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Supporting families of people in prison and on probation

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CLiNKS
Supporting the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

About the authors

Jane Dominey has been at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge since October 2011. Following a ten year career in the probation service, she has conducted research across the criminal justice sector with particular expertise in probation practice and policy, desistance, the voluntary sector involvement in criminal justice and the families of people in contact with the criminal justice system.

Sophie Ellis worked for nine years in forensic psychology practice in the prison service, before joining the Institute of Criminology in 2017. Her main research interests are in the relationship between the 'psy' disciplines and criminal justice institutions, particularly those that punish. She is currently completing her PhD on the role of psychologists in English prisons, and is founder of the Critical Conversations in Forensic Psychology network. She has also worked on a longitudinal study of imprisoned fathers and their partners and children, and has a particular interest in the experiences of IPP sentenced prisoners and their families.

Caroline Lanskey is a university lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology and a deputy director of the Institute's research Centre for Community, Gender and Social Justice. She has over ten years' experience of research on prisoners' families and children and recently led the Families and Imprisonment Research (FAIR) Study – a longitudinal study of families experiencing paternal imprisonment (www.fair.crim.cam.ac.uk).

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Prison visitor centre
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Why read this evidence review?

In recent years there has been increased interest from policy makers, researchers and practitioners in the role that the family can play to help prisoners survive the pains of imprisonment and resettle successfully. There has been much less interest on the impact of criminal justice involvement on the families of people in prison and on probation. The team from the Institute of Criminology assemble the up-to-date evidence on this impact in a lucid analysis complete with critical success factors of approaches designed to mitigate these difficulties.

This review covers a wide range of issues including:

- How imprisonment is viewed through the eyes of family members
- Five key areas of impact
  - » Sustaining relationships
  - » Communication and information
  - » Economic disadvantage
  - » Health impacts
  - » Exclusion and stigma.
- The discussion of each impact area includes signposting to best practice guides and helpful resources.

Seeing criminal justice through the eyes of the family

Lord Farmer's reviews of the importance of strengthening family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime (Ministry of Justice 2017 and 2019) describe good family relationships as a 'golden thread' that should run through the work of prisons and other agencies, acting as a resource to support the process of rehabilitation. There is much talk about how the family may help the justice involved person, but far less about the ways in which families are affected and how their difficulties can be alleviated. Where families are already experiencing discrimination, poverty or social exclusion, the experience of criminal justice involvement can amplify these disadvantages. This report provides a brief and accessible summary of relevant research evidence and highlights approaches that are experienced by families as supportive.

This report defines family broadly. Families are structured in different ways, with a variety of home circumstances and patterns of living. Close family members may be parents, partners, and children, but might also include individuals who are not related 'by blood'.

Seeing the criminal justice system through the eyes of the family highlights these five themes: sustaining relationships; communication and information; economic disadvantage; health impacts; and exclusion and stigma.

Sustaining relationships

Close family relationships are as fundamental to the well-being of family members as they are to their relative in the justice system. It is not just the relationships with the person in prison that are affected but relationships between other family members too (Lösel et al, 2012). The nature and extent of the effect depends on the closeness and quality of these relationships before the family member's conviction.

A family member's involvement with the criminal justice system can be a confusing and fearful experience particularly for young children who may not fully understand what is going on. Children who witness the arrest of a mother or father and their sudden absence from their lives if she or he is sentenced in custody may experience trauma and separation anxiety (Murray and Murray, 2010). They may respond by withdrawing and becoming depressed or by 'acting out' and behaving aggressively. When primary caregivers, of whom the majority are mothers, are given custodial sentences the impact on family life can be severe and involve the break-up of the family home and the placement of children into alternative care, either within the wider family or through social services (Baldwin 2018; Minson nd; Raikes 2016). The relative's release from prison will bring further adaptations to family relationships and roles such as caring, decision-making and income-earning (Lösel et al, 2012).

Family relationships can be usefully supported in a number of ways. In addition to prison visits (discussed in the next section), there are initiatives which help families come to terms with someone's involvement in the justice system and which provide advice on how to talk to children about what has happened. There have been some successful mentoring programmes for children of prisoners (Heinecke Thulstrup and Eklund Karlsson, 2017, Lanskey, 2017) as well as use of trauma focused cognitive behavioural therapy (Morgan-Mullane, 2018). Support needs to be culturally appropriate, consistent, and reliable.

Communication and information

Families of people caught up in the criminal justice system value accurate and timely information and the chance to communicate their fears, worries and concerns to professionals. The need for information – to know what is going on – begins at the point of arrest, continues through the process of prosecution and conviction, and is vital while a family member is serving a sentence in custody or the community.

Research studies point to the frustration and distress caused when information is inaccurate or lacking. For example, relatives of people serving indeterminate sentences for public protection (IPP) spoke to Annison and Condry (2018) of poor communication exacerbated by ever-changing prison staff. Relatives of people on probation also expressed frustration; they told Coley (2020) that they would like to know more about the purpose of probation supervision and the support that practitioners are able to provide.

As well as receiving information about sentence progress and processes, family members also want professionals to value the contribution that they make to supporting their relative. Family members can feel invisible, with the work that they do to offer help through community and custodial sentences unacknowledged. A particular cause of distress for some is the difficulty of communicating concerns to prisons about the health and well-being of prisoners (Prison Reform Trust/Inquest/Pact 2019).

Opportunities for good quality communication with prisoners themselves are important too. Without contact, relationships may become stale, threatening the well-being of all involved (Lanskey et al, 2015 and 2016; Kotova, 2016). Research evidence supports the use of a wide range of communication methods: including letters, telephone calls and visits. While visits are often crucial for sustaining close family relationships, indirect communication (through letters and phone calls) is important for wider family relationships (see Weaver and Nolan 2015). There are several examples of prison programmes (many of them run by the voluntary sector) aiming to improve the contact between people in prison and family members (see, for example, Clancy and Maguire 2017; Rees et al 2017; Dominey et al 2016).

Prison visits that enable families to interact as they would in their own homes, to talk through issues of concern, to laugh, play and eat together are welcomed (Moran 2013, Hutton 2016). A hospitable environment is important but so are opportunities for interactions within that environment which meet the interests and wishes of family members including children of different ages. Conversation does not always flow easily and may be helped by structured activities (for example, like playing board games (Markussen 2017)). Families say they appreciate visits that are planned with their interests in mind, which recognise their other commitments (such as children attending school) and take account of practical matters (such as the accessibility of transport) (Lösel et al, 2012).

Economic disadvantage

Families affected by imprisonment often suffer disproportionately from poverty prior to a family member's incarceration. Lanskey et al. (2015) found that 79% of families in their study of imprisoned fathers were living below the poverty line prior to the father's imprisonment. This increased to 91% once the father was imprisoned. In the same study, Souza et al. (2019) found that 40% of mothers from families intact at the point of imprisonment said that the father either shared equal parental responsibility (32%) or was the main caregiver (8%). Another study found that half of imprisoned fathers reported being the primary source of financial support for their children (Glaze & Maruschek, 2008). This indicates an increased burden of both economic and childcare responsibility for women with imprisoned partners. The women studied by Souza et al. (2019) had lower pre-existing levels of education which restricted their employability, and although they often expressed a desire to invest in their careers, childcare responsibilities frequently stopped them doing so, a barrier also found in other studies (Austin et al. 2001). In essence, imprisonment intensifies economic disadvantage and exclusion for families (Arditti 2018; Besemer & Dennison, 2019).

Families can face an abrupt reorganisation of their economic circumstances when someone (who may be the main wage-earner) is sent to prison. An already precarious economic situation may be intensified by a sudden drop in income, threatening basic security through, for example, becoming unable to afford current accommodation. Alongside loss of income, imprisonment may bring additional costs. For example, if one parent is imprisoned, the other may have to give up work due to the increased demands of childcare. Families may also incur financial costs supporting the person in prison: sending money and goods directly, travelling to the prison to visit, and/or bearing responsibility for fines and legal costs.

Economic difficulties persist post-release. Markson et al. (2015) found that economic difficulties reported by families after imprisonment were not related to quality of pre-existing family relationships, or to other resettlement related outcomes. Other studies have found that the economic exclusion of men released from prison can actually increase strain on family relationships, via difficulties in renegotiating gender roles, particularly if a female partner has successfully transitioned to economic independence while their partner is imprisoned (Comfort, 2018; Lanskey et al. 2018).

Economic strain compounds the other problems faced by prisoners' families. Assisting families to access practical support is helpful in its own right, but also a long-term investment in sustaining positive family relationships which are, in turn, related to reduced reoffending.

Health impacts

The imprisonment of a loved one is associated with health problems for family members, which are often exacerbated by stress. Condry (2007) found that arrest was described by family members as producing a deep sense of shock, unreality and numbness, which is consistent with symptoms of trauma. Kotova (2018) described similar feelings for families at sentencing. Lanskey et al (2018) distinguish between the acute and chronic pains of imprisonment for families, describing (as does Kotova) a process of habituation to pain over time. However, this habituation still involves poor health. Souza et al (2019) found that 29% of women with an imprisoned partner had physical health problems while their partner was in prison. Caddle and Crisp (1997) found that between one fifth and one third of children developed health problems, including sleep problems, eating problems and bedwetting. Problems tended to be worse in older children, and those separated from siblings.

In a multinational study of parents of people in prison, Raikes et al (2019) found that this group were already suffering their own health problems, which they neglected in order to look after their grandchildren in their parents' absence. The grandparents' mental health also often worsened, due to the deterioration of their social lives. Annison and Condry (2018) found that the families of people serving IPP sentences suffered particularly poor mental health and stress-related illnesses, which they saw as compounded by the additional burden of providing legal and emotional support for their loved ones.

There is less research about the recovery from the impact of stress and trauma. Souza et al (2019) found that in the six months after a partner's release, women's physical health improved but they reported greater mental health problems. This may reflect the adjustment to a changing set of family circumstances and overcoming a painful period of their lives.

Given the role of stress, shock, and ongoing pain in families' lives, the HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) trauma-informed care framework may provide a framework upon which to build methods of support for families, although this should be done with caution and respect for what families want. A greater recognition of the impact of prison on families' health may lead to a greater understanding of their problems, needs, and the possible impact of risk management on family health, particularly in the case of prisoners serving IPP sentences.

Exclusion and stigma

Having a family member caught up in the criminal justice system is associated with experiences of stigma and social exclusion. These interact with economic disadvantage to reinforce patterns of social inequality. In particular, because prison impacts disproportionately on people already marginalised by class or race, the impact on families amplifies existing patterns of disadvantage. The work of Halsey and de Vel-Palumbo (2020) sets out the damage done by patterns of inter-generational incarceration to indigenous communities in Australia and similar research in the US demonstrates the link between imprisonment, race and inequality. In the UK, migrant families may be particularly isolated and without those they can turn to for advice and support (Canton and Hammond, 2012).

Social exclusion arises for families partly as a result of the financial impacts of criminal justice involvement, but also from the loss of opportunities to participate in the range of educational, community and leisure activities that underpin a good quality of life. The stigma and shame associated with prison and punishment can make people reluctant to seek help and engage with services, a further obstacle to civic inclusion and participation (McGillivray 2016). The impact of shame and stigma falls unevenly on families, depending on the type of offence, the length of sentence and the extent of any media interest. Family members can suffer 'guilt by association' and be viewed as undeserving of help; in some cases families face hostility and violence (Scott and Codd 2010).

For children, stigma and exclusion lead to problems at school and in other aspects of community life. The imprisonment of a parent may well lead a child to struggle at school. If teachers are aware of the child's circumstances then they can offer help and support. There are good practice guidelines for schools (including, for example, Barnardo's Cymru 2014; Families Outside 2018) stressing the need to keep a focus on the needs of the child.

In conclusion

There is now a wealth of evidence that points to the importance of supporting the families of individuals caught up in the criminal justice system. This evidence points to common themes – about maintaining contact, addressing the need for information, understanding the impact of stigma and providing practical assistance – but also identifies the need for culturally appropriate responses that take account of the way in which criminal justice involvement exacerbates existing patterns of social disadvantage.

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Supporting the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

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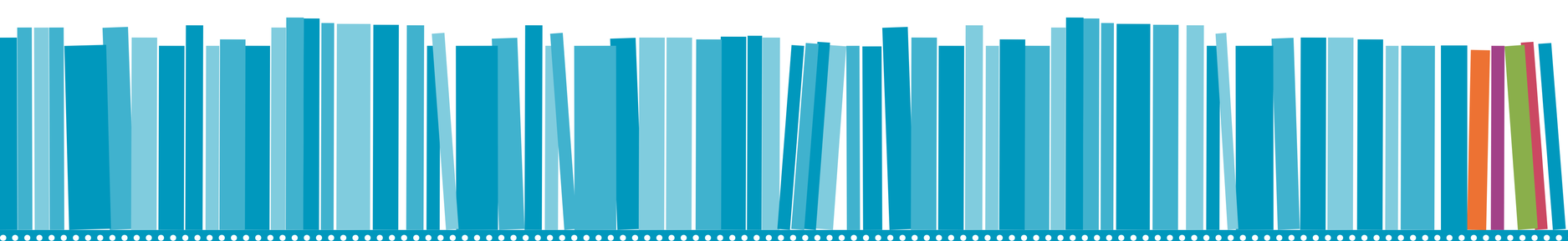

An online evidence base for the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

This article forms part of a series from Clinks, created to develop a far-reaching and accessible evidence base covering the most common types of activity undertaken within the criminal justice system. There are two main aims of this online series:

1 To increase the extent to which the voluntary sector bases its services on the available evidence base

2 To encourage commissioners to award contracts to organisations delivering an evidence-based approach.

Each article has been written by a leading academic with particular expertise on the topic in question. The topics are selected by Clinks' members as areas of priority interest. Clinks intends to build a comprehensive directory of the best evidence available across a wide range of criminal justice topics within the next three years (2020-2023). The online evidence base is co-ordinated by Russell Webster on behalf of Clinks.

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