RESEARCH ON PRISONERS’ FAMILIES – An Update

Addendum to Dr Browne’s paper of 2005

March 2007

This paper examines some of the research that has been carried out since Dr Browne’s paper (and includes some that was carried out before), mostly in the UK. Some of the studies, like the ones outlined by Dr Browne, tend to be small scale and/or methodologically weak, e.g. self selection of samples and little follow up research. (Some suffer from narrow accessibility, as they have not been published or have only been written for internal purposes.) However, the findings overall tend to be persistent and consistent, which is noteworthy.

1. IMPACT OF INCARCERATION ON CHILDREN AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

The studies confirm the negative impact of separation on children (and families generally) of people in prison, and the importance of good quality, stable visiting arrangements.

A larger scale survey was carried out in 2001 by Young Voice: it covered 34 prisons, with 347 family members being surveyed, of whom 70 (ranging in age from 7 to 74) were interviewed one to one. A further 30 written contributions from within prison were received.

The study paints a powerful picture of the sense of loss and of the dramatic change that is brought upon the lives not only of the people who get incarcerated but of their families. The research depicts the stigma of having a father, mother or sibling imprisoned, and of the sense of otherness and exclusion that this creates, which comes through with most impact in the interviews with prisoners’ children. Children talked of how they felt about their parents and of their experiences of grief, guilt and/or shame. Parents of imprisoned young adults talked of their efforts to help them with drug or mental health problems. Parenting involved a range of practical and emotional problems, including money worries, exhausting travel and relationship breakdowns.

However, the survey found that a striking majority of prisoners were absorbed by their own situation and showed little understanding of the problems faced by their families. They also had a tendency to abdicate responsibility, insisting
that their relatives (especially mothers and female partners) were coping well. This was often an impression these women were trying to give, by hiding their problems from their partners, but their interviews tended to show otherwise. Upon release, unrealistic expectations and a lack of understanding often led to a failure of relationships and/or of the reintegration process.

Rachel Condry (2006) examined the impact of serious offending (identified for the purpose of the study as violent and sexual offences attracting sentences of more than 4 years) on female relatives. Her ethnographic fieldwork took place over several years and included observation of a self-help organization and a visitors’ centre as well as interviews with professionals and with 32 relatives of serious offenders. Condry acknowledges that her sample may encounter representativeness problems (compared to the general prison population, her interviewees were overwhelmingly white and of a higher socio-economic status).

The study highlighted that the families experienced the discovery of the offence as traumatic, and this engendered a renegotiation of responsibilities and dynamics, which often meant reorganizing their lives around the needs of the offender. The study also found that many of the relatives experienced having to navigate the judicial system, the court and sentencing process, and having to face not only the gravity of the crime but also public exposure as all upsetting and frightening. Supporting a relative in prison or special hospital was also extremely demanding, both financially and emotionally. For example, visiting could be expensive and not being able to claim for transport costs in advance was a problem. Participants on low incomes described having to ‘go without’ in order to be able to visit or to buy items for the imprisoned relative.

Condry’s research showed that women (mothers, sisters, grandmothers, wives and partners as well as aunts and daughters) were the emotional linchpin and a source of emotional and practical support for the prisoner and for the rest of the family and were frequently caught between conflicting demands and pressures. They also suffered secondary stigmatization and shaming in their social interactions. Social negative responses, Condry argues, stem from cultural and popular beliefs about familial blame and contamination.

Rose et al. (2007) carried out in-depth interviews with 41 family members or partners of prisoners and examined services offered to such group by three British voluntary sector organisations. Their study provides a powerful picture of the social (e.g. housing, physical and mental health, relationships disruption, social exclusion) and financial cost of imprisonment.

Rose et al. highlight that criminal justice and social welfare policies combine to impoverish and disadvantage prisoners’ families and their children in particular. They draw attention to the disjunction between the policy assumption that work is the way out of poverty and the real choices that mothers make about staying at home to look after their children, following the imprisonment of their partner or husband. This means that, lacking the income of the imprisoned person, families end up being dependent on benefits, which
are set at such low levels that they drag the families into poverty and saddle them with debt (when they are often easy prey to unscrupulous loan ‘sharks’). Older and disabled people are the most likely to remain poor, with ethnicity and nationality also playing a key role in entrenched poverty.

The study found that prisoners’ families spend an average of £208 for their imprisoned relative over a period of six months, together with an average of £60 on clothing for the prisoner and just under £400 on visiting costs over such a period. Additionally, the authors report that imprisonment of a family member costs state agencies (NHS, social services) an average of £4,800 per family over six months.

The authors point out that helping families and children of prisoners clashes ideologically with dominant, populist punitive stances and is electorally unappealing. Voluntary sector services cannot provide a consistent coverage and there is little appetite for increasing funding. On the other hand, NOMS is likely to distance services from local control as it moves to regionally based commissioning; this is likely to make them less sensitive to specific needs and to the cultural and ethnic diversity of local communities.

2. IMPORTANCE OF AND BARRIERS TO FAMILY CONTACT AND VISITING

Pugh (2005) reported on a study carried out at HMP Hollesley Bay, as part of the Ormiston Children and Families Trust *Time for Families* programme (which provided services for marginalised families who did not access mainstream community services). The study comprised a number of elements, including a survey that was completed by 61 visitors and 5 focus groups of 5-10 prisoners (constituting a 10% sample of that prison population). Although it may suffer from the same methodological weaknesses already highlighted by Browne in similar types of studies, the research findings reinforce the message about the importance of visiting and family contact to prisoners, their families and children. The report made a number of recommendations with regards to measures needed to enhance family ties in the prison, including the introduction of parenting courses and of specially tailor-suited children’s visits, the improvement of physical facilities (e.g. the refurbishment of and the addition of a play area to the visits hall), the use of outside areas for social visits, the appointment of a Family Liaison Officer and the creation of links with local community projects offering family activities during town visits or family support post-release.

These findings are reinforced by a later study, also carried out by the Ormiston Children and Families Trust (2006) as part of the *Time for Families* programme, which evaluated two projects, Time for Children & Young People (Norfolk) and Children’s Visits at HMP Highpoint. Ten case studies were used to assess the impact of the projects in supporting vulnerable children and young people affected by the imprisonment of a parent or close relative. The projects aimed to improve the children’s ability to cope through a variety of initiatives carried out in liaison with other agencies (e.g. schools and health), including one-to-one support at home or school,
social clubs, the provision of specially tailored visits where children were the focus of attention and enjoyed additional activities and facilities (e.g. painting and craft, family photos, drinks and refreshments).

The study found that the two projects had made a significant difference for children visiting a parent or relative in prison: they found the visits less stressful, their behaviour during the visits improved and felt happier about their relationship with the prisoner, who on their part seemed to gain a better understanding of the children. The information and social activities provided by the projects appeared to reduce the children’s fears about prison life, break down their sense of isolation and help them cope with bullying. The study is prone to a number of methodological difficulties, which the authors recognize: e.g. it is extremely difficult to be able to assume a causal link between a service received and a desired outcome; additionally, the effect may be short term and/or be overrun by other variables in the participants’ lives. However, the positive reception of specially tailored visits highlighted how children feel about ‘standard’ visits in noisy, crowded situations which lack privacy and opportunities for play and non-verbal communication with the parent/relative: e.g. children get bored and agitated by having to sit still, which often leads to bad behaviour and stress also for the adults, or end up running around with little supervision or structure. The study made a number of recommendations, including that good quality visits for children and families of offenders need to be provided in accordance with guidelines set out by the KIDS VIP (2005) guide.

Family contact and visiting and other forms of contact can also be vital for the prisoners themselves, not just for their families.

In her review of the literature and debates surrounding the roles they can play in helping prisoners cope with incarceration, Mills (2004) stresses that the main focus has been on the families' experiences during the imprisonment of a relative, rather than on prisoners’ views of family contact. She argues that more qualitative work should be carried out to gain an increased understanding of the meaning to prisoners of family relationships, and that more attention should be given to the role of family members other than partners and children, like parents and siblings.

Mills also argues that, despite families’ potential in reducing the risk of suicide and self-harm among prisoners, they remain an untapped resource and are largely excluded from relevant processes. If a prisoner has attempted suicide or is thought to be at risk, families are rarely consulted about their care or invited to participate in case conferences where support plans are prepared. There is as yet no avenue to discuss with them specific suicide/self harm prevention measures.

Mills discusses the difficulties families face with regard to maintaining contact, including literacy obstacles, the cost of or access to telephone calls and the practical problems of exercising prisoners’ visiting rights (distance, searches, lack of information, booking, poor facilities, inconvenient opening times). She calls for research into the reasons why prisoners reject visits, which might
improve our understanding of the decrease in their number (besides objective factors) and what might be done to reverse this trend.

Even when visits take place, the support families can give prisoners may be limited: it can be difficult to talk freely in a public arena and problematic topics may not be broached. Relate run workshops for prisoners and their partners that allow them to talk in a relaxed atmosphere, but this provision is still relatively rare.

Hartworth and Hartworth (2005) examined four prisons in the North East of England, interviewing 20 prisoners and 106 visitors. Their findings supported the view that routine visits do little to support family relationships and can add strain to them, which is exacerbated by prison protocols and staff behaviour. Opportunities when parents could spend a sustained period of time with their children were extremely beneficial to all involved. Unfortunately family days provision is poor or lacking, in spite of strategies and policies stating a commitment to support family relationships. Such facilities should be made as widely available as possible and should not be considered as privileges. The researchers also concluded that in order to enable the prison service address parenting needs, information on whether offenders have any dependent children should be collected on admission to custody and should be included in OASYS, the resettlement tool.

Clarke et al (2005) carried out a study of father-child contact, involving 43 imprisoned fathers in three English prisons, one open and two closed ones. Both prisoners and their partners (or the carers of their children) were interviewed (separately). Although the study had deliberately selected those men who had expressed an intention of keeping contact with their children both before and after release, the data showed great variability in attitudes and behaviour, but most men demonstrated difficulties in sustaining emotional and practical connections to family members whilst in prison, with their parenting role undermined by the psychological and physical restrictions of their environment. Visits, phone calls and letters were all critical in sustaining connections between the families, but again practical considerations (e.g. the cost of phone calls, the specific visiting arrangements, cost of travel) as well as familial tensions had a significant effect on the quality and frequency of such contacts. The frequency and quality of father-child visits were shown to be related to the nature of the parents’ relationship, both before and during imprisonment. A good relationship with mothers was usually critical for maintaining access to children. These findings prompted the researchers to argue that initiatives set up to encourage greater integration of resettlement, post-prison community support with in-prison treatment need to be both ‘father and couple sensitive’, and that prisons and practitioners need to start tracking the prisoner’s relationship with the mother of his children at a much earlier phase in the resettlement process. Clarke et al also argue that parental status should be routinely recorded during sentencing and prison admission, as a first but essential step for enhancing the family sensitivity of resettlement work.
Hudson (2006) looked at prisoners’ perceptions of their relationships to their families, and barriers to maintaining them, whilst in prison in the South West of England. 202 questionnaires from inmates in four prisons across the region were analysed. A number of the respondents stated that they were unwilling to let their children visit them, as they felt that prison was not a suitable environment. They valued a service like the ‘Extended Visit’ scheme, which enables prisoners to spend a day with their children in a more relaxed and informal set up, with minimal uniformed staff present. Consequently the researcher recommended that the availability of such scheme be increased.

Hudson also found that the time taken to travel to a prison is a critical factor in determining whether a prisoner received any visits: prisoners who lived less than an hour away were approximately nine times more likely to receive visits. She concluded that imprisoned parents should therefore be located close to their families, perhaps even at the expense of a transfer to prisons with better facilities, but was realistic about the likelihood of this happening given a rising prison population.

The study highlighted that the facilities available to the families of female prisoners lag behind provisions in the male estate (such disadvantage applies to all aspects of the resettlement process for women).

3. Families role in reducing prisoners’ harm

Whitehouse and Copello (2005) considered the role of families with regards to tackling substance abuse in prisons, when about 55% of those received into custody were classed as problematic substance users and 80% reported some drug use (their source: Prison Service Drug Strategy Unit). They undertook a programme of consultation across four areas in England and Wales (East, Yorkshire and Humber, Wales, South West and London) which involved interviews and discussions with 54 prisoners, 41 family members, a range of multi-disciplinary staff from 13 prisons and 14 community agencies providing drug, alcohol or family support, as well as 12 policy making agencies and departments. The study also includes a useful review of international literature on the subject.

Among the conclusions reached was that families play a central role in supporting, or undermining, the management and treatment of substance misuse in prisons. Work with families, the authors argue, is significant both in decreasing drug supply and in enhancing the user’s motivation to stop – hence it is potentially important in reducing re-offending. Additionally, many imprisoned users expressed a wish to play an effective family/parenting role and were concerned to protect their families from (further) harm. The study re-affirmed that families face high degrees of stigma, fear and isolation, and highlights that the health and welfare of family members is not given sufficient priority, especially considering that research seems to confirm that relatively brief interventions (e.g. counselling, therapy, coping skills training) can be beneficial in reducing physical and psychological stress. However, families
need support services which are multi disciplinary in nature, tailor-suited to their needs and accessible within their home area, not just in prison.

Whitehouse and Copello recommended (inter alia) that families’ involvement should be incorporated in prisoners’ drug reduction strategies at national, regional and local levels, that protocols between prisons and family support services should be formally agreed to this effect and links with Drug Action Team partnerships strengthened. Families should also be consulted about services development.

Research by Sullivan et al. (2002) has evaluated La Bodega’s (see Browne, s.5.1) programme of involving families in the drug treatment of users, as a supplement to probation, parole or pre-trial supervision. The researchers compared outcomes for a sample of 90 Bodega participants and 71 of their family members with a control group of users and their families (a full study group of 181 people). Interviews (repeated after six months) were conducted which used standardized instruments to measure physical and mental health, family functioning and social support. The researchers also used official arrest and conviction data of each drug user in the study and conducted more detailed, ethnographic interviews with a sub-sample of both the Bodega participants and the comparison group.

The results of the research indicated that Bodega’s family case management can be an effective supplement to more traditional criminal justice responses to drug addiction. Family members participating in the programme obtained the medical and social services they said they needed at significantly higher rates than those in the comparison group; they also showed a significantly stronger sense of being supported emotionally and materially in their social relationships. At the same time, the percentage of Bodega substance abusers using any illegal drug declined from 80% to 42%, significantly more than in the comparison group. The reduction in use was not due to greater use of drug treatment among Bodega participants, but appeared to be a direct result of pressure and support from case managers and family members. Arrests and convictions were also lower among Bodega participants over six months.

**Life sentence and long term prisoners**

A number of studies of this group of prisoners stress that links with the outside are likely to diminish over the course of their sentence, leading to an increased sense of isolation and alienation. Research tends to concord that the preservation of outside contact can contribute to the prevention of self harm and suicide (life prisoners have a disproportionately high risk of suicide^1^) and should be integrated in the management of the mental health of long term prisoners. However, other research has suggested that prisoners may consciously reduce contact with their family in order to cope more easily with long term imprisonment. Mills’ study (2005) confirms that family contact can be a double-edged sword for many life sentence prisoners: it may provide considerable support but can also be a source of substantial suffering and emotional disturbance.

^1^ See e.g. HMIPP (1999) LIFERS: A Joint Thematic Review by HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation, London: Home Office
Mill interviewed 20 prisoners, half of whom in HMP Kingston, ranging in age from 22 to 64. Despite the fact that most interviewees were still in contact with some members of their families and that they valued such links, this had decreased during the course of their imprisonment. This was sometimes due to practical difficulties, but in most cases the prisoners themselves had taken a conscious decision to have less contact, which they viewed as exacerbating anxiety and a cause of feeling unsettled and emotionally drained. Some prisoners had also decided that they did not want to disrupt their families’ lives by long and difficult journeys or by having to worry about them. Mills argues that whether family ties are perceived as a help or a hindrance to coping with prison is likely to depend not only on the nature and strength of these ties but also on the stage of the sentence a prisoner has reached (as well as its length). Family contact can help to relieve some of the initial depression that imprisonment entails, but as prisoners settle into their sentence they may find that visits disrupt the coping strategies that they have developed.

Mills stresses the need to recognise prisoners as active agents, who assess the value of family ties both to themselves and their families and who structure the level and nature of contact accordingly. The most common explanation for the decline of prison visits centres around the practical problems experienced by families: this needs to be tempered, she argues, by a consideration of the ‘potential role of prisoners in causing such a decline’. Mills however recognises that generalising from her small sample of prisoners is problematic.

4. RESSETLEMENT/REOFFENDING

Whitehouse and Copello and Hudson (2006) exemplify a widespread recommendation that families (including parents, grandparents and siblings as well as partners and children) be encouraged and given opportunities to participate in resettlement planning. Evidence suggests that involving prisoners’ families in the resettlement process can be valuable, as relatives can offer a unique insight into the circumstances that are likely to lead to re-offending. It can also help families cope with their kin’s imprisonment by enabling them to get a better understanding of the prisoner’s experience. Mills (2004) agrees about the role that stable family relationships can play in effective resettlement. She asks, however, what kind of support families should be expected to offer and whether it is appropriate or even possible for them to provide such help. She points out that little is known about the social and psychological support that families can offer during the resettlement process. Expecting families to play a significant role in desistance can have negative implications and place families that are already experiencing social and financial problems under further pressure. For example, they may feel responsible, or fear being blamed, for an offender’s failure to ‘go straight’, or be expected to fulfil a ‘policing’ role. Mills warn against instrumentalising families so that any help provided to them is given on the basis of their value in crime prevention, rather than to meet their (health, social, financial etc) needs.
Mills points out that not all families are ready to welcome prisoners back in their lives, let alone support them. Even when they do, families tend to receive little assistance. They are often excluded from the sentence planning process and this can leave them without a sense of how much prisoners are prepared for a return to conventional life. Currently prison governors are required to ensure that families have the opportunity to contribute to the sentencing planning process only for under 18s and offenders given Detention and Training Orders; in all other cases family involvement is a matter for governors’ discretion.

Other dangers involved in placing too high expectations on families include the fact that ‘some families may themselves engage in criminal activity and are therefore unlikely to promote a reduction in re-offending’ or the possibility that families could be left ‘feeling responsible or blamed if an offender fails to “go straight”’ (Mills and Codd).

These findings are reinforced by a later study conducted by Mills and Codd (2007), who again stress the importance of social and psychological support that family ties offer offenders both during imprisonment and after release, which may help reduce re-offending. However, they also point at some inherent dangers of placing too high expectations on family members: for example, some families may themselves engage in criminal activities; some may not wish to maintain links with the offender; families may end up feeling responsible if rehabilitation does not occur; and importantly, families’ needs may end up being secondary and be neglected. Mills and Codd suggest that their role should be clearly limited to help minimise any problems of readjustment.

Bahr et al’s (2005) is an American study of how people on parole adjust to release from prison. Its findings support the view that family networks are important in a successful transition from prison to the community. The researchers interviewed 51 people three times, over a period of three months after their release, as well as 19 parole officers. They also kept track of each ex-prisoner for six months following release and found that 10 of the 51 parolees were re-incarcerated within that period. The study concluded that family support, being married or having a partner, living with a family member and being a parent were not associated with the likelihood of returning to prison. Re-incarceration was associated instead with socializing with friends four or more times a week, the number of conflictual family relationships, having relatives who had been on probation or in jail and the parolee’s difficulty in staying off drugs. Variables associated with non-re-incarceration were: the number of close relationships within their family network, the quality of the parent/child relationship, being employed and having stable housing.

5. INTERGENERATIONAL OFFENDING
LINKS CONVICTION OF PARENT/OFFENDING BEHAVIOUR IN CHILDREN
Small scale, mainly quantitative research (see Murray 2005) suggests that the incarceration of a parent can affect children in a variety of indirect ways, including reduced family income, home and school moves, traumatic prison visits, disrupted relationships between prisoners and those who care for their children, stigma, shame, decreased social support.

Murray and Farrington (2005) found that parental incarceration predicted delinquency among working class males in London up to their 30s, even after controlling for parental criminality.

Murray, Janson and Farrington (2007) carried out a cross-national comparison of two longitudinal studies to examine the role that parental criminality plays in predicting children’s criminal behaviour. They used data from a Swedish project that examined 15,117 children born in the same year as the English cohort (1953), analysed in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development. Their study concluded that parental incarceration was a stronger risk factor for offending in England than in Sweden. The authors posited a number of possible reasons for the difference: in Sweden the combination of shorter prison sentences, prison policies encouraging family contact and welfare oriented juvenile justice policies, the advanced social welfare system, sympathetic public attitudes could have protected children from the harmful effects of parental incarceration. The authors pointed at the need for further research, e.g. to test the mechanisms linking parental incarceration and negative outcomes, to identify protective factors among offspring of prisoners, and to look at differentials according to the gender of the imprisoned parent and of the children.

6. Support and Information

Mills and Codd among others argue that factors that may discourage prisoners’ families from attending prison visits include lack of information on how to arrange visits, facilities available to visitors and security rules and procedures.

Hartworth and Hartworth maintain that the decline in visits in a period of fast rising prison population is due to such difficulties. From the beginning of the visiting process relatives come across inadequate telephone booking systems and are faced with long and exhausting trips, often with children. On arrival they experience long queues and often intimidating security procedures and rarely receive their allocated visit times.

The Ormiston Children and Families Trust (Pugh, 2005) Visits and Family Ties Survey at HMP Hollesley Bay found that prisoners and families would welcome more information, advice or support on family issues, including help on release. A family liaison officer would fill this gap, the report argued, for example by providing a point of contact with families on the outside during a crisis, liaising with social services, advising about parental rights, encouraging participation in sentence reviews or planning or help link up with sources of help in the community.
Whitehouse and Costello suggested that a greater awareness of substance use issues in relation to families should be promoted within generic, prison-based support and information services and made available to both prisoners and relatives. In particular they recommended that a template for a leaflet covering drug treatments be 'designed centrally and adopted locally'. Their study formed the basis for the ‘Partners in Reduction – A Good Practice Toolkit’, published by Adfam and distributed to area drug co-ordinators, prisons and prison visitors’ centre and substance related family support services.

Hartworth and Hartworth highlight problems concerning visitors centre administrators, mainly to do with staffing and resourcing issues. Where visitors centres have closely working relationships with the prisons they serve and there is investment by the prison, there seems to be effective collaboration. Where there is weak co-operation, the visitors centre’s contribution to service delivery, e.g. in resettlement policy, is weak. They recommended that the organisations that administer the visitors centres be helped in participating in resettlement policy, for example by contributing to staffing costs and therefore freeing up managers’ time.

APF carried out a survey of 256 visitors to prisons visitors centres across East and West Midlands in 2005-06. The research identified that information needs of visitors clustered around the following areas: who to contact in prison to find out about the family member; what happens to the family member on entering prison; how to sort out the prisoner’s personal and domestic affairs; how to take things to the prisoner; help and assistance with travelling to the prison for visits.

Families Outside surveyed Edinburgh Prison Visitors Centre in 2006, asking visitors what sort of information they would want the Visitors Centre to provide. 94 questionnaires were completed. Priorities identified the following topics: prison based issues – e.g. information about the first visit (including times and process) and the prison; counselling and advice about children; health (including mental health); benefits and death; housing; addictions and treatment programmes. Many visitors were unaware of the financial assistance available from the Assisted Prisons Visits Unit and of the role of the FCDO within the prison. Other areas with which help was sought included: maintaining relationships with partners whilst they were serving their sentence; difficulties faced by families in moving on from what had happened; parenting skills; support groups for families.

The research concluded (inter alia) that families need additional support services, specifically around mental health, addictions, benefits and relationships, in order to cope when the family members are released. It recommended that accessible information be provided, particularly for those with literacy needs. Translations in relevant languages would be necessary.

CONCLUSIONs
- Methodological limitations as identified by Dr Browne still apply to most of the studies.

- However, in aggregate, evidence presented confirms that the continuation of family relationships whilst in custody can play a vital role in prisoners' resettlement and in preventing re-offending.

REFERENCES


