

**Out of Reach: A Qualitative Investigation into the Lives of Those with a
Loved-One in Prison**

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Introduction

Imprisonment of offenders is a much debated topic with large amounts of research focusing on the psychological impact of imprisonment on inmates (Ireland & Monaghan, 2006; Bryan et al, 2006; Swann & Pam, 1998; Lekka, Argyriou, & Beratis, 2006; Lonczak et al, 2006; Henning and Frueh, 1996; Cooke and Philip, 2000). Despite having quite a large amount of research being conducted on those who commit offences and even the victims of crime (Green, Streeter & Pomeroy, 2005) the families of those incarcerated go very much unnoticed as hidden victims of crime. With children, the effects of parental loss or separation are well documented with regards to divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991) or death. Lowenstein (1986) found it necessary to create a distinction between those disruptions that are socially approved and those that are not. Loss of a family member because of incarceration seldom elicits sympathy or support from others and family members may be stigmatised by being associated with a criminal (Western & McLanahan, 2000). Lowenstein (1986) found that the most common problems amongst children who had a parent incarcerated were a decline in the quality of schoolwork, deterioration of relations with mother and peers and emotional problems characterised by such reactions as bed-wetting, a sudden fear of darkness and recurring nightmares.

Previous research showed that the salient issues identified by women who had a partner in prison were separation trauma, stigma, powerlessness, worrying about the safety of the inmate and difficulties with visitations and transportation (Scott, 2003). Various studies also document the financial burden of maintaining a relationship with an inmate. Costs may include transport to prison visits (Christian, 2005), food packages, food and drink bought at the visit, phone-calls (Brink, 2003), letters, clothes for the inmate and legal fees for defence and appeals (Hairston, 2002). Furthermore, women have reported feeling oppressed by the enforcement of rules and regulations by prison staff (Comfort, 2003), which also restrict the amount of intimacy allowed between couples, with some prisons only allowing one hug and kiss to be administered at the beginning and end of each visit (Comfort et al, 2005).

Maintaining relationships during incarceration; are extremely important for the inmate's emotional well-being during incarceration as well as their chances of success on release, that is prevention of delinquency and recidivism (Hairston, 2002). From the institution's point of view keeping the inmate's family together eases strain within the prison environment. Woolf and Tumin (1991) conducted a review of the causes and contributing factors to prison riots in UK prisons during 1990 and asserted that an inmate's connection with the outside through contact with loved ones through prison visits could greatly reduce inmate tensions and in turn reduce the likelihood of deviant behaviour, disturbances and even riots.

The purpose of this piece of research was to examine the lives of Scottish prison families and to identify any difficulties they face, whether practical or psychological which were a direct result of having a loved one in prison.

Method

Each participant attended an interview with the researcher. An opportunistic sample of eight participants were recruited through the organisation Sacro (Safeguarding Communities - Reducing Offending). Six were female and two were male, all were between twenty-three and seventy-four years of age. Both males and one female admitted to having been in prison themselves for longer than three months and three of the participants admitted to having had drug or alcohol addictions in the past, but not as a direct result of the inmate's incarceration. Half the sample visited their partners in prison; one woman visited her grandson, one woman her son and the two males visited friends with one visiting a cousin as well. Letters were sent out by Sacro to users of their transport service to prison visits. Participation was voluntary and each participant was given a £10 Tesco voucher as an incentive to participate. The only criterion required for participation was that the individual was currently visiting a family member, friend or partner in a Scottish prison. All interviews were tape-recorded and conducted by the researcher at the Sacro office in Glasgow, as this was a familiar environment to all participants.

Analysis

A qualitative approach to this piece of research was adopted because the study attempts to gain an insight into the lives of those who have a loved one in prison. Therefore this research is not testing a hypothesis; its purpose is to document the experiences of this under-researched group that in different ways, are also victims of crime. After transcription of the recorded interviews Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was conducted in order to analyse each transcript so that recurrent themes and use of language could be identified in order to define the thinking and understanding of each participant. IPA was chosen as a means of analysis because it does not test hypotheses, within IPA participants are seen as experts regarding their own experiences. During the interview participants were required to talk in detail about their own feelings pertaining to the topic in their own words without the researcher having any *a priori* assumptions. During the transcription process the researcher sometimes had to change the participant's wording in order to protect anonymity and sometimes words were inaudible. A series of symbols were used, as shown in table 1:

Table 1. Key of Quotation Symbols

| Symbol | Meaning |
|---------------|--|
| (...) | Part of this quote has been removed due to irrelevant data or material which jeopardises the participant's anonymity |
| (???) | Represents inaudible words |
| [] | Words within these brackets have been changed to ensure the participant's anonymity, also used to add a comment to clarify meaning or context. |
| | Each full stop represents one second of silence or pause. |

Ethical Issues

The following steps were taken to protect anonymity and ensure that participants were not caused any distress:

- A consent form was issued to participants at the start of the interview explaining what will happen during the interview and required their initials as evidence of consenting to take part in the research.
- After the interview, participants were given a de-briefing form with a list of organisations that give assistance to prisoner's families and the contact email of my supervisor, Dr Rhonda Milligan, if they had any queries about the research project.
- After the tape-recorded interviews had been transcribed with specific names and places being given pseudonyms, the tapes were destroyed. Each participant was also given a pseudonym to protect anonymity. The eight participants are Dave, Steve, Debbie, Leanne, Anita, Catherine, Laura and Marge.

Results

The analysis identified five recurrent themes apparent throughout at least half of the interviews. These were categorised as:

Psychological Impact of Prison Visits

Separation Trauma

Barriers and Limitations to inmate Contact

Attitude to Prison Staff

Support and Coping

Psychological Impact of Prison Visits

The analysis showed that all participants saw prison visits as extremely important. After being asked what visits meant to him when he was in prison Dave replied:

The world honestly that's what you've got that's what you look forward to

Steve added to this notion by explaining how a lack of visits can negatively affect the emotional state of an inmate by adding to the pressures of being incarcerated:

if you don't take jail right you just end up staying in all the time and err if especially if you don't get visits as well that can make you do that as well cos you feel like nobody cares out there obviously they do but you feel they don't you know what I mean

The psychological impact of prison visits on inmates was commented on by the majority of the sample, and they understood their role as a visitor was to alleviate the psychological pressures that prison puts on the inmate. As a result some participants admitted to making a significant effort to take 'pleasure' in prison visits, as Leanne puts it

“you’ve gotta enjoy it for his sake more than anything else cos he’ll go away depressed if he doesn’t”, other participants adopted similar behaviours such as hiding negative feelings or trying to put a brave face on things so as not to upset the inmate. Laura describes how she must monitor and control her own emotions and behaviour during visits:

I don’t like breaking down in front of him cos that makes him worse as well see if he sees me getting upset and all that that makes him worse as well I’ve got to be strong for him as well (...) if he knows I’m alright then he’s gonna be more settled when I leave the visit

Separation Trauma

As with previous qualitative research (Scott, 2003), participants described how they were psychologically affected by the separation caused by prison and described a constant fear about the health and safety of their loved ones in a prison environment:

things do happen the other day there [Stan] luckily enough hadn’t come out of his cell but whatever happened one er con [prisoner] err whatever they’re called cons whatever stabbed another fella that was in front of him the blood was all over the hall way (...) but this is the type of thing that happens in prison I mean it does happen unfortunately and this is what I’m worried about this is my main worry at the moment

Yet separation through incarceration also brings up feelings that are similar to those experienced by mourners. As found by Arditti (2005) the loss of the individual to prison causes a type of grief with participants feeling isolated and cut off from their loved one, as Debbie tries to explain:

its like you feel as if you drift away from them [inmate] as well so erm because that’s the way cos I’ll only get three visits a month but while he was on remand I could go up every day so its really hard (...) you just feel lonely because you’re used to him being like around you so its just like depressing sometimes

Barriers and Limitations to inmate Contact

As with previous research (Fuller, 1993; Christian, 2005) there were a variety of barriers that prevented participants from contact with the prisoner. With regard to prison visitations the main barrier was financial due to sending parcels or giving money to the inmate in addition to transport costs, which in Marge’s case regulated how often she could see her husband:

I used to go up and visit [Harry] every second week at the time and every second Tuesday I was goin up to see [Harry] then I think that lasted about four years and I started getting paid weekly cos I got put onto the sick and I told [Harry] this so we could start seeing each other weekly

Nearly all participants talked about the difficulties of travel indicating that no instructions or directions were given by any agencies, one participant spoke of being “terrified” of missing a train or bus and as one participant described “its a nightmare if you’re going to one of these places for the first time”.

Barriers to visits are described by participants to be an emotional and financial drain which can disrupt the already fragile relationship between an inmate and family member or partner due to the limited amount of contact visits allow. By missing a bus or train to the prison and being late results in not being able to see your loved one which places a lot of stress onto an individual. One participant spoke of her reaction to being told that she could not attend the visit due to an administrative error “my heart nearly stopped and I burst into tears cos I hadn’t seen him for couple of months”. As well as the emotional cost a wasted visit means the unnecessary expenditure of time, money and effort in getting to the prison.

Attitudes to Prison Staff

Overall attitudes to prison officers were two-pronged. Officers weren’t seen as being totally against the visitors, as one participant explained it “they talk to you sometimes and all as if you’re a piece of shite do you know what I mean I don’t know and yet you get some of them that are alright”. Six of the eight participants did discuss being negatively perceived by prison officers; one participant describes her feelings of being stigmatised during visits:

You really get treated like dirt it was terrible (...) they just treated everybody horrible because you’re visiting a prisoner and you must be the same

Anita, a seventy three-year-old grandmother whose grandson was incarcerated told of one particular incident that highlights the possible stigmatisation of visitors. In this incident officers accused her of bringing drugs into the prison with the accusation apparently based on rumour. Anita demanded a strip search in order to ensure that she could partake in a standard visit as oppose to a closed visit where a glass partition divides the inmate and visitor or at worst be denied the visit altogether.

this kinda head man and a lady worker [prison officer] took me into a room he says we have reasons to believe you’re passing drugs off I says me? don’t talk rubbish I says well look I’m so sure strip search me I says that lady Ill take my clothes off my bags in the locker I says strip search me someone had said that [Simon’s] Gran was bringing drugs and that’s it and that’s how they took me in there but to prove my point I says I’m willing to take my clothes off

This example highlights the common theme of stigmatisation of visitors which runs through a lot of research into prison families (Western & McLanahan, 2000; Scott, 2003). As a result of perceived stigmatisation from prison staff, the participant will adopt a negative attitude to prison staff and the institution which may in turn become a barrier to visitation, as Anita herself admits “I hate going [to visits]”

Prison Security

Participants described various forms of security measures they had to pass through in order to be admitted into the prison, this varied greatly depending on the institution ranging from a single identification check in one prison to fingerprinting and photographing visitors, x-raying possessions and a body search of the visitor in another prison. A form of secondary 'prisonisation' identified by Comfort (2003) was apparent during the analysis in some degree, as security measures were found to be a large source of stress for participants and some participants felt they were being oppressed through such measures designed to prevent drugs getting into prison. Many participants found the security measures over the top and de-humanising

I've got nothing with searching people but they were actually searching wee babies and everything you know fair enough I know people do take stuff in..wee babies I mean just I hate it

Intimacy in Visits

Intimacy during visits was linked to the issue of security and in particular with visitors bringing drugs into the prison. Dave describes his personal experience of actual physical oppression when he was an inmate being visited by a family member:

my dad came up to visit me and all I hadn't seen him for ages the last time I seen him we nearly fell out erm he came in and as soon as I'd seen him I went over to give him a cuddle erm I gave him a cuddle and my dad kissed me on the cheek erm and I got my arms put up my back my dad got dragged outta the visit [by prison officers] and once I got took into the wee room I got strip searched and all that and they were grabbing my throat in case I was trying to swallow anything

According to Dave the officers had seen his father kiss Dave and had assumed that drugs were being passed from the visitor to the inmate. Dave's father was also searched after being taken to a local police station. No drugs were found on either party and security camera footage from the visiting room indicated that no contraband had been passed on. Neither Dave nor his father received an apology, which for Dave reinforced the notion that prisoners and (due to stigmatisation prisoner's families) should not be allowed basic affectionate interaction:

I was really looking forward to the visit and I walk out and my natural instinct was just to give him a cuddle and all that happened for it it was hard so it was really really hard

Once again signs of oppression by prison officers as well as humiliation begin to creep into Dave's account of the event through the language he uses, When asked how he felt about what had happened with his father, Dave replied "made me feel that size [gestures with his fingers] all my pals were in visiting their relatives and I'd been carted out the room with my hands up my back". This account horrifically depicts what visitors are subjected to if suspected by prison officers to be bringing drugs into the prison. Although the topic of drug control in prisons is a serious issue, Dave experienced

humiliation, oppression and the denial of expected contact with a loved one for doing nothing wrong. In turn Dave's father had to be taken away and searched all because he wanted to show affection towards his son. Neither was given an apology, indicating to visitors that prison institutions are not interested in acknowledging or rectifying emotional distress or in this case physical assault caused to visitors and prisoners through security measures.

In contrast some participants described officers as "helpful" and "nice", and all participants were aware that prison officers had a job to do and there were valid reasons for searches and the monitoring of visits.

Support and Coping

Organisational support was apparent with all participants as they had been recruited through Sacro. Participants praised the bus service provided by Sacro as it alleviated barriers such as cost and organisation of travelling to the prison.

I say Sacro is a lifesaver here you know cos if you're trying to find one of these places on your own it can be an absolute nightmare

However, most participants only mentioned one or two other agencies that gave support and initially at the start of the inmate's sentence participants were unaware that such assistance existed. It appeared from the interviews that there was no standard procedure whereby participants obtained information about support groups resulting in support being offered later than necessary:

at the time I didn't know anything about Sacro to be honest with you it was actually when my [Chris] had been in jail the first time and it was through my own probation officer you know and if I'd known that I'd probably saved myself an absolute fortune

In a sense some participants demonstrated learned helplessness whereby no support had been offered previously so the participant did not look for any. Other examples of learned helplessness were demonstrated by participants in other ways. In this sample some participants chose not to receive support from friends, which may possibly be due to potential perceived stigmatisation, pride or shame.

I try to keep it all to myself I don't even tell my closest friend all about it they don't know half of the ooh I could write a book I could write a book

With regards to coping with the emotional strain of having a loved one in prison most participants demonstrated no obvious overarching coping strategy. "I just take every day as it comes". Avoidance coping was also apparent with a large proportion of the sample. Instead of dealing with the problems and mental anguish participants tried to keep their mind on other things as they do not believe there is another way:

How do I cope? Well I've always got like things to keep me busy like appointments and everything it's a bit boring but it's the only thing I can do

The struggle to cope with having a loved one in prison can progress into extremely negative consequences. Marge was also one of the participants who covered up her emotions denying herself emotional support from friends or family. Marge speaks of how her husband being in prison affected her mental health and later on in the interview discusses how she copes with the negative feelings in what could be described as a maladaptive coping strategy:

I'll get rid of this feeling the way I usually get rid of it just put a smile on my face I don't care about what's inside as long as that smiles on my face and nobody knows what's going on inside my head (...) I just used to sit in my room in fact I was actually getting more and more depressed as the years were going on I noticed

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present investigation aimed to identify themes that reflect problems and difficulties faced by prison families attempting to maintain contact or relationships with family, friends and partners inside Scottish prisons. Research consistently demonstrates that prison families suffer financial, practical and emotional hardships as a direct result of having a loved one in prison (Christian, 2005; Scott, 2003), which in turn can assist in forming barriers to prevent what little family contact there is with inmates (Brookes-Gordon & Bainham, 2004). This is especially significant as it has been shown that families are extremely important to prisoners as on release strong family ties have been shown to be an indicator of post release success (Dowden and Andrews, 1999; Hairston, 1991).

From analysing the themes brought up by this study, it seems that many of the psychological and practical difficulties faced by prison families could be alleviated. On a practical level it seems that prison families would benefit from precise instruction as to the location of prisons, visiting times, directions and cost of visits to be administered immediately after the loved one has been sentenced. At the very least this would ease the anxiety of individuals who are attending a prison visit for the first time. Whether this could be administered by each individual prison or whether the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) should produce a publication covering all Scottish prisons is more of an administrative issue. Perhaps more importantly, organisations such as Sacro that support prison families should also be brought to the attention of prison families as soon as they are placed in such a situation. Although national public sources such as the citizen's advice bureau and organisations like Sacro do publicise themselves through a variety of mediums such as the internet, publications and advertisements, the participants interviewed in the present study did not appear to know the existence of such organisations and were therefore denied the benefits that could be offered. This may be due to illiteracy issues or not acknowledging to friends and family that help is required.

In light of the psychological and emotional trauma described by participants ranging from anxiety to depression, some form of therapeutic support is urgently required for prison families. Perhaps the use of focus groups consisting of individuals in similar

circumstances and led by a mental health professional may be beneficial for prison families in dealing with the emotional problems of separation such as feelings of grief.

With regard to prison visits future research may need to be conducted to achieve a balance between security and inmate welfare. Overall the specific prisons discussed in the study were a mixed bag with some institutions receiving praise for short visitor waiting times and less intrusion into the conversations of visitors and inmates, whereas others demonstrated oppression and the 'secondary prisonisation' of visitors. A quantitative piece of research comparing visitor satisfaction against security violations for each individual Scottish prison may shed some light as to the optimal combination of factors that combine humane visitor conditions with efficient security procedures.

The issue of security policy and procedure within prison is an extremely controversial one. It is clear that drugs are prevalent within prisons with research conducted in the UK showing that hard drugs such as heroin are a significant component in prisoner social life (Crewe, 2004). One female participant in the study even admitted to having cannabis brought into a prison by a family member while she was an inmate. Searches and identification checks are needed in penal establishments, although extreme examples heard from the study's participants involving the searches of babies, elderly women and officers using physical aggression to forcibly remove inmates and their family during visits as described by Dave does seem to stigmatise and degrade the individuals, especially if they are found to be innocent.

Further qualitative research in the UK may want to focus on a more homogenous sample to discover whether similar or different themes arise when the inmates are female as opposed to male or a sample where all participants visit the same prison. Also, further research, similar to the study by Comfort et al (2005) may need to gain a perspective from the prison officers in order to find compromises or similar difficulties experienced by officers and prison families during visits.

This study has provided one of the first insights into the lives of Scottish prison families, and has hopefully opened the door to further research resulting in better treatment of individuals who are essentially just partners, mothers and friends who play an important role in keeping the offender away from deviant behaviour both inside and outside prison on release.

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