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Manby, Martin, Monchuk, Leanne and Sharratt, Kathryn

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THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING FAMILY TIES DURING IMPRISONMENT – PERSPECTIVES OF THOSE INVOLVED IN HMP NEW HALL’S FAMILY SUPPORT PROJECT

MARTIN MANBY, LEANNE MONCHUK & KATHRYN SHARRATT

Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative evaluation of the Family Support Project (FSP) delivered at HMP New Hall, a female establishment located in West Yorkshire. The FSP was delivered by one female Family Support Officer (FSO) and managed by Lincolnshire Action Trust (LAT). Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to elicit the views of residents, their family members, those responsible for delivering the project and representatives from statutory agencies. The findings revealed a high demand for the services of the FSP. Participants spoke positively about the FSO’s approachable nature, dedication and ability to communicate effectively with other agencies. The benefits of Family Days in maintaining family ties, and Final Contact adoption visits for residents saying farewell to children, are also discussed.

Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between prisoners and their families has received increased interest from academics and policy makers. Particular attention has been paid to the role of families in reducing re-offending, the potential for inter-generational offending, and the impact of imprisonment on children and families. Initiatives to sustain family ties during custodial sentences are likely to have beneficial consequences for society, with a decrease in re-offending being associated with a reduction in the number of victims of crime and in costs to the Criminal Justice System. They are also likely to result in improved outcomes for prisoners and their families, with fewer family breakdowns and positive implications for mental health, thus incurring a saving to health and welfare services.

This paper presents an evaluation of a Family Support Project (FSP) delivered at HMP New Hall, and managed by Lincolnshire Action Trust (LAT) since 2009. HMP New Hall is a closed female prison in West Yorkshire. The establishment has an operational capacity of 446 and holds adult female prisoners of all categories, and Young Offenders.

One female Family Support Officer (FSO) was responsible for the delivery of the FSP. Its aims included: enabling residents to re-establish and maintain contacts with children and families, particularly during times of crisis; enabling families to access prison visits; and promoting positive parenting skills. In addition, residents were provided with financial advice and assistance to secure future employment, education and training. The FSP also strived to build links with local community organisations to support residents upon release.

Review of the Literature

There remain concerns about the unprecedented number of people receiving custodial sentences, and the high proportion of these who reoffend shortly after their release. In 2012, the prison population in England & Wales was in the region of 86,000¹ and this represents the second highest rate of imprisonment in Western European Union countries (with the exception of Spain)². Over half of all repeat offenders in England and Wales have 11 or more convictions, and around half of those released from prison are reconvicted within one year³.

Despite women only representing 5% of the prison population in England and Wales⁴, they present significant needs with regards to children and family. A recent longitudinal survey revealed that 54% prisoners have children under the age of 18⁵. Although there was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of men and women with children, analysis of the 2004 Resettlement Survey indicated that female prisoners were about twice as likely as males to report needing help with problems concerning family or children⁶. This perhaps reflects the higher percentage of women living alone with children prior to imprisonment (58% compared to 43% of men) and the subsequent disruption to care-giving arrangements⁷. Most children (94%) with a father in prison were cared for by their mother/step-mother. This compares to 27% of children with a mother in prison who were cared for by their father/step-father; with many going to live with other family members and a small proportion being taken into care.

Female prisoners have also been identified as having particularly chaotic backgrounds, where childhood abuse, domestic violence, and substance misuse problems are not uncommon⁸. Combined with the emotional distress of being separated from their children and family, concerns for their children's welfare, and the stress of trying to manage their family from within the prison, this makes them a particularly vulnerable section of the prison population.

A substantial proportion (43%) of sentenced prisoners are reported to lose contact with their families during their time in custody⁹. Due to the small number of female establishments and their geographic location, women tend to be located further from home than men, making it more difficult for family members to attend visits¹⁰. Just

¹ Ministry of Justice (2012) Offender Management Statistics Quarterly Bulletin, January to March 2012, England and Wales. London: Ministry of Justice.

² Tavares, C., Thomas, G. and Bulut, F. (2012) Population and Social Conditions: Crime and Criminal Justice 2006-2009. Luxembourg: Eurostat.

³ Ministry of Justice (2012) Proven Re-offending Statistics Quarterly Bulletin, January to March 2012, England and Wales. London: Ministry of Justice.

⁴ Ministry of Justice (2012) see n. 1.

⁵ Williams, K. Papadopoulou, V. and Booth, N. (2012) Prisoners childhood and family backgrounds: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners. Ministry of Justice Research Series 4/12. London: Ministry of Justice.

⁶ Williams, K. Papadopoulou, V. and Booth, N. (2012) see n. 5.

⁷ Williams, K. Papadopoulou, V. and Booth, N. (2012) see n. 5.

⁸ Home Office (2007) The Corston Report: A report by Baroness Jean Corston of review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System. London: Home Office.

⁹ National Offender Management Service (2005) The National Reducing Re-offending Delivery Plan. London: Home Office.

¹⁰ Prison Reform Trust (2010) Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile. London: Prison Reform Trust.

over two thirds of prisoners surveyed believed that support from their family and contact with their children would help prevent them from re-offending¹¹. Women were more likely than men to see sustaining family ties as a deterrent for future offending (51% compared to 39%).

Prisoners who had received at least one visit during their time in custody were also found to be 39% less likely to re-offend than those that had not received any visits¹². Contact with family was also found to be associated with other factors demonstrated to protect against re-offending. Prisoners, particularly women, who had received at least one visit from a partner or family member, were significantly more likely to have accommodation and education, training or employment arranged for release than those who had not received any visits¹³.

Data relating to the parental status of prisoners is not routinely collated as they are often reluctant to disclose this information as part of prison reception procedures, but it is estimated that in 2009, 200,000 children were affected by parental imprisonment¹⁴. The Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development revealed that individuals who had experienced parental imprisonment during their childhood were at increased risk of criminal or antisocial behaviour in adulthood¹⁵. The likelihood of inter-generational offending was also found to be greater when the parent was in prison as opposed to just receiving a conviction, and for longer periods of imprisonment. Some studies have found that children of imprisoned mothers were more likely to be convicted than children of imprisoned fathers¹⁶.

Parental imprisonment has also been demonstrated to have adverse implications for children's mental health. The nature and severity of the impact varies but can include a sense of loss and confusion, stigma leading to feelings of shame and low self-esteem, social withdrawal, anger and aggressive behaviour, and decreased school attendance and performance¹⁷. The impact on mental health has also been found to be long-lasting, with children of prisoners showing higher levels of depression and anxiety in adulthood and being disproportionately represented in clinical populations¹⁸.

¹¹ Williams, K. Papadopoulou, V. and Booth, N. (2012) see n. 5.

¹² May, C., Sharma, N. and Stewart, D (2008) Factors linked to re-offending: a one-year follow-up of prisoners who took part in the Resettlement Surveys 2001, 2003 & 2004. Ministry of Justice Research Summary 5. London: Ministry of Justice.

¹³ Niven, S. and Stewart, D. (2005) Resettlement outcomes on release from prison in 2003. Home Office Findings 248. London: Home Office.

¹⁴ Williams, K. Papadopoulou, V. and Booth, N. (2012) see n. 5.

¹⁵ Murray, J. and Farrington, D.P. (2005) 'Parental Imprisonment: Effects on Boys' Antisocial Behaviour and Delinquency through the Life-Course'. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 46 (12): 1269–78.

¹⁶ Dallaire, D. H. (2007) 'Incarcerated Mothers and Fathers: A Comparison of Risks for Children and Families'. *Family Relations* 56 (5): 440–53.

¹⁷ See for example, Boswell, G. and Wedge, P. (2002) *Imprisoned Fathers and their Children*. London: Jessica Kingsley; King, D. (2002) Parents, Children and Prison: Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children. Dublin: Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin Institute of Technology; and Philbrick, K. (2002) Imprisonment: The impact on children. *Issues in Forensic Psychology* 3: 72-81.

¹⁸ Murray, J. and Farrington, D.P. (2008) 'Parental imprisonment: Long-lasting effects on boys' internalizing problems through the life-course'. *Development and Psychopathology* 20 (1): 273-290.

The value of sustaining relationships between prisoners and their families has received increased recognition in recent policy documents. The “National Reducing Re-offending Delivery Plan” identifies “children and families”¹⁹ as one of the seven pathways to reducing re-offending²⁰. The document also places responsibility on prisons to protect the welfare of children attending visits, and invites the commissioning of voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations to deliver family services.

The role of families in reducing re-offending and the duty of prisons to ensure children’s wellbeing is re-iterated in “Reducing re-offending: supporting families, creating better futures”²¹ and the Coalition Government’s “Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders”²². The first report makes a series of recommendations on how establishments should support contact between prisoners and their family, including facilitating positive visiting experiences and assisting prisoners to communicate via telephone and letter. The report also specifies that prisoners should have the opportunity to complete parenting courses as part of their sentence plan objectives. With specific reference to female establishments, it was suggested that trained family support officers with an understanding of children’s services and care proceedings, and the necessary knowledge to link with external agencies, should be made available.

Working in partnership with VCS organisations, prisons have developed numerous initiatives to support the maintenance of family ties, including the provision of visitor centres and family days. There has been increased recognition of the need for individualised and sometimes long-term support for prisoners and their children. One example of such a service is Integrated Family Support Workers (IFSWs) operating at eleven prisons, delivered by the North East Prison Aftercare Society (NEPACS) and the Prison Aftercare Trust (Pact), and funded by Department for Education and National Offender Management Service. The support provided by the IFSWs falls into three broad categories: facilitating contact between prisoners and their families; providing information and emotional support to families; and resettlement work such as assistance with accommodation, employment and finances. Independent evaluators have commended the IFSWs for their ability to overcome scepticism displayed by some prison officers; and to operate fluidly with agencies both inside and outside the prison such as substance misuse teams, faith-based organisations, schools and social work teams²³.

Methodology

¹⁹ National Offender Management Service (2005) see n. 9.

²⁰ National Offender Management Service (2005) see n. 9.

²¹ Ministry of Justice and Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) Reducing re-offending: supporting families, creating better futures. A framework for improving the local delivery of support for the families of offenders. London: Ministry of Justice.

²² Ministry of Justice (2010) Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders. London: The Stationary Office.

²³ Barefoot Research and Evaluation (2012) Integrated Family Support in the North East Evaluation Report. Newcastle: Barefoot Research and Evaluation; and Estep, B. and Nicholles, N. (2012) Economic study of Integrated Family Support Programme (IFS). London: nef consulting.

This evaluation, conducted in 2012, was commissioned by Lincolnshire Action Trust (LAT). Its purpose was to explore the aims and objectives of the FSP; its delivery and perceived successes and challenges; the needs of residents and their families and how the FSP addressed these; and how the FSP worked with the prison and external agencies.

There were six strands of data collection:

- i) Semi-structured interviews with the Family Support Officer (FSO) and her line manager (the Resettlement Officer);
- ii) Semi-structured interviews with eight current residents who had accessed the FSP within the previous twelve months. These participants were randomly selected to reduce selection bias;
- iii) Two focus groups with a total of thirteen residents (including those serving indeterminate sentences);
- iv) Telephone interviews with representatives from six families who had engaged with the FSP;
- v) Telephone interviews with two children's Social Workers and one Probation Officer and
- vi) A semi-structured interview with one Senior Officer (SO).

With the consent of participants, interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. A broad thematic analysis was undertaken.

Additionally, data from the COPING project, an investigation of the impact of parental imprisonment on children funded by the European Union FP7 Framework was made available for the evaluation.

Findings

Overall, the evaluation found that the FSP was valued highly by residents, family members and the prison and viewed as an important resource to help maintain family ties. Six dominant themes emerged and these are discussed below.

The Remit of the FSP

Prior to the FSP, there had been no family support provision at the establishment. Funding for the FSP was fragile and relied on successful grant applications. At the time of the evaluation, a three year funding term had recently ceased, and the Prison was providing temporary funding while new funding opportunities were being explored.

Ease of access was particularly appreciated and residents described how they were initially informed about the FSP by "*word of mouth*" from other residents who had met with the FSO. The Senior Officer (SO) described how the establishment recognised the importance of helping residents to maintain family ties during their sentence, with prison staff now routinely referring those with family issues to the FSP.

The level of support provided by the FSP was dependent on the residents' individual needs and concerns. These were assessed through an initial consultation and

thereafter cases were prioritised accordingly. The interviews with the FSO and their line manager indicated that many of the residents experienced complex and sensitive issues in their background which may affect current efforts to re-establish or even maintain family ties.

Sometimes it was sufficient to provide general advice at the initial consultation, but support also extended to longer periods of engagement, with ongoing review meetings. One example of extended engagement was to re-establish regular contact between a mother serving a long sentence for a serious offence and her 10 year old daughter whom she had previously met very infrequently. Another resident described how the FSO had helped her repair her relationship with her grown-up daughter:

Because I had been arrested, my daughter had fallen out with me because she was annoyed that I had got myself in this situation. [The FSO] was the one that got through to my daughter and then eventually my daughter has come to visit me and it has been alright. But it was [the FSO] who had done the link with Social Services, because they were involved...It was a big, big breakthrough for me that was. But who else would I have gone to in the prison? There would have been no-one else.

A key role of the FSO was to ensure that residents were included in the future plans for their children which often involved communicating with many individuals (e.g. family members) and agencies (e.g. Social Services).

The SO had also commissioned a range of other services, co-located inside the prison to support residents in other aspects of their welfare such as: Through the Gate, Housing Associations, Citizen's Advice Bureau and After Adoption. This complemented the one-to-one support provided by the FSP.

Final Contact Visits

In addition to providing general advice and support to residents, the FSP organised and facilitated Final Contact Visits. In some instances, it was not possible for the resident to maintain contact with their child and the decision was taken to place the child for adoption. Initially, project staff had been concerned that Final Contact Visits were held as part of regular visiting hours in the main visits hall. Consequently, scant attention was paid to the particular needs of the residents and their children at this emotionally challenging time. In response, the FSP developed a protocol to ensure that these visits were carefully planned to provide extended visits, where the mother and child had private time together, supervised by the Social Worker or FSO.

The Resettlement Manager commented on how the FSP had now facilitated "a much longer goodbye, a much more qualitative goodbye and a dignified one as well". Women were able to access support of the prison chaplain following these visits, and support themselves when they returned to their cells, for example by working on memory boxes and life stories. Residents appreciated the support available and expressed confidence in the arrangements that had been made. One of them said: "I don't want to hand the baby over to anyone but you [FSO]".

Family Days

The FSO also organised and facilitated Family Days to proactively help residents maintain family ties. Family Days were longer and more relaxed than domestic visits, as highlighted by one resident who stated: “*There’s no pressure like a normal visit*”.

Residents and family members equally recognised that Family Days were instrumental in sustaining relationships. One family said that they felt that Family Days were imperative and that they had:

...dramatically added to the bond between [resident] and the children, providing a touch of normality.

Family Days were also commended for the use of different activities that kept the children engaged:

My son would never sit on a normal visit. I get to interact with him and do different stuff. Like he was playing in the sand pit...

On the whole, Family Days were considered to be well run, but family members had some critical observations about reception arrangements and lengthy security processes, which reduced the amount of time the visitors had to spend with the resident.

All interviewees stated that Family Days should occur more frequently. As one resident commented:

I think they are brilliant! I think there should be more of them!

However, the SO acknowledged that this might be difficult to achieve taking into account the time required to organise them, and the FSO’s workload, as discussed below.

| *Demand & Capacity*

The interviews conducted with both the FSO and their line manager highlighted the high level of demand for the FSP within the establishment. A review of the FSP ‘Attendees Register’ indicated that in the year up to March 2012, 121 residents had accessed the service. This comprised 87 initial consultations and 289 reviews.

Issues of capacity were raised throughout the interviews, focus groups and the evaluation more widely. Initially, the aim of the FSP was to adopt a holistic approach to supporting residents throughout their sentence and resettlement. However, owing to the demand for the service, the FSP had to focus solely on the immediate needs of the residents within the prison, prioritising and responding to issues raised.

Although the residents applauded the work of the FSP, several expressed concerns regarding the FSO’s heavy workload and suggested that more staff were needed:

Eighty per cent of imprisoned women have children. I think that [the FSO] could do with someone helping her. She is on her own with how many women?

I feel for her. There are 450 women in here. How can you cater for all (of) them? But she does it.

| *Personal Attributes*

During the course of the evaluation it became apparent that part of the success of the FSP could be attributed to the personal attributes of the FSO. Residents and family members spoke positively about the FSO's friendly and approachable manner:

You can just come over here and knock on the door. .There is access – human access. She puts the girls back in touch with their families and she wants us to be happy and if there is anything else she can do, she asks us and I think she is really good for me. I have never met anyone like her.

She just makes you feel at ease and you don't feel like you are in jail. She treats you, like, you give her respect and she will give you respect...I don't approach many people, but she is just.... a likeable person.

The FSP's ethos was to empower women to take action on their own behalf, while balancing the needs of the child and resident, qualities recognised by residents:

She can see things from our point of view and she can also see it from a child's point of view and the school's point of view...

...She is realistic as well. She will tell you – if you want something, she'll say 'well really, you know, we can't really do that but, how about this instead?'

| *Partnership Working*

The SO expressed a high level of confidence in the FSP, which liaised closely with other prison based services. Initially, some prison staff were suspicious of the FSP and of potential conflicts with prison security. However, the FSP had demonstrated full awareness of prison security requirements and its credibility within the prison improved markedly.

Owing to the complex needs of the residents, it was often necessary to liaise with external agencies. Residents described the range of help which they received, including establishing links with schools, solicitors and Social Workers:

... she got in touch with all the different parties like the schools, (and) the counsellor, and then she sorted out for me to see a solicitor...I mean it has took a while to get there but we got there in the end, so it was worth it.

Three external agencies were interviewed (one Probation Service Officer and two Children's Social Workers). Ordinarily, it could be difficult and time consuming for

them to communicate with their client, but the FSO provided a link into the prison and ready access to residents and up-to-date knowledge about their concerns.

..... [It is] so much easier having somebody inside the prison who can make immediate contact with the residents.

The Social Workers and the Probation Officer also commented upon the energetic approach of the FSO in advocating on behalf of residents, whilst still maintaining a primary focus on the needs of children. Additionally, they described the FSO as “*very persistent in contacting Social Services – like a dog with a bone*” when contacting them to obtain information on behalf of their client.

Discussion & Conclusion

At least half of the residents in a women’s prison such as HMP New Hall are likely to be mothers and three quarters of their children are likely to have experienced disruption as a consequence of maternal imprisonment. Given that women are more likely to be living alone with children prior to imprisonment this causes greater disruption to children’s care giving arrangements, and consequently the demands on family support services are likely to be high. The chaotic backgrounds of many female prisoners mean that they are likely to present with complex needs. The literature has documented the benefits of maintaining family ties in reducing re-offending and this has been recognised in policy.

HMP New Hall welcomed the FSP as it had the potential to fulfil Prison Service targets to improve family ties with a view to reducing reoffending rates. The FSP helped the Prison to further recognise that women required support in their role as mothers if they were to be successfully rehabilitated.

Family Support Projects can be based inside the prison, as at New Hall, or can be community based, the model preferred by NEPACS. Residents at New Hall clearly valued the FSP being based within the prison as it was easy to access. Initial consultations ensured that residents with the highest levels of needs were successfully prioritised. Thereafter, the level of intervention was tailored to the resident’s individual needs, and ranged from ‘one-off’ meetings to provide advice to ongoing regular engagement.

The FSP was entrusted with the responsibility for improving Family Visits and Final Contact Visits. Residents and their family members appreciated Family Days because of the opportunities provided to spend quality time together in a more relaxed environment. Through the work of the FSO, Final Contact visits became a more private and personal experience, allowing for a proper farewell. Perceptions of the FSP were based on the dedication and motivation of the FSO, her ability to ensure the resident had realistic expectations, and to find a balance between the rights of the residents and their children’s needs.

There was evidence of some tension between security and family support objectives within the prison in the frustrations voiced by relatives experiencing delays during

extended Family Day visits. However, relations improved, as evidenced by the Prison referring complex family and contact issues into the FSP.

The FSP enabled residents to communicate more fluidly with external agencies, and where necessary the FSO was persistent in her approach to help facilitate this. External agencies also benefited from the FSP as it was easier to obtain updates and information about their client.

There was no shortage of ideas about expanding the FSP, such as more frequent Family Days, but consistently high demands for the service and the fragility of the funding base constrained these ambitions. Perhaps the initial FSP brief was too wide for one person to deliver. All of the FSO's energies were allocated to working with residents on family links and supporting relatives on visits, with no time left for post support rehabilitation. At HMP New Hall this mattered less because the prison had a progressive policy for co-locating other community organisations with the FSP in the prison, focussing on residents' welfare post release. This is a model which other prisons may wish to consider.

A main limitation of this qualitative evaluation was that it was not possible to assess longer term project impact on re-offending rates. Useful, if speculative, indicators from the evaluation included: residents' accounts indicating that they welcomed the humanising influence of the Project, and which may have provided some benefits for the prison overall; residents' having positive experience of family support within the prison which may have improved their capacity to work with support agencies subsequently; and residents having good experiences of final adoption visits which may have helped them approach being parents again in the future more positively.

For the future, there is a strong argument for the prison and welfare services to allocate more funding to supporting female residents, both during sentences and as part of rehabilitation.