been convicted (NIACRO, 1994).

Prisoners' family members seek and receive help, support and information from a diverse range of sources, with varying satisfaction. While for some prisoners' partners relatives, friends and neighbours may be a source of profound practical and emotional support, the support of family and friends is not universal. Friendship and kinship ties may be irreparably damaged by the nature of the offender's offence: families of those whose crimes are of a sexual or violent nature often experience stigmatisation, in some cases involving violence or property damage. Where practical and emotional support is made freely and generously available by family and friends, prisoners' partners may feel guilty at continually 'taking' from their friends and family, not wishing to become dependent.

Family members may seek help from an array of agencies and professionals,

including social workers, probation officers and solicitors. However, research has highlighted major differences between initial expectations of the Probation Service, and families' experiences (Codd, 1998).

The first few days of the remand or sentence are often the time when the partner on the outside is most in need of information, advice and support; if resources mean that it is not possible to contact the family in the days immediately following the sentence or remand, then partners can feel that, by the time a probation officer has been in touch, they have already found out everything they needed to know. Sometimes, it appears that limited resources mean that pragmatic decisions as to prioritising cases have to be made, with probation officers recognising that some relationships do not survive long sentences. While this may indeed be the case, if officers communicate these beliefs to prisoners' partners, this can cause additional distress.

Owing to limited resources and conflicting pressures operating on probation officers, there are inevitable time delays in responding to a person's imprisonment, which means that the Probation Service may not be able to offer practical or emotional support when it is most needed. This echoes previous research, which found the response of the Probation Service appeared to depend on the interest of individual officers, rather than on a commitment of the agency (Noble, 1996). Given that the Probation Service is largely client-centred, it is not surprising that the broader relationships of an inmate effectively become secondary concerns for officers working within limited resources.

It is clear therefore that organisations within the voluntary sector play a vital role in assisting prisoners' partners to maintain family ties throughout an individual's period of imprisonment (Smith, 1989). Religious and charitable organisations, pressure groups and self-help groups provide a range of services, all of which

can help a family member cope. There are a number of local and national self-help groups for prisoners' partners, families and children. Some, such as Aftermath, respond to the particular needs of the families of those accused of serious offences. Such groups meet needs for information and emotional or practical support during the prison term, and help families adjust to the inmate's release. They provide three crucial things: information, support and pre-release preparation.

Information

When a family is coping with a relative's imprisonment, particularly for the first time, lack of information may pose one of the biggest problems. Sometimes partners simply need to know which establishment their partner is being held in. Once this is known, this raises questions as to how and when visits can take place; whether visits are 'open' or 'closed'; and sometimes about financial help available through the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme. Organisations such as the Prison Reform Trust can be a hugely important source of such information: the Prisoner's Information Book, published jointly by the Trust and the Prison Service contains a great deal of relevant material, including details of all penal establishments in England and Wales.

There are also many national and local support or self-help groups for prisoners' families, and these have a detailed and up-to-date awareness of current information. These self-help groups can provide much-needed information about prisoner's rights, rules for visiting, Assisted Prison Visits, welfare benefits and housing issues. For example, a common complaint of prisoners' family members is that the rules on visiting, and on what can be taken in for prisoners, vary not only from establishment to establishment, but from visit to visit. Local support groups are

usually aware of these changes, and can advise accordingly.

Emotional and Practical Support

One useful working definition of a self-help group - adopted by the Nottingham Self-Help Team in 1993 - defines such a group as:

“made up of people who have personal experience of the same problem or life situation, either directly or through their family or friends.”

This definition goes on to stress that:

“sharing experience enables them to give each other a unique quality of mutual support and to pool practical information and ways of coping.” (quoted in Wilson, 1995).

Both of these elements are highly visible in prisoners' family groups. Such groups can provide emotional support and friendship within a context of shared experience. The non-judgmental and welcoming approach of support groups can be of particular benefit to people who experience violence, harassment and hostility as a result of their partner's imprisonment: the support groups provide a valuable 'safe environment' in which it is possible to reveal and share emotions and experiences in an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance. For some members of self-help groups, the close relationships within the group become quasi-familial (Codd, 1998).

In addition to emotional support, self-help groups encourage the rebuilding of self-esteem, which is often seriously damaged by the experience of a partner's arrest and imprisonment. After some time in the group, some groups encourage their members to take courses in listening and counselling skills, so that they can themselves support and nurture new members. This can give members a strong

sense of being able to 'give something back' to the group. Alongside this, many groups encourage their members not to view imprisonment purely as a crisis, but as an opportunity. Several groups encourage their members to gain qualifications with the aim of going back to work, or developing their careers.

Preparing for Release and Resettlement

Support groups play a significant role in preparing families for the prisoner's release and supporting the family through the subsequent process of readjustment. Membership of a self-help group does not necessarily end on the release of the prisoner. The support groups recognise that, just as the initial imprisonment brought major changes to the relationship, so the return of the prisoner brings with it its own challenges. Official agencies can provide information and support in relation to financial, employment and housing matters, but it is submitted that the self-help groups are unparalleled in their appreciation of the difficulties of re-adjustment experienced both by the released inmate and his or her partner and family (NIACRO, 1994).

The support groups also recognise that some relationships fail during the period of imprisonment, but continue to provide help and support. Support groups recognise that the experience of being the partner of a prisoner may have implications beyond the life of the relationship: even after divorce or separation, social stigma may persist. The groups recognise that it is possible to be the ex-partner of a prisoner, but the experience of having coped with offending and imprisonment is always there. If the offence was of a sexual or violent nature, then partners and families cope with the knowledge and experience of the offence and prison sentence long after the relationship or sentence is over.

Social Exclusion of Prisoners' Families

It is important to locate current responses to the needs of prisoners' families within the broader political penal context. The marginalisation of prisoners' families reflects the much-documented long-term shift in penal policy away from rehabilitation towards a justice-based approach. Within a penal climate dominated by the discourse of 'law and order,' justifications for facilitating the rehabilitation of offenders through assisting families have limited application.

Although families are recognised as playing a role within the rehabilitative process, in a climate of retribution families become part of the landscape of punishment of the offender for wrongdoing. Limitations on contact with one's family becomes part of the retributive experience. The "permeable wall" between prison and the outside community envisaged in Woolf's vision of community prisons has failed to materialise (Penal Affairs Consortium, 1994). After all, such an approach rests on the assumption that the community would wish for these better links, but as Roberts has pointed out, there are many people who would wish to increase the isolation and stigmatisation of prisoners (Roberts, 1994). In this context, families often speak of being presumed 'guilty by association', retribution extending beyond the offender to include the family because of unspoken suspicion that they must have known of the offender's activities. By implication, the response of criminal justice agencies to the needs of prisoners' families indicates symbolic denunciation not only of the offender but also of his or her family.

The social exclusion of the offender, as achieved through imprisonment, is extended to partners and children through the consistent failure of penal policies and practices to treat prisoners' families as anything other than unworthy of assistance, implied 'guilt by association' rendering

prisoners' families disqualified from recognition as deserving help and support. This exclusion is particularly visible in the experiences of prisoners' partners: children may be viewed as 'innocent' and thus in need, whereas partners become stigmatised by their relationship with the inmate.

The Role of the Probation Service

The changing role of the Probation Service and the ongoing debates surrounding the search for appropriate values for probation mean that prisoners' families are pushed to the margins of probation practice. In a recent speech, the Home Secretary stressed that the main function of the Service is:

"protecting the public by providing punishment in the community which is credible and effective" (Straw, 1997).

Within this correctionally-focused view of the functions of the Service, the development of work with families may add to the effectiveness of sentences of imprisonment, but working with prisoners' families is clearly tangential to the main aims of the Service.

In her recent book, Anne Worrall (1997) argues that the role of the Probation Service has changed from an aim to 'advise, assist and befriend' to having to 'confront, control and monitor.' Within such a concept of probation practice, families only become important in relation to confronting an offender with the effects of offending, and in relation to the control and surveillance of offenders so as to prevent re-offending. In practice, this means that responsibility for assisting prisoner's families does not squarely rest with one statutory agency, and, as has already been discussed, it is as a result of this lack of officially sanctioned provision that support groups have developed as a response to the climate of exclusion.

So how can the Probation Service help? Within the context of a profession working

under manifold pressures with many competing demands on resources, it would be meaningless to argue that the Probation Service should spend more time working with prisoners' families. A more achievable recommendation would be improved awareness of, and links with, voluntary sector provision on the part of probation staff, and improved communication between probation staff, prisoners' families and support groups. Information about support groups can reach families via lawyers or probation officers, but sometimes depends on word-of-mouth between families during visits, or on the imprisoned partner passing on relevant details. It is important to recognise that prisoners' partners and families who are in touch with support groups appear to have a more positive experience of coping with the sentence. Lack of contact with a support group owes more to lack of information than lack of interest: families may be unaware of any groups operating in their area, or unaware that some groups are national in their scope (Codd, 1998).

Information needs to be available to family members at an early stage in the prosecution process. The Prisoners' Families and Friends Service runs a court project in a number of London crown courts, using trained volunteers to identify affected families and friends after sentencing, and to give out advice and information as appropriate. Where such schemes do not exist, then it would be useful if lawyers and court probation staff kept details of relevant national or local support groups to which individuals could be referred as appropriate.

Conclusion

Prisoners' partners and families have been referred to as "forgotten victims" (Matthews, 1983). Unlike offenders and victims, families are secondary participants in the criminal justice process, in some cases having an influence on decision-

making and ultimately affected by any decision of the Court. If we accept the desirability of promoting and maintaining relationships between prisoners and their families, then on a short-term level the central and essential role of support groups needs to be recognised. If families are to cope with imprisonment, then contact with support groups needs to be promoted, not left to chance. In the longer term, the experiences and needs of prisoners' families need to be moved from the margins to the mainstream of consideration in the development of penal policies and practices.

Author

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