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'Nowhere Else to Turn'

— Key Findings from an Evaluation of the Offenders' Families Helpline

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Introduction

Children and families of offenders have been described as the 'forgotten victims' of the Criminal Justice System (CJS), and advocacy groups argue that criminal justice agencies pay insufficient attention to the impact of their processes on families, meaning that their best interests can be overlooked or actively damaged.[1] This paper presents findings from an evaluation of the Offenders' Families Helpline — a free and confidential service providing information, emotional support and signposting to families and friends of offenders involved in any stage of the CJS. In 2013, the Helpline received almost 10,000 telephone calls and over 145,000 unique visitors to its website. The Helpline is funded by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), and at the time of the evaluation was delivered by Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group (POPS), a voluntary sector organisation based in Manchester. The aims of the evaluation were to assess the extent to which the Helpline meets families' support needs, and to evidence the impact and outcomes of the Helpline for family members.

The Impact of the CJS on Families

Offenders and their families represent a particularly vulnerable section of society where unemployment, debt, family discord, substance misuse and mental health problems are disproportionately common even before involvement in the CJS.[2] Although involvement in the CJS does not necessarily signal the onset of problems for families, there is a growing body of literature that demonstrates how the various stages of the system can add to the challenges that that are already experiencing.

For family members, an offenders' arrest can be sudden and unexpected, and can be accompanied by feelings of shock and disbelief.[3] Information about the arrest, for example, the offence with which they are charged or the police station at which they will be detained, is not necessarily made available or properly explained to family members.[4] Witnessing the arrest of a parent can be highly traumatic for children, and can go unexplained for some time whilst the remaining parent/carer devises a strategy for telling the child.[5]

There can be considerable delays between the arrest and court proceedings, and this period is often characterised by feelings of uncertainty regarding the future, stress, anxiety, and heightened family conflict.[6] When the court hearing finally arrives, proceedings and sentencing outcomes can be difficult for families to comprehend.

The imposition of a custodial sentence can be advantageous for some families — providing a welcome reprieve from domestic violence or substance misuse — but there is considerable evidence that families are more likely to suffer as a direct result of imprisonment.[7] Imprisonment can be associated with a loss of income, strain to partner relationships, disruption to children's care giving arrangements, and unwelcome adjustments to roles and responsibilities within the family.[8]

Furthermore, families of prisoners are known to experience severe stigma, bullying, victimisation and social isolation.[9] Understandably, many families adopt a policy of secrecy to protect themselves from negative community reactions, but as a consequence, this inhibits the

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2. Social Exclusion Unit (2002) Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners. London: Social Exclusion Unit.
3. Condry, R. (2007) *Families shamed: The consequences of crime for relatives of serious offenders*. Collumpton: Willan Publishing.
4. Jones, A., Gallagher, B., Manby, M., Robertson, O., Schützwohl, M., Berman, A., Hirschfield, A., Ayre, L., Urban, M. and Sharratt, K. (2013) *Children of Prisoners: Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health*. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield.
5. Phillips, S. and Zhao, J. (2010) The relationship between witnessing arrests and elevated symptoms of posttraumatic stress: Findings from a national study of children involved in the child welfare system. *Children and Youth Service Review* 32(10): 1246-1254.
6. See Jones et al (2013) n.4.
7. Murray, J. (2005) The effects of imprisonment on families and children of prisoners. In Liebling, A. and Maruna, S. (eds) The Effects of Imprisonment. Devon: Willan Publishing.
8. See Robertson (2007) n.1.
9. Murray, J. (2007) The cycle of punishment: Social Exclusion of Prisoners and their children. *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 7(1): 55-81.

opportunity to seek support from their established social networks. Perhaps it is not surprising then, that partners and children of prisoners frequently experience poorer mental health outcomes.[10]

Maintaining contact with the individual in prison has multiple benefits, including sustaining partner relationships and parent-child attachments, protecting the wellbeing of individual family members, and also reducing the likelihood of reoffending.[11] Despite this, it is estimated that 43 per cent of prisoners lose touch with their families during their time in prison.[12] The emotional strain experienced by families can diminish their willingness to maintain contact with the offender.[13] The distance to the prison and the associated travel costs, complicated visits booking systems and the cost of telephone credit can also present challenges to maintaining contact.[14]

An offender's return to the family home — after months or perhaps even years in prison — can have dramatic and unanticipated consequences for all concerned. Families report problems re-adjusting, communicating, and negotiating roles and responsibilities around the home.[15] If the offender experiences difficulties finding employment, relapses into drug or alcohol misuse, or re-offends, this can also be a major source of frustration or disappointment for families.

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Methodology

An independent evaluation of the Offenders' Families Helpline was conducted by the University of Huddersfield in December 2013-February 2014. The evaluation adopted a multi-stranded methodology, which was approved by the School of Human and Health Sciences Research and Ethics Council. Protocols were established to ensure that family members were able to give their informed consent and understood their rights as participants.

1. Sixty eight family members who had accessed the Helpline participated in a telephone survey. All of these participants had accessed the service by telephone, but only eleven had also accessed the website, meaning that the analysis was restricted to data relating to the telephone service. The survey elicited information related to satisfaction with the service, the extent to which the Helpline meets families support needs, and the impact of the service on callers. Respondents were mostly female (77.3 per cent) and white British (79.4 per cent). Wives/partners/girlfriends (30.8 per cent) and mothers (29.2 per cent) of offenders' accounted for the largest proportion of all participants. Most of the participants had contacted the Helpline for issues relating to prison (57.4 per cent), followed by issues concerning release from prison (19.1 per cent). When compared to existing call monitoring data, it was found that participants were highly representative of all service users, as were their reasons for accessing the Helpline.

2. Four family members who participated in the telephone survey also took part in semi-structured interviews. The interviews covered similar topics to the questionnaire but were intended to elicit more in-depth information. All interviewees were female and had either a son or close friend in prison. Interviews were also conducted via telephone and lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

3. Two focus groups were conducted with the Helpline team, including the Service Co-ordinator and volunteers. The focus groups covered a variety of themes including the aims and objectives of the Helpline, perceived benefits of the Helpline to families, and the personal qualities and skills required to successfully support families. Focus groups lasted approximately one hour, and were recorded and fully transcribed.

Findings

Overall, the Helpline was found to provide a crucial service that was highly effective in meeting families' support needs. Four prominent themes emerged from the telephone survey and interviews, and each is discussed in turn below.

10. Wildeman, C., Schnittker, D. and Turney, K. (2012) Despair by association? The Mental Health of Mothers with Children by Recently Incarcerated Fathers. *American Sociological Review* 77(2): 216-243; and Nesmith, A. and Ruhland, E. (2008) Children of incarcerated parents: Challenges and resiliency, in their own words. *Children and Youth Services Review* 30(10): 1119-1130.
11. Sharratt, K. (in press) Children's Experiences of Contact with Imprisoned Parents: A Comparison between Four European Countries. *European Journal of Criminology*; and May, C., Sharma, N. and Stewart, D. (2008) Factors linked to re-offending: a one-year follow-up of prisoners who took part in the Resettlement Surveys 2001, 2003 & 2004. Ministry of Justice Research Summary 5. London: Ministry of Justice.
12. National Offender Management Service (2005) The National Reducing Re-offending Delivery Plan. London: Home Office.
13. See Sharratt (in press) n.11.
14. Clarke, L., O'Brien, M., Day, R.D., Godwin, H., Connolly, J., Hemmings, J. and Van Leeson, T. (2005) Fathering behind Bars in English Prisons: Imprisoned Fathers' Identity and Contact with Their Children. *Fathering* 3(3): 221-241.
15. Naser, R.L. and Visher, C.A. (2006) Family Members Experiences with Incarceration and Reenty. *Western Criminology Review* 7(2): 20-31.

'Nowhere Else to Turn'

As part of the telephone survey, participants were asked if they believed that there were lots of other places that families could seek **information** about the CJS, and most responded 'no' (79.4 per cent), a few responded 'yes' (14.3 per cent) and a small proportion were unsure (6.3 per cent). Perceptions about alternative sources of **emotional support** for families affected by the CJS were similar (81.8 per cent responded 'no', 15.2 per cent 'yes' and 3.0 per cent 'not sure').

The perceived absence of alternative sources of support for offenders' families was also echoed in the interviews (e.g. *'I feel like there is nowhere else to turn'*). Interviewees described the relief that they experienced when they first discovered the Helpline, and said that it was reassuring to know that *'someone is there, that there is somebody that you can speak to'*.

> *I didn't know that there was anybody there to turn to. I thought it was just go to this jail and that was it, you were on your own, that's the end for you.*

Family members also described the Helpline as a unique service and said that there were few comparable sources of information and support for families affected by the CJS:

> *With there not being anything else like them, I don't know what people would do...the Helpline is the only hope for them.*

Interviews with the Helpline team offered further insights into the perceived lack of support for families. It was reported that families often encounter difficulties obtaining information from criminal justice agencies. Prisons, for example, have limited resources to respond to families' queries, and are also bound by strict security and data protection regulations that prevent the release of certain information.

Indeed, one interviewee expressed her frustration that despite contacting several different agencies on numerous occasions, she had been unsuccessful in receiving a response to her query, and said that the Helpline were *'the only people that have actually been helpful'*:

> *Our experience of Probation is that they have no contact at all with the families. The prison were just like 'confidentiality, we can't speak to you'. We had major concerns for his health and wellbeing and they kept quoting the Data Protection Act...*

Although the preferred approach of the Helpline was to provide families with a platform from which they can resolve issues independently, sometimes obstacles associated with obtaining information from criminal justice agencies limited the extent to which this is possible. In these cases, the Helpline was able to act as an effective intermediary between families and agencies, made possible by well-established links with criminal justice agencies. The Helpline team pointed out that by responding directly to families' queries, there was no need for them to contact the prison, and so the Helpline could reduce some of the burden on prisons' already over-stretched resources.

During the interviews, family members continued to speak positively about the Helpline team's knowledge of the CJS and their ability to confidently answer their queries.

Meeting Families' Information Needs

It was apparent from the interviews that the support needs of families and offenders are heavily intertwined, and in supporting families, the Helpline invariably supports offenders too. This is particularly true for offenders who are held in custody and are less able to deal with issues themselves, in which case families often play an important role in accessing information of their behalf.

The telephone survey revealed very positive perceptions of the information provided by the Helpline. On a scale ranging from 1 to 5, the statements *'At the end of my call, I had enough information to deal with the issue better'* and *'The information that I received was easy to understand'* received mean scores of 4.92 and 4.91 respectively. The statement *'I had confidence that the person I spoke to could deal with my concerns'* achieved a mean score of 4.92.

During the interviews, family members continued to speak positively about the Helpline team's knowledge of the CJS and their ability to confidently answer their queries. Some interviewees reported that they had found information provided by the CJS to be either contradictory (e.g. *'I was being told one thing and then I was being told another'*) or difficult to understand, and expressed their gratitude to the Helpline for providing valuable clarification and explanation.

> *They were excellent, they were straight to the bone, anything I wanted to ask, I got an answer to, I didn't get a 'don't know' or 'unsure'.*

I just felt like I was in a foreign country and I didn't speak the same language at all…I suppose it was explanations in plain English really, in a language that I understood, without the legal jargon.

A couple of interviewees commended the Helpline for providing information quickly, saying that delays would only exacerbate their anxieties. Other family members indicated that they would like the Helpline's opening hours to be extended as having to wait to speak to someone could prolong and heighten their feelings of stress. It is noteworthy that this was the only potential area for improvement mentioned by family members during the survey and interviews.

You're stressed enough as it is, I am at the moment you know, you want the answers…you don't want to be faffing around, waiting and waiting…

…if you can't talk to someone you just let things stew, and the more you think about it, the more worked up you get, and this is not good, you get stressed…

Helping Families to Cope

All of the family members who were interviewed indicated that they had primarily contacted the Helpline seeking information, but also reported that they had found it to be a very valuable source of emotional support. The Helpline team highlighted that although families might initially call with a question, it can become apparent that they are really seeking emotional support. Families can be very conscious of the stigma associated with their involvement in the CJS, and might be hesitant to confide in others for fear of how they will react. The Helpline team reported that it was important to be sensitive to how callers are feeling in order to properly recognise their support needs, and that building a sense of rapport and trust was crucial in enabling family members to confide in the Helpline.

Perhaps one of the most pertinent examples of how the Helpline supports both families and offenders, are calls from family members who are concerned about the safety or wellbeing of a prisoner, for example, in relation to bullying or self-harm. In contacting the prison on behalf of the family, the Helpline can ensure that the appropriate safeguarding procedures are instigated, and can also report back to the family that their relative is being looked after, providing much needed reassurance.

It was evident from the interviews that family members called the Helpline in various states of distress, despair, frustration and anger. Interviews provided evidence that the Helpline was successful in helping families to cope with a range of emotions, for example:

I was a bit upset on the phone, I was in a bit of a turmoil, I was all agitated before I rang, she was excellent, she helped calm me down really.

Nevertheless, the emotion that family members most often associated with their involvement in the CJS was 'stress'. Interviews suggested that the first point of contact with the CJS could be one of the most stressful times for families (e.g. *'I did not know where to even begin when my son was remanded in custody'*, and interviewees variously described feeling *'panicked'*, *'lost'* and *'confused'* at this time.

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For a few interviewees, intense or prolonged periods of stress seemed to be having adverse implications for their health, but the Helpline provided a much-needed sense of relief:

Miles better because I'd had a weight lifted off my shoulder, because I'd been getting frantic with it, I'd been stressing out, making myself worse.

The telephone survey indicated that the Helpline was very successful in alleviating feelings of stress and anxiety. On a scale ranging from 1 to 5, the statements *'At the end of my call, I felt reassured'* and *'At the end of my call, I felt more confident about my situation'* received mean scores of 4.91 and 4.88 respectively.

The Helpline team reported that although they provided immediate support, part of the ethos of the service was to enable families to develop coping strategies to deal with their situation on their own. This was reflected in the interviews with family members who reported that the Helpline provided them with a sense of courage to deal with challenges posed by the CJS (e.g. *'She was strength to me, even though I don't know the girl…'*).

During the evaluation, it emerged that a number of staff and volunteers had previously been affected by a friend or relative's involvement in the CJS. It was believed that personal experience enabled the team to thoroughly empathise with families, and contributed to the provision

of high quality support. Indeed, the questionnaire item *'The person that answered my call seemed to understand my situation'* received a mean score of 4.97 out of a maximum of 5. Support for this assertion was also provided by one of the family members interviewed who said that most people struggled to understand her concerns: *'Well friends and family don't get me because they're not in that situation'*.

Refreshingly Genuine and Non-Judgemental

Simply knowing that the Offenders' Families Helpline existed seemed to make a real difference to the family members interviewed; it provided a sense that their support needs have been recognised and they had been acknowledged as an important part of society. The sense that families of offenders 'mattered' seemed to be further reinforced by the style in which the Helpline team responded to calls. Family members reported that the Helpline team really listened to and understood their concerns, and put a considerable degree of effort into helping families resolve issues. Callers were left with the impression that the Helpline team genuinely cared about families and had a genuine desire to help them.

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> *…you know, sometimes you can talk to someone and they're 'um, um, um' but you know that they're not taking in things, they really, really do.*

> *They were genuine like they wanted to give you help and advice, like they really wanted to help.*

As anticipated, interviews with family members revealed that there was a great deal of stigma and prejudice associated with involvement in the CJS. One family member reported that she was so *'embarrassed'* and *'ashamed'* of her son's imprisonment that she felt unable to confide in family or friends. Other participants reported that they had spoken to family and friends about their situation, but had found them to be very opinionated and felt that they were being *'judged'*. Interviewees reported that although family members tried to be supportive, as a result of the negative attitudes towards offending, their efforts often seemed very insincere:

> *Family and friends are trying to support you but its either coming across as 'poor you', 'poor him', or they think that you are a bad parent…*

A couple of the interviewees thought that the emotional attachment to family and friends made it impossible for them to provide unbiased support. The Helpline on the other hand was perceived to be *'detached'*. According to families this enabled them to provide support in a more impartial manner and to take a *'view from the outside'*.

> *Family especially are very opinionated, because the Helpline haven't got any emotional attachment, they are not judgemental….There's no 'he shouldn't have done that, he wouldn't have landed himself in prison then'. That's refreshing, you really need that.*

Summary and Conclusion

Previous literature revealed that offenders' families may be classed as a particularly vulnerable section of society. Involvement at all stages of the CJS has negative implications for families including disruption to family relationships, practical and financial challenges, deleterious consequences to emotional wellbeing, and stigma and isolation. Maintaining relationships between offenders and their families is likely to present significant benefits in terms of preventing family break-down, protecting the wellbeing of individual family members, and reducing the likelihood of re-offending. Despite this, a significant proportion of relationships break down as a result of emotional strain and practical and financial barriers to sustaining contact with relatives in prison.

The literature points to a need for services designed to reduce the negative impact on families involved in the CJS. Families' support needs are likely to be complex and diverse but might include access to information (e.g. explanations of criminal justice procedures and arrangements for contact) and emotional support provided in a confidential and non-judgemental manner. Families might also require help and advice on how to support children throughout the various stages of the CJS, and signposting to other agencies and organisations that can offer assistance with regards to finance, health, accommodation, etc. Services designed to support relationships between offenders and families are also likely to have a positive impact.

There are several regionally-based services dedicated to supporting families affected by a relative's involvement

in the CJS, but the Offenders' Families Helpline is the only service available to families across the whole of England and Wales. The volume of telephone calls and website hits (in 2013 this was 10,000 and 145,000 respectively) provides a clear indication that the Helpline is a much-needed service, and this was further evidenced by the evaluation. Approximately 80 per cent of family members surveyed thought that there were few alternative sources of information and emotional support for families. Interviewees also reported that they felt there was *'nowhere else to turn'*, and perceived the Helpline to be a unique source of support.

These findings might reflect the difficulties that families experience obtaining information from criminal justice agencies. It should, however, be acknowledged that agencies have limited resources to respond to families concerns and regulations exist preventing the release of certain information. Nevertheless, the well-established reputation of the Helpline enabled them to act as a successful intermediary between families and agencies where necessary.

Even though the Helpline fills an important gap in service provision, this does not guarantee its success in meeting families' support needs. The evaluation, however, revealed that the Helpline was very effective in meeting families' needs for information and emotional support. Both the questionnaire survey and interviews found that the Helpline provided easily-accessible information and enabled families to cope with a range of emotions, particularly stress. By providing a combination of good quality information (e.g. about prison visiting arrangements) and emotional support that reduces the strains associated with the CJS, the Helpline has the potential to influence the likelihood that relationships between offenders and their families are maintained.

The evaluation also revealed that family members perceived the Helpline team to be very understanding, genuine and non-judgemental. The quality of service provision could partly be attributed to some of the Helpline team having personal experience of the CJS; therefore enabling them to better empathise with families' circumstances.

Although the focus of the evaluation was primarily the extent to which the Helpline meets families' support needs, a number of additional benefits emerged. In responding directly to families' queries, the Helpline was found to reduce some of the pressure on criminal justice agencies already over-stretched resources. The Helpline was also found to support the instigation of safeguarding procedures in prisons, and to provide an indirect source of information for offenders. Further research exploring how non-governmental organisations, including but not limited to the Offenders' Families Helpline, can support the interface between families and criminal justice agencies would be advantageous.

In light of the finding that being able to access information quickly is important in meeting families' support needs, the evaluation recommends that the opening hours of the Helpline are reviewed. It is acknowledged, however, that that the evaluation had a modest sample size and therefore this observation might not necessarily reflect the views of all family members accessing the Helpline.

A further limitation of the evaluation was that, due to the small number of participants who reported accessing the website, it was not feasible to assess the extent to which this aspect of the service effectively meets families' needs. Therefore further research is required to understand the impact and outcomes of the website for family members. Although the website might provide instantaneous access to information, it seems unlikely that it would be able to rival the quality of the unbiased emotional support provided by telephone, or to support the interface between families and criminal justice agencies so seamlessly.

Overall, the Offenders' Families Helpline was found to make an important contribution to reducing the negative impact of the CJS on families, particularly in terms of alleviating negative emotional consequences and supporting families and offenders to maintain relationships. Well-established links with criminal justice agencies, and personal experience of the CJS might partly explain the effectiveness of the service. Although further research is required to explore alternative mechanisms to support offenders' families, it is envisioned that an online-only service would not suffice.

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