

Detention and families

Helen Codd calls for greater recognition of the impact of detention on families.

Depending on your viewpoint, prisoners' families are becoming more significant in penal policy-making or remain largely invisible and ignored. From a governmental point of view, the recognition of the significant role played by the families of prisoners in the resettlement and community re-entry of ex-prisoners has become more and more important as a consequence of the Social Exclusion Unit report into preventing re-offending by ex-prisoners (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). In contrast, some commentators reiterate a critical perspective which stresses the ongoing difficulties and challenges faced by prisoners' families, and are cautious about initiatives which support prisoners' families as tools of resettlement policies (Codd, 2008). The increased awareness of the importance of family ties in resettlement, combined with concerns about the impact of the rising prison population in the UK and the 'mass imprisonment epidemic' in the USA, has re-energised academic debate, discussion, and research into the impact of imprisonment on prisoners' family members. Most recently, attention has been paid to the impact of detention not only on families of individual prisoners but to the impact of the widespread use of imprisonment on entire communities, which has had a disproportionate and damaging impact on disadvantaged urban communities and particularly on African-Americans. In some urban American communities, the combined impact of AIDS, drug use, and imprisonment has meant a significant shift in the gender ratio, with many children growing up in

a women-dominated community. In addition, the consequences of the increased rise in the women's prison population worldwide mean that, in this context, many children in these communities lose 'the only anchor they have left' when their mothers are imprisoned (Golden, 2005).

Prisoners' families have long been described as 'serving the second sentence' and as presumed 'guilty by association.' Both of these descriptions continue to be relevant. Families may lose an income, whether a legitimate income or a criminal one, and non-imprisoned family members have to meet additional costs of visiting and supporting prisoners from the outside. These financial burdens go hand-in-hand with the varied experiences of visiting reported by prisoners' partners. At a time of increased imprisonment, the number of prison visits is falling, and this has been attributed to an increased focus on security which has made visiting more tension-filled for families. While some establishments are less traumatic to visit than others, some families report feeling that they are a nuisance and sometimes a negative and dangerous security risk. Family members may feel labelled and that they are reacted to as if they were as criminal as the inmates they are visiting. In addition, family members may feel socially stigmatised and shamed,

some family members reporting abuse, hostility, and violence. Even where no actual hostility is experienced, the fear and anxiety about the reaction of other people can be a constant concern.

The impact on children must not be underestimated. Many prisoners are parents: two-thirds of women in prison are mothers. Although there are no accurate figures available, the Prison Reform Trust, a prominent British pressure group, estimate that more than 150,000 children in the UK currently have an imprisoned parent (Prison Reform Trust, 2006). Prisoners' children may be lied to, albeit with beneficial intentions; may experience stigma and hostility; and may be traumatised not only by the incarceration of a parent but by having witnessed the parent being arrested, detained, then tried. Prisoners' children in school very often have multiple needs, imprisonment of a parent adding one more difficult challenge to lives

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already most often characterised by poverty and social exclusion. Schools may not know that a child's parent is imprisoned, as parents may try to avoid telling the school for fear that the child

will be humiliated, for fear that social services may become involved, or through simple shame. Sometimes, children's behaviour may change dramatically, with children becoming angry, aggressive, and hostile or, in contrast, becoming withdrawn. Children can develop enuresis, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. Children may feel betrayed by the imprisoned parent, or feel that society is against them and that their parent is being unfairly victimised. In this situation, children may rebel against all perceived forms of authority, including their teachers. Research continues to consider whether and how there is a link between parental imprisonment and

a child's own chance of going to prison in later life.

Recent years have seen an expansion of schemes encouraging prisoners to develop and maintain positive relationships with their families, especially with their children. These schemes have included programmes such as 'Storybook Dad' (and Mum); parenting programmes; extended visits and family days. However, although the storybook schemes in particular have involved substantial numbers of prisoners, schemes such as extended family days and visits may for a range of reasons only be open to a very limited number of inmates, and then possibly only as a one-off event. Security considerations may mean some prisoners are not eligible, and the sheer practicalities of numbers and resources available to the non-statutory agencies which run such schemes may mean that only a minority of inmates are eligible. The families which take part in such schemes report having really enjoyed and benefited from the opportunity to have a more relaxed visit in which parents and children can talk, eat, and play together. In the current penal climate, however, unless such schemes can be shown to have a clear impact on crime prevention, both by prisoners after they leave prison and also possibly in the long-term in preventing offending by

prisoners' children, these may not receive governmental funding.

The current situation of prisoners' families poses dilemmas for those interested in criminal justice policy and practice. At first sight, it is tempting to argue in favour of extended visits and the provision of increased support for prisoners' partners and children. However, if such support is justified on the grounds of prisoner resettlement, as it often is at the moment, then families become co-opted as tools of resettlement and become part of the network of agencies tasked with promoting resettlement and preventing re-offending. Families themselves may want to dissociate themselves from some imprisoned family members, especially when the offending itself is intra-familial. The research literature indicates that the burden of caring for prisoners from the outside usually falls on women, regardless of the gender of the inmate. There is a broader argument that improving the situation of prisoners' families is a short-term and superficial response to the overuse of imprisonment and if policy makers are serious about only punishing those who have done wrong, and not their partners and children, then imprisonment should be substantially minimised in its usage. In discussions about prison sentences, families are often overlooked. The impact on children, especially of the

imprisonment of mothers, can lead to life-changing disruptions in the lives of children which can have long-term negative consequences. If, as a society, we care about families and care about children, then we must include the impact on children as part of any policy discussion about imprisonment. At the moment, families are only selectively visible, even though offenders come from families, kin networks, friendship groups, and communities. We know a great deal about the impacts of detention on offenders, but we need to remember that the impacts of imprisonment go beyond the impact on the sentenced person and often affect partners, children, and entire communities. ■

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References

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