

Book review

Natalia Hanley reviews *Parenting Under Pressure: Prison* (2002),
(ed) Adrienne Katz. Young Voice 2002

Parenting Under Pressure: Prison provides a unique insight into a world that has been all but ignored by academic and scholarly research literature. As the title indicates, the focus is upon the effects, consequences and issues facing prisoners who have children, and children who have a parent in prison. From both sides of the prison gate, the book highlights invaluable evidence of the pressures, emotions and concerns that surface when a parent is imprisoned. The recurring theme is that imprisonment cannot simply be considered punishment of an offender but punishment of a family unit.

There is a plethora of literature that examines the purpose and effectiveness of punishment, particularly imprisonment, but very little that takes into account the views and experiences of prisoners' families. There has been a move to rectify this in recent years, but what really sets this book apart from others is its accessibility. The content of the book is drawn from survey evidence from three hundred and forty-seven prison parents and seventy-one individual interviews with prisoners. Additionally, over thirty written contributions were offered. Prisoners' families were contacted through visitors centres and interviews were also conducted with family members. The research project was co-ordinated by Young Voice, a registered charity that focuses upon the views and experiences of young people in Britain, in partnership with New Bridge. The Family Policy Unit at the Home Office and The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund have also supported this project.

The majority of the book takes the form of personal narratives and quotations from interviews, presented as a set of stories under key headings. Prison parents, their children, partners and grandparents have each contributed to provide a rich tapestry of personal experiences and perceptions of the effect imprisonment can have on family and personal relationships.

Parenting Under Pressure details the process from sentencing through to release. It begins by presenting narratives about the difficulties experienced by families coming to terms with the imprisonment of a loved one. For example, the difficulties in explaining a parent's imprisonment to children are discussed. Contact between parents and children is also explored which is particularly useful in light of statistics from this research that indicate that ninety percent of male prisoners and eighty-eight percent of female prisoners over 23 years of age have children. As with the book in its

entirety, no 'best practice' solution is offered in response to such difficult issues, rather an array of opinions and examples of how this has been dealt with are presented in a non-partial manner.

The visiting process is examined in some detail and interesting gender divides are highlighted. Moreover, problems, worries and practical advice are included alongside personal accounts, both positive and negative, of visiting a relative in prison. Chapter four examines family change, from letting go to coping with bereavement and the grandparents' perspective. The book goes on to address the varying emotions associated with the imprisonment of a relative; guilt and loss are the major themes.

The particular issues facing young offenders or those with psychological problems are discussed, largely from the perspective of the offender. Poetry written by offenders is included and offers an alternative and insightful presentation of important issues. Practicalities such as financial constraints and coping alone are examined, from the perspective of fathers, mothers and teenagers. This extends into 'getting out' and life after release and highlights the difficulties that this presents and how contrary to the popular viewpoint, release actually has its own difficulties and problems, particularly in terms of trust and 'fitting back in'.

The final chapter summarizes key findings from the research and includes survey results around all of the themes raised in the preceding chapters of the book. The conclusion usefully takes the form of a 'wish list' of recommendations to improve the prison experience for both those inside and those visiting prison.

This book is successful in presenting complex and wide-ranging narratives that are emotive yet insightful descriptions of the difficulty of maintaining relationships through imprisonment. In doing so, it provides a positive overview of the diversity in attitudes towards imprisonment and the ways in which people 'survive' the prison experience. Not only is it essential reading for anyone involved in the criminal justice process, particularly policy makers, and the academy more generally, but it also provides a human context in which those sentenced to imprisonment and their families can locate their feelings and experiences to make sense of the effects of living with a partner or relative in prison.

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Book review

Julia Braggins reviews *No Truth No Justice* by Audrey Edwards.
Waterside Press, 2002.

In 1994, on 29 November (eight years to the day on which I am writing this review), Christopher Edwards, aged 30, was found battered to death in his cell in Chelmsford Prison. In the summer of 2002, Christopher's mother Audrey was awarded the inaugural Longford Prize, recognising "outstanding qualities of humanity, courage, persistence, and originality in the field of social or penal policy". She and her husband Paul, in their mission to uncover the whole truth about the circumstances surrounding Christopher's tragic death, had battled as far as the *European Court of Human Rights: application 46477/99, Paul and Audrey Edwards v The United Kingdom*.

Their submissions to the European Court were unanimously upheld. "Christopher had been denied his right to life; we had been denied an effective investigation; and denied an effective remedy under the UK legal system." But getting to that point required an extraordinary persistence. This book is the story of their struggle to seek justice for their dead son, to do what they could to draw attention to our shameful treatment of the mentally ill and their

the magistrates did not know what else to do with him. He died in a prison cell, within hours of his arrival. As a result of a series of blunders and communication failures, no doubt within an overstretched, understaffed local prison, he was placed with a dangerously disordered cellmate, Richard Linford, who attacked and killed him. Christopher was so severely injured that his parents were advised not to see his body. In an almost throw-away aside, Audrey Edwards writes: "Bizarre as it may seem, because we had never had the opportunity of saying our final goodbye to our son, I could never accept the fact that he was dead".

The curt chapter headings tell their own story: Prelude to Tragedy; Official Spin; Reaching for Help; Stonewall. Then, later on: Putting the Record Straight; Pinning Down Responsibility. Christopher's parents felt thwarted from start to finish in their efforts to discover exactly what had gone wrong. The harder they tried to uncover what had happened to their son, how it could have been that he had been murdered while in the state's keeping, the greater seemed the official obfuscation. Yet all they sought was some

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families, both in the community and in prison, and, one hopes, to find at last some peace for themselves.

Christopher was a gentle and highly intelligent young man, born into a loving family. But the clouds had gathered for him, over his mid to late twenties. He became deeply troubled in spirit. He started to show signs of mental illness, obsessive behaviour, such as pestering his vicar for immediate confirmation. At no time did he show any tendency to violence.

His worried parents had repeatedly tried to seek help for Christopher from the statutory services, but to little avail. He had medication... but that was all. And since he was an adult, there was little they could do to compel him to take it, or to compel others in positions of authority to heed what they saw as the increasingly worrying warning signals of impending disaster. The tragedy moved to its final act when he was arrested for causing a breach of the peace: he had approached two young women in Colchester, seeking to form relationships with them. The second young woman had a boyfriend; there was a fight.

Remand to Chelmsford Prison followed. But within hours of admission, Christopher was dead. There was no asylum for him. He was sent to prison, for three days, for psychiatric assessment, because

acceptance of responsibility.

The iron entered their souls. And they were formidable interrogators. In a telling section, Edwards describes the final meeting with the police inspector, prior to Linford's trial. As is the experience of many victims' families before them, the Edwardses found themselves sidelined and discounted at every stage in the official progress of the bringing to court of their son's killer. This served only to harden their resolve. At the end of a tense meeting the inspector "looked round with a slightly bemused expression on his face and said that every time he left our house he felt he had been in the witness box. We closed the door and ran to the kitchen before bursting out laughing."

There are many poignant moments in this moving book. Why do restaurants never have tables for three (when Audrey and Paul and their daughter Clare went out to celebrate the first family birthday after Christopher's death) only for two or four? The vignette of the prison governor sitting in the Edwards' living room, visiting the family long after the appropriate time for such a visit had passed, and telling the bereaved parents of the trauma suffered by his staff after coping with the aftermath of their son's death, rang all too painfully true. The kindness

of strangers – letters from a teacher of Spanish who had known their son, a bouquet from investigating officers left on Christopher's grave – meant a great deal, as did the honourable and decent behaviour of a number of powerful, and less powerful, figures who took up the cudgels on their behalf, and supported them when they felt weary and alone.

The final chapter, *Journey to Hope*, registers some sort of resolution. "I do not believe I failed Christopher during his life, and I was resolved that I would not do so after his death" writes Audrey Edwards.

The loss of a child is a fearful prospect for any parent. To lose a child in this manner, and then to feel charged with the task of setting right the wrongs that allowed such a thing to happen and then precluded its proper investigation, would be a burden beyond endurance for most of us. Audrey and Paul Edwards, in their calm and courteous manner, have seen this terrible assignment through. Some good must come of their struggle.

Julia Braggins was formerly Director of CCJS. She is now a trainer and consultant.

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