

A Prisoner in the Family

Kelli Brown reports on research into the needs of teenagers with a prisoner in the family.

In the year 2000, Action for Prisoners' Families (formerly the Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups) began a three-year project to identify and address the needs of teenagers with a close family member in prison. During 2001-02, the Young People's Project developed three pilot projects designed to act on the findings from our research conducted in 2000 with 53 young people living in London, Durham and Manchester. The Young People's Project (YPP) will conclude in January 2003 with a conference to highlight the issues for young people with a prisoner in the family and the models of support piloted by the project.

Findings from the research

We believe this was the first time in England and Wales that young people aged between 12 and 18 were asked about the impact on their lives when a parent or sibling received a custodial sentence. Rarely have teenagers with a prisoner in the family been recognised in the literature which exists on prisoners' families and they are also often overlooked within their communities.

The research report, *No-one's Ever Asked Me* (launched in May 2001), highlights the isolation, discrimination and emotional pressures this population of young people face as a result of having a family member in prison.

Seventy-five per cent of the young people surveyed had experienced changes in their family beyond the removal of the prisoner. One-third of respondents had been removed into other care arrangements or had moved with their family to other parts of the country. Most young people mentioned a decrease in finances, treats, activities and celebrating special occasions as all part of the impact of having a loved one in prison. A belief that life is more stressful within the family when a relative is imprisoned was also evident, although for some, especially in domestic violence and child protection cases, the removal of the offender can bring relief to the family. Some young people had tried to care for younger siblings to take responsibility and pressure off their carers. They had also tried to protect the family from rumours and negative judgements.

The majority of young people with a prisoner in the family confront these issues with very little support, other than that given by their carer (usually their mother). Over 80 per cent of respondents said that nobody had asked them at any stage how they were coping with the imprisonment of their relative. Most said that they did not tell and did not talk about their situation and that when people did find out

about the imprisonment, they were 'looked at funny' and 'treated differently'.

Within all of this, too, young people very clearly wanted to maintain a relationship with their imprisoned relative. However, visiting regimes were often described as extremely difficult and unpleasant experiences. The issues which concerned young people most when visiting were their inability to visit unless accompanied by an adult, the boredom, stress and anxiety experienced while waiting to be allowed in for a visit, and the lack of privacy and individual time with the prisoner.

When asked how they would like to be supported, the young people said they would like:

- someone to talk to, in confidence and outside the system;
- help with visiting and associated practical issues;
- to be kept informed, and access to information;
- provision of a youth space within visiting areas.

Models of Support

Based on these findings, the Young People's Project developed:

- a support post housed in the visitors' centre at HMP Durham, with our project partners the North East Prison After Care Society;
- training and evaluation of support offered by pastoral care workers in a number of secondary schools in Norfolk and Suffolk with our project partners YMCA Norwich;
- a young people's advisory group to produce a booklet and video for young people, with our partners the Prisoners' Families and Friends Service in London (PFFS).

The issues for young people with a prisoner in the family are usually complex, as are their family dynamics. These pilot projects had the aim of supporting young people within a visits environment or at school, as well as raising awareness within the community to ensure that those not in school or not visiting were also remembered. Work with the families of young people in contact with the projects was also offered in recognition of the fact that many young people wanted their carers to receive support too.



Julie Grogan

The following case studies should illustrate the range of issues tackled by the project and the way each of the pilot projects worked to support the young people.

Case Study 1

John is 14 years old and was referred to the Young People's Support Service (YPSS) housed within the visitors' centre at HMP Durham by the Travellers Education Service. He is the eldest of four children and takes care of his sister who is severely disabled. His father was on remand facing a long prison sentence for a violent offence. His mother is insistent that no outside agencies be involved in assisting the family. John was referred because the education workers were concerned for his well-being – he had threatened suicide on two occasions. The YPSS arranged for John to have a holiday away from the family for a week with a friend and qualified youth worker. Unfortunately, before John could take up this offer of a holiday his father committed suicide in prison. The YPSS worker is now supporting John and his family with the inquest procedures and is working with his mother to sort

out some housing difficulties they were experiencing.

Case Study 2

Katie is 13 years old and referred herself to the pastoral care worker in her school. Her relations with her mother were difficult at times and there was a danger of self-harm. Her father was in prison; he had sexually abused his daughter; the mother had reported him. At this time Katie was not allowed counselling as she was scheduled to be a witness in the case against her father. She was able to use the pastoral care worker as a resource because the role of the worker is to befriend and listen.

Case Study 3

Joe and Jack are brothers aged 15 and 17. Their aunt received a long prison sentence resulting in her children being looked after by Jack and Joe's mother. This has caused disruption in the family as there is now less space within the household and less money for activities and other items such as clothes. Joe and Jack have also had to witness their cousins' and mother's emotional distress regarding the imprisonment of their aunt. Their mother sought support from PFFS and has had considerable contact with the service. Jack and Joe decided to take up the invitation to join the young people's advisory group. As Joe said, he sees coming to the group as "something to look forward to every meeting and to learn and do things I would not do if I did not attend the meeting". Jack says "I think the group is for people our age and in our circumstances to come and talk to someone and help other people who have the same problems as you (by making a video and leaflets and then reading and watching it)". They both agree that the group is "to help us learn that we can still live normal lives even if you have someone in prison. And to make others learn that too".

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For further information about the Young People's Project or for a copy of the research report, *No-One's Ever Asked Me*, please contact Action for Prisoners' Families on: tel. 0207 384 1987, e-mail: info@actionpf.org.uk, website: www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk

A report on the project will be available after the conference on 16th January 2003.