

The Impact of a Custodial Sentence on the Siblings of Young Offenders: Matching Services to Needs

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Little policy or practice directly relates to the wellbeing of siblings of young offenders and only a scattering of services are in place which engage the siblings of young offenders by means of positive activities or constructive family support. A review of policies in England and Wales reveals that few services have been designed to address a young person's needs arising directly from sibling imprisonment. It comes as little surprise that much of the relevant service provision targets siblings of offenders indirectly, or as one of a number of target groups, and evidence of policy that directly concerns the siblings of those in the criminal justice system remains scant. Where services have been designed specifically for young people with a sibling in custody, they tend to relate to the young person's own risk of offending rather than the effect on their welfare of their sibling being imprisoned¹. Although a growing body of research has acknowledged that the siblings of young people in custody do have specific and additional welfare needs² in reality, few support mechanisms are implemented to address those needs.

Adult perceptions of how a young person will (or indeed 'should') react to the imprisonment of a sibling clearly shape the way support is delivered to this group, but it is telling that research with prisoners' families has discovered that 80 per cent of siblings have never been asked about how they are coping following their sibling's imprisonment³. Nonetheless, the detrimental impact of sibling incarceration on young people is clear and there are strong indications that welfare can be significantly affected both inside and outside of the home.

Indirectly, the two main areas of policy that have an impact on the siblings of young offenders are those

that centre on families (specifically parenting) and the prevention of offending through early intervention targeting those considered at-risk of becoming offenders. The main connection to siblings in this context is the recognition that the risk of engaging in offending is considered to increase when other family members are known to have a history of offending. In 2004, the Home Office, YJB and DfES published 'Prevent and Deter' as part of its Prolific and Other Priority Offender Strategy⁴. This guidance relates to the third of three strands of the strategy (alongside 'Catch and Convict' and 'Rehabilitate and Resettle') and the main purpose of the 'Prevent and Deter' strand is to target those most at-risk through youth justice and community based interventions. Consequently, siblings of young people who offend could potentially be one of the groups of children and young people targeted as part of the service provision delivered under such a strategy.

Academic study of the siblings of young offenders

Literature surrounding the imprisonment of a family member tends to focus on the children of prisoners⁵, with research concerning family members having a strong focus on the partners of prisoners⁶. The impact of being a sibling in adverse circumstances is well documented in other domains such as mental and physical health, disabilities and the care system, but with few exceptions very little research attention has been paid to the siblings of offenders.

The precise number of children and young people who experience separation from a sibling through imprisonment each year is unknown. This group of young people has, until recently, been overlooked and it is only now that efforts are being

1. Nee, C. and Ellis, T. (2005). Treating offending children: what works? *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 10, 1-16.
2. Meek, R. (2008). Experiences of younger siblings of young men in prison. *Children and Society*, 22, 265-277.
3. Brown, K., Dibbs, L., Shenton, F. and Elson, N. (2001). *No-one's Ever Asked Me: Young People with a Prisoner in the Family* London: Action for Prisoners Families.
4. Home Office, YJB, DfES (2004) *Prolific and Other Priority Offender Strategy Guidance Paper 3: Prevent and Deter*. London: The Home Office.
5. Murray, J. (2007). The cycle of punishment: social exclusion of prisoners and their children. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 7, 55-81.
6. Condy, R. (2007). Families outside: the difficulties faced by the relatives of serious offenders. *Prison Service Journal*, 174, 3-10.

made to acknowledge the difficulties that they face and the specific needs that they have. A number of barriers are in place that prevent the collection of accurate figures representing children affected by sibling imprisonment. As well as the failure of prisons to collect routine data on family members, professionals in the children and young people's workforce may be unaware of a young person being affected by sibling imprisonment. Previous research⁷ has established that young people and their parents or carers may not tell teachers, youth workers or members of the community about a relative's imprisonment due to a fear of discrimination or bullying as a result. Although official figures are not available, a modest estimate can be calculated by multiplying the number of children and young people held in custody by the average number of siblings each dependent child has. The most recent figures available indicate that in England and Wales there are 2,631 children under 18⁸ and a further 9,558 young people aged 18-20⁹ in custody, resulting in a total figure of 12,189 children and young people in custody. Official figures indicate that each dependent child has an average of 0.8 siblings¹⁰ although the actual figure is likely to be far greater since the calculation doesn't take into account evidence that young offenders tend to come from large families¹¹.

However modest the estimates for the number of children affected by sibling imprisonment are, it is clear that the substantial number of children who do experience sibling imprisonment are significantly likely

to suffer detrimental consequences of such disruption to family life. According to Murray¹²:

The effects of imprisonment on families and children of prisoners are almost entirely neglected in academic research, prison statistics, public policy and media coverage. However, we can infer from prisoners' backgrounds that their families are a highly vulnerable group (p.442).

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A substantial body of research has established that the siblings of offenders are at an increased risk of becoming offenders themselves¹³, particularly the brothers of offenders¹⁴, and a range of citations show that siblings with a family history of anti-social behaviour (ASB) are at increased risk of delinquency and conduct disorder. Slomkowski *et al.*¹⁵ argue that theories have traditionally focused on the role of parents in transmitting ASB within families although recent attention has now focused more on shared experiences between siblings in families as key risk

factors. This could be either in providing training models through observation of negatively reinforced interactions with parents which are then practised with each other or as the result of becoming partners in crime and committing offences together¹⁶.

As well as being significantly more likely to demonstrate offending behaviour than children with non-offending siblings, children with a prisoner in the family may experience physical and mental health problems, become withdrawn or secretive, display anger

7. Meek, R. (2008). Experiences of younger siblings of young men in prison. *Children and Society*, 22, 265-277.
8. Youth Justice Board (2009). *Youth Justice System Custody Figures* <http://www.yjb.gov.uk/en-gb/yjs/Custody/CustodyFigures/> (last accessed 7/7/09).
9. Ministry of Justice (2009). *Population in Custody Monthly Tables May 2009 England and Wales*. London: Ministry of Justice.
10. The most recent figures (from 2006) suggest that the average number of dependent children in a family is 1.8. Office for National Statistics (2007). *Families in Focus*. <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=1865&Pos=2&ColRank=2&Rank=224>. Last accessed 7/7/09. The resulting estimation of 0.8 (1.8 - 1) refers only to the number of dependent children who are siblings so the actual figure will be substantially higher given that for the purposes of the present research the imprisoned sibling can be up to 21 years of age.
11. Biles, D. and Challenger, D. (1981). Family size and birth order of young offenders. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 25, 1, 60-66.
12. 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.
13. Margo, J. and Stevens, A. (2008). *Make Me a Criminal: Preventing Youth Crime*. London: IPPR.
14. Farrington, D. and Painter, K. (2004). *Gender Differences in Risk Factors for Offending*. Findings 196. London: The Home Office.
15. Slomkowski, C., Wasserman, G., Schaffer, D., Rende, R. and Davies, M. (1997). A new instrument to assess sibling relationships in antisocial youth: the social interaction between siblings (SIBS) interview: a research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38, 2, 253-256.
16. Arnull, E., Eagle, S., Gammampila, A., Archer, D., Johnston, V., Miller, K. and Pitcher, J. (2005). *Persistent Young Offenders*. London: Youth Justice Board.

or defiance, exhibit attention-seeking or self-destructive behaviour, and have a lowered self-esteem¹⁷. A qualitative study of the needs of young people affected by the imprisonment of a family member in Scotland¹⁸ found that, for young people, loss of a family member to imprisonment creates multiple problems and the specific needs of this disadvantaged group of young people are largely unrecognised.

Other research focuses specifically on young people's ability to maintain contact with a family member in prison, with Salmon¹⁹ claiming that '*Children will never maintain a healthy emotional link with their parent or sibling in prison whilst there are so many hurdles to jump over to gain a visit to the prison*' (p.6). For example, although some prisons have crèches, play areas and play workers, others have no facilities for children, and establishments vary enormously in the extent to which they provide child-friendly visiting facilities.

Aside from the practical and emotional difficulties of visiting a sibling in prison, other studies emphasise that young people and their families may have other, distinct needs at different points in the whole process of their family member entering the youth justice system. Indeed, the effects of having a family member involved in criminal proceedings go beyond the imprisonment itself and include the different stages of investigation²⁰. This understanding is underlined by research conducted by Families Outside²¹ which states that:

The impact of losing a family member to imprisonment is not a one off trauma. It starts at the point of arrest, reverberates through court and trial, imprisonment itself and then the readjustments demanded of all family members after release (p.2).

It has also been found that young people report high levels of emotional distress immediately after their sibling

has been taken into custody, with additional concern about maintaining contact, the well-being of their older brother both in prison and after release, and the manner in which the sibling relationship might have changed as a result of the imprisonment and resulting separation²².

The current research aims to extend upon the small body of previous research concerning the experiences of the siblings of young people in custody. By drawing on qualitative interviews carried out in the North of England, the research seeks to explore the perspectives of the young people themselves, incorporating a specific focus on the young participants' attitudes towards and use of support services in relation to their experience of sibling imprisonment.

Methods

A total of six young people participated in the research. Ages ranged from 11-15 years (mean age 13 years). Four of the participants were female and two were male. A summary of the research participants can be found in Table 1.

The participants were all interviewed in their own homes by a female researcher and with at least one parent nearby but out of earshot. In the cases of sibling groups, the young people were given the option to be interviewed either together or separately; each of these opted to speak to the researcher together. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and followed a semi-structured format with questions relating to school, home, peer groups, relationships with the offending sibling(s), experiences of the criminal justice system and aspirations for the future.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with all identifying information removed to protect the anonymity of participants. The transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis²³ with illustrative quotes extracted from the transcripts in order to give voice to the rich interview data generated by the participants.

Table 1: Research participants

Identifier	Age	Gender	Sibling	Other information
A	11	Female	19, male, recently released	Sibling of B
B	14	Male	As above	Sibling of A
C	14	Male	16, male, in custody	
D	11	Female	16, male, recently released	Sibling of E
E	13	Female	As above	Sibling of D
F	15	Female	17, male, recently released	

17. Salmon, S. (2005). Prisoners' children matter, *Prison Service Journal*, 159, pp 16-19.
18. McCulloch, C. and Morrison, C. (2001) *Teenagers with a Family Member in Prison*. Edinburgh: Families Outside.
19. Salmon, S. (2006) *Good Childhood Inquiry Final Submission*. London: Action for Prisoners' Families.
20. Condry, R. (2007). Families outside: the difficulties faced by the relatives of serious offenders. *Prison Service Journal*, 174, 3-10.
21. Families Outside (2006). *"It's No Holiday" — The Experiences of Young People Affected by Imprisonment*. Edinburgh: Families Outside.
22. Meek, R. (2008). Experiences of younger siblings of young men in prison. *Children and Society*, 22, 265-277.
23. Boyatzis, R. (1998). *Transforming Qualitative Information*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Findings

Following the process of a thematic analysis, a number of themes and sub-themes were identified from the interview transcripts. Responses were categorised according to the themes of 1) emotional distress; 2) the arrest event; 3) maintaining contact; and 4) support services.

Emotional distress

It was clear from the interviews that siblings reported being affected by different aspects of their sibling's imprisonment, with different emotional trigger points for each. Though arrest and visiting were the most common themes which arose, other emotionally distressing aspects of sibling imprisonment were raised by many of the young people interviewed. One such example centred on the affect on the family at the post-release stage. The interview findings suggested that many young people quickly adjusted to their sibling not being there, particularly as their behaviour was often disruptive and had an impact on family life. Though interviewees reported missing their siblings while they were away, many found it equally difficult to adjust when they returned to the family home. For instance, one interviewee's brother left home again only a week after being released:

When he came back [from prison] it was right different ... it all just went back to normal when he left again, because it was like normal when he wasn't here ...

Others reported the way in which their relationships with their siblings had changed after release:

He never talks to me though...he used to tell you he loved you when he used to ring up ... but now he only rings when he wants something. I don't want all that.

Many of these quotes were characterised by feelings of ambivalence, reflected in the manner in which the emotional health of the young people interviewed was clearly affected by worry for their brother or sister alongside an awareness of the potentially negative influence of the older sibling:

I do want to see him but I know he's going to get me into trouble. Like before when I used to

hang around with him I used to get into loads of trouble.

The arrest event

The participants identified the process of their older sibling being arrested as being particularly stressful. Searches of personal property and homes were seen as an invasion of privacy, destructive and unnecessary on the part of the police, and this provoked anger in a number of the young interviewees. For example, participants A and B explained how, although they weren't present at the time of their siblings arrest, the police had '*turned the house upside down*' and B had returned to the family home to discover his bedroom (which he shared with his older sibling) '*wrecked*' by the police.

Others found the public nature of their sibling being arrested humiliating; one reported how her friends had seen her brother's arrest, leading to her being taunted about it afterwards:

They were like, oh, look at your brother, ah shame, he's not that big hard man no more. And I was like, so what? They just got annoying. Then people kept coming up to me and saying oh, where's your brother and everything.

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Keeping the issue private, or not wanting others to know, was a recurrent theme, reflected in a reluctance to disclose what had happened to teachers and the wider community.

Maintaining contact

Visiting a sibling in prison was a recurrent theme in the interviews and clearly had an impact on the young people involved. The majority of the young people interviewed had only visited their siblings once or twice and a number of those involved in the research found visiting to be traumatic and upsetting. One sibling recalled:

We were in a big hall and everyone could hear what you were saying. We could never talk properly.

Some of the participants described the process of visiting as difficult on a practical level too; many were placed too far away from home to enable visits on a regular basis. The only two interviewees (a pair of sibling) who reported being able to visit their incarcerated sibling regularly were driven there by family members; those who

relied on public transport had more difficulty making visits to what were typically remote locations.

Support services

None of the young people involved in the research were receiving any support directly as a result of their sibling being in custody. Those who were involved with services were so coincidentally: for example one was receiving extensive support from the Youth Offending Team as a result of her own offending behaviour; another as the result of a family friendship with a Police Community Support Officer.

When asked whether they would like any external support, and what they would like this support to be like, most of the young people interviewed were unable to conceptualise what they would like. While some of the interviewees stated that they did not want external help because they had enough familial support (*'I've got my mum and my family and that's all I need'*), others suggested that it might have been beneficial to have someone to talk to about their problems, especially at particular times of crisis. A key example of this was provided by one participant who confirmed that she would have liked support when she was experiencing bullying at school as a result of her brother's arrest. Another indicated that he would have benefited from having a conversation with someone similar to the research interview; an opportunity to discuss feelings with someone outside of the family. For another young person, who was receiving individual support from a key worker at her YOT (Youth Offending Team), having someone she trusted and felt able to talk to outside the family was invaluable. In this case, the young person reported that the time she spent with her keyworker was unstructured with no specific aim, but the supportive relationship had transformed her behaviour. The same young person also reported the benefit of YOT support in resolving education issues and helping her to access college courses after expulsion from school.

It was clear that siblings set both their own and their family's privacy as a priority, and in particular many felt reluctant to let others know that they were, or could potentially be, engaged with support services. One spoke about a friend whose sister was in prison. She had to take

time off school to meet with a support worker and for that reason, the friend did not want the sessions:

She didn't like it at all. Because people obviously knew what were going on and stuff ... and people see these cars all coming to the house ... if too many people find out, if loads and loads of people are coming to the house and they haven't seen their faces before they start saying things. There's loads of nosey people around here.

Similarly, few of the young people interviewed had made a point of telling people outside the family about their siblings' imprisonment. Teachers and friends generally only knew through hearsay, and not through direct information from the young person or their parent/carer.

The findings highlight the need to be aware of the effects, not only of the physical incarceration of a sibling, but also the emotional effects of the arrest and the transition of roles and expectations after release from prison.

Discussion

The research findings build upon existing research and also serve to highlight some original insights regarding young people's perceptions of, and receptiveness to, engaging in support services in relation to the imprisonment of an older sibling. The findings highlight the need to be aware of the effects, not only of the physical incarceration of a sibling, but also the emotional effects of the arrest and the transition of roles and expectations after release from prison.

The research has highlighted the fact that emotional distress can manifest itself in many ways for the siblings of young offenders. Research from Families Outside²⁴ concludes that substance misuse is often one outcome, impacting on the physical health of young people as well as their mental health. The report notes:

Without acknowledgement and support young people can end up expressing their stress through substance abuse, behavioural problems, deterioration of school performance, poor mental health. The key message for professionals is to recognise and address the support, information and signposting needs of these young people. Most important is simply to acknowledge the impact of imprisonment of

24. Families Outside (2006). *"It's no Holiday" — The Experiences of Young People Affected by Imprisonment*. Edinburgh: Families Outside.

a family member... and to listen to what that means for the young person. In effect, applying good practice in child centred approaches to help these young people deal with a burden which can rob them of their childhood (p.4).

The research findings presented here echo the message that Families Outside convey: that young people face a significant emotional impact relating to the imprisonment of a sibling, which without support can lead to severe problems. There is a clear need for services to engage with young people to provide support while taking into account the reservations that the young participants spoke about.

There are potentially a wealth of opportunities to engage young people in service provision and support, but currently there are only pockets of good practice. No national approach or policy exists to support siblings, which means that service provision is generally localised and disjointed. What service provision is available is not usually offered specifically to siblings of offenders; it may be targeting children of offenders as well for example, and siblings are a secondary or coincidental target group.

Recommendations: what do practitioners need to do to support siblings?

Two reports, one conducted in Scotland²⁵ and another by Action for Prisoners' Families *et al.*²⁶ have made recommendations for better addressing the needs of children and young people with a family member in prison. The two studies approach the issue from different perspectives — the first making the case for better professional support, and the latter setting out terms for improved visiting and contact with the imprisoned relative. The current research supports the recommendations made by both reports, but taking into account the research findings, the following additional recommendations are made:

- ❑ Policy makers and sentence decision makers should be more aware of the wider detrimental impact of imposing custodial sentences on young people, there is clear evidence that having a young offender in the family can impact on other vulnerable children, creating a 'ripple effect'.

- ❑ Practitioners should be aware of the emotional trigger points for siblings and be equipped and ready to deal with them at all stages of a sibling's journey through the criminal justice system.
- ❑ Teacher training should include awareness of the issues surrounding siblings of offenders as a vulnerable group.
- ❑ Families need support from an early stage in the process. Effective communication between services and providing services from the point of arrest onwards would support young people at their most distressing times.
- ❑ Practitioners should understand how siblings are affected practically by a sibling being in custody, and develop services to fit. For example, services should not impinge on school time as this highlights their 'difference' to peers. Consideration should be given to the young person's need for discretion.
- ❑ As well as making sure that visiting procedures are as non-threatening to children as possible, prisons should provide (or collaborate with support services that can provide) family-oriented support and guidance, making better use of visits as a way of engaging with and providing information for families of prisoners, including siblings.

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Conclusion

As well as encouraging service providers and policy makers to take the specific needs and experiences of the siblings of young offenders into account and make greater efforts to engage with this largely invisible population of the criminal justice system, these findings highlight a clear need for good quality longitudinal research which can inform policy development and provide a solid evidence base for effective practice in this domain. The present research was based on in-depth interviews with a small representative sample of children with older siblings in custody, but whilst the sample size allowed for a depth of understanding less achievable in large samples, the findings and resulting conclusions remain tentative and further efforts need to be made to track the development of larger samples of siblings in order to contribute further to this important but largely overlooked area of research.

25. McCulloch, C. and Morrison, C. (2001) *Teenagers with a Family Member in Prison*. Edinburgh: Families Outside.

26. Action for Prisoners' Families, CLINKS, Prison Advice & Care Trust and the Prison Reform Trust (2007). *Parliamentary Briefing – The Children and Families of Prisoners: Recommendations for Government*. London: APF/CLINKS/PACT/PRT.