

Poverty and disadvantage among prisoners' families

Findings
Informing change

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This study explores the dilemmas faced by families when someone receives a custodial sentence, and how families respond to the financial, social and emotional challenges.

Key points

- Prisoners' families were vulnerable to financial instability, poverty, debt and potential housing disruption following the imprisonment of a family member.
- Families subsidised the imprisonment by sending prisoners money, clothing and electronic goods.
- Disadvantage associated with imprisonment included high rates of depression, physical illness, housing disruption and, for families of foreign national prisoners, permanent separation after deportation.
- Prisoners' partners and mothers prioritised the care needs of children above household income.
- Barriers to employment were magnified for those caring for prisoners' children.
- The New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) does not take into account families' perspectives on their caring responsibilities, while carers also fall into the 'hardest to help' groups not served well by the NDLP.
- Costs incurred by statutory services (NHS, social services) and voluntary organisations for services needed as a direct result of the imprisonment averaged an estimated £4,810 per family. This cost was calculated by examining figures from a case study group.
- Maintaining family relationships during imprisonment was financially draining, though families are officially recognised as significant in enabling the successful resettlement of prisoners.
- The researchers conclude that:
 - criminal justice and social welfare policy combine to impoverish, disadvantage and exclude prisoners' families, and their children in particular. At the root of their poverty is the reliance on welfare benefits, levels of which remain below the Government's own poverty level. Foreign national families may not even have recourse to public funds;
 - within the emerging regionally-based framework for service commissioning (NOMS), community-based support for prisoners' families is at risk of decline.

The research

By staff at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, and the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College, London, using interviews with 41 family members and an evaluation of services for prisoners' families.

Background

Imprisonment brings many challenges for families. This study set out to discover how poverty and disadvantage were experienced among prisoners' families and partners. It attempted to document families' experiences and understand their decision-making as they fought poverty and exclusion. This sense of ordinary families facing extraordinary challenges was a theme of the analysis. The study looked at the experiences of 41 family members living at or below the poverty line. It also tried to estimate the costs of imprisonment, and evaluated services for prisoners' families.

How imprisonment brings crisis and disruption

The impact of imprisonment and separation disrupted all aspects of families' lives. Finances were reduced through loss of prisoners' income, and women left paid work to care for prisoners' children, as one partner explained:

"... I was doing a cleaning job... [in the] evenings. So I had to give that up because he wasn't here to have the kids." (Amy)

As well as lost earnings, financial transitions were damaging. Benefit delays exacerbated future financial disadvantage by leading to rent arrears reclaimed at source from income support payments. Housing, whether rented or owner occupied, became precarious because of financial disruption.

Families faced new expenses associated with subsidising the imprisonment. For instance, they sent cash (£5-£10 per week) to the prisoner for buying essential items, including phone cards, clothing and electronic goods, in accordance with prison security regulations. Although prison visiting is in principle funded by the Prison Service, families paid a proportion or all of the costs of visiting prisoners over long distances. Financial support was negotiated with the prisoner:

"I just try and economise. I mean, there's weeks where I can't send the money... it's voluntary that I send it to him, and he understands... I say look, I can't send it this week, and he gets quite worried that I've got no money..." (Tracey – a grandmother)

These outgoings weighed heavily on families' marginal incomes, and standards of living fell. Families' incomes had little or no flexibility, particularly among those who were claiming benefits prior to the imprisonment. Rarely, families were insulated by a better-off extended family. Financial loans (usually very small) from the extended family addressed immediate shortfalls and enabled the purchase of items such as food and payment of utility bills.

Debt was accrued because of the financial disruption and pressure on inadequate incomes. Two families had received money from the Social Fund, but more commonly credit was obtained through private loan companies, charging high rates of interest that in turn increased financial pressure. The proportion of income allocated to debt repayment could be substantial:

"[You] take loans out and then when the people come round every week that's half your money gone... With one of them [the repayments] would be £60 per week. It's a lot... £60 a week is half the money I'm on at the moment." (Pam - a partner)

Older and disabled people were vulnerable to remaining poor, as were minority ethnic groups, and foreign national families who had limited recourse to public funds. Other problems were caused by offence-related difficulties, such as housing disruption in response to threats, or deportation.

Imprisonment also caused profound impacts on psychological health; depression among the sample of adults was very high. Prisoners' families also linked declining physical health to the exacerbation of stress-related illnesses. Moreover, family relationships were destabilised and fragmented as a result of the pressures they bore throughout a term of imprisonment. Children's responses to the separation of imprisonment ranged from signs of missing the imprisoned parent, to psychological distress or behavioural problems for which they received treatment. The study suggests a need to be alert to the way in which prejudice and discrimination may affect the fortunes of prisoners' children. Around 150,000 children are affected by imprisonment each year.

Stigma was experienced as an association with criminality. There was some apprehension in relation to disclosing the imprisonment, for instance to schools – families were aware of the power that statutory agencies hold in relation to their children.

Decisions about paid work

At the root of poverty among prisoners' families was the reliance on welfare benefits as a source of income. Incomes from benefits remain below the Government's own poverty level. 'Welfare to Work' policies (which aim to tackle poverty through enabling people into

work) assume that decisions about taking up paid work are based on maximising household income, which is known as ‘economic rationality’. However, caring responsibilities took priority over employment among the prisoners’ families. Their decision-making in this respect conformed to a recognised logic, found in families more widely. Those women who left paid work, for instance to care for prisoners’ children, included prisoners’ partners and mothers. One woman who had given up her job and her home to care for the prisoner’s child explained her decision to care for her grandchild:

“So the option was... me – or him being put in care, and I don’t think... I wouldn’t have been able to live with that choice. It’s not [the child’s] fault.” (May)

The significance of ‘Welfare to Work’ policies

Paid work at present remains the only route out of poverty: the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) prioritises access to work as a way out of poverty and a means of tackling child poverty. Underlying this policy is again an assumption of ‘economic rationality’, but this study showed that lone parents and carers in prisoners’ families made decisions on a different basis.

In addition, women parenting alone faced barriers to work similar to those of other lone parent families who may increasingly be ‘hardest to help’ under NDLP, but magnified in the context of imprisonment. For instance, older age, disability and caring responsibilities are all recognised barriers to paid employment, but grandmothers caring for prisoners’ children sometimes faced all three. Additional barriers to employment were also experienced, including imprisonment-related housing disruption.

The assumption of economic rationality underlying NDLP fails to appreciate families’ perspective on caring responsibilities, while carers also fall into the ‘hardest to help’ groups not served well by NDLP. This policy – considered crucial for tackling child poverty among lone parent families – is thus flawed, if not inappropriate. It is likely to be ineffective in the longer term in relation to impoverished prisoners’ families.

Child poverty

Reducing child poverty is a major policy target, and there has been some success in this area. However, there is no adequate safety net for children living within workless families. Given the impact of imprisonment on employment and incomes in prisoners’ families, prisoners’ children form a key part of that wider group at risk of poverty. In particular, children within families who do not hold British nationality – families

which may have restricted recourse to public funds as a condition of entry to the country – are at risk of being profoundly impoverished, with associated disadvantage in terms of housing and health risks.

Costs of imprisonment

The study has estimated the costs of imprisonment to families and wider society, on the basis of data from five selected case studies. Loss of prisoners’ or partners’ earnings averaged £6,200 over a six-month period. The average personal cost to the family and relatives was estimated at £175 per month. Moreover, the full cost per family over six months – including the cost to agencies (£4,810) and the cost of support provided by family and relatives – averaged £5,900. These findings are illustrative rather than conclusive. However, the estimated annual cost of imprisonment would rise by almost a third (from £37,500 to £49,200 per case) if the costs to the family and wider society were included in the calculations.

Services for prisoners’ families

The Prison Service funds prison visiting by people in need, but to an inadequate level, and lacks information as to the extent of need. Services in the voluntary sector are hampered by the stigma attached to imprisonment, which extends to charitable organisations’ willingness to fund work with the families of prisoners. Lack of adequate funding has perpetuated a dearth of services in some geographical areas. Funding difficulties result in vulnerabilities and potential distortions to services. Internally, services lack sufficient expertise, especially in relation to the urgent and complex welfare needs of the families and partners of prisoners. The proposed introduction of regionally based competitive tenders by the service commissioning framework – the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) – foreshadows an extension of these pressures. Families from minority ethnic groups may have specific social needs through the combination of risks they face over and above the usual difficulties.

Implications for policy

The study found examples of areas of tension between criminal justice and stated welfare policy: in particular, whether the policy of increasing imprisonment – and more stringent deportation policies for innocent families of foreign national prisoners – can be reconciled with benign welfare intentions or commitments. Incomplete funding of prison visiting also reflects an implicit policy tension regarding direct support to

prisoners' families for a Government presiding over the highest imprisonment rate in Europe and the most rapidly rising prison population.

Destabilised and fragmented relationships following the separation brought about through imprisonment have implications for release. This raises questions regarding policy that focuses on the family as a supportive location for the resettlement and rehabilitation of prisoners on release.

Conclusion

The study concludes that clarification and review of the consequences of criminal justice policy for families are needed. The research has demonstrated the implications of criminal justice and social welfare policy as they combine to impoverish, disadvantage and exclude the relatives of those in prison – in particular prisoners' children. Given that these impacts are contrary to at least some stated policy intentions, the research indicates that immediate action is needed to protect the hidden and innocent victims of imprisonment.

Four fundamental themes require attention:

- Rights and equality – there is a need to comply fully with the spirit and letter of international Human Rights legislation (including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Commission on Human Rights) as well as the Equality Act 2006.
- Principles of care in welfare policy – the devaluing of care, which leads to inequalities, could be addressed through policies that acknowledge gender, care and diversity – specifically the significance of caring (in this case usually for prisoners' children) in sustaining social cohesion. Policies could thus move to adequate state welfare provision.
- Public accounts reform – calculations of imprisonment costs do not include the financial impact for family members/individuals, or the indirect costs to the public purse, that is, the costs (estimated in this study) to other government departments such as the NHS and social services.

- Community-based services – government policy, which involves NOMS moving away from locally accountable services to regionally based commissioning, will take services further from local communities. Services will therefore be less able to meet the specific advice, information and cultural needs of an ethnically diverse population of prisoners' families. Local community links and adequate funding, currently lacking, are essential for the development of a strong civic voice among families' organisations. Effective voluntary services could combine immediate legal and welfare-related advice and information with counselling or referrals, together with a focus on service development.

About the project

The research was carried out by staff at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, London, and the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College, London. A sample of 41 family members and partners of prisoners, living at or below the poverty line (i.e. at or below 60 per cent of the median income) took part in in-depth interviews. The interviews focused on the impact of imprisonment on their incomes, housing and on their physical and psychological health, and that of their children. The sample was recruited through prison visitor centres, national distribution of leaflets and posters to visitor centres, and through three voluntary sector organisations. Data from the qualitative interviews was used to estimate the actual costs of imprisonment, both to the individual family and to society, over a six-month period. In addition, services for prisoners' families were evaluated. The services included were identified through a national consultation exercise. Information concerning management and funding, service provision and how delivery is achieved was sought through interviews with staff and financial information.

For further information

The full report, **Poverty and disadvantage among prisoners' families** by Rose Smith, Roger Grimshaw, Renee Romeo and Martin Knapp, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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