

Keeping Families Together: Maintaining Positive Relationships Between Children and Parents in Prison

A Study in the North East of England

Introduction

This research was carried out by Barefoot Research and Evaluation on behalf of Nacro and was funded by the Northern Rock Foundation.

It took place between October 2004 and October 2005. The research consisted of a review of literature and policy, interviews with policy makers and the voluntary sector, and interviews with prisoners and prison staff in four prisons in the North East including HMP Acklington, HMP YOI Castington, HMP Holme House, HMP Low Newton and HMP YOI Low Newton (the two latter share the same premises).

The aim of this research was to identify what prisons in the North East of England can do to improve the ways in which constructive family relationships can be maintained or developed whilst a parent is in prison.

Summary of the Findings

The research has produced a series of important findings. Some of these reinforce what research and policy professionals already know and some are new findings. The findings include:

- Visiting a prisoner is not a pleasant experience, particularly for children, and the many difficulties discourage family members from visiting. This results in fewer people visiting family members in prison, which means more family relationships are damaged.
- Routine visits do little to support and maintain family relationships and indeed can put more strain on relationships because of the difficulties involved for the family. Most of the strain is caused by the prison service, its protocols and behaviour of the prison staff.
- Those responsible for security in prisons have consistently said that security concerns need not restrict family or child-parent visits.
- Opportunities when a parent can spend a sustained length of time with his or her child(ren) is extremely beneficial to all involved. What is even more beneficial are opportunities when the prisoner and his or her family can have sustained and quality time together.
- Provision by the prison service for family days is very poor. Some prisons have no provision for family visiting outside of normal visits. Other prisons do have provision but make it almost impossible for prisoners and families to access those opportunities. Other prisons put on the days so infrequently as to severely limit the impact they have on improving family relationships. Many



prisons with weak or infrequent provision openly state in their policy and communiqués that they do much to support and maintain family relationships.

- All the prison strategy and policy is highly supportive of measures to support and maintain family relationships.

In addition to these, the research has also found that NEPACS and the Holme House Visitor Centre (voluntary sector organisations that administer the visitors centres) play an extremely important role in facilitating the visiting process and provide many valuable support services to visitors, including practical and emotional support. However, there are a number of problems experienced by the visitors centre administrators which predominantly concern staffing and resourcing issues. Where visitors centres have close working relationships with the prisons they serve and there is investment by the prison, e.g. HMP Acklington, there seems to be an effective collaboration. Where there is weak cooperation, then the relationship is weak and the visitors centre's contribution to service delivery, e.g. in resettlement policy, is weak (through no fault of their own).

Problems often arise in the visiting process because different prisons have different procedures. Prisoners have often been held in several establishments and receive visits by family members. Because procedures vary depending on the establishment, families often experience problems when they expect procedures to be the same.

Conclusions

The research has demonstrated several important issues that are of importance to the prison service and policy makers in the criminal justice field.

To answer the question of why is visiting declining when the prison population has risen, this evidence suggests that it is because visitors find it difficult to visit family members in the current system. From the beginning of the visiting process they encounter inadequate telephone booking systems and are faced with long and exhausting trips (with children). On arrival, they experience long queues, often intimidating security procedures, rarely receive their allocated visit time and have unsatisfactory contact with a member of their family that they have possibly not seen for weeks.

These difficulties are occurring despite major national, regional and prison-based policy which states that every endeavour is made to support the maintenance of family ties. When returning to the HIP 2004 *Expectations* list, out of total of 10 recommendations, only two have been found to have been fulfilled in some of the case studies presented in the main report. Firstly, only three out of five prisons in this research provided evening visits and family days were either unavailable, or difficult to access in three of the case studies. Secondly, a well run visitors centre was available in four out of five case studies.



Therefore, this research indicates that the main weakness in supporting and maintaining family relationships is the delivery setting, i.e. the individual establishments not doing what they are saying, or not doing what they are instructed they should be doing.

The Government has identified that the maintenance of family ties as a key factor in the reduction of re-offending and in resettlement (SEU 2002 among others). With the prison population having exceeded 77,000 the resettlement agenda has never been so important. Within this research, routine visits have been shown to be inadequate to maintain family contact. This is particularly relevant to the relationship between parent and child(ren). Against this backdrop, it would seem incredulous that the Government is saying that an initiative is important, that it is doing it, but on inspection it is not. It is also concerning that if it were not for voluntary sector research, such as this, that this would not have been identified.

Recommendations

What this research points towards is the need for frequent opportunities for prisoners to be able to spend some time with all of their family members, particularly their children. In order to achieve this aim there are several recommendations.

- Family days and child-parent visits need to be as widely available as possible to all prisoners and should cease being considered as privileges. This means that the individual establishments need to make them easier to access (i.e. HMP Holme House and HMP YO1 Castington).
- Where family provision already exists, the quality of that provision must be improved, for example in HMP Low Newton, the child-parent days must be made accessible at times outside of school hours and the Millennium days must be better resourced and it partners and carers should be allowed to participate in the day.
- Where family visiting provision does not exist, i.e. in HMP Acklington, it must be started.
- It is recommended that information on whether the offender has any dependant children be collected on admission to custody. At present this information is either not collected, not used or in an accessible format. Knowing parenting responsibilities is the first step in addressing needs. OASyS, the resettlement tool, needs to include information about family status and responsibilities (something that it does not currently do, i.e. information on if the prisoner has children or if the prisoner is the primary carer of any children). If this is not known, it is almost impossible to design



any family or resettlement support either whilst the prisoner is in custody or upon release.

- Special visits, child-parent or family days should not be regarded as privileges as any time spent maintaining and rebuilding family relationships will lead to greater success in the post-release settlement process.
- There is training for staff on their attitudes and how to speak to and deal with children and their parents.
- Inconsistencies between prisons about what is and is not permitted in visiting different prisons should either be ironed out or made very clear to visitors and so if a prisoner is transferred then visitors are clear about the different rules about visiting (a cause of many family problems).
- The organisations that administer the visitors centres must be assisted to participate in resettlement policy and other key meetings inside the prison. This includes investment by the prison to free the time of visitors centre managers to allow them to participate, i.e. contribute to staffing costs.

A copy of the full report can be seen on the following web link:

<http://www.barefootresearch.org.uk/private/final%20report%20-%20families%20and%20prison.pdf>

Please send any comments or reactions that you have on this research to:

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