

Who's Guilty?

Lucy Gampell looks at the punishing effects of imprisonment on the family.

"She mustn't think we don't love her – if we don't keep in touch she will think we don't love her and she will harm herself again". (sisters, 13 & 15, mother in prison)

The fact that the prison population in England and Wales continues to rise to new records is no longer headline news. What tends to be ignored however is that the daily population being highlighted masks the even more shocking figure – that in 2002 over 140,000 people will have been committed to custody. Whilst some of these will be repeat receptions, the majority are not. Most leave behind them partners, parents and children to cope with the aftermath. Many prisoners are there for the first time and their families are devastated by the event, left with little support, information or recognition of their needs.

Prisoners are asked about their family and dependent children during the allocation process but the information is not recorded.

The size of the prison population is having a devastating effect on families in a number of ways. Not only are more children, partners and parents facing the trauma of separation and loss caused by the imprisonment itself, but prisoners are being held further from their homes, making the logistics of visiting increasingly difficult. Pressure on booked visits telephone lines means some families simply give up trying to book a visit and even if they do get to the prison, heightened security and inadequate visitors' facilities mean the visits experience is often a poor one – less than two-thirds of our prisons have a properly resourced visitors' centre. Over-crowding also means fewer prisoners being able to attend courses and insufficient attention given to preparing them for release. The Chief Inspector of Prisons' recent report on HMP Ford highlighted that even the open prisons are feeling the effects of over-crowding, being unable to take appropriate category prisoners and therefore not fulfilling their resettlement potential.

Families can and should play a major part in the resettlement of people coming out of prison. The excellent report by the Social Exclusion Unit, *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners*, published in July 2002, identifies family ties as one of the nine key factors in reducing re-offending. The report contains a detailed analysis of the problem faced by families and the current failure of the prison system and others to ensure they can realise their potential as a positive resource. To achieve this, families need

support and those agencies in touch with them in their communities, such as the education and health services, need to acknowledge the particular needs of families affected by imprisonment.

Both the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Human Rights Act (1998)* hold that all children have a right to maintain personal contact with both parents and that all people have a right to a private family life. It is the case, however, that the families of prisoners are too often ignored and that the systems which discriminate against them continue to remain in place: no information routinely given to the family at the point of the prisoner being taken in to custody; families arriving at a prison for a visit and finding that no one has informed them that the prisoner has been moved; children taken into care because their carer had been given a custodial sentence where a community sentence could have sufficed; and families being forced to move because

their accommodation was in the prisoner's name or because they have been hounded out due to adverse media coverage and victimization.

Of greatest concern is the welfare of children and young people experiencing the imprisonment of their parent, sibling or close relative. No one even knows the number of children affected. The Prison Service does not collect this information, although, interestingly, prisoners are asked about their family and dependent children during the allocation process but the information is not recorded.

Conservative estimates suggest over 140,000 children a year face this experience which can lead to anxiety, depression, anger, grief, increased absences from school, stigma, isolation and a change in their care environment.

Typical of their experiences is that: *"The police have been, and the judge, so insensitive. I feel like they have no care towards me. I felt I had no one to talk to. I told my two best friends. The school still doesn't know because I don't feel they will be sympathetic. Now I am doing my GCSEs I really wish they knew"* (15 year old girl, both parents in prison).

There are no specific support mechanisms in place for these children and indeed, most prisoners' families are left to cope as best they can – often excluded by their community because of their association with a criminal. What little help exists tends to be in the form of locally-based, self-help style support groups. However fewer than 20 of these



exist nationwide and most are under-resourced and rely heavily in volunteers.

Action for Prisoners' Families (formerly the Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups) exists to draw attention to the effect of imprisonment on the family, influence policy that impacts on prisoners' families and ensure that support and information is made available to those families who need it through a nationwide network of support services. Over the past three years we have been focusing much of our work on the issues facing families in their community, seeking to ensure that mainstream family service providers and statutory bodies such as the Education Service acknowledge children and families of prisoners as an identified group of people in need of support.

In 2001 we published two reports – one from young people themselves about their experience of having a prisoner in the family; and the other reporting on good practice in schools. These have been followed by a series of pilot projects to address

some of the needs identified and a report on these will be published in January 2003.

We have also joined a European lobby group on children of prisoners, EUROCHIPS, and hope that pan-European pressure may enhance the status of the issues in member countries.

There are recent signs that we, and our colleagues, are beginning to be listened to. The Connexions Service commissioned Action for Prisoners' Families to produce an information pack for Connexions workers across the country. The resulting leaflet and guidance notes have also been widely used by Youth Offending Teams, family support groups and prison visitors' centres. The Department of Education and Skills has recently revised its guidance to schools on warranted leave of absences, including parent-child prison visits as a justifiable absence from school. Our report on visitors' centres, commissioned jointly with the Prison Reform Trust, *Just Visiting?*, has attracted significant attention and stimulated two debates in the House of Lords. The implementation of the Social Exclusion Report should result in the Prison Service engaging more proactively and positively with families in the resettlement process.

There is, of course, much more to do. Over the coming year Action for Prisoners' Families will be continuing to lobby hard on behalf of families of prisoners. We will be producing resources for professionals and for families, launching a national helpline for families of prisoners, and working to develop the potential of families as a positive force for change and to help them to receive the support they so desperately need.

Lucy Gampell has been the Director of Action for Prisoners' Families since 1993. She has 17 years experience of working within the voluntary sector, much of it linked to the criminal justice system.

References:

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