

# Families are punished too: a husband's perspective

Family members, innocent of any criminal charge, are also punished when a family member is imprisoned. The Reverend Ian Morgan spoke for Action for Prisoner's Families in 2004 about his experience when his wife went to prison.

**A**t the outset I want to make it perfectly clear that this is a personal reflection; no more, no less. It's about me, my son and my wife – it's a very brief sketch of some of the feelings and effects her imprisonment has had on all of us. It is not objective, studied or careful; neither is it a considered statement from my professional position as a Church of England parish priest; at some stage in the future I will do that as well – but this isn't the time or the place.

So, in the particular circumstances which my wife and I have experienced, from either side of the fence, prison is first, second and third about one thing, and one thing alone – it is about nothing more enlightened and sophisticated than punishment.

It seeks to punish the offender.

But in doing that it inflicts significant and direct punishment on the wholly innocent: the offender's

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partner, their children and, in my case, the wider community which I serve – I am simply not as available to my parish for the period of my wife's sentence as my primary duty is now the care and support of my nine year old son. Call me in the middle of the night for an emergency and I am unable to respond.

If, as a society, we insist that the only viable option is to imprison someone – and I have some views on that in the light of this experience too – then we have to be clear that we are sentencing not the just offender but the offender's family as well.

It is my clear view, from the most difficult of experiences, that if the criminal justice system decides that a crime is of sufficient seriousness to break up a family through judicial process then it also has a duty of support for that family.

In the face of the most significant trauma and bureaucratic obfuscation, some of us are committed and determined to try to keep our families together. But it seems the system does what it can to make that as difficult as possible – I'll come back to the 'how' in a moment.

So, the day my wife told me what she had been doing was the day I, a 'control freak' par excellence, lost control of my life and was sucked into a vortex of chaos.

I was living in someone else's nightmare, unable to do anything to effect the course of events for me, for my son, or indeed for my wife.

Completely unable to do my job, my bishop responded with genuine care and support and offered me a period of compassionate leave – a time during which I discovered literally dozens of different ways of staring at the walls, wondering what horror the next phone call would bring; each one seemed to bring worse news.

And then, somewhat ironically, when the press got hold of it, when my wife was charged, it was partially out in the open and I felt I could return to work – because at least we could all start being honest

and not having to hide; hiding to avoid lying actually.

And oh bless the press when she was finally sentenced, some five months after I had returned to work – how could I possibly keep my job with a wife who'd done what she'd done – nod, nod wink, wink – despite confirmation by the CPS that I was wholly innocent and an assertion from the judge that any implication otherwise would be in contempt of court.

No, she was a vicar's wife, so let's go for him too... locally and nationally.

But, now the fun really started – the prison system itself. She was settled in a prison close to home and all was going well; and then with 7 weeks to go before eligibility for Home Detention Curfew, with less than 12 hours notice; let's move her somewhere which requires a round trip of 300 miles and psychologically make her start her sentence again – because that's what moving a prisoner has done – she had made huge strides with overcoming her feelings of guilt, the weight she had been carrying for years, and I began again to recognise the woman I had married; and all this was undone, in the cause of operational efficiency.

At the new prison, visiting is at best disorganised and is available on far fewer days each week, family visits once a quarter instead of monthly as in her previous prison (we missed the first family visit there – she was transferred two days before – explain that to a nine year old who was looking forward to playing with his Mum in a relaxed atmosphere) and being at 9.30am, instead of the afternoon, meant leaving home before 6am.

But what of arranging the visit? Can you get through on the phone to arrange the visit anyway – a common and debilitating issue; it's my Monday job. If you've never had to do it you simply can't appreciate the frustration of a system which often takes hours, even to get a call answered.

And yes, there's an age to process letters in and out, sometimes up to a week.

A male Prison Officer referring regularly to my wife as a "wench".

A system which transports prisoners in the backs of vans along major roads and motorways without seatbelts.

A system which seeks, allegedly, to help to support and encourage offenders into being better citizens by denying them a basic human right and excluding them from the democratic process by refusing them a vote.

Incidentally, have you any idea what it feels like to take your nine year old son into prison and watch him being searched? Last week he was searched without my permission and whilst my back was turned, in any other context a clear child protection issue.

Add to those few examples – loss of control, guilt by association, teasing at school, genuine personal grief, in my case my Sunday morning services staked out by the press, dislocation, and in many other cases financial ruin – the really

disabling thing for the families of prisoners is the complete and utter lack of decent information as opposed to rumour, gossip, folk knowledge and hearsay.

And is there any sign anywhere that anyone might understand, or is this just me, alone, against the system?

But via an internet search – God bless Google – when some months before sentencing it looked like a custodial term was inevitable in the present illiberal circumstances and punitive climate, I found Action for Prisoner's Families and a pre-publication series of booklets called "The Outsiders".

I emailed, got a response the same day and the booklets arrived within 3 days – and no longer was I alone in my feelings – other people had shared them and were sharing them, I wasn't losing it, my marbles were still intact – well, as much as they ever have been – and look, here was good information; it's authoritative, it's clear, it's well-written and there are plenty of places I can follow up if I need to; and most of all there's resonance and empathy.

Someone, somewhere had cared enough to think about me and people like me, I wasn't quite such an Outsider any more; and that matters. Trust me – in present circumstances it matters very much indeed.

*Thanks to Action for Prisoners' Families for permission to reprint this article, which originally appeared in Action News, Autumn 2004.*

*For further information on Action for Prisoners' Families, visit: [www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk](http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk) or tel: 0208 812 3600. APF also co-ordinates the Prisoners Families' Helpline, the national freephone number for anyone with a relative or friend in prison. 0808 808 2003.*

## British Society of Criminology

### ***Prisoner Resettlement: Repairing the Broken Links***

University of Leicester

**Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> December 2005**

- ◆ The legitimacy of prison as a response to serious criminal behaviour is widely debated. What is rarely disputed is that a period spent in custody is a negative experience and only exacerbates the problems which most prisoners already face. However, the impact of the prison experience on released prisoners and their needs is influenced by how well they are resettled back into their communities.
- ◆ Short-term prisoners face particular resettlement problems as many services in prisons are not available to them and they have traditionally received no statutory supervision. This group particularly highlights the problem of the revolving door when prisoners continually return to custody after short periods of time in the community. Meanwhile, the great bulk of increases in the UK prison population over the last 15 years is amongst persons serving longer sentences and this group presents an equally particular problem.
- ◆ This whole agenda has been remarkably placed centre stage by the decision to create NOMS as the organising framework for a new national system of offender management. One of its key objectives is to eliminate the present gulf between desirable and actual practice of prisoner resettlement co-ordination between the formerly separate prison and probation services.
- ◆ The BSC is therefore taking this opportunity to provide a forum for policy makers, academics and resettlement practitioners in both the public and independent sectors to engage with some key facets of the available evidence about resettlement.

#### **This workshop is aimed at:**

- Managers and practitioners in Offender Management services
- Academics and students in Criminology
- Crime and social policy makers
- Organisations providing resettlement services
- Politicians focussing on crime issues
- Organisations concerned with victims of crime
- Voluntary sector organisations and staff

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