Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Literature Review: Understanding Family Support Needs of People in Prison Custody

CRIME AND JUSTICE

social research

Literature Review: Understanding Family Support Needs of People in Prison Custody

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents findings from a literature and evidence review exploring the support needs of families of people in custody (see chapter three for methodology). It synthesises main themes extracted from a range of sources - including reflection opportunities with a small number of people in custody, families, prison staff and key stakeholders - to better understand the multifaceted issues surrounding families affected by imprisonment, including:

- understanding the impacts of custody on families;
- the support needs of people in custody and their families;
- barriers to building and maintaining family relationships;
- support approaches and models of family support;
- gaps in our understanding; and,
- key considerations for policy and practice.

Findings are also considered alongside the ten national principles of the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF) for holistic family support, helping to transform services so that families can access preventative, holistic support, which is wrapped around their needs, and provided when they need it, and for as long as they need it (see chapters nine, ten and twelve).

The review integrates all this evidence to develop a draft logic model (with key stakeholders), designed to guide future initiatives and policies to support families affected by imprisonment in Scotland with evidence-based, responsive interventions (see chapter ten for the draft logic model).

The policy context surrounding family support within Scotland's custody system is defined by a commitment to a person-centred, trauma-informed approach, ensuring supportive family environments and social relationships are maintained throughout the custody experience. The strategies (detailed in chapter two) emphasise enhancing family contact, engagement, safety and wellbeing, particularly focussing on the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment, and reflect a commitment to human rights, rehabilitation and community wellbeing.

Understanding the Impacts of Custody on Families

The literature underscores the importance of expanding the concept of family beyond traditional nuclear units to encompass extended family members, friends and former partners (see chapter four). The literature also highlights the multifaceted impacts of imprisonment on families, demonstrating the

extensive emotional, financial, social and psychological challenges they experience (see chapter five).

Children of prisoners are particularly vulnerable, experiencing disruptions in caregiving and educational arrangements and facing emotional and behavioural challenges. They are overrepresented in mental health services and face stigma, bullying and social isolation, which increase their risk of antisocial behaviour.

Further, the literature on how imprisonment affects various family members highlights both the potential positive outcomes and challenges experienced by those with loved ones in custody. However, a number of research studies focus on the negative consequences of imprisonment, often termed 'secondary prisonisation', particularly affecting (primarily female) domestic partners/spouses and children. Families face financial strain due to increased costs related to imprisonment and minimal social and financial support, exacerbating poverty and social isolation.

Gender differences also influence the impacts of custody, with women prisoners and their families experiencing distinct challenges related to maternal roles and societal stigma. Grandparents and other extended family members frequently step in as primary caregivers, facing their own set of financial, emotional and health-related stresses.

Support Needs of People in Custody and their Families

Supporting people in custody to maintain family relationships (see chapter six) involves addressing diverse needs across various stages of imprisonment and reintegration. Clear, consistent policies on visitation and communication are essential to fostering and preserving family bonds throughout imprisonment.

Embracing technology alongside traditional visit methods can enhance accessibility, while mitigating the isolation experienced by prisoners and their families. Peer support in custody and community-based initiatives post-release further complement formal support structures, offering invaluable emotional and practical assistance.

Families of individuals in custody face profound challenges (see chapter seven), including issues such as poverty, access to information, emotional and practical support and the complexities of in-prison visits.

During imprisonment, families sometimes endure sudden financial strains due to reduced household incomes and increased reliance on social services. Support, including housing assistance and income maximisation referral, is crucial to mitigate these impacts.

Maintaining family relationships in custody requires clarity and consistency in policies regarding contact with imprisoned family members. Access to clear and timely information about prison procedures is essential for families navigating the complexities of imprisonment. Addressing families' informational needs regarding remand, legal rights, support services and the justice process is also essential for effective coping and decision-making. Emotional support from peer groups and counselling services play a pivotal role in helping families cope with stress and uncertainty.

Visits to prisons, while beneficial for maintaining family bonds, present challenges, particularly for children who may find the experience intimidating or confusing. Child-focussed visitation arrangements would help to minimise distress and enhance the quality of family interactions.

In Scotland, Prison Visitor Centres (PVCs) work to achieve positive outcomes for the families of people in custody by providing essential support services, including access to information and emotional support. They create welcoming environments that mitigate the stigma associated with having a family member in prison, and provide various programmes and activities across different prisons aimed at enhancing family connections, and supporting children's wellbeing during visits.

Post-release, families face the pressure of supporting their loved one's successful reintegration into society. This responsibility, coupled with managing their own emotional and financial wellbeing, emphasises the need for comprehensive support systems. Assistance with housing, employment and navigating legal restrictions post-release is crucial to stabilising family dynamics, and facilitating successful reintegration.

Barriers to Building and Maintaining Family Relationships

Family relationships are pivotal for the emotional and psychological wellbeing of imprisoned individuals and their families. However, maintaining these bonds during imprisonment and upon release presents significant challenges. The review, in chapter eight, shows that various logistical, emotional and systemic obstacles impede the building and sustaining of family relationships.

Visiting hours and geographical distance from prisons pose substantial challenges for families. Restrictive visiting schedules and long distances, (especially for rural families), coupled with limited transport options, result in prohibitive costs and time commitments. Prison environments are often unwelcoming and unsuitable for family visits. Issues such as lack of privacy, stringent rules and tense atmospheres can discourage regular visitation. Negative interactions with prison staff, including perceived stigmatisation and demeaning treatment, can act as barriers to family visits, whilst positive staff interactions can significantly improve the visiting experience.

The stigma associated with imprisonment imposes significant emotional burdens on imprisoned individuals and families, leading to feelings of anger, shame and embarrassment: emotional responses can be particularly complex for children of imprisoned parents.

Approaches and Models of Family Support

The review, in chapter nine, explores various family support models in Scotland, particularly aimed at strengthening relationships between imprisoned parents and their children. Several initiatives, such as the Beside Me project, Game with Mum and Dad, and Healthy Dads, Healthy Kids, demonstrate significant benefits in improving family connections, parenting confidence, and overall wellbeing. These initiatives showcase innovative approaches to fostering meaningful interactions within prison settings.

Beyond Scotland, family support initiatives in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and across Europe and the United States (U.S.) highlight the importance of structured activities, extended visitation opportunities, and holistic, family-centred approaches. Scandinavian models, in particular, emphasise rehabilitation through open prison settings and child-friendly visitation policies. Programmes in Poland, the Netherlands, and the U.S. further reinforce the value of quality interactions, privacy, and play in maintaining parent-child bonds. However, the transferability of international models may not be appropriate, given differing country and penal policy contexts.

Gaps in Understanding Family Support Identified in the Literature

The literature reviewed reveals several critical gaps that hinder effective support system development (see chapter eleven). There is a notable lack of comprehensive research globally on the specific needs of children of prisoners, on minority and protected characteristic groups within the prison system, and on issues surrounding mental health. Extended family members, including siblings and grandparents, play crucial roles in supporting prisoners/families. However, their contributions appear overlooked in policy discussions and research.

Another gap is the absence of research on parents of adult prisoners, and the experiences of siblings of those in custody. The experiences of prisoners with other family members concurrently in custody, and the support needs of 'single' prisoners, and the ageing prison population appear not adequately studied.

Differentiating between support needs during remand versus post-sentence remains under-explored. Likewise, limited literature reviewed examines the support needs during the transition from prison back into the community.

Reliance on self-reporting of personal circumstances from imprisoned parents contributes to data limitations, suggesting a need for more reliable methods to collect comprehensive data, especially on affected children (recognising the ethical and data protection sensitivities and legislation). There is also a lack of comprehensive data on the long-term impacts of imprisonment on families, and the effectiveness of existing support models to inform policy and practice.

Key Considerations for Policy and Practice

Acknowledging the current challenges in Scotland (i.e. the prison population pressures), the review indicates key considerations in chapter twelve for policy and practice in the longer-term, to better support individuals in custody and their families, including:

- **Expanding child-friendly visiting spaces** to encourage family engagement.
- **Enhancing use of digital technology** for people in custody and their families to maintain contact, flexibly.
- **Enhancing training for prison staff** to foster supportive interactions.
- **Involving families/people with lived experience** when designing and developing support programmes (formal and informal) that are person-centred, tailored and/or specialised.
- **Ensuring accessible information is available for families** about what to expect when a loved one is in custody, such as available support and help to navigate the system. Including enhanced communication between prison establishments and families.
- **Enhancing financial assistance** for families struggling with travel and communication costs.
- **Increasing public awareness** to reduce stigma and improve societal support.

1 - Introduction

Background

The Scottish Government wished to commission research to undertake a comprehensive and robust collation, review and synthesis of available literature evidence on family support needs of people in prison custody.

The aim of the literature review was to inform the development of holistic models of family support for people in prison custody, to overcome barriers to building and maintaining family relationships.

The Scottish Government commissioned The Diffley Partnership and KSO Research to undertake the literature review on its behalf. The review was undertaken from April to October 2024, with a period of report drafting and finalisation thereafter before publication.

The literature review commission was funded through the Scottish Government's Whole Family Wellbeing Fund.

Literature Review Topics

The review of literature for this study adopted a narrative approach, synthesising main themes extracted from various sources and summarising their findings. This methodological choice ensured a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted issues surrounding families affected by imprisonment. The literature review topics guiding this review were structured to illuminate the dynamics and support needs of these families, as follows:

- Understanding the families of people in custody: Uncovering the characteristics, experiences and challenges faced by families with members in custody.
- Impacts of imprisonment on families: Exploring the psychological, social and economic effects experienced by families when a family member is in custody.
- Support needs of individuals in custody: Identifying the interventions and support mechanisms necessary to sustain familial relationships during periods of imprisonment, and after release.
- Support needs of families: Investigating the specific assistance required by families while their member is in custody, and upon their return to the community.
- Barriers to maintaining family relationships: Identifying the obstacles that hinder the establishment and maintenance of familial ties during and after a family member's imprisonment.

- Approaches and models of family support: Exploring approaches from Scotland and internationally to inform policy and practice.
- Exploring whether the literature aligns with the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF) Ten National Principles for Holistic Family Support, providing a benchmark for effective support frameworks.
- Gaps in understanding: Identifying gaps in the existing literature, highlighting and suggesting areas for further research and development of support services in Scotland.

The review integrates findings from academic literature, alongside evidence from the public sector, third sector organisations and agencies that support families and individuals in custody. Primary research was also conducted with a small number of prisoners, visitors and staff at His Majesty's Prison (HMP) and Young Offenders Institution (YOI) Polmont and HMP Edinburgh, as well as a roundtable with key stakeholders with an interest in supporting families and individuals affected by imprisonment.

This combined evidence critically informed the development of a draft logic model, which serves as an initial strategic framework to develop and guide improvements, and future initiatives and policies aimed at supporting families affected by imprisonment in Scotland. By leveraging insights from diverse sources, this approach ensured that interventions are evidence-based and responsive to the complex needs identified in this comprehensive review.

Report Structure

Chapter two sets out the policy context of the literature review. Chapter three focuses on the methodology.

To respond to the review topics set out above, the subsequent chapters (4-11) synthesise the main findings, uncover emerging sub-themes, and identify gaps in the current evidence base.

Chapter twelve highlights key areas the authors suggest for consideration, to improve support to individuals in custody and their families.

2 - Policy Context

Introduction

The policy landscape surrounding family care and support within Scotland's custody system is multifaceted. This chapter identifies key strategies and initiatives implemented to enhance familial relationships and support networks for individuals in custody, as context ahead of the review of evidence.

Family care and support in custody within Scotland are intricately structured through several robust strategies: the Scottish Prison Service's (SPS) Family and Parenting Strategy 2024-2029, the SPS Strategy for Women in Custody 2021-2025, The Vision for Young People in Custody 2021, and through targeted grant funding to Prison Visitors' Centres (PVCs).

These strategies aim to create a cohesive and supportive environment for the families of those in custody. Central to these strategies are efforts to recognise and mitigate the impact of imprisonment on families, aiming for positive rehabilitation outcomes and successful community reintegration.

From the Scottish Prison Service's strategies to targeted initiatives like Prison Visitors' Centres and technological advancements in family contact, this chapter sets out how these strategies and initiatives address the diverse needs of families affected by imprisonment.

The chapter ends with a discussion of key related policies to this literature review: His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland (HMIPS) Standards, the Scottish Government's Tackling Poverty Delivery Plan and the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, and highlights examples of family support and services provided in Scotland.

Scottish Prison Service Family and Parenting Strategy

Following SPS Family Strategy 2017, the new Family and Parenting Strategy (2024-2029) published by SPS in June 2024 sets out the following principles for family support:

1. Families are treated with dignity and respect.
2. Families are included and engaged.
3. Children's rights and best interests are at the centre of policy and practice.
4. Families are diverse and unique.
5. Partnership working is essential to achieving positive outcomes (Scottish Prison Service, 2024b).

This renewed strategy contains several key strands:

- Communication and engagement: Actively consulting families, children and young people in the implementation, review and improvement of family support strategies.
- Culture of reflection and improvement: By utilising self-evaluation based on a clear shared understanding of what the strategy should look like in practice, to plan for implementation and guide continuous improvement, and embedding review and research.
- Implementation and sharing best practice: Implementation of the strategy across the prison estate, and supporting establishments to develop consistency.
- Workforce: Implementing training for the staff group who come into contact with families, providing knowledge and information to help support their role in upholding children's rights, and understanding the impact faced by families which works towards positive wellbeing outcomes.
- Partnership working: In delivering positive outcomes, SPS will continue to form meaningful partnerships that support the health and wellbeing of those in the care of SPS, identifying barriers and being proactive in promoting and signposting universal services for families, children and young people (Scottish Prison Service, 2024b).

Strategy for Women in Custody (2021-2025)

The Strategy for Women in Custody is built on principles recognising the unique experiences of women, including trauma and adversity. It advocates for a gender-specific, trauma-informed approach to the care and support of women in custody, ensuring that their specific needs are met, and their experiences are understood. This strategy aims to provide a supportive environment that addresses the unique challenges faced by women in custody, promoting their overall wellbeing and facilitating their rehabilitation (Scottish Prison Service, 2021a).

Community Custody Units and HMP&YOI Stirling

The innovative Community Custody Units (CCUs) and HMP&YOI Stirling are grounded in the Strategy for Women in Custody. These facilities are designed to provide a more supportive and rehabilitative environment for women in custody. Two CCUs became operational in 2022, with the opening of the Bella Centre in Dundee and the Lilias Centre in Glasgow.

The Scottish Prison Service (SPS)[1] states that: “The Community Custody Units have been designed to provide safe and secure accommodation, which is trauma-informed and gender-specific. The CCUs will support the needs of women who would benefit from closer community contact and access to local services. Women will be supported to live independently in accommodation based on a ‘shared house’ principle to develop a range of independent living skills, which are reflective of real life.”

An evaluation of the CCU model was commissioned in May 2023, and will report outcomes in Summer 2025. The aim is to evaluate the early impact and emerging outcomes of SPS’s new innovative model of Community Custody Units (CCUs), and the operation of the Strategy for Women in Custody in the CCUs. The CCU evaluation also aims to support and inform ongoing improvement of gender-specific and trauma-informed care and support for women in custody and on release, and support policy decisions in the future, specifically on the implications of the CCU model for other population groups in custody.

Further, the evaluation will include relevant family support insights to be shared with service providers, identifying best practices and areas for improvement, ensuring that the support provided to women and their families is effective and impactful.

The evaluation will also inform a review of the Strategy for Women in Custody.

Commitment to Better Outcomes

The Strategy for Women in Custody commits to ensuring women’s time in custody leads to better outcomes for themselves, their families and communities. It aims to establish a comprehensive structure and process to ensure the wellbeing of women, uphold the rights of children affected by maternal imprisonment, and adhere to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This commitment ensures that women receive the support they need to rehabilitate and reintegrate successfully, while their families, particularly their children, are also supported.

Vision for Young People in Custody (2021)

SPS’s Vision for Young People in Custody is a long-term plan to support young individuals, emphasising preparation for a positive future. This vision is grounded in engaging, motivating and supporting young people in custody, reflecting SPS values of belief, respect, integrity, openness, courage and humility. It recognises the potential of young offenders to contribute positively

[1] Bella Centre | Scottish Prison Service
Lilias Centre | Scottish Prison Service

to society, and aims to provide the support and opportunities they need to realise this potential (Scottish Prison Service, 2021b).

Recognising Potential and Responsibility

The Vision posits that young offenders have the potential to positively contribute to society, and that SPS and its partners bear the responsibility to facilitate this transformation. The Vision aims to mitigate the adverse effects of custody on young people, focussing on education, relationships and mental health. It seeks to provide a supportive environment where young people can engage in learning and find mentorship, helping them to build a better future.

Alignment with International and National Standards

The Vision aligns with international conventions, such as the UNCRC[2] and Scottish Government priorities and strategies for children and young people, including Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)[3], The Promise[4] and the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014[5]. It supports the Scottish Government's Vision for Justice[6] and a whole-system approach to youth justice, ensuring that young people receive the support they need throughout their time in custody and beyond.

Prison Visitors' Centres (PVCs)

The Scottish Government has supported the development of PVCs since 2016/17. There are currently 11 PVCs[7] and 3 'Support Services'[8] across the custodial estate. These are independent non-statutory services provided by a range of third sector not-for-profit organisations, which are independent of the prisons they work alongside[9]. PVCs work to achieve positive outcomes for the families of prisoners – serving a dual function:

[2] UN Convention on Rights of a Child (UNCRC) - UNICEF UK
[3] Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) - gov.scot
[4] The Promise
[5] Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014
[6] The Vision for Justice in Scotland - gov.scot
[7] The 11 PVCs and (providers) are at HMP: Addiewell (Cyrenians); Barlinnie (The Croft); Edinburgh (Barnardos); Glenochil and Stirling (Stirling Interfaith); Grampian (Action for Children); Kilmarnock (Recovery Enterprise Scotland); Low Moss (Early Years Scotland); Perth and Polmont (Crossreach); and Shotts (Getting Better Together).
[8] Support Services provide a more limited service in Prisons where a full PVC cannot be accommodated. The three support services and (providers) are at HMP: Dumfries (Summerhill); Greenock (Early Years Scotland); and Inverness (Apex Scotland).
[9] Information and Advice on Visiting Scottish Prisons

- First, for those visiting prisons – particularly with children – the PVC offers a ‘soft landing’ to improve the experience; reduce trauma, stress and anxiety; and facilitate meaningful family contact. This is outside of the secure line of the prison, and is separate but complementary to the formal visiting arrangements which are handled by SPS.

- Second, PVCs take advantage of the opportunity afforded by visits to provide a range of direct support, including advice and referral to wider agencies and services to families – many of whom come from seldom-heard groups and represent, or are directly impacted by, the disadvantages identified in the Robertson Trust’s Hard Edges report.[10]

There is not a single PVC service model adopted nationwide, rather each organisation determines the exact nature of their own provision to the families visiting the prison they work alongside. The National Performance Framework for Prison Visitors’ Centres in Scotland[11] guides these functions, ensuring that PVCs provide valuable support to families, and contribute to the overall wellbeing of those in custody.

Families Outside provides the national coordinating role for Prison Visitors’ Centres in Scotland. Families Outside (2017) identifies that these centres offer a welcoming environment, access to information and emotional support. Programmes facilitating family visits, parenting programmes within prisons, and communication aids like video calls are essential components of these centres. Lockwood et al. (2022) suggest that these facilities are key to creating a more welcoming and supportive environment for some of Scotland’s most vulnerable families.

An example in England is that of Partners of Prisoners (POPS) who operate visitor centres in 11 prisons in the North West of England. An evaluation by Yarwood et al. (2017) showed that these services help reduce feelings of being stigmatised as ‘guilty by association’. Further, McCarthy and Adams (2021) found that despite no statutory support for families of prisoners in England and Wales, mothers tended to seek support from prison visitor centres rather than from family and friends.

Children’s Visits

Families Outside (2024b) highlights various initiatives across different prisons in Scotland aimed at enhancing family connections and supporting children's wellbeing during visits, as follows:

[10] Robertson Trust- Hard Edges Scotland Report
[11] Families Outside- National Performance Framework for Prison Visitor's Centres in Scotland

- **Grampian**: The Family Centre and Help Hub offers weekly art and craft activities during children's visits, tailored to each family. They organise events for significant dates like Mother's Day and Christmas to foster family bonding. The SPS supports with events such as giving out presents at Christmas.
- **Barlinnie**: Efforts include making rooms more child-friendly with activity packs and loaned tablets, regular updates on activities via an information board and newsletter, and participation in children's visits to strengthen family relationships. They have also introduced a sensory room to enhance the visiting experience. These efforts are coordinated by the PVC in partnership with Family Contact Officers. During the pandemic, tablets provided were funded by the Scottish Government.
- **Edinburgh**: Play, Learn & Connect Sessions feature morning activities with healthy breakfasts and themed evening events. These are facilitated by Early Years Scotland and Barnardo's support these sessions, providing homemade pancakes and waffles, themed evenings like pizza and ice cream nights, and photo opportunities to capture special memories. Additionally, personalised birthday cakes are donated by Edinburgh Cake for Kids.
- **Addiewell**: The 'Creative Adventures' programme during children's bonding visits includes various toys, games and sensory equipment to foster relaxed interaction. Events like feeding lambs at Easter and a summer funday with games and activities help families create positive shared experiences. This is run by the PVC and supported by the prison.
- **Perth**: Informal play and arts and crafts sessions, a picnic-themed visit with afternoon tea, and personalised birthday gifts help families interact and bond. A feedback tree in the visit room allows families to shape their visits. These are run by the PVC.
- **Low Moss**: Initiatives include movie nights, virtual visit boxes and programmes like the Fathers' Programme and Baby Massage, which promote interaction and family bonding during visits. This programme is run by Early Years Scotland who also host the PVC at HMP Low Moss.
- **Polmont**: The Visitors' Centre hosts events such as Easter parties and summer activities, with new toys and resources funded by the Scottish Government. The Storybook Families Project run by the PVC, with support from parenting officers, facilitates quality contact by enabling parents to record stories for their children.
- **Stirling**: Information on children's mental health and wellbeing is provided, along with the Jelly Baby Tree for recognising emotions. Books and resources about children's mental health are available and a new mascot is planned to support visitors with autism and learning disabilities. This is run by the PVC.
- **Glenochil**: PVC staff attend all children's visits, offering educational and interactive activities. The PVC provides resources about children's

mental health and supports families with back-to-school supplies and sensory activities.

- **Shotts**: The Family Time Project facilitates children's bonding visits with tailored activities based on family interests. Events like Easter parties and oral health initiatives promote family interaction and wellbeing. The Visitor Centre maintains a playroom and sensory area for children to enjoy before visits. This is run by the PVC with support of the Family Contact Officer.

These initiatives collectively aim to create a supportive environment that strengthens family relationships and promotes the wellbeing of children with imprisoned parents, addressing the emotional and practical challenges they face. Evaluations of these initiatives were not found during this review.

Technological Advances in Family Contact

The rollout of mobile phones across the prison estate and virtual visit options now offer alternative ways to maintain contact with loved ones in custody in Scotland, supplementing traditional face-to-face visits. These technological advancements provide additional means for maintaining family connections, which are crucial for the emotional and psychological wellbeing of those in custody. At the time of writing, the Scottish Prison Service is rolling out in-cell telephony across the estate.

Key Related Policies

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland (HMIPS) Standards[12]

HMIPS Standard 6: Purposeful Activity ensures prisoners engage in constructive activities and maintain positive relationships with family and friends. Quality Indicators 6.9 to 6.12 measure the effectiveness of family contact facilitation, visitor support, alternative arrangements for family interaction and the management of restrictions on family contact. These standards ensure that prisons provide a supportive environment that encourages positive relationships and constructive use of time.

All HMIPS prison Inspection Reports can be found on their website[13].

Tackling Child Poverty

The Scottish Government's "Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022 to 2026" sets out Scotland's national mission to tackle

[12] Standards of Inspection and Monitoring | HMIPS

[13] Publications | HMIPS

child poverty. This includes key actions to “maximising the support available for families to live dignified lives and meet their basic needs.” This mission recognises that there is a strong interaction between poverty and deprivation and engagement with the justice system, and that the system can play a stronger role in tackling child poverty.

The Delivery Plan further recognises parental imprisonment as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) that significantly impacts long-term health and wellbeing and negatively affects both attainment in school and later life experiences. The long-term aim is for imprisonment to only be used for those who pose a risk of serious harm, and for community based interventions to be the default for those who do not.

A key action to support families impacted by imprisonment is through the £800,000 (yearly) funding provided to Prison Visitor Centres (see earlier at page 13), to meet the specific needs of families including: alleviating poverty, mitigating loss of income and providing practical and emotional help, including referrals for income maximisation and housing support (Scottish Government, 2022a).

The Delivery Plan also sets out the £500 million of funding for the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund over this Parliamentary term.

Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF)[14]

The WFWF is helping to transform services so that families can access preventative, holistic support, which is wrapped around their needs, and provided when they need it, and for as long as they need it (Scottish Government, 2022a).The fund is guided by 10 National Principles promoting support which are:

1. Non-stigmatising: Support should be promoted and provided free from stigma and judgement. Services should be as normalised as accessing universal services.
2. Whole family: Support should be rooted in GIRFEC[15] and wrapped around the whole family. This requires relevant join-up with adult services and whole system, place-based, and preventative approaches, addressing inequalities.
3. Needs-based: Support should be tailored to fit around each individual family, not be driven by rigid services or structures. It should cover the spectrum of support from universal services, more tailored support for wellbeing and intensive support (to prevent or in response to statutory interventions). Creative approaches to support should be encouraged.

[14] Whole Family Wellbeing Funding - Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) - gov.scot
[15] Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) - gov.scot

4. Assets and community-based (community-empowered): Support should be empowering, building on existing strengths within the family and wider community. Families should be able to ‘reach in’ not be ‘referred to’. Support must be explicitly connected to locations that work for local families and the community, such as schools, health centres, village halls and sports centres.
5. Timely and sustainable: Flexible, responsive and proportionate support should be available to families as soon as they need it, and for as long as it is required, adapting to changing needs.
6. Promoted (and accessible): Families should have easy, well understood routes of access to support. They should feel empowered to do so and have choice about the support they access to ensure it meets their needs.
7. Take account of families’ voices: At a strategic and individual level, children and families should be meaningfully involved in the design, delivery, evaluation and continuous improvement of services. Support should be based on trusted relationships between families and professionals working together, with mutual respect to ensure targeted and developmental support.
8. Collaborative and seamless: Support should be multi-agency and joined up across services, so families don’t experience multiple ‘referrals’ or inconsistent support.
9. Skilled and supported workforce: Support should be informed by an understanding of attachment, trauma, inequality and poverty. Staff should be supported to take on additional responsibilities and trusted to be innovative in responding to the needs of families.
10. Underpinned by children's rights: Children’s rights should be the funnel through which every decision and support service is viewed.

These principles emphasise a family-centric approach, ensuring that support is accessible, inclusive and responsive to the dynamic needs of families, fostering an environment where children thrive in supportive familial settings rather than in care systems. This will create a Scotland where more children will only know care, compassion and love, and not a ‘care system’. The Promise[16] clearly highlights the importance of un-stigmatised access to effective universal and intensive family support, with early intervention and prevention at its core.

As the literature review study was funded by the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, the study explored whether any of the WFWF principles for holistic family support were evident in the literature reviewed, particularly in the context of approaches and models of family support (chapter nine). The principles are also reflected on in chapters ten (reflection opportunities) and twelve (points for consideration).

[16] The Promise

Examples of Support and Services Provided in Scotland

Much of the literature reviewed describes support in a generic sense, rather than being focussed on either the period of custody or post-release in the context of family support. Below are some examples of support provided in Scotland by Families Outside, Barnardos and SACRO, with whom the research team engaged as part of the research.

An example of support offered in Scotland is from Families Outside. According to their 2022-23 impact report, Families Outside offers the following support:

- Support and Information Service, which supported 1,351 people in 2022-23 with 3,041 contacts. The helpline support was primarily taken up by women (81%), but helped a variety of family members including partners, parents and other family members. Emotional support was another reason identified for people reaching out to Families Outside and other common issues raised were visiting, concern for someone in prison and information about prison.
- Regional Family Support Coordinators based across Scotland, who provide direct face-to-face support to families. Coordinators connect with key agencies and referral sources such as prison staff, schools and social work.
- Support and Participation model running since September 2022, which aims to work with families to encourage peer support groups, and ensure participation of families in important conversations across the criminal justice landscape.
- Delivering training and awareness raising for key professionals to widen the support available for families, across three modules:
    - Understanding the issues for families affected by imprisonment
    - Supporting children and young people who have a family member in prison
    - Prison and prison visiting.
- Practice learning whereby social work student placements can learn in the areas of family support, helpline, peer support groups and research.
- Influencing change for prisoners and their families by contributing to consultations, requests for input and research projects on matters related to family support in Scotland (Families Outside, 2023a).

Barnardo's Scotland also offers a range of services throughout the country to children, young people and families who are currently in contact with youth justice services, or with previous experience of the justice system and imprisonment. These services include prison-based support such as those within HMP Polmont Young Offenders Institution and the HMP Edinburgh prison visitors' centre; community-based youth justice services including those based in Stirling and Clackmannanshire; women's justice services like Shine

Women's mentoring and Ayrshire Court screening; and family support for children affected by parental imprisonment (Barnardo's, 2022).

SACRO[17] offers a free volunteer driving service which helps to facilitate visits between families living in the Edinburgh and Lothian areas and their loved ones in prison. This aims to mitigate against the barriers associated with cost and practicalities of travel, and to help maintain contact between families (SACRO, 2024).

In addition to this service SACRO also offers:

- A Bail Supervision Service which works to prevent unnecessary custodial remands and re-offending on bail by providing supervision, monitoring and support (including electronic tagging in some areas).
- Throughcare which offers support to people on release from prison. This is often done by meeting people at the prison gate and arranging support with appointments, accommodation, health, employment and other issues that may need attention to help with the transition back to successful independent living.
- The Arrest Referral Service which engages with people at the point of arrest whose offending is linked to drug or alcohol misuse. By seeing the person as soon as they are arrested, SACRO can offer individuals a pathway into harm reduction, treatment and rehabilitation services. Engagement is voluntary and not a formal part of the criminal justice process. SACRO workers offer the service daily to individuals within the Sheriff Court cells in addition to contacting those suggested by police assessment, post-release.
- SACRO Custody Navigators work to reduce the number of people entering and re-entering custody in Fife. They help individuals who have offended to re-integrate successfully and safely back into the community. The service aims to enhance capacity for change, reduce harm caused by substance use or violence, improve overall wellbeing and stop the revolving door of imprisonment (SACRO, 2024).

Conclusion

Scotland's approach to family care and support within its custody system demonstrates a commitment to human rights, rehabilitation and community wellbeing. The strategies and initiatives outlined in this chapter, from the SPS Family and Parenting Strategy to the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, highlight the importance of maintaining familial connections and supporting the holistic needs of individuals in custody and their families. Although it should be noted that limited evaluation evidence of these initiatives was found as part of this review. After the methodology discussion in chapter three, the remainder of

[17] Sacro | Paths to Positive Change

this report explores the existing literature reviewed, to understand these needs and inform future developments in addressing the support needs of families affected by imprisonment.

3 - Methodology

Introduction: Approach to the Review

The literature and evidence review sought to identify, review and synthesise research on the family support needs of people in prison custody. The research topics guiding this review are detailed previously in the Introduction (page 8).

The aim of the review was to interrogate available existing literature to inform the development of holistic models of family support for people in prison custody, to overcome barriers to building and maintaining family relationships.

This study employed a comprehensive methodology, integrating rigour with subject-matter expertise to explore and assess family support mechanisms for individuals in custody. The approach encompassed a detailed literature review, the development of a draft logic model for Holistic Whole Family Support, reflection opportunities and stakeholder engagement, analysis and an ongoing quality assessment of the reviewed literature and limitations. These steps were designed to provide a thorough and evidence-based understanding of the needs and support structures for families impacted by imprisonment.

Literature Review

The evidence and literature review was carried out between April and October 2024, and built on initial scoping work conducted by Scottish Government Justice Analytical Services (JAS). The scoping work brought together a range of sources, including academic research, civil society reports, government documents and international studies, to present a collation of some of the existing knowledge base. This literature was not reviewed by JAS, but was shared with the authors for review and decisions on inclusion in the study within their methodological approach.

The approach used in this literature review built on and developed further the scoping exercise of JAS in more depth. The first stage of the literature review involved developing a search strategy and parameters for the review. As with the JAS scoping exercise, this approach combined evidence from academic research, government/policy research, and strategic/practice literature from organisations working with or for adults in prison custody (including ‘grey literature’), to ensure robustness.

Key topics covered in the review include the impacts of custody on families, the support needs of both imprisoned individuals and their families, existing

support models, and the barriers to maintaining family relationships during and after custody.

Search Strategy

The tables below shows the resources used to implement the search, as well as the key words used for the search strategy.

The first table below shows the resources searched:

Resources Searched
Academia.edu
Research Gate
Sage Journals
ProQuest
Scottish Government publications
United Kingdom Government publications
Policy Commons
SPS publications
His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons Scotland (HMIPS) publications
His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) publications
Families Outside publications
The Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR) publications
Community Justice Scotland publications
The Howard League
Google Advanced Search
Google Scholar

This table shows the keywords and search strategy deployed:

Keywords/Search Strategy
Prisoners' families
Prisoners' children
Prison visits
Visiting prison
Family in prison
(prison) AND (family)
(prison) AND (family) AND (support)
(family support needs) AND (prison)
Family member in prison
Family member in custody
Family strategy prisons
Impacts of custody on families
Contact with prisoners
Older prisoners
Aging/Ageing prisoners
Aging/Ageing prison population
Disabled prisoners
Disability and prison
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) and prison
Sexuality and prison
Ethnicity and prison

Race and prison
Race-ethnicity and prison
Minority prisoners
Intersectionality and prisoners
Prisoners' siblings
Siblings of prisoners

Some of the returned literature was excluded after reviewing titles and abstracts. Although they appeared in the search results, they were not relevant to the key topics of the review and were not included in the analysis.

Where an organisation's publications were searched, searches took the form of using the above search terms or scanning the available literature within the organisation's publication section, depending on the source. A list of the literature reviewed is presented in the bibliography (Annex A).

Discounted Search Terms

Certain other search terms were discounted, as the references generated were too wide in nature and 'off topic' or out of scope for the research. These were:

- Prisoners' Needs
- Supporting Prisoners
- Support in Custody
- Prison Regimes
- Custody models
- Prisoner Support Needs.

An initial search using these terms generated masses of material related to physical and mental health needs (including a significant body of research related to drug and alcohol addictions and wider criminogenic needs), but with most material containing no substantive content linked specifically to family contact or family support needs.

Search Parameters

Although a robust approach has been taken to mitigate any shortcomings within the conduct of this review, it is not intended to be an exhaustive or traditionally 'systematic review' of evidence and, as such, there are a number

of limitations (noted later in the chapter). Due to the nature of this type of review, it is possible some literature may have been missed.

In filtering and refining material, the following parameters were used:

- Publication date - all research from 2010 onwards was included, although initial searches were generated dating back to 2000 and key papers of interest were extracted and retained.
- Publication formats - searches included journals, books, reports, conferences, posters, theses, presentations and 'other' publications.
- Language - only material that was published in the English language was retained.
- Origin - searches were not restricted by geography and included both United Kingdom (UK) and international literature (including the United States of America (USA), Canada, mainland Europe and Australia).

Developing the Draft Logic Model

Based on the insights from the literature review, a draft logic model was developed to conceptualise a framework for Holistic Whole Family Support for individuals in custody and their families.

This model outlines the essential components, processes and outcomes associated with effective family support.

A logic model is a structured framework used to apply research findings to real-world practice, ensuring that programmes are well-planned, evidence-based, and measurable. In the context of supporting families of those in custody in Scotland, developing a logic model helps translate key insights from a literature review into clear actions that improve support services and policies.

A logic model provides a clear pathway for achieving meaningful change by mapping out:

- inputs (resources such as research, funding, and collaboration),
- activities (actions like training, policy development, and new support initiatives), and
- outputs (measurable results such as increased service access).

It also identifies outcomes at different stages, from short-term awareness and access improvements, to long-term benefits such as lower reoffending rates and stronger family resilience.

Developing a logic model based on the literature review ensures that findings inform practical decision-making, helping to address gaps in support, anticipate challenges, and measure impact. It also considers external factors (such as policy and economic influences) and assumptions (such as the role of family support in rehabilitation), ensuring a realistic and strategic approach to improving family engagement in the justice system. The draft logic model development is further discussed at chapter 10.

Reflection Opportunities and Stakeholder Engagement

Reflection Opportunities

As part of this research we discussed the key themes explored in this research with prisoners, staff and visitors at HMP YOI Polmont and HMP Edinburgh in September and October 2024. This involved a researcher attending these establishments and carrying out in-person interviews on-site.

The discussion guides used in these interviews were agreed and signed off by the Scottish Government. Where consent was given, interviews were recorded and notes of key insights from interviews were transcribed from the recordings.

Across the two fieldwork visits, a combination of individual and group interviews were conducted. The researcher also attended at the visitor centres at each establishment.

The reflection opportunities heard the views of:

- 10 individuals in custody
- 8 members of staff
- 6 people visiting someone in custody.

Stakeholder Engagement

Alongside the reflection opportunities, stakeholder engagement formed a pivotal part of the methodology, involving collaboration with key organisations that provide support to families of imprisoned individuals in Scotland. This engagement was crucial for identifying additional literature, and gaining a deeper understanding of the specific needs and experiences of these families. The organisations consulted included Families Outside, Barnardo’s Scotland, SACRO and the Prison Reform Trust.

In addition to this, a roundtable was carried out with these stakeholders on the draft executive summary and logic model in order to gather their views on the emerging findings, and offer an opportunity to test the outputs with experts in supporting families of those in custody.

Insights contributed by key stakeholders have been included in the review of literature (see chapter 10).

Analysis

The evidence review involved consulting and summarising the relevant literature outlined above, and thoroughly documenting the key information contained within this.

To begin, documents were sifted for inclusion by reviewing abstracts and titles. This initial screening process ensured that only those sources directly aligned with the core research topics — particularly those related to the support needs of families of individuals in custody and related outcomes — were selected for further review. This process also allowed the inclusion of a variety of sources, including peer-reviewed articles, grey literature, reports, and other non-peer-reviewed materials, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the existing evidence base.
Once relevant documents were identified, full texts for all included sources were downloaded and reviewed by the research team. Each document was assessed in detail, considering its relevance, methodological quality, and the applicability of its findings to the research focus. This review was essential for ensuring that the sources included in the analysis were robust and provided reliable data to address the research topics.

For each document that met the inclusion criteria, the research team extracted the main themes, summarising key findings and conclusions. This process not only facilitated easy tracking of common themes across multiple sources, but also enabled the team to reference specific documents during analysis and synthesis stages.

The research team applied a thematic analysis approach to the included documents. From these descriptive themes, analytical themes were generated, which addressed the key research topics and highlighted significant patterns across the literature. This approach allowed us to systematically explore the evidence and draw meaningful insights about the needs and support mechanisms for families of individuals in custody.
As part of the iterative nature of the project, stakeholder engagement feedback was incorporated into the analysis. Insights from stakeholders, including practitioners and individuals with lived experience, were used to revisit the emerging themes and validate the findings.

Finally, the findings from the thematic analysis were synthesised under key headings, with a clear narrative structure that connected the themes and responded to the research topics.

Quality Assessment of Literature and Limitations

Date of literature reviewed

A limitation of this review is that much of the evidence reviewed was dated, particularly in certain thematic areas. Although the review parameters allowed for a broad scope of sources, some of the themes discussed in the review are based on research that may no longer fully reflect the current context or recent developments in the field.

The absence of more recent research on some topics may mean that the review may not capture the most up-to-date evidence, or emerging best practices.

Evaluating Programmes, Initiatives and Interventions

When evaluating programmes and interventions noted as positive examples of ‘what works’ in supporting families affected by imprisonment, it is important to exercise caution. The literature often highlights that these evaluations are based on small and self-selecting samples. Prisoners and families who choose to participate in these studies may already have a predisposition to change or improve their experience, which may not reflect the wider prison population. This selection bias can limit the generalisability of the findings and may present an overly optimistic view of the effectiveness of these programmes.

Data Collection Issues and Challenges in Scotland

A significant gap identified in the literature is the lack of data on the numbers of children affected by parental imprisonment. Estimates of the number of children affected by parental imprisonment are often based on self-reports from imprisoned parents. These reports are less reliable than more comprehensive measures and may be skewed, as noted by Quilty et al. (2004). Domżalska et al. (2022) also emphasise the need for future research to engage larger samples of prisoners' children. Much existing work relies on small samples, limiting the ability to use advanced statistical techniques for data analysis.

This data deficit hampers the ability to fully understand the phenomenon and to develop targeted support. Burton (2012) and others have noted this issue across various studies.

For instance, Bocknek et al. (2009) highlight the lack of reliable data on children of prisoners in the United States (US), pointing out several barriers to gathering robust data. These barriers include difficulties in comprehensively identifying affected children, and ethical challenges in interviewing them to

qualitatively gather their views. Consequently, existing quantitative data are often limited to basic functional information such as:

- The estimated size of the population
- Racial and age demographics
- Basic information regarding family and household compositions.

However, there is also a scarcity of qualitative information about children's personal histories, needs, wider characteristics, lifestyles, education and support networks. This lack of detailed data impedes a full understanding of the challenges faced by these children. Ethical concerns further complicate the collection of qualitative data. Saunders et al. (2015) report that ethical issues are a major barrier to gathering detailed qualitative data about children of prisoners.

In July 2024, the Ministry of Justice published a new set of statistics seeking to estimate the number of children a year with a parent in prison in England and Wales. These statistics estimate that between 1 October 2021 and 1 October 2022 there were 192,912 children with a parent in prison (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Similar statistics are not collected in Scotland.

Challenges in Scotland

In Scotland, there is a notable lack of statistical information regarding the profile of families affected by prison custody. Data captured upon arrival in custody could potentially be improved to provide a clearer picture. For example, gathering information on extended family structures/partnerships, and validating self-reports from prisoners by cross-checking with partner agencies at an early juncture.

Key stakeholders who participated in the review, stated that this lack of detailed information presents a substantial challenge for service providers who need to understand who they are serving to tailor their interventions effectively.

However, it should be noted that SPS are required to justify why they are collecting and holding data on individuals who come into custody, and individuals are not required to provide information to SPS about their family if they do not wish to do so.

Therefore, any additional personal data gathered, held, processed or to be shared requires a clear purpose and lawful basis under the Data Protection Act 2018. It is acknowledged that gathering information on third parties without their explicit consent, and the basis partner agencies would have to verify third party information with SPS, would not align to SPS’s law enforcement processing purposes under the Data Protection Act.

Methods and approaches to improve data/information would require further and deeper exploration with individuals in custody, their families, SPS and partner agencies and key stakeholders, to understand the complexities of doing so, and to ensure compliance with data protection legislation.

Furthermore, there is a need for more research focussing on the voices of those with lived experience, involving both family members and individuals in custody. Ensuring that interventions are appropriate and effective requires incorporating the perspectives of those directly affected by imprisonment.

Another challenge is that for many strategies and initiatives included in the review, it was difficult to find published evaluations of their impact, meaning it is hard to know and evidence how successful some interventions and programmes are.

The extremely high and complex prison population in Scotland should be acknowledged, as it continues to place significant pressures on SPS and staff and the time available to them, for example to develop and implement work and initiatives to support people in custody and their families to maintain and build relationships. The average daily prison population in Scotland was 7,860 in 2023-24. This is an increase of almost 6% from 2022-23 (7,428), and the highest level since 2019-20 (8,198). This increase is primarily driven by an increase in the sentenced population (+8%)[18].

Gaps in understanding of family support identified in the literature reviewed, and points for consideration that emerged from the literature review are discussed in more detail in chapters 11 and 12 respectively.

The report now moves on to discuss the literature review findings in chapters 4-10.

[18] Scottish Prison Population Statistics 2023-24 - gov.scot

4 - Understanding the families of people in custody

Introduction

This chapter explores the concept of family in the context of imprisonment, drawing on a range of literature to highlight the diverse ways in which family structures are defined and experienced. It examines how these definitions shape policies and support systems, particularly in relation to prison visitations and maintaining family connections.

A key focus is on the need for an inclusive understanding of family, extending beyond traditional nuclear relationships to encompass extended family, friends, and supportive peers. The chapter also reviews existing research on the impact of imprisonment on different family members, including partners, children, and siblings, as well as the specific challenges faced by families of male and female prisoners. Additionally, it highlights gaps in the literature, such as the experiences of prisoners without family support and those with protected characteristics.

Defining Families

The concept of family is multifaceted and shaped by diverse socio-cultural perspectives. Definitions of family vary across the literature reviewed, influencing policies that govern prison visitations and support systems. Acknowledging this variability is crucial as it allows for inclusive practices that cater not only to traditional nuclear families, but also to broader networks of relationships.

Evidence from studies reviewed emphasise the importance of expanding the definition of family to encompass not just spouses and children, but also extended family members, friends and former partners. This inclusive approach emphasises holistic support for imprisoned individuals and their broader familial and social circles (Deacon, 2020; Prison Reform Trust, 2024).

The concept of ’family’ in the context of imprisonment necessitates inclusive considerations in prison policies. Evidence from the Family Learning Group at HMP Kilmarnock suggests that enriching the visiting experience involves not only partners and children, but also extending to other significant relationships like uncles and nephews (Deacon, 2020).

Research by the Prison Reform Trust ('A Long Stretch') advocates for expanding the definition of supportive relationships beyond biological family to encompass friends, ex-partners and supportive peers within prison (Prison Reform Trust, 2024). Enhancing peer support programmes is crucial for

assisting individuals in custody in navigating imprisonment and preparing for reintegration into society. Additionally, addressing financial barriers such as the high costs of communication and visitation, especially for those imprisoned far from home or with family abroad, is essential (Prison Reform Trust, 2024).

Families of Male Prisoners

Scottish Prison Population Statistics 2023-24 show that the average daily population of men in custody increased by around 5.5% between 2022-23 and 2023-24, from 7,144 to 7,540.[19]

Most of the literature reviewed on families focusses on the female partners of male prisoners and their children (e.g. McDonnell et al., 2023), rather than focussing on male partners of females in custody (although see Rees et al., 2020, below) or indeed the wider family (Tubex and Gately, 2024). This presumably is due to the fact that the prison population is made up predominantly of males.

Rarely do studies focus on fathers of prisoners: for example, several studies address the needs of mothers specifically, especially those of adolescent or young adult males (Dillavou et al., 2022; Lockwood, 2021; McCarthy and Adams, 2021).

Families of Female Prisoners

Scottish Prison Population Statistics 2023-24 show that[20] the average daily population of women in prison increased by almost 13% in 2023-24 (from 282 in 2022-23 to 318). This is a greater rate of increase than the overall average daily prison population, although women still comprised just 4% of the prison population in 2023-24.

Bocknek at al. (2009) have noted that, when fathers are sent to prison, children are most likely to remain in the care of the mother whereas when a mother is sent to prison, children are most likely to be placed in the care of their mother's family, often the child's maternal grandparents. This is also noted by Burton (2012) based on international samples.

Rees et al. (2020) held focus groups with children in Wales (aged 7-18) whose mothers were imprisoned in England (there being no prisons for women in Wales). The authors concluded, (citing the Prison Reform Trust) that 'Where mothers are imprisoned, 19 out of every 20 children are forced to leave their family home, yet local authorities do not collect routine data about the children of prisoners'.

[19] Scottish Prison Population Statistics 2023-24 - gov.scot

[20] Scottish Prison Population Statistics 2023-24 - gov.scot

Children of Prisoners and Siblings

Children's experiences of parental imprisonment are under-explored, not only in Scotland but internationally (Lockwood et al., 2022). Historically, it has been estimated that 20,000-27,000 children experience the imprisonment of a parent in Scotland. However, this figure should be treated with extreme caution as it was derived from Prison Survey Data in 2010-11, and there has been no further estimates since, or reliable measure developed to date.

Few studies have incorporated views of children themselves, though there are exceptions (Flynn, 2014; Jones et al., 2013; McGinley and Jones, 2018; Raikes and Lockwood, 2011; 2019). Equally, much of the more recent literature focusses on the children of both mothers and fathers in prison, but in the past the focus has been primarily on the children of imprisoned fathers, not least perhaps because in Europe, at least 95 per cent of the prison population is male (Venema et al., 2024). However, despite some 40-50 per cent of prisoners having a 'minor' child or children (Venema, 2024), these children are noted in much of the literature as being subject to 'systemic invisibility' (Knudsen, 2018) or neglect by researchers and workers alike.

Buggy (2016) notes that children are "silent, unseen and apparently unconsidered when a sentence of imprisonment is being imposed on their parent," and highlights that there is often little given in evidence about the children of prisoners during the legal process, except to confirm the number of children that a potential prisoner has responsibilities for. Specifically, Buggy notes that children's "social, economic, cultural or emotional needs are rarely offered to a court for consideration when an offender is being sentenced to imprisonment." Likewise, many countries, including Scotland, do not collect information on prisoners' offspring and do not know the extent of adverse home circumstances (Dzierzyńska-Breś, 2017).

Children may also be more prone to behavioural and emotional disruption if a parent is imprisoned (albeit based on parental perceptions or quantitative/psychometric data) (e.g. Domżalska et al., 2022), not least if they are lied to by parents protecting them from the truth about the other parent's imprisonment, or children themselves lying to their peers because of the fear of reprisals, stigma, etc. (Knudsen, 2018).

Evidence from a Families Outside project entitled 'This is my story' highlights the complex emotional landscape children navigate when a family member is imprisoned. Their experiences range from feeling relief due to reduced household conflict to deep sadness and social isolation. Practical changes at home, such as improved stability and safety, contrast with new responsibilities and financial strain. Children value support, understanding and opportunities to share their experiences and they seek practical improvements in their

interaction with the imprisoned family member and their broader social environment (Families Outside, 2024c).

Extended Families

Loucks (2004) comments that extended families (including brothers/sisters and aunts/uncles) can have “a measurable impact on people’s lives.” Despite this, the literature reviewed covers less in relation to prisoners’ siblings or extended families/wider family networks, the focus almost always being on romantic/domestic partners and their immediate children. Where wider families are mentioned, this is usually in the context of grandparents acting as carers for children when their parents are sent to prison (e.g. Burton, 2012).

Again, maternal imprisonment is cited in the literature reviewed as causing comparatively more disruption to children’s caregiving arrangements, with children of female prisoners being more likely to be cared for by members of the extended family or to be taken into care (e.g. Williams et al., 2012).

There is a large body of historical research (see Dillavoue et al., 2022 for discussion) that shows that women (in particular) often form prison ‘pseudo-families’ (with fellow prisoners) as substitutes for pre-prison family relationships (specifically, pseudo-mother child relationships). This study of pseudo-families amongst females imprisoned in a women’s prison in the USA found that the make-believe relationships formed between prisoners can extend rather than replace outside family relationships, and provide additional relational support. The work showed that such families can also assist prisoners with coping with the trauma often associated with periods of imprisonment and removal from the family (Dillavou et al., 2022).

Da Cunha (2008) reveals significant negative impacts including feelings of loss for those with an imprisoned sibling. Pre-custodial conflicts and relationships continued influencing experiences. Significant negative impacts discussed include feelings of loss, sadness and anger felt by children/young people experiencing a sibling's imprisonment. The process of visiting is often described as difficult, traumatic and emotionally fraught. Damaged relationships that remain distant even post-release indicate long-term, lasting effects on individuals and the family unit (Deacon, 2022a).

Gaps in the Literature Reviewed

Carers/Care Recipients

There is nothing obvious in the literature reviewed that relates specifically to carers or care recipients (beyond parental caring responsibilities). Initiatives such as The Promise emphasise the importance of all meaningful

relationships of care experienced children being maintained and nurtured (Duncan, 2020).

Prisoners without Families

There is noticeably little in the literature reviewed that focusses on ‘single’ prisoners or those without families, and nothing of relevance to the current research.

Prisoners with Protected Characteristics

There is also little in the research reviewed that specifically focusses on prisoners with protected characteristics.

Rogers (2019) carried out research with families of prisoners with learning difficulties/disabilities and on the autism spectrum. The study reports amplified lack of support for mothers of prisoners with learning disabilities and autism, including lack of access to professional support, a systemic lack of understanding of their child’s complex needs across the criminal justice system, and a lack of appropriate response to such needs.

Summary

In conclusion, the exploration of families within the context of prisons reveals intricate dynamics influenced by diverse familial compositions as in society. The literature reviewed highlights the evolving definitions of family for people in custody, advocating for inclusive definitions that recognise the significant roles played by various relationships beyond biological ties.

Moving forward, efforts to enhance support systems for families of both male and female prisoners, address financial barriers to maintaining connections and amplify voices often marginalised, such as children and extended family members, are viewed as crucial by advocacy groups in the field. This was emphasised in both the evidence review and the stakeholder engagement carried out as part of this research.

5 - Understanding the impacts of custody on families

Introduction

The impact of imprisonment on families spans multiple dimensions, including emotional, social, psychological, financial, relational, physical and developmental effects (Weaver and Nolan, 2015). This chapter explores the extensive literature on how imprisonment affects various family members, highlighting both the challenges and potential positive outcomes experienced by those with loved ones in custody.

The literature reviewed and referenced in this chapter mainly focuses on the negative consequences of imprisonment, often referred to as 'secondary prisonisation,' particularly affecting domestic partners/spouses and children (Aiello and McCorkel, 2018; Comfort, 2003; Witkowska-Paleń, 2020). Families are often perceived as collateral damage within the criminal justice system, with their victimisation overlooked in court proceedings (Buggy, 2016).

Impact on Relationships and Mental Health

The Prison Reform Trust's report, 'A Long Stretch', demonstrates the profound impact of imprisonment on personal relationships within the prison environment. Disruption of external relationships significantly affects inmates' wellbeing, motivation and prospects for parole and reintegration (Prison Reform Trust, 2024). Inmates often experience isolation and despair as personal relationships deteriorate during their imprisonment, with fears of re-entering society without a support network (Prison Reform Trust, 2024).

Where desired, maintaining a meaningful connection between imprisoned individuals and their families is essential for the wellbeing of all parties involved. However, as highlighted in the Paying the Price Report (Families Outside, 2023), the costs associated with maintaining these connections are substantial and place additional financial pressure on (often) already struggling families.

Financial and Social Strain

Research from Families Outside (2024a) highlights that imprisonment exacerbates poverty among children and families, particularly affecting single women with low incomes who bear the brunt of additional financial burdens.

This group experiences adverse effects on their physical and mental health due to the strain of meeting increased costs related to imprisonment. Families

affected by imprisonment often face severe food and fuel poverty, social isolation and limited participation in community activities, perpetuating cycles of financial and social deprivation (Clancy and Maguire, 2017a).

Additionally, the stigma associated with being a visitor, particularly for women, adds emotional strain and isolation (Hannem, 2012).

The Howard League identifies particular challenges for those with family members on remand in terms of financial strain, emotional stress and the impact on family dynamics (Howard League, 2021).

Barriers such as travel costs, geographical constraints and limited local transportation options further impede families' ability to maintain meaningful contact with imprisoned loved ones (Families Outside, 2023). The current support structure, designed to alleviate these challenges, specifically the Help with Prison Visits Scheme, is seen to be insufficient as it only reaches a fraction of eligible families and is inadequately publicised, leaving many in need without support (Families Outside, 2023). The scheme offers a contribution to the costs associated with travel and is means tested. Therefore, not all families meet the financial criteria to apply. Work is ongoing to promote the scheme, and a recent mileage increase has been implemented.

Impacts based on Relationship Status

Burton (2012) identifies that children, in particular, are more likely to suffer detrimental effects of imprisonment in cases where their mother is the one being held, (attributed mainly to the observation that women are more likely to have been the main custodian of their children's care before being sent to prison).

Similarly, research suggests that women are more likely to experience negative impacts of separation from their children compared to male prisoners, including emotional problems linked to changes to their motherhood role (Donato et al., 2023). Women are also reported to be more likely to have concerns regarding the stigmatisation of their children as a result of their own imprisonment, and may discourage their children from visiting as a result (Lockwood et al., 2022).

The double impact for mothers of being a) imprisoned and b) perceived as not 'good' mothers, can result in their stigmatisation and isolation in prison. For example, prison routines can exacerbate a feeling of being a 'bad mother' - being unable to move from their seat in visiting rooms and unable to hug their child, and prison staff are not always seen as being supportive emotionally (Morgan and Leeson, 2023). McCarthy and Adams (2017b) found that mothers whose children were imprisoned had the added responsibility to

maintain that parenting role despite the lack of support from some prison staff, and the reluctance of their sons (in particular) to have their mother intervene in such a masculine environment as a prison, as one mother in England commented to the authors:

> "…if I have a concern and I phone in, the officer will say to him, 'oh, your mother's been on the phone again' and he [son] gets it in the neck because I've phoned him, as if I'm being annoying and making their lives more difficult. So as a result he [son] tells me less about what's worrying him" (ibid: 100).

Noting that increasing rates of female imprisonment are linked to increased pressure on grandparents who take up the role of primary caregivers (Burton, 2012), specific impacts for this group have been noted to include:

- grandparents providing care for their grandchildren with limited or no financial support (Burton, 2012)
- grandparents being forced to leave the workforce to take up this role causing financial, physical and emotional stress (Hairston and Addams, 2001)
- increased psychological problems, including depressive symptoms among grandparents (Moore and Convery, 2011).

Although less frequently covered in the literature reviewed, the impacts on romantic or close partner relationships due to imprisonment are also touched upon in some studies (La Vigne et al., 2005; Travis et al., 2005) with decreases in opportunities for intimacy resulting in relationship strains. Impacts on intimate relationships also include high risk of marital dissolution/divorce (Massoglia et al., 2011) most often due to feelings of secondary stigmatisation by the non-imprisoned spouse (which itself varies based on the nature and strength of the pre-custody relationship).

Children

Children are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of parental imprisonment, including emotional distress, anxiety, confusion and post-traumatic stress disorder (Aiello and McCorkel, 2018; Bocknek et al., 2009; Clancy and Maguire, 2017a). They are overrepresented among those accessing mental health services and exhibit higher emotional needs compared to their peers (Lockwood et al., 2022). Moreover, children of prisoners face educational challenges, stigma, bullying, victimisation and social isolation, which heighten their risk of engaging in antisocial behaviour (Lockwood et al., 2022).

For imprisoned children and young people in the United States, their parents have to rely on prison staff regarding their child's wellbeing and health (Muñiz

et al., 2024). But for the young person in prison, visits can reduce isolation, help maintain a sense of identity, reduce misconduct and improve mental health and educational attainment (Muñiz et al., 2024).

It is important to note that in Scotland recent legislation, namely the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, commits to ending the placement of under-18s in Young Offenders institutions and to accommodate them in residential or secure accommodation instead.

For visiting children, research has shown that imprisonment - and indeed the prison environment and staff (Lockwood et al., 2022) - can have negative impacts on children's emotional state including being the cause of anxiety, confusion and concern for children (Aiello and McCorkel, 2018), as well as post-traumatic stress (Bocknek et al., 2009).

Gender differences in impacts may also exist between children, it has been shown, with boys being more likely to exhibit externalising problems compared to girls (including greater risk of developing criminal or antisocial behaviour), while girls may have a greater propensity to internalising behaviours compared to boys (Kinner et al., 2007; Murray and Farrington, 2005; Murray et al., 2014). Overall, girls with a family member in prison may also bear greater psychological costs than boys, it has been found (Domżalska et al., 2022).

Impacts on children are also shown to vary depending on a number of mediating factors (Brookes, 2018), including:

- the child's age at separation and any previous parent-child separations
- the sentence nature and length
- pre-existing bonds/relationship between the parent and child (pre custody)
- availability of support.

Brookes (2018) again encourages researchers and practitioners not to consider children of prisoners as a homogenous group, but to always consider the multitude of different factors that will play a part in their experience, as follows:

> "Some have contact, some do not. Some have mothers in prison, some fathers. Some want to understand their parent's crime and why they did what they did; some would prefer not to know. Some children have parents serving long, or indeterminate sentences; some have parents who serve short sentences and might go in and out of custody in a seemingly never ending revolving door. Some of these children feel angry, some relieved and some are desperately sad. Many blame themselves and most of these children feel a

> whole array of emotions often at the same time.” (Brookes, 2018: 271)

Clancy and Maguire (2017a) identify that families of prisoners experience financial hardship, emotional stress, stigma and isolation from social networks, as well as increased risk of separation/divorce from imprisoned partners. Children face issues like behavioural problems, mental health issues and educational difficulties, including attendance issues.

Research has shown that children of prisoners can experience non-emotional impacts too, including changes in their schedules and routines (Aiello and McCorkel, 2018).

Loureiro (2010), in a report prepared for Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCCYP), lists deterioration in behaviour, in physical and mental health and in social and financial circumstances, in housing and care arrangements, schooling, victimisation, substance misuse and risk of future offending, among the negative impacts of parental imprisonment.

For children, negative impacts linked to educational attainment and engagement also feature in the literature (Morgan and Gill, 2013).

Stigmatisation

Murray et al. (2014) warns against targeting services specifically to children of prisoners based on perceptions that they may be 'at risk' of future criminal behaviour, as this can have unintended negative consequences by making children feel labelled.

Granja (2016) notes that in highly impoverished neighbourhoods in Portugal, imprisonment is so prevalent that relatives do not feel the need to conceal it, suggesting stigma may be less of an issue in some community contexts.

Meek (2008) suggests that siblings feel reluctant to inform teachers at school about their sibling's incarceration due to fears of stigmatisation, pity or guilt by association. Instead, the young people in this research drew crucial informal support from close friends and relatives to help them process the feelings of sadness, anger and loss. Family and social networks played an important role in providing emotional support to cope with the negative impacts of having a sibling in prison. This highlights the need for non-judgmental assistance.

One quote from the ‘This is my Story’ research carried out by Families Outside demonstrates the negative feelings that stigma can create in children (Families Outside, 2024c):

> “Life is hard. It can cause a lot of arguments and people can say things about my dad. Having a family member in prison makes me very angry and sad.”

Positive Impacts and Unique Considerations

Although less of a focus across the research in the literature reviewed, there is some evidence that prison can have positive impacts on relationships for the period of the sentence, with prisoners having more contact with families while in prison (e.g. Mowen and Visher, 2016), with increases in both familial emotional support and familial interactions. This same research showed a corresponding decrease in the same once the prisoner had been released.

Imprisonment of a family member has also been shown to have positive impacts where this reduces or removes potential for victimisation of family members, for example, protection from domestic or sexual violence or abuse by a family perpetrator (Buggy, 2016; Condry and Smith, 2019).

Bucerius et al. (2020) also note that, for some of the most vulnerable women, prison can provide a temporary refuge from the challenges they face on the outside, including financial hardship and marginalisation. Feedback from a sample of female prisoners showed reductions in exposure to/consumption of drugs while in prison, offering a period of stability in their living conditions, access to better nutrition and medical interventions, and a ‘break’ from their otherwise chaotic lives.

Although only identified in one study, there is also evidence that removal of contact with others, including solitary confinement, can benefit some prisoners (Aranda-Hughes et al., 2020a). The study suggests that it may provide an opportunity not to have to “deal with others,” as well as a chance to focus on the prisoner’s own physical and mental health needs uninterrupted, and to ease the discomfort of prison life for those who have trouble adjusting to shared prison spaces.

Impacts from other Factors

Weaver and Nolan (2015) note that the impacts of imprisonment for families can be greatly influenced by a number of variables and characteristics including, for example, the nature of the offence, relational dynamics, care and living arrangements and social supports available to families, all of which will be unique to each individual family. They state the need for “the identification and completion of individualised and holistic assessments, of the children and families of prisoners that include factors at the level of the individual, wider family and community.” (p.2) Any future mapping or modelling of support needs must, therefore, adopt a person-centred and family-centred approach

with plans that are tailored to individual circumstances and needs, rather than any ‘generic’ support model being appropriate.

Gaps in the Literature

Simultaneous Family Imprisonment

Deacon (2021) highlights a unique and understudied demographic: young people who are simultaneously imprisoned with a parent or sibling. This group is often overlooked in research, policy and practice concerning familial imprisonment.

Recognising these familial relationships within the prison context is necessary. Simultaneous imprisonment of family members can have both positive and negative impacts. For young people in prison, having a sibling or parent also in prison can provide comfort, but can also add stress and responsibility. Understanding this duality is crucial for addressing the unique stressors and emotional wellbeing of young people, highlighting the need for tailored support (Deacon, 2021).

Life Sentences and the Impact on Families

A rare qualitative study of the families’ perceptions of life sentence imprisonment of young men in Australia concluded that: “Supporting family members serving a life sentence is an incredibly challenging and emotionally taxing experience” (Tubex and Gately, 2024: 218). The authors pointed out that many of the parents would be in their 70s before their children were released and had little knowledge of the criminal justice process, felt discrimination from police, community and courts alike, and experienced inevitable uncertainty of an indefinite sentence length.

Summary

This chapter has highlighted the multi-faceted impacts of imprisonment on families, demonstrating the extensive emotional, financial, social and psychological challenges they face.

The literature consistently shows that children, spouses and extended relatives bear significant burdens as a result of imprisonment of a family member. Financial strain, social isolation, disrupted relationships and mental health challenges are common experiences for these families, compounded by systemic barriers such as inadequate support services and social stigma.

6 - Support needs of people in custody to maintain family relationships

Introduction

Maintaining family connections during imprisonment is widely recognised as crucial for reducing recidivism and supporting successful reintegration into society. The Social Exclusion Unit (2002) argues that prisoners who maintain regular family contact are significantly less likely to reoffend, emphasising the pivotal role of familial relationships in promoting desistance from crime (see also Casey et al., 2020). The ‘What Works to Reduce Reoffending Report’ published in 2015 also notes that Offenders’ relationships with supervisors, family and friends are considered to be important to the process of desistance (Sapouna et al., 2015). Lord Farmer’s Review (Farmer, 2017) echoes this sentiment, describing families as the 'golden thread' essential for fostering positive change within the prison system.

This chapter explores the key themes surrounding the support needs of people in custody to maintain family relationships. It examines the role of in-person visits, remote communication, and peer support in fostering connection, as well as the barriers that prisoners and their families face. Additionally, it considers the importance of post-release support in sustaining relationships and promoting successful reintegration

Support While in Custody

The Prison Reform Trust's report, 'A Long Stretch' (2024), provides firsthand accounts of the challenges prisoners face in maintaining meaningful relationships while imprisoned, which was echoed in the interviews conducted for this research (see chapter 10) and research conducted by Diffley Partnership for the Scottish Prison Service corporate plan (Diffley Partnership, 2023). It highlights how the erosion or absence of external relationships impacts inmates' wellbeing, motivation and prospects for rehabilitation. This report emphasises the vital role of pro-social relationships in instilling hope and humanity within punitive environments, advocating for policies that uphold realistic expectations of hope throughout and after imprisonment (Prison Reform Trust, 2024).

Prisoners often lament the loss of personal connections during imprisonment, fearing a return to a world where their support networks have dissolved, exacerbating feelings of isolation and hopelessness. The stark reality is that many prisoners confront the prospect of enduring their sentences without any external contact, underscoring widespread social isolation among imprisoned individuals (Prison Reform Trust, 2024).

Efforts to leverage technology for communication in prisons vary widely, reflecting disparities in access across institutions. The slow adoption of modern communication methods within the prison system underscores persistent challenges in maintaining familial ties, especially for those serving lengthy sentences (Prison Reform Trust, 2024). It should be noted, at the time of writing, that in-cell telephony is currently being rolled out across the Scottish prison estate.

In-Person Visits

A wealth of literature reviewed reports benefits of visits for prisoners, both from families, children and professionals. Those taking part in visits are typically reported across this literature to be females and their children as well as parents of the imprisoned individual. Children's visits, in particular, contribute positively to parental involvement in their upbringing, promoting a sense of parental efficacy and self-esteem; factors that support rehabilitation (Clarke et al., 2005; Loper et al., 2009).

Foster (2017) discusses how prisoners rely on emotional support from families through visits. Maintaining supportive family ties is linked to improved mental health for prisoners by decreasing risks of suicide and self-harm. It is also connected to successful resettlement and reintegration upon release. Families provide emotional reassurance and encouragement, as well as practical support through items permitted for the individual in custody. Foster notes that previous research has identified a positive correlation between parole success and maintenance of family ties while imprisoned (Foster, 2017).

Much of the literature reviewed highlights that visits are important for prisoners' wellbeing, mental health and prison regime, and these studies are referenced in the paragraphs that follow. One study (Condry and Minson, 2021) showed that visits help prisoners cope with imprisonment and stay focussed. Positive visits improved prisoners' moods and interactions, while negative visits increased stress levels. Prisoners viewed visits as the highlight of their regime and vital for coping with imprisonment. Positive visits through physical contact/kisses lifted moods, while negative visits increased stress and in one case led to an overdose. This evidenced the crucial support role visits play. Many prisoners involved with the research suggested that the visitors’ centre made the prison a friendlier environment which encouraged their families to visit them.

Families Outside (2017) emphasises the need for consistent and meaningful contact through visits, phone calls and written correspondence, citing emotional support from family as crucial for prisoners' mental health and motivation toward positive behavioural change.

It is worth noting that there is literature which shows the potentially negative impacts of prison visits too, both for prisoners and others. Research from America suggests that visits can be disruptive for prisoners, both practically in terms of their routines and regimes, but also emotionally, e.g. giving them insight into the outside world and the liberty they have lost, and/or causing frustration which can manifest in disruptive behaviours back in the cells/prison communal areas (Siennick et al., 2013).

Equally, visits can have positive and/or neutral effects. Siennick et al. (2013) for example, explored the effects of prison visits on inmate misconduct and found that misconduct decreased before visits and increased temporarily after visits, but then reverted to 'normal' levels of misconduct, suggesting little longer-term impact of visits on conduct. Casey et al. (2020) found that the more frequent prison visits, the greater likelihood of reduced recidivism, but countered that extraneous factors such as a goal to remain connected with loved ones may be a greater influence on future behaviour, than visits per se. Furthermore, de Claire and Dixon (2017) suggest that women's recidivism is less impacted by visits than men's, and that children's visits had a more positive impact if structured and delivered as part of an intervention.

Despite efforts to facilitate visits, studies internationally have shown that a substantial portion of prisoners, up to 50%, do not receive visits due to various barriers, including personal choice or logistical challenges (Burns et al., 2024; Lockwood et al., 2022; Ryan and Ryan, 2024). Burns et al. (2024) reviewed literature on reasons for male prisoners not having visits, the effects of not having visits and the value of volunteer visitor programmes. They found that some prisoners felt a threat to their masculinity from visits, some mothers refused to bring their children to visit and sometimes cost, time and logistics made visiting challenging. Sometimes, volunteer visitors offer a neutral third-party source of support, both emotional and practical.

These findings from the literature reviewed correspond with findings from primary research conducted by Diffley Partnership (2023), which involved interviews with prisoners in which they reflected on the rules surrounding visits, and the applications of these rules. Challenges included that families often felt the rules were applied inconsistently and differed from establishment to establishment causing confusion, particularly where prisoners had been moved. They also noted the shame that they could feel when their families felt upset or stigmatised by the process of being processed to be able to visit. Prisoners also often discussed the length of visits which had reduced to 45 minutes since the COVID-19 pandemic. Many felt that 45 minute visits were insufficient in length, particularly where families and visitors had travelled a distance.

Indeed, of the literature reviewed, while most historical research focusses on prisoners' families and friends in the context of visiting, more recent work has

started to explore the valuable role of volunteers and community-based professionals (CBPs) in providing both emotional and instrumental support for individuals in prison (Bares and Mowen, 2020; Kjellstrand et al., 2021). Individuals such as local authority representatives and charity volunteers have been shown to offer significant support especially in cases where prisoners have no family (Bares and Mowen, 2020).They also often offer a vital signposting source to practical support in the pre-release planning period (Kjellstrand et al., 2021). Based on observations of the prison system in the Netherlands, Pasma et al. (2022) highlight the importance of considering facilitation and accessibility in relation to visits from such external agencies, noting that access and facilitation can be highly variable between different establishments, creating inequitable opportunities for prisoners in benefiting from such support. American research has also shown a correlation between visits from community volunteers - specifically clergy and mentors - and a reduction in recidivism (Duwe and Johnson, 2016).

Remote Contact

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of mobile phones and video communication in prisons, challenging traditional security concerns. This area is not highlighted extensively in the literature reviewed and could be explored through future research in this area.

Participants in a study conducted by the Prison Reform Trust advocated for leveraging technology more effectively to facilitate and maintain these crucial family connections, citing disparities in access to communication technologies across different prisons. It highlights a general sentiment that the prison system lags behind in adopting modern communication methods, which could profoundly affect those serving long sentences (Prison Reform Trust, 2024).

These are similar to findings from research conducted by Diffley Partnership on behalf of the SPS as part of the latter's Corporate Plan preparations, where the introduction of remote forms of communication via mobile phone and 'virtual visits' were welcomed by prisoners. A common theme among prisoners interviewed was the importance of visits to them, in terms of morale and maintaining ties with their family. The process of organising visits was discussed, and many prisoners felt this could be improved via digital solutions (Diffley Partnership, 2023).

In Romania, Drāghici et al. (2023) asked inmates about online visiting, and the positives were seeing more than just one or two family members at the same time (including pets), and seeing the background home environment in the video. The negatives were limited time for online visits, the lack of physical touch and the often poor quality of the connection.

Findings from the cross-Europe COPING project (Robertson et al., 2012) also reports that while indirect contact via written communication (letters) is universally welcomed across jurisdictions, especially for families experiencing poverty or living in rural/remote areas, it is never considered by prisoners, their families or professionals to be of the same benefit to prisoners and their families as face-to-face contact.

Indeed, recent research shows there is a fear that technology may replace, rather than supplement, more traditional means of communication between prisoners and their families/friends (Lockwood, 2021). McKay and Macintosh (2024: 3) suggest that the success of digitisation (for the prison authorities at least) is being used to cement remote or virtual communication channels: "This points to a future of absolute confinement uninterrupted by "inconvenient" physical court attendance or human visitors." Digitisation may also discriminate against people who live in rural and more disadvantaged areas, as in Australia (Antojado and Ryan, 2024).

So-called 'smart prisons' (Hofinger and Pflegerl, 2024) can adversely affect the quality of visits and interactions. However, Hofinger and Pflegerl found that prisoners generally approved of digital communication devices, especially for keeping in touch with their children, not least if such devices were cheaper than landline telephone calls, more available to prisoners and less subject to monitoring by prison staff.

Antojado and Ryan (2024) found that in Australia at least, video or telephone conversations can be recorded for security reasons, creating privacy/confidentiality issues for prisoners and their families, as well as uncertainty as to how long such recordings will be stored. These authors recommend "a hybrid model that harmoniously blends the intimacy of in-person visits with the convenience, accessibility and extended reach of video ones" (ibid: 17).

Support within Prison

Walker et al. (2021) notes that some jurisdictions have legal provisions for residential programmes (i.e. full or part-time accommodation of babies and very young children with their mothers while in prison as a means of supporting bonding in the early years). Research from Australia (Walker et al., 2021) noted, however, that these provisions are often shaped by outdated ideologies that can limit their effectiveness in meeting the needs of mothers in prison, their children and prison staff. The main problems they identify include failing to separate out the rights and interests of the child and the mother, over-reliance on attachment theory principles (and historical evidence to support it), and concerns held by prison managers and support staff around responsibility and risk.

The literature reviewed also notes the challenges faced by prison staff in delivering support including, for example, lack of appropriate training in relation to such things as trauma, distress and self-harm (Short et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2017; Walsh and Freshwater, 2009). Powell et al. (2020) note in particular that staff can experience challenges when working with separated mothers, as this work can be emotionally difficult especially when operating under the constraints of the criminal justice system and prison rules.

For those on remand, the Howard League critiques the current remand system in Scotland for its inadequate support structures, and advocates for alternatives like supervised bail and community-based accommodations (Howard League, 2021).

Peer Support

Donato et al. (2023) reports that a strong support group from inside of prison is also essential for female prisoners, in particular - i.e. the loss of friends on the 'outside' is compensated for by making friends on the 'inside' with whom women can share their experiences and concerns.

Many prisons in the UK also offer peer support programmes such as the Samaritan Trained Listeners[21] across the Scottish Prison Service (SPS), wherein fellow prisoners act as trained listeners to provide confidential emotional support to their peers who are struggling to cope.

Recent Scottish research from Long et al. (2022), that gathered lived experience of children, young people, parents and other relevant adults, also showed a desire among parents for the development of parent-to-parent and young people-led support groups for families involved in the prison system. The research also called for more and better signposting for affected families to self-support groups.

Self-Reliance

Although less evident across the literature reviewed, self-support and self-reliance are also reported as coping strategies from a study of mothers in prison in the Philippines. This self-reliance involved staying positive, hopeful and accepting their situation. This was deemed to be helpful for prisoners who find themselves isolated from families and other support networks, especially women (Donato et al., 2023).

[21] Our work in prisons | How we can help | Samaritans

Support on Release

Of the research available, the main sources of support for prisoners on leaving prison appears to be support given by family and friends (e.g. Berg and Huebner, 2010; Picken, 2012).
Across the research reviewed (see references in paragraphs below), the main support needs of prisoners on release appear to be practical, including such things as:

- financial support and assistance in securing paid employment
- provision of housing/a place to sleep
- access to food and clothes
- assistance accessing physical/mental health support or addictions support.

Emotional support features less in the post-release research literature reviewed, but consistency and a sense of feeling 'cared for and connected' are noted to be important (Condry and Smith, 2019). The literature also shows links between positive and frequent visits when someone is in custody and the support provided and felt on release. For example, relationships are likely to be stronger on release with corresponding lower risk of re-offending (Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2017). Similarly, strong family relationships can be a predictor of positive outcomes such as securing accommodation, managing addictions and feelings of coping and support (Markson et al., 2015).

Families Outside (2017) states that upon release, individuals need support in re-establishing relationships and reintegrating into the family unit. This may involve family counselling, support groups and assistance with finding employment and housing. Continued emotional support from family is crucial for reducing recidivism and promoting successful reintegration. Mills (2005) also reports on the significant role played by families in potentially reducing the risk of suicide/self-harm once a prisoner is released.

Garland et al. (2001) point towards the role of families in directing ex-prisoners towards more formal support agencies, as well as their role in ensuring compliance with and taking guidance from probation services, etc.. Families can also play a role in helping ex-prisoners in their desistance by advising on the risks of criminal associations post release (Mills, 2005), and preventing reoffending and intergenerational crime (Farmer, 2017).

More general issues with post-release support have been identified, including comment from researchers in Australia (Carlton and Segrave, 2015) who note that post-release support policy and practice are often shaped and informed by the experiences and needs of men, and they argue that there is a need for "alternative approaches that respond to the structural injustices that define the post-release trajectories of women and men." (p.1)

Qasim and Webster (2020) find that British Muslim inmates, like most other inmates, struggle with resettlement. This includes, particularly, struggling to maintain healthy family relationships, trying to find suitable work and refraining from further offending after release from prison.

Daily life pressures and unresolved issues can cause relationships to falter post-release. This highlights the need for continuous and adaptable support to navigate the transition (Deacon, 2020).

Summary

Supporting people in custody to maintain family relationships involves addressing diverse needs across various stages of imprisonment and reintegration. Clear, consistent policies on visitation and communication are essential to fostering and preserving family bonds throughout imprisonment.

Maintaining family relationships in custody requires clarity and consistency in policies regarding contact with imprisoned family members. Ambiguity around the frequency and type of permitted contact complicates family bonds. Clear and consistent policy is needed to ensure support is readily accessible and adaptable (Deacon, 2021).

Embracing technology alongside traditional methods can enhance accessibility while mitigating the isolation experienced by prisoners and their families. Peer support and community-based initiatives further complement formal support structures, offering invaluable emotional and practical assistance.

By integrating these insights into policy and practice, stakeholders can enhance support systems that promote resilience, reduce recidivism and strengthen familial bonds throughout the criminal justice process. This is an area for further research.

7 - Support needs of families of people in custody

Introduction

The imprisonment of a family member profoundly impacts the lives of those left behind, creating a range of practical, emotional and financial challenges that can strain the family unit. This chapter explores the multifaceted support needs of families when a loved one is in custody, highlighting the critical importance of comprehensive support systems. Research consistently shows that families often experience sudden financial instability due to the loss of income associated with imprisonment. They also encounter a host of emotional burdens, from coping with stigma to navigating complex legal processes.

The chapter also explores the complexities of in-prison visits, the support needs when a family member is released and the challenges of this transition period, and the differences in support needs between remand and post-sentence detention. Before concluding, the chapter discusses the gaps in understanding around meeting the range of cross-cutting needs families with a person in custody experience.

Support Needs When a Family Member is in Custody

Visitor Survey Findings

The last SPS Visitor Survey in 2018 revealed that a third of visitors experienced challenges, primarily the distance to the prison, costs involved and time limits on visits (Scottish Prison Service, 2018).[22] Specifically, 53% of visitors who responded to the survey cited distance as a major problem, 44% mentioned the cost of travel and 41% were concerned about the limited visiting time. Visitors suggested organising visits online, though infrastructure limitations were noted.

In primary research conducted in 2022, the quality of visits was reported to vary across establishments, with some visitors feeling respected while others felt uncomfortable or stigmatised (Diffley Partnership, 2023).

[22] The 2018 Visitor Survey was carried out in the following way: As visitors arrived at the prison prior to their scheduled visit, they were asked by visits staff if they wished to participate in the survey. Those visitors who agreed to take part were given questionnaires to complete. Each establishment received a quota of questionnaires proportionate to its size and was requested to distribute to visitors over a one-week period in November/December 2018. A 74% (n=812) return rate of those issued was achieved (66% in 2016).

Alleviating Poverty and Providing Practical Support

The Scottish Government's “Best Start, Bright Futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022 to 2026” identifies several needs of families impacted by imprisonment. These include alleviating poverty, mitigating loss of income and providing practical and emotional help, including referrals for income maximisation and housing support (Scottish Government, 2022a). This suggests families often face a sudden reduction in household income when a family member is imprisoned, leading to increased reliance on social services and support networks (Scottish Government, 2022a).

Clancy and Maguire (2017a) argue that practical and financial support is needed to overcome the hardship of loss of income including help with travel and childcare for visits, and emotional support to deal with stress of imprisonment.

Condry and Minson (2021) argue that government has a responsibility to support families affected by imprisonment. They introduce the idea of ’symbiotic harms’ and suggest that, when creating laws and policies, the government should recognise these harms and provide the necessary support to these families as part of their duty. The paper discusses potential interventions like financial assistance, housing support, access to education, improved prison visitation, family therapy post-release, and other measures to mitigate harmful impacts on families throughout the custody period and beyond. Recognising ongoing prisoner-family relationships, residual obligations imply the need for responsive, tailored initiatives to address varied family circumstances. Negative interactions with the criminal justice system can create mistrust in children and families by eroding their trust and view of state representatives, and symbiotic harms may be reduced through mutually supportive relationships between prisoners and families.

Access to Information and Emotional Support

Families Outside (2017) emphasises that families need access to information, emotional support and practical assistance, such as understanding prison rules, visiting schedules and available support services. Emotional support can come from peer groups, counselling and services provided by Prison Visitors' Centres. For instance, knowing visiting hours, how to send money and what items can be brought into the prison can significantly reduce stress for families.

School Support

Schools can be a valuable source of support for children at all stages of a parent's custody and release (Robertson, 2016). Robertson identified good practices in schools to include raising awareness among teachers, and

sensitising both teachers and students to the experiences of children with a parent in custody to ensure they are supported.

Christmann et al. (2012) identify that communities, especially schools and other pre-existing social networks, play a pivotal role in supporting the resilience of children of prisoners. Christmann et al highlight that community resilience, especially shown by teachers, schools and peers, can provide a valuable source of support for children at all stages of their parent's involvement in the criminal justice process.

In-Prison Visits and Their Complexities

Visits between prisoners and their families, especially children, are often seen positively for prisoners, but the evidence on benefits for children is less clear (Knudsen, 2016). Because some children find prison visits frightening and confusing, Knudsen argues against presumptively encouraging visits between children and parents in prison, and recommends helping children decide the best way to maintain contact. Similarly, Saunders (2016) and Poehlman et al. (2010) suggest making visiting arrangements more child focussed.

Dixey and Woodall (2012) note that prisoners often discourage children from visiting to protect them from emotional distress. Marshall (2008) highlights additional support needs for children, including protection from media, financial support, addressing bullying and harassment and coping with the new family dynamics post-imprisonment. The presence of these stressors can lead to long-term emotional and psychological impacts on children.

Research by Condry and Minson (2021) also set out that barriers such as stress, fear and emotional toll of visiting on prisoners and their families led to some people stopping visiting altogether. Many prisoners felt uncomfortable at the prospect of their children seeing them in a daunting and unfamiliar environment, and some suggested that seeing their child for only a brief period and then being taken away from them could be psychologically damaging.

A Dutch study found visitors' experiences more negative than those of prisoners, with visiting protocols and conversation topics often causing stress (de Jong et al., 2022). Dixey and Woodall (2012) describe visits as “an emotional minefield fraught with practical difficulties.” This highlights the need for more supportive visiting environments and processes.

Research conducted by Diffley Partnership (2023) involved speaking to visitors at establishments across the SPS estate. The method of organising visits varied across establishments but, generally speaking, visitors and families reported a fairly straightforward experience when organising visits.

Some felt that there should be a way to organise visits online, but appreciated that the infrastructure was not currently in place to allow for this.

The experience of attending visits was variable, dependant on the establishment in question. Visitors often raised that their experience could be dependent on the staff members who were on duty, and that rules were applied inconsistently across establishments and sometimes between visits (Diffley Partnership, 2023).

Many visitors commented on the length of visits as they are currently 45 minutes. There was a strong feeling that this was not long enough, particularly where families had to travel long distances in order to attend visits (Diffley Partnership, 2023).

Based on this Scottish research, visitors who participated were, broadly speaking, treated with respect when visiting an establishment and encountered friendly and helpful staff. However, there were instances/establishments where visitors did not feel comfortable, or felt stigmatised in their treatment (Diffley Partnership, 2023). For example, some visitors described feeling uncomfortable during searches when attending visits.

Virtual Visits and Child-Friendly Environments

Virtual visits, which became popular during COVID-19, are generally seen as helpful, providing flexibility for visitors unable to travel (Diffley Partnership, 2023). These virtual alternatives allow families to maintain contact without the financial and logistical burdens of in-person visits.

The flexibility allows people to speak with their loved one when they may have time restrictions/unable to travel, and visitors are keen that they stay in place. They also provide a tangible benefit for prisoners with families who live abroad. However, there have been a few technical issues such as poor internet connection that have impacted both visitors and their loved ones (Diffley Partnership, 2023).

Traditional visit room setups can be intimidating for children, but initiatives like the Family Learning Group create more relaxed environments for interaction (Deacon, 2020). The Family Learning Group, established within HMP Kilmarnock, helps mitigate some of these impacts by providing a relaxed and supportive environment for family interactions, which is crucial for maintaining familial bonds and addressing the emotional needs of children. The staff's approach, wearing casual clothing and reducing the level of surveillance, helps normalise the experience, fostering a supportive environment.

Challenges Specific to Mothers in Prison

Children visiting mothers in prison often experience anxiety, stigma and safety concerns. For example, Ye (2023) describes how criminals' identities are passed down through generations, resulting in discrimination and harmful stereotypes placed on children, and Hannem (2012) provides anecdotes of visitors being treated poorly by prison staff leading to embarrassment, discomfort and distress. Despite these challenges, research shows visits can improve parent-child relationships and reduce adjustment problems for children (Lösel et al., 2012; Murray, 2005; Poehlmann, 2005). This suggests that while visits can be beneficial, they need to be managed carefully to support children's wellbeing.

Visiting as a Privilege vs. Right

One paper reviewed explored visiting as a right or a privilege in the United States (US) and Western countries (Berghuis et al., 2024). In many US states, visits are often seen as a privilege rather than a right, leading to stricter control and monitoring such as the ability to revoke visits.

Where visits are treated as a privilege Siennick et al. (2013) found that inmates' risk of infractions were consistently lower in the weeks prior to visits, but if visits are legally conferred, and consequently, inmates are certain of their visits, then they seem less likely to adjust their behaviour in anticipation of visits.

However, treating visits as a privilege can undermine prisoners' fundamental rights to family life and hinder the development of social ties critical for re-entry (Berghuis et al., 2024). Most Western countries view visits as a right, as evidenced by higher visit rates in the Netherlands (Berghuis et al., 2024). In Scotland, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child upholds children's rights to visit their parents.[23]

Support Needs When a Family Member is Released

When a family member is released from prison, the transition period can often be challenging for families. The process of reintegration often places demands on families, who may experience emotional, financial and relational pressures as they navigate this adjustment. The evidence reviewed highlights the dual burden families face in supporting their loved one's reintegration while managing their own wellbeing. This section explores the specific needs of families post-release, the pressures they encounter and the importance of

[23] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024

targeted support to foster successful reintegration and maintain family stability.

Pressure to Maintain Relationships and Responsibility

Historically, families have felt pressured to maintain relationships with imprisoned members to support their reintegration upon release. However, Codd (2007) argues that families should not be made to feel responsible for a prisoner's successful resettlement, highlighting the need for support for families themselves. Jardine (2015; 2018) notes the dual burden on families to support prisoners while often being unsupported. This dual burden can lead to significant emotional and financial strain on families.

Specific Needs Post-Release

Families need to adapt to restrictions placed on offenders, such as those on the sex offenders' register (Condry, 2007), shifts in gendered relationship dynamics (Comfort, 2018) and financial hardships (Comfort, 2016). Clancy and Maguire (2017a) highlight the lasting financial and emotional strain on families and the need for continued practical and financial help, housing assistance and support for reintegration challenges. For example, families may need assistance with finding affordable housing, securing employment and accessing mental health services.

Families Outside (2017) outlines support models including transitional programmes offering counselling, job training and housing assistance. Family reintegration programmes providing therapy and support groups can help ease the transition, and address issues arising during reintegration. Families Outside (2017) further point out that families need support in adjusting to the return of their family member. This includes assistance with relationship dynamics, financial stability and navigating changes in family roles. Support services should help families cope with the transition and maintain a stable environment. This transition period is critical as it can set the tone for the family's long-term adjustment and the former prisoner's reintegration success.

Stigma and anticipated stigma continues to be a barrier upon release (Moore et al, 2016) as former inmates and their families struggle with societal judgment. The potential for relapse into criminal behaviour further complicates the reintegration process, impacting family dynamics and stability.

Differences in Support Needs Between Remand and Post-Sentence Detention

The support needs of families during remand detention differ significantly from those post-sentence, yet this area was underexplored in the existing literature

reviewed. Remand detention presents unique challenges, marked by uncertainty, disruption and stress for families as they navigate unfamiliar systems and face unclear outcomes. Despite these distinct experiences, the literature review found research into the specific needs of families during remand to be limited, leaving gaps in understanding on how to provide effective support. This section examines the limited available insights into the challenges and concerns faced during remand, and the differences in family experiences compared to post-sentence detention.

Challenges During Remand

Research shows that remand or pre-trial detention presents unique challenges. A few older studies found that partners often feel overwhelmed by rules and lack of experience (Christensen, 1999) and families experience disruption, disorientation and uncertainty (Codd, 2008). Boswell and Wedge (2007) reported worsened child behaviour during remand detention. These challenges are exacerbated by the uncertainty of the trial outcome and the potential for a custodial sentence.

Concerns During Remand

The Howard League set out a number of effects on families during remand including uncertainty, impacts on childcare, stress, impacts on income and housing, and family division compounded by the uncertainty of the release date and duration of remand (Howard League, 2021). The COPING project found high levels of stress and trauma for children at the point of a parent's arrest (Robertson, 2016). Families need greater support and timely information to navigate these uncertain times effectively (Howard League, 2021).

Visiting Rights for Remand vs. Sentenced Prisoners

Visiting rights for remand prisoners can vary by jurisdiction. For example, in the UK, remand prisoners have more frequent visits compared to those in Scandinavian countries, where visits can be police-supervised and less frequent (Smith, 2017; Smith and Jakobsen, 2017). Pre-trial solitary confinement in Scandinavian countries can also negatively impact prisoners' mental health and family interactions (Smith, 2011).

Cross-Cutting Needs

Families of prisoners face a range of cross-cutting needs that span emotional, informational and practical domains, yet existing research reviewed highlights gaps in understanding how best to meet these needs. While families require clear and accessible information about the justice process and support services, stigma and individual circumstances often create barriers to

accessing help. The diverse and sometimes complex experiences of families further underscore the importance of tailored and flexible support. This section explores the common themes of informational needs, stigma and heterogeneity in family experiences that emerged from the literature.

Need for Information

Families need clear information about the justice process and what to expect for both themselves and their imprisoned family members. Adequate explanations are crucial for children to cope with a parent's imprisonment (Ayre et al., 2006; Robertson et al., 2012; Howard League 2021). This need for information extends to understanding legal rights, available support services and processes for maintaining contact with the imprisoned family member. This highlights that consideration must be given to who gives this information and how, given the potential complexity of delivering information to families of those who have been imprisoned.

Unique Needs of Families

Families of prisoners may have unique needs requiring independent support. For example, Rodriguez (2016), highlights complexities such as mental ill health, substance misuse and trauma histories, which may act as barriers to seeking support. Support services need to be flexible and responsive to these varied needs to effectively assist families.

Stigma and Barriers to Accessing Support

Stigma often prevents families and children from accessing support. Bocknek et al. (2009) note that children may avoid social support due to stigma, and parents may not disclose imprisonment to teachers for fear of discriminatory attitudes (Dallaire and Wilson, 2010). This highlights the importance of creating non-judgmental support environments, and raising awareness about the needs of these families.

Heterogeneity of Experiences

The literature reviewed cautions against assuming uniform experiences among families. Many children of prisoners may not have lived with or had a close relationship with the imprisoned parent, and impacts vary greatly. Some children/family members may welcome or be ambivalent to the removal of a harmful family member (Turney et al., 2024). Knudsen (2016) stresses the need for individualised support to address these diverse needs.

Summary

Understanding the support needs of families of people in custody requires acknowledging the complexities and individual differences in their experiences. The literature reviewed, although limited in some areas such as on remand and cross-cutting needs, highlights the critical need for comprehensive support that addresses practical, emotional and informational needs. This includes providing financial assistance, facilitating easier access to visits, offering emotional and psychological support and ensuring families receive clear, timely information about the justice process and available resources.

Post-release, the focus shifts to supporting reintegration, where families often face additional challenges, such as adapting to new dynamics, dealing with financial pressures and navigating societal stigma. Effective support systems must continue beyond imprisonment, providing ongoing assistance with housing, employment and mental health services.

Key differences in the support needs between families dealing with remand and post-sentence detention further complicate the landscape. Families of remand prisoners experience unique stressors due to the uncertainty and potential impermanence of their situation, requiring tailored support strategies.

8 - Barriers to building and maintaining family relationships

Introduction

Family relationships are crucial for the emotional and psychological wellbeing of individuals, both within and outside the criminal justice system. However, imprisonment presents significant challenges to maintaining these relationships.

This chapter explores the barriers to building and sustaining family relationships when a family member is in custody. Drawing from various studies and reports, the chapter highlights logistical, emotional and systemic obstacles that impede familial bonds.

When a Family Member is in Custody

When a family member is in custody, families often face logistical, emotional and systemic barriers that make maintaining contact difficult. Geographic distance, restrictive visiting policies and unwelcoming prison environments create significant challenges, particularly for children and caregivers. The literature points to a critical need for child-friendly and family-oriented practices to foster connections during imprisonment. However, despite some examples of good practices internationally, the literature reviewed highlighted research on effective interventions remains limited. This section explores the logistical barriers families encounter, the impact of prison environments, and lack of information on visitation rules.

Logistical Barriers

Families Outside (2017) identifies restrictive visiting hours and the geographical distance from prisons as significant barriers. For many families, especially those in rural areas, the cost and time associated with travel are prohibitive (Families Outside, 2024a; Condry and Minson, 2021).

Women in Prison (2013) highlights that women prisoners were often housed an average of 60 miles from their homes, exacerbating the difficulty of maintaining contact. Scottish research in 2012 indicated that children of imprisoned parents were particularly disadvantaged due to geographic remoteness and limited public transport options (Loucks, 2012).

Prison Aesthetics and Environment

Prisons are often uninviting and not child-friendly, acting as a deterrent to visits (Mowen and Visher, 2016). Issues such as lack of privacy, rigid rules and negative atmospheres contribute to the reluctance to visit (Smith, 2014). However, child-friendly visiting environments can foster positive outcomes (Schlafer and Poehlmann, 2010; Sharratt, 2014).

Across the literature reviewed (e.g. Diffley Partnership, 2023), several common features make prisons uninviting environments for family visits. These include a lack of privacy and the inability to have open, free conversations (Smith, 2014), as well as the perception of children as security risks who require careful supervision. Strict visitation rules often hinder the creation of a relaxed atmosphere (Smith, 2014), while tensions between prisoners and the outside carers who bring children to visit can further complicate interactions. Additionally, both prisoners and their families often feel a lack of control over visits, contributing to a less welcoming and supportive environment.

Robertson et al. (2012) and Robertson (2016) also report that examples of good practice exist in such countries as Norway, where ‘private’ visits without guards are permissible for families, and in Italy and Belgium where opportunities for play and creativity (such as puppet shows and painting) are provided.

Lack of Information and Understanding

Ryan and Ryan (2024) highlight that visitors often lack information about visitation rules, particularly those with literacy or technological challenges. This lack of understanding can discourage families from visiting and maintaining contact. A general lack of information about prison processes and visiting policies further complicates family interactions.

This was emphasised in research conducted on behalf of SPS, which found that the varied visitation rules and inconsistent provision of services across Scotland created a barrier and confusion for families (Diffley Partnership, 2023).

Emotional and Social Barriers

The evidence reviewed shows that families of imprisoned individuals face complex emotional and social barriers that can strain relationships and hinder contact. Stigma associated with imprisonment often leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment, deterring families from visiting. Negative interactions with prison staff, including perceptions of judgment or dismissiveness, further discourage visits and can create lasting negative impressions, particularly for

children. In contrast, positive staff interactions and family-focussed practices have been shown to enhance the visiting experience, helping to alleviate emotional strain. This section explores these barriers and the role of supportive practices in improving outcomes for families with a family member in custody.

Stigma and Psychological Strain

Stigma associated with imprisonment significantly impacts families, leading to feelings of shame (Families Outside, 2022). This emotional strain can deter families from visiting and maintaining contact. Dzierzyńska-Breś (2017) notes that children of imprisoned parents often suffer from post-traumatic stress and may glorify the imprisoned parent, complicating their emotional responses and needs.

Negative Interactions with Prison Staff

Negative interactions with prison staff can also act as a barrier, including perceptions of being stigmatised by staff and talked to in demeaning or derogatory ways. Negative stereotyping as a consequence of being related to the offender has been referred to as ‘legally sanctioned stigma’ by Hutton (2018), and may be experienced by families as staff discriminating against them.

Robertson et al. (2012) also reports that simple gestures such as staff smiling can determine how children perceive the visiting experience (with unsmiling prison staff being off-putting to children). Actions of prison staff and lack of flexibility/understanding in families’ requests can also exacerbate families’ negative experiences of the prison visit, and act as a barrier to further visits (Condry et al. 2016).

In contrast, work has shown that independent facilitators, such as staff running voluntary prison-based services, can often help to relax families, especially children. As Yarwood et al. (2017) report staff who were friendly and helpful and demonstrated good interaction skills, such as listening and chatting with families during visits, resulted in positive experiences for families overall.

Dixey and Woodall (2012) suggest, at the time of their research, that prison visits in an English category-B prison had declined in recent years despite prison numbers increasing. They argued that this was because families feel stigmatised and because of the logistical problems in getting to, from and moving within, the prison. Interestingly, these authors also asked prison staff about visits and logistical challenges (operationally and security-wise) were their main concern. As one prison staff member commented, a prison can be ‘bigger than a theme park’, with thousands of visitors entering them each year.

Hart-Johnson and Johnson's (2020) UK study took a similar qualitative approach to understanding prison staffs' views of their role in overseeing visits, and found a broad difference between those who viewed their role as one of encouraging/facilitating family-oriented practices and visiting protocols, and those who viewed themselves in a more traditional police-officer mentality. The authors noted that shifting staff attitudes and practices towards family-focussed visiting can play a positive role in contributing to the health and psychological wellbeing of families and inmates in visiting settings.

Primary research conducted by Diffley Partnership on behalf of SPS also found that visitors and families reported negative interactions with prison staff as a barrier to visiting. Examples included feelings of being judged, invasive search procedures and bureaucracy which felt over the top, such as having to show identification on each and every visit and being denied access, despite being a frequent visitor (Diffley Partnership, 2023).

Cross-Cutting Barriers

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that families of imprisoned individuals face cross-cutting barriers that compound the emotional and financial strains of maintaining connections and providing support. Guilt and shame often weigh heavily on families, adding to the pressures of their financial responsibilities. Visiting a loved one in prison and supporting them post-release comes with substantial costs, often consuming a significant portion of household income and leading to sacrifices in quality of life. These challenges disproportionately affect women, who frequently manage the financial and logistical burdens, sometimes relying on food banks or cutting back on essentials to cope. This section further discusses these barriers, particulalry through research by Nugent (2022) for Families Outside, and highlights the importance of emotional and practical support in alleviating the strain on families.

Feelings of Guilt and Shame

Guilt and shame have been highlighted as pervasive barriers that affect family relationships both during imprisonment and after release (Condry and Smith, 2019). These feelings are often linked to the financial and emotional burdens placed on families, leading to further strain and distancing (Smith, 2014).

Financial Costs

Nugent (2022) highlights that supporting a loved one serving a prison sentence incurs substantial costs. With an average prison term of six years, families typically visit twice a month, covering 106 miles per trip and spend around £180 per month – around a third of the household income - on travel, snacks and other expenses. This amounts to £2,160 annually. Additionally,

families dedicate a day and a half each week to calls and visits (Nugent, 2022).

Families experience significant financial strain during the remand period, marked by uncertainty and stress. In Scotland, on average, families travel 74 miles per visit, dedicating five hours and spending approximately £300 monthly on travel, snacks, personal account deposits and other costs. For many, these expenses consume all or half of their income, making it a particularly challenging time (Nugent, 2022).

Post-release support is financially demanding, with families in Scotland spending between £30 to £1,000 monthly, averaging £300. The initial months post-release are particularly costly and stressful, with families bearing the burden of replacing lost belongings and facilitating social work appointments. Home leave expenses can be substantial, consuming a significant portion of the family income (Nugent, 2022).

Families, particularly women, manage these costs through meticulous budgeting, self-sacrifice and often silent suffering. Many rely on food banks, endure fuel poverty and forgo social activities, which impacts their mental health and quality of life. A diminished lifestyle and loss of social connections are common, with some unable to afford activities for their children. Support from organisations like Families Outside and SACRO is crucial, providing both emotional and practical assistance, although peer support, when available, is highly valued (Nugent, 2022).

Summary

This chapter explores the significant barriers families face when maintaining relationships with a family member in custody. It identifies logistical, emotional, and systemic challenges that hinder family connections, particularly for children and caregivers. Geographic distance, restrictive visitation policies, and unwelcoming prison environments create substantial obstacles, while a lack of information about visitation rules further complicates the process. Emotional barriers, including stigma and negative interactions with prison staff, discourage visits and contribute to psychological strain. Additionally, financial burdens, especially for women who often manage the logistics and costs of supporting incarcerated loved ones, exacerbate the difficulties. Despite some examples of good practice internationally, research on effective interventions remains limited. The chapter highlights the need for family-friendly policies, improved prison environments, and supportive staff interactions to foster and maintain familial bonds during imprisonment.

9 - Approaches and models of family support

Introduction

The support provided to families of imprisoned individuals varies significantly across different countries, reflecting diverse approaches and models aimed at maintaining family connections and supporting reintegration. Literature reviewed indicates that state initiatives and government-funded programmes targeting children of prisoners are often ad hoc and inconsistent (Burton, 2012). However, several countries, including Scotland, have implemented innovative strategies to mitigate the negative impact of parental imprisonment on families.

This chapter explores family support models/practices firstly in Scotland, and then from various countries (England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scandinavia, Poland, Netherlands, USA and Australia) that Scotland could potentially learn from to enhance its own support systems for families affected by imprisonment. However, it should be noted that international examples might not be appropriate to transfer to Scotland given the differing contexts. For example, the Scandinavian model differs from the Scottish context, particularly in penal policy. For instance, the Prisons and Young Offenders Institutions (Scotland) Rules do not permit overnight stays in Scottish prisons for children.

Family Support Models

During Custody

In Scotland, the Beside Me project was a six-month initiative at HMP Perth which took place between March 2023 and October 2023, aimed at strengthening relationships between imprisoned fathers and their children. Led by Dundee Rep in partnership with Families Outside and the Scottish Prison Service (SPS), the project used creative theatre workshops to facilitate meaningful interactions. Seven families participated in activities designed to build confidence, improve communication, and foster a sense of togetherness. The project concluded with a performance at HMP Perth, allowing participants to showcase their experiences and growth. The evaluation, conducted independently by Social Research Solutions, focussed on the impact of the project on participants, their families, and stakeholders (Social Research Solutions, 2024).

The evaluation found that Beside Me had a profound positive impact on participants, deepening their connections with family members and improving their self-esteem and resilience. The project provided a unique and supportive

environment where participants could momentarily forget their imprisonment and engage meaningfully with their children. Many fathers reported increased confidence in their parenting roles, and families appreciated the informal, nurturing setting. However, challenges such as recruitment, retention, and operational constraints within the prison were noted. The report recommended improving long-term support for families and expanding the project to other prison settings (Social Research Solutions, 2024).

The Game with Mum and Dad initiative was a family fun day held at HMP Grampian in 2023, designed to foster meaningful connections between imprisoned parents and their children through sports and creative activities. The event featured a variety of games, including Beat the Goalie, running races, Keepy Uppie competitions, and arts and crafts, ensuring participation for all ages. The day concluded with a five-a-side football match, after which all children and parents received medals, trophies, and treats as a token of their participation (Families Outside, 2023b).

Feedback from both families and staff was overwhelmingly positive. Participants highlighted the joyful atmosphere, the opportunity for meaningful interaction, and the event’s departure from typical prison visits. Many requested more events of this nature, with some expressing regret that older children were unable to attend due to visit restrictions. Staff praised the initiative for its ability to promote positive family contact in a relaxed, enjoyable setting, and noted that prison officers were more engaged with families than usual (Families Outside, 2023b).

The Healthy Dads, Healthy Kids (HDHK) in Prisons programme is a pioneering initiative introduced at HMP Barlinnie, marking the first time this Australian-developed programme has been implemented in a prison setting. Designed to strengthen relationships between imprisoned fathers and their children, HDHK uses physical activities and shared meals to enhance health, wellbeing, and family connections.

Developed by researchers from the Universities of Glasgow, Stirling, and Newcastle (Australia), it is part of a broader two-year study examining ways to improve family relationships for imprisoned men both during their sentence and after release. The programme includes weekly "fathers-only" sessions on topics like positive parenting and health, followed by interactive sessions with children, incorporating activities such as rough-and-tumble play, fitness, and fundamental movement skills. The sessions conclude with a family meal, offering an intimate bonding experience outside the usual prison visit setting (Scottish Prison Service, 2024c).

The evaluation of HDHK highlighted profound positive impacts, with fathers reporting stronger emotional connections, better parenting awareness, and improved communication with their children. Participants valued the structured

time spent with their families, noting that the absence of external pressures helped them engage more meaningfully. Due to its success, the programme expanded from HMP Barlinnie to HMP Perth and is set to be introduced in HMPs Low Moss, Shotts, Kilmarnock, and Dumfries. Additionally, 23 prison staff members have been trained to facilitate its wider rollout. Researchers praised the dedication and compassion of staff, emphasising the programme's role in reducing intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and supporting long-term rehabilitation (Scottish Prison Service, 2024c).

The Bookbug in Prisons scheme in Scotland sought to increase the amount of quality interaction (talking, reading, singing, playing and cuddling) between prisoners who were parents and their young children, failed to engage families (Skellington Orr, 2015). Facilitated by Family Contact Officers (FCOs) within prison, fathers were encouraged to take part in singing, rhyming and story-telling sessions with their visiting children, however, uptake was low. The initiative nonetheless resulted in key staff across prisons receiving training in positive parenting and how to encourage better prisoner-child interactions, which had more generalised positive impacts on visiting experiences.

In England and Wales, two schemes have been identified during the review aimed at promoting positive relationships between imprisoned parents and their children: Invisible Walls Wales and the Visiting Mum Scheme.

Invisible Walls Wales[24] is a Big Lottery funded project based in HMP Parc, South Wales, aimed at maintaining and improving relationships between male prisoners and their children and families, improving the quality of life of all participants, reducing re-offending by the prisoners, and reducing the risk of 'intergenerational' offending by adopting a 'whole family' approach. It was found to have resulted in decreased drug misuse, improved attitudes to reducing reoffending, better family, school and prison liaison, reduced support needs for children and improved potential for prisoner resettlement on release (Clancy and Maguire, 2017a).[25]

The Visiting Mum Scheme[26] three year pilot (2014-2017) supported longer visits in rooms with limited prison staff and access to play/games, as well as volunteer helpers. An evaluation of the Visiting Mum Scheme by Rees et al. (2017) found that the scheme significantly reduced children's anxieties about their mothers in prison by providing a more supportive and less intimidating

[24] Although no further evaluations were found, Invisible Walls Wales website states that in 2022 Invisible Walls expanded its remit to start delivering support services in visitor Centres and visiting halls in five public sector prisons in England and Wales, and in G4S prisons. In 2023, Invisible Walls became incorporated as a Community Interest Company invisiblewalls.co.uk

[25] Evaluation of Invisible Walls Wales

[26] Supporting mothers in prison - Prison Advice and Care Trust

visiting experience. The first visit was considered crucial, as a negative experience could deter children from returning, although the scheme did not always manage to engage families in time. Children valued the service highly, noting that it strengthened family bonds and provided a nurturing environment through extended, informal visits. They appreciated meeting others in similar situations, and contact with their mothers was regarded as a right rather than a privilege.

The evaluation also found that mothers benefited from the scheme as well, reporting reduced anxiety, improved mental health, and an enhanced ability to maintain a parenting role, which aided family reintegration upon release. The service helped reduce incidents of self-harm and disciplinary issues in prison. Carers also found that the scheme alleviated emotional and financial pressures, while prison staff recognised its value within the institution. Volunteers played a crucial role and expressed interest in providing further support, although post-release services, particularly regarding housing and employment, remained minimal and awareness of the scheme was limited across the social care spectrum.

Based on the successful Visiting Mum's Scheme pilot, Pact operates two Visiting Mum's Services at HMPs Styal and Eastwood Park (under One Wales), and HMP Downview (funded by Comic Relief)[27].

Also in the UK, voluntary prison-based Partners of Prisoners (POPS)[28] run services in the North of England including visitor centres, family support services, and offer supervised play areas which have been evaluated by users as being helpful to families to support visits with children (Yarwood et al., 2017). Provision of refreshments by these services were also seen as a way of helping to bring families together during visits.

In Northern Ireland (NI), the Families Matter programme in Maghaberry Prison, developed by Barnardo's NI, was designed specifically to help improve and maintain relationships between children and their fathers. This residential programme, delivered collaboratively by Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) and external providers, allowed fathers to take part in a range of parenting/relationships skills classes, as well as to live in separate accommodation to other prisoners, and receive family visits once a month to put into practice the skills they had learned. An evaluation of the programme (Butler et al., 2015) showed that involvement in the programme had many short and medium term benefits including increased frequency and quality of contact between fathers and their families; fostering a culture of peer support;

[27] Noted on Pact website: Supporting mothers in prison - Prison Advice and Care Trust

[28] Partners of Prisoners - POPS provide information and support for offenders' families from the point of arrest through to release and beyond.

improved wellbeing and ability to cope with the prison experience. Use of appropriate settings and close working between professional partners in delivering the project were highlighted as examples of good practice. Scandinavian countries such as Norway and Sweden have pioneered family support models that prioritise rehabilitation and family integration (Families Outside, 2017). These countries emphasise open prison settings, community-based alternatives to imprisonment and robust family support programmes, demonstrating how community-based alternatives to imprisonment and strong social support systems help in reducing recidivism and supporting families. For instance, in Norway, children could stay overnight with their imprisoned parent in specially designed apartments, fostering uninterrupted family time and maintaining familial bonds (Smith, 2014).

Research by Smith (2014; 2015) suggests that the rights and conditions of sentenced prisoners in Scandinavia may provide a model of positive practice. At the time of the research this included, for example:

- visits taking place both inside and outside of the building (with opportunities for children to play outside)
- access to mobile phones in open prisons (without Internet connection) to facilitate contact with family members
- in Norway, children being able to stay overnight with their parent in specially designed apartments
- in Denmark, entire families being able to stay overnight in some cases.

Denmark has implemented children's officers in prisons, dedicated to ensuring child-friendly visitation procedures and facilitating family therapy sessions. This approach was shown to be successful in integrating child perspectives into the prison environment, and supporting positive family interactions (Smith, 2015).

In Poland, the ‘Patronage‟ Penitentiary Association holidays pilots also reported success in helping to maintain family ties and strengthen family bonds (Napadło-Kuczera, 2015). Organised residential holidays for prisoners and their children were arranged which facilitated contact between families and their imprisoned parents, as well as contact between siblings. Separate holidays were organised in different projects for male and female prisoners, but all reported positive benefits for participants and their families. Prisoners felt they were able to ‘make up for lost time,’ and ‘feel like free people for a moment’ whilst caring for their children, and children and siblings expressed enjoying the meaningful time they were able to spend with their parents and siblings (Napadło-Kuczera, 2015: 25).

In the Netherlands, a family approach programme was shown to be potentially beneficial in terms of encouraging parenting amongst imprisoned fathers (Venema et al., 2024). Those on the programme had a greater insight into

their father role, the effects of imprisonment on that and the implications for release. The authors found that “Key factors that positively affected father-child interaction quality during visits included privacy, active interactions, physical contact, opportunities for play and a child-friendly atmosphere” (Venema et al., 2024: 16). The study was inconclusive as to when programmes should be delivered – at the start or end of a sentence. They also recommended widening family-centred approaches beyond the scope of a limited programme.

The Baby Elmo programme in the US (Barr et al., 2011; 2013) also reported positive impacts on quality of interactions in prison visits for male prisoners and their children, as well as improved emotional responsiveness between families. Fathers who were provided with training around how to improve interactions with their children, using such things as following the child’s lead, were filmed and assessed for changes in use of their time on different activities during visits and the quality of interactions. Results showed significant positive increases in the amount of parent support and infant engagement (although the absence of a control group was noted).

Extended Families

Robertson (2016) reported that several European countries actively involved children and young people in decision making regarding how best they should be supported, i.e. giving them greater agency in the process as a means of support in itself. Roberston highlighted the following examples:

- Advisory groups of young people with a parent in prison in Norway being consulted to describe their needs, give advice and suggestions and contribute to UN Convention on the Rights of the Child shadow reports.
- Relais Enfants Parents Romand in Switzerland fostering agency in the child during support sessions by enabling them to determine how such sessions unfold.
- Children in Sweden being invited to create "10 wishes" of things they would like to see done differently to support contact (for example, being allowed to telephone into prison).

Similar interactive approaches are reported in Luxembourg, Belgium, France and Italy (Robertson, 2016).

Post-Custody

From the literature reviewed there is less evidence regarding successful models of support in the post-release period. One historical study by Frye and Dawe (2008) reported on an intensive multifaceted parenting program in Australia, Parents Under Pressure (PUP), delivered to women offenders after

release, or in low-security confinement where they were living with their children. Although limited to a small sample of 12, they reported “improvement in maternal mental health and the quality of the parent-child relationship” (p. 99), along with reductions in both abuse potential and problem child behaviours.

Reflections on Whole Family Wellbeing Fund Principles

The ten Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF) principles are explained in chapter two.

The examples in this chapter show alignment with several Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF) principles, particularly whole family support, needs-based approaches, and collaborative working.

The various models discussed highlight the importance of holistic, family-centred approaches, such as the Healthy Dads, Healthy Kids and Beside Me projects, which aim to strengthen relationships between imprisoned parents and their children. These initiatives reflect the WFWF principle of tailoring support to the individual needs of families, rather than relying on rigid structures.

Additionally, non-stigmatising support is emphasised in programmes like The Visiting Mum Scheme, which creates a more welcoming environment for children visiting their mothers in prison. The chapter also showcases assets and community-based approaches, such as Scandinavian family support models, which integrate rehabilitation into community settings. The emphasis on reducing intergenerational cycles of disadvantage aligns with the WFWF’s focus on early intervention and preventative support.

However, the chapter also highlights gaps in post-custody family support, which suggests a need for more sustainable and seamless services, reinforcing the WFWF principle that support should be timely and adaptive to the family’s changing needs.

Summary

This chapter explored various family support models aimed at strengthening relationships between imprisoned parents and their children. Several initiatives within Scotland, such as the Beside Me project, Game with Mum and Dad, and Healthy Dads, Healthy Kids, demonstrate significant benefits in improving family connections, parenting confidence, and overall wellbeing. While challenges such as engagement and operational constraints were noted, these programmes showcase innovative approaches to fostering meaningful interactions within prison settings.

Beyond Scotland, successful family support initiatives in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and across Europe and the U.S. highlighted the importance of structured activities, extended visitation opportunities, and holistic, family-centred approaches. Scandinavian models, in particular, emphasised rehabilitation through open prison settings and child-friendly visitation policies. Programmes in Poland, the Netherlands, and the U.S. further reinforced the value of quality interactions, privacy, and play in maintaining parent-child bonds.

While much of the research focussed on support during custody, evidence of post-release support models was more limited. However, initiatives such as Parents Under Pressure in Australia indicated the potential for targeted parenting programmes to improve family reintegration and reduce reoffending. Overall, the chapter emphasises the need for continued investment in family-centred support strategies, both during and after imprisonment, to enhance rehabilitation outcomes and break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

10 - Reflection Opportunities

Introduction

The reflection opportunities with a small number of people in custody, families, prison staff, and key stakeholders provided valuable insights into the barriers faced by families of imprisoned individuals, and echoed themes from the literature review.

Visitors/families who were interviewed were visiting a range of different relatives including mothers with children visiting their partner and father, people visiting their children and one respondent visiting a friend.

Participants discussed the benefits of family contact, and the key challenges they identified in the context of visiting to maintain family contact. They also discussed the positive impact of in-cell telephony. Opportunities for improvement emerged from the discussions which are highlighted in the chapter, before ending with a discussion on the feedback from key stakeholders on the draft logic model.

Benefits of Contact

Both the literature review and reflection opportunities underscored the profound benefits of maintaining contact between prisoners and their families. Prisoner participants who regularly interacted with their families described improved mental health, greater engagement with rehabilitation programmes and stronger motivation to avoid reoffending. Staff participants reported observing noticeable differences in behaviour and morale between prisoners who maintain regular family contact and those who do not.

Visitor/family participants said that, for their families, especially their children, maintaining contact provides reassurance, emotional support and a sense of continuity during a challenging period. Stakeholder participants emphasised that family bonds can play a crucial role in reducing intergenerational cycles of imprisonment. Staff and stakeholder participants emphasised that children benefit from maintaining a connection with their parent, as it helps them process their feelings and reduces the stigma they might face in their communities or schools.

However, the quality of contact is just as important as the frequency. Meaningful interactions, whether through in-person visits, phone calls or virtual meetings, can mitigate the emotional toll of separation and reinforce positive relationships. Participants, across all of prisoners, staff, stakeholders and families, highlighted the need for child-friendly visiting spaces and structured activities to make visits less intimidating and more engaging for

families, with some prisoner participants emphasising the better quality of family visits in the establishments which allow parents to spend time with their children in a more private environment, than a general visit.

Key Challenges Identified

One of the most significant barriers to family contact remains the logistical and financial burden of travel. Families often travel long distances, at great cost, for short visits. For example, a family travelling from Aberdeen to Edinburgh for a 45-minute visit noted they had to leave at 5 a.m., making regular visits unsustainable. This aligns with the literature review, which identifies travel difficulties as a critical impediment to maintaining family ties. Participants called for more joined-up thinking in terms of support available and timing of visits to take into account the challenges and costs of travelling to visits.

The length of visits also emerged as an issue among participants. Some visitor/family participants emphasised that 45 minutes is insufficient for meaningful interaction, particularly given the time and effort involved in visiting. Prisoner participants, too, expressed dissatisfaction with the visit length, as these brief sessions provide limited emotional support and felt short, especially for participants who were parents.

Stakeholder and family participants further highlighted inconsistencies in visiting protocols across establishments (important where a family member was moved during their sentence, or had previously been imprisoned elsewhere). Families reported confusion due to varying application of rules and lack of clear communication, exacerbating their stress. While virtual visits introduced during the pandemic were praised for increasing accessibility, technical issues such as connection failures and misdirected sessions frustrated both families and prisoner participants.

Positive Impact of In-cell Telephony

One of the most popular interventions noted in the reflection opportunities was the introduction of in-cell telephony. Both families and prisoner participants emphasised its importance in maintaining regular communication. Prisoners appreciated the ability to make calls at their convenience, which provided a sense of autonomy and allowed them to maintain family connections, without relying on the limited availability of in-person visits. Visitor/families participants valued the increased accessibility, particularly during times when travel was not feasible.

However, there were concerns regarding the costs associated with these calls. While prisoners are allocated free minutes each month, prisoners who participated reported that the allocation was insufficient to maintain regular, meaningful contact. This sentiment was echoed by their families, who found

themselves financially strained by additional communication expenses. Participants suggested reviewing the current minute allocation and exploring options to subsidise costs further, aligning with broader recommendations to reduce financial barriers to family contact.

Opportunities for Improvement

Several considerations emerged from the discussions during the reflection opportunities, supported by both the literature review and participant insights. Enhanced communication remains a top priority. Families expressed a need for clearer, more accessible information about visiting procedures, virtual visit options and prison processes. Suggestions included digital handbooks, improved websites and consistent updates during custody transitions.

Expanding the use of in-cell telephony while addressing its cost implications was another key recommendation. Participants stressed the importance of affordable, regular contact for maintaining family relationships, particularly when in-person visits are not feasible. The need for wider support to help families struggling to afford or attend visits was a consistent theme in the interviews conducted during the reflection opportunities.

The reintroduction of family induction programmes and the creation of child-friendly spaces in all prisons were also widely supported by participants. Sharing best practices across the prison estate, such as innovative family engagement projects already in place in some establishments, could help standardise and elevate the quality of support.

Draft Logic Model – Stakeholder Feedback

The research team developed a first draft logic model based on the evidence that emerged from the literature reviewed. The logic model methodological approach is discussed in chapter 3. Figure 1 below shows the first draft logic model.

Figure 1: First Draft Logic Model

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES			IMPACTS
			Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term	
Stakeholder Engagement Financial Resources Information and Communication Counselling Services Family-friendly Facilities Policy and Training Programmes	Develop inclusive visitation policies Review activity on communication outside of visits Train prison staff Enhance access to information and services Implement community-based reintegration programmes Greater financial support	Increased family visits or opportunities for contact Better communication with families Enhanced access to counselling and information Consistent policy application Trained and supportive staff	Improved emotional and mental wellbeing Stronger family bonds Better navigation of time in custody for prisoner and family Less financial burden in families	Improved family support systems Increased engagement in reintegration programmes Reduced stress and conflict among families and imprisoned family members	Successful reintegration Reduced recidivism Enhanced family stability	Overall improvement in the quality of life for families of imprisoned individuals Stronger community ties and support networks Reduction in family breakdown Enhanced social integration of formerly imprisoned individuals Greater societal resilience

EXTERNAL FACTORS	ASSUMPTIONS
Economic conditions Policy changes Legal and regulatory frameworks Community attitudes	Stakeholder commitment Sufficient funding Staff engagement Continuity of services Family participation

The research team then hosted a roundtable with key stakeholders to develop the logic model further.

Stakeholders provided constructive feedback on the above draft logic model, suggesting it required a broader perspective to adequately address family support. Participants noted that the model appeared overly focussed on prison-based interventions, neglecting the critical role of community networks and external support systems. They also recommended revising outputs to focus on improving the quality of family contact, rather than simply increasing visit opportunities.

Suggestions for refinement included explicitly recognising the role of community services in supporting families, integrating a rights-based approach, and adopting clearer, more inclusive language to avoid overly prison-centric interpretations. By incorporating these changes, stakeholder participants thought the logic model could better align with the holistic needs of families.

Following the stakeholder roundtable the research team refined and developed the draft logic model further, based on stakeholder's insightful and constructive feedback. The second draft of the logic model is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Second Draft Logic Model

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES			IMPACTS
			Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term	
System-Wide Collaborative Engagement Accessible and diverse financial support Information and Communication Tools Family-friendly Facilities Policy and Training Programmes Community Networks	Develop inclusive visitation policies Review activity on communication outside of visits Training for prison staff and social workers on family contact Enhance access to information and services Best Practice Sharing Greater financial support Provide accessible, trauma-informed counselling for families and those in prison	Enhanced quality and accessibility of visits, including virtual and in-person options Better communication with families Enhanced access to counselling and information Consistent policy application Trained and supportive staff Improved access to comprehensive support services for families and individuals in custody	Improved emotional and mental wellbeing for families and those in prison Stronger family bonds Better navigation of time in custody for prisoner and family Increased awareness and utilisation of available support services	Improved family support systems Increased engagement in reintegration programmes Reduced stress and conflict among families and imprisoned family members Improved emotional wellbeing and stability for families	Successful reintegration Reduced recidivism Enhanced family stability Less financial burden in families Recognition of families affected by imprisonment as a distinct group requiring systemic support	Overall improvement in the quality of life for families of imprisoned individuals Stronger community ties and support networks Reduction in family breakdown Enhanced social integration of formerly imprisoned individuals Greater societal resilience

EXTERNAL FACTORS	ASSUMPTIONS
Economic conditions Accessibility of public transport and proximity to prisons Policy and legal frameworks supporting family engagement Community attitudes Collaboration among stakeholders, with clear accountability	Stakeholder commitment Adequate and sustained funding for family support programmes Staff engagement Continuity of services Family participation Policy frameworks consistently applied

The draft logic model is an iterative document which the Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service can draw upon in any future policy development work.

Reflections on Whole Family Wellbeing Fund Principles

The ten Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF) principles are explained in chapter two.

The findings of this chapter reflect the WFWF principle of taking account of families' voices, as it is based on direct feedback from people in custody, their families, prison staff, and stakeholders.

The reflections highlight key concerns around the logistical and financial burdens of visits, inconsistent visiting policies, and the need for child-friendly spaces, all of which align with the WFWF's commitment to needs-based and accessible support.

The findings also emphasise the importance of skilled and supported professionals, particularly in how staff interactions shape family experiences. Positive engagement from prison staff enhances visits, whereas dismissive treatment reinforces stigma—highlighting the need for training in trauma-informed and family-centred approaches.

The introduction of in-cell telephony is a promising example of collaborative and seamless support, ensuring that families can maintain contact even when physical visits are challenging. However, financial constraints on call minutes demonstrate that support must be timely and sustainable, as the WFWF principles advocate.

Finally, the development of a logic model reflects a whole system, multi-agency approach, ensuring that family support services are not fragmented but integrated across different sectors.

11 - Gaps in understanding of family support identified in the literature and suggested research

Introduction

Family support for those affected by imprisonment is a critical area of study, yet the existing literature reviewed reveals significant gaps in understanding that hinder effective support for these families. Addressing these gaps is important for developing comprehensive support systems that meet the diverse needs of families and children impacted by imprisonment. This chapter explores the various gaps identified in the literature reviewed and suggests areas for further research to develop in the longer-term, particularly in the Scottish context.

Gaps Identified and Suggested Research

Needs of Children of Prisoners

One significant gap identified by the literature review is the lack of comprehensive research on the needs of children of prisoners, especially as perceived and communicated by children themselves. Understanding the specific challenges these children face is important for developing targeted interventions that support their emotional, psychological and social wellbeing.

Parents of Adult Prisoners and Sibling Experiences

The literature review also identified a noticeable gap in evidence related to the parents of adult prisoners. The experiences of children and young people with a sibling in custody are also largely unreported in the literature reviewed, leaving a significant gap in understanding their unique challenges. Addressing these gaps is important for providing holistic family support.

Suggested Research: Develop detailed studies on the emotional, educational and social needs of children with a parent(s) in custody that is from the perspective of children to understand the unique experiences of, and challenges faced by, parents of adult prisoners and children and young people with a sibling in custody.

To facilitate this, there is a need to explore innovative ethical approaches to collecting qualitative data from children affected by parental/sibling imprisonment.

Concurrent Family Members in Custody

The experiences of prisoners who have another family member concurrently in custody are not apparent in the existing research reviewed. This lack of information suggests a need for studies that explore the dynamics and support needs of families where multiple members are imprisoned simultaneously. Understanding these dynamics could help to create more effective support strategies.

Suggested Research on Family Dynamics: Develop research on families with multiple members imprisoned simultaneously to develop targeted support.

Minority and Protected Characteristic Groups

Few research studies in the literature reviewed delve into the unique needs of minority or protected characteristic groups. This oversight indicates a need for more inclusive and diverse research approaches that consider the varied experiences and support needs of different family demographics.

Suggested Research: Develop research to investigate the unique challenges faced by minority and protected characteristic groups within the prison system – their experiences and support needs to maintain family relationships.

Remand Phase vs. Post-Sentence Imprisonment

Most empirical research reviewed as part of this research on the children of imprisoned parents, and other family members of prisoners, does not differentiate between the remand phase and imprisonment following a sentence. Understanding the distinct challenges and needs during these different phases is important for providing targeted support.

Suggested Research: Develop future research that aims to distinguish between these phases to develop more nuanced support mechanisms.

Single Prisoners and Ageing Population

There is little research in the literature reviewed into the needs of ‘single’ prisoners and those without families, as well as the ageing prison population and their family support needs. As the prison population ages, understanding their specific needs becomes increasingly important.

Suggested Research: Develop research to investigate how ageing and single prisoners can be better supported, particularly in maintaining social connections and preparing for reintegration.

Release and Transition

Less literature was found on ‘release’ or ‘transitions’ from prison back into the community compared to research focussed on time in custody. The associated family support needs during these transitions are underexplored, despite being a critical period for reintegration and family reunification.

Suggested Research: Develop research focussed on the support systems necessary during the release/transition phase from prison to community, to ensure successful reintegration and reduced recidivism.

Mental Health and Social Support

There was less literature identified regarding the mental health needs or impacts of visits for young people, or how social supports help the mental health of imprisoned young people over time. In Scotland, investigating the mental health outcomes of supportive visits and social connections could inform better practices within the prison system.

Suggested Research to develop on mental health to:

- examine the mental health impacts of prison visits and the role of social support in mitigating negative outcomes
- explore the relationship between visits and self-harm or suicide attempts among prisoners.

Visit Dynamics and Family/Friend Interactions

The impact of virtual or actual visits on misconduct, as well as the specifics of who visits, when and what occurs during these visits were gaps in the evidence reviewed. Additionally, there is a gap in the existing evidence in understanding the rate and frequency of visits to local versus national prisons.

Suggested Research: Research should examine how different visit arrangements impact prisoner behaviour and family wellbeing; given the relatively new roll out of forms of remote contact such as virtual visits, this area requires further research to build on the literature review.

Long-Term Impacts and Effectiveness of Support Models

There is a need for more research on the long-term impacts of imprisonment on families, particularly children. There is also a lack of data on the effectiveness of various support models and programmes, highlighting a need for more inclusive approaches that consider the diverse needs of different family members.

Suggested Research: Develop long-term evaluations of existing family support models and programmes to determine their effectiveness and areas for improvement to guide policy and practice, and share learning and best practice across the prison estate.

Continuing Parenting Needs

Consideration of the continuing parenting needs of mothers and fathers of imprisoned children is very rare in the evidence reviewed. Furthermore, father-child relationships during imprisonment could be explored further, to enhance understanding on how to support these relationships.

Suggested Research to develop on:

- understanding continuing parenting needs during imprisonment and how to support parent-child relationships effectively; and,
- how to maintain and strengthen parent-child relationships during imprisonment to support family unity and child development.

Suggested Areas for Further Research Methods Development in Scotland

The literature review evidence also suggests areas for further research methods development in Scotland, as follows:

1. **Profiling of families affected by imprisonment**: Develop more reliable methods for identifying and gathering data on children and families of prisoners, including both quantitative and qualitative information. There is a need to improve the data collection processes in Scottish prisons (and among wider justice partners such as Social Work services) to better understand the profiles and needs of families affected by imprisonment. The Data Protection challenges of doing so are highlighted in chapter two.
2. **Larger Sample Sizes**: Engage larger samples in research to enable the use of advanced statistical techniques and improve the reliability of findings.
3. **Focus on Lived Experience**: Prioritise research that includes the perspectives of family members and imprisoned individuals to ensure that interventions are relevant and effective.

Other Key Observations

In addition to directly addressing the research topics detailed in chapter one, several observations emerged from the review of literature, offering valuable context to the study of family support for prisoners and their families.

The extensive body of literature on this topic highlights the complexity of family support needs within the criminal justice system. While the focus has predominantly been on qualitative research, these studies often use small sample sizes, which may limit generalisability. However, qualitative methods provide critical insights into personal experiences, capturing the nuanced challenges faced by individuals in custody, their families and prison staff.

A significant portion of the research emphasises the needs of female prisoners and mothers. This focus reflects their unique challenges, such as caregiving responsibilities, which differ from those of male prisoners. Yet, this concentration may inadvertently neglect the needs of male prisoners and fathers, signalling a potential gap in the literature. Similarly, some studies, particularly from third-sector publications, underscore the distinct needs of different family members. For example, children with imprisoned parents often require tailored support services that differ from those for young people in general.

The literature reviewed also identifies systemic barriers to maintaining family relationships, such as logistical challenges, restrictive visitation policies and unwelcoming prison environments. These barriers can hinder meaningful interactions, which are vital for fostering strong family ties. Additionally, research explores the dual consequences of family contact. While it can offer emotional support and reduce recidivism, family visits may also trigger disruptive behaviours, highlighting the need for balanced and mindful approaches.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant shifts in how families connect, with a rise in remote and virtual communication methods. This period underscored the importance of flexibility in maintaining contact and the potential of alternative methods to complement traditional in-person visits.

Finally, there has been a noticeable increase in research on family support for prisoners over the last decade, reflecting growing recognition of the importance of this issue. These findings underline the need for comprehensive, inclusive and adaptable approaches to family support and for continued research to address remaining gaps and refine support strategies.

Summary

Addressing the gaps in understanding family support for those affected by imprisonment is important for developing effective and comprehensive support systems. The identified gaps highlight areas where further research could be considered in the longer-term. By focussing on these areas, researchers and policymakers could create more effective support mechanisms that cater to the diverse needs of families impacted by imprisonment, ultimately potentially leading to better outcomes for individuals in custody and their families.

12 - Points for consideration

Acknowledging the current challenges in Scotland (i.e. the prison population pressures), the review indicates key considerations for policy and practice in the longer-term, to better support individuals in custody and their families, including:

1. **Child-Friendly Visiting Spaces:** Create more child-friendly visiting spaces in prisons, or develop visiting models that are less deterring than some current formats. This would help to maintain family bonds and provide a more conducive environment for children visiting their imprisoned parents.
2. **Training for Prison Staff:** Consider whether current training for staff and other professionals involved in providing support for families is sufficient. The evidence considered in this review suggests that training should emphasise family-centred and supportive interactions, aiming to create a more welcoming and understanding environment for families.
3. **Involvement of People with Lived Experience:** Involve individuals with lived experience, particularly families of prisoners, in the design and development of new interventions, programmes or initiatives. Their insights can help identify strengths and weaknesses in current provisions, ensuring that new measures are relevant and effective.
4. **Person-Centred and Family-Centred Assessment:** Consider person-centred and family-centred assessments of need in relation to maintaining family contact, leading to individualised support plans. These plans should be based on a thorough understanding of pre-prison family dynamics and characteristics, ensuring tailored support.
5. **Access to Specialist Support:** Provide access to specialist support for families, particularly for the most vulnerable, at-risk or those for whom generic support is insufficient. Specialist services should address specific needs that require more focussed intervention.
6. **Consideration of Informal Support:** Recognise and utilise the potential of informal support networks, such as families' social networks, peer support and community resources. Schools, for example, could play an important role in supporting families during a member's imprisonment.
7. **Role of Advocates or Facilitators:** Engage advocates or facilitators to encourage and maintain relationships between families and imprisoned individuals. These advocates can act as a bridge, supporting both the family and the person in custody, ensuring their needs are equally considered.
8. **Accessible Information for Families:** Provide easily accessible information in a variety of formats (online, written, verbal) to families about what to expect when a loved one is in custody, available supports (both practical and emotional) and best practices for maintaining

positive relationships. This information can help families navigate the challenges of having an imprisoned member.

9. **Enhanced Use of Digital Technology:** Expand the use of video visits by offering flexibility in timings to accommodate family and children's schedules. Additionally, provide online practical and emotional support groups for both new and existing prison visitors. Digital technology, including phone calls, should be affordable for prisoners and families to use in order to maintain contact.
10. **Financial Support:** Increase financial support for families of prisoners, recognising that lack of formal financial assistance is a significant barrier to maintaining family contact. This support could cover travel expenses, communication costs and other related expenditures. This could involve enhancing the existing Help with Prison Visit scheme[29] or introducing new ways to support families.
11. **Improved Communication:** Enhance communication between prison establishments and families. Clear, consistent and timely communication can help families stay informed and feel more connected to their loved one in custody.
12. **Public Awareness and Stigma Reduction:** Raise awareness among the general public about the support needs of prisoners' families to reduce stigma and secondary victimisation. Public education campaigns and community programmes can help foster a more supportive societal environment for these families.

Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF) Principles

These considerations aim to align WFWF principles, in terms of providing consideration for improving family support in the criminal justice system. Suggestions such as child-friendly visiting spaces, enhanced communication, and financial support for families reinforce the need for non-stigmatising, whole-family, and needs-based support.

The recommendation to enhance training of prison staff in family-centred approaches reflects the skilled and supported workforce principle, ensuring that professionals are equipped to work sensitively with families. Furthermore, the emphasis on collaboration across agencies — including justice, social work, and community services — mirrors the collaborative and seamless approach advocated by WFWF.

Finally, the call for greater public awareness and stigma reduction ensures that families affected by imprisonment are not marginalised, aligning with the

[29] SPS has recently uplifted the mileage and refreshment allowance of this scheme, and introduced a scheme in November 2024 to support families travelling from Orkney, Shetlands and the Western Isles to visit a loved one in custody (a non-means tested scheme that provides £200.00 twice a year).

principle that support should be normalised, accessible, and rooted in children’s rights.

By considering these measures, the wellbeing of families and the reintegration prospects of imprisoned individuals may potentially achieve improved outcomes.

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