

# Prisoners' Families: Still Forgotten Victims?

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*Forty years ago, when the first systematic study of prisoners' families was published (Morris 1965), the average daily prison population stood at 30,421. The figure now exceeds 80,000. Despite the dramatic increase in their numbers, prisoners' families largely remain forgotten victims. Financial difficulties, emotional issues and prison visiting are particular concerns. It is essential that prisoners' families are included in the current debate on prison numbers. This article reviews the issues and appraises recent initiatives and possible reforms.*

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On 1st December 2006, the average daily prison population reached an all-time high of 80,175. This was not far short of the prison system's 'useable operational capacity' of 80,207. A year previously, the population had stood at 77,262 with a capacity of 78,275 (NOMS, 2006). In September 2005, the then Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, outlined a strategy for confronting the problems created by the relentlessly expanding prison population. One of the measures suggested was the establishment of a network of community prisons (*The Guardian*, 20 September 2005). Housing inmates nearer to their homes, it was said, would facilitate improved family contact and should reduce re-offending. Community prisons were a key recommendation of the Woolf Report (1991), which stated that 'where practical, prisons should be community prisons sited within reasonable proximity to, and having close connections with, the community with which the prisoners they hold have their closest links' (para.11.49). This recommendation was endorsed by the then Home Secretary, Kenneth Baker, but abandoned by his successor, Michael Howard. Since then, little official attention has been paid to either community gaols or to the problems faced by the vastly increased number of prisoners' families. It remains to be seen whether community prisons ever appear, but, with a soaring prison population, the resurrection of the idea of community gaols and the fortieth anniversary of the pioneering work of Morris, it is

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a propitious time to appraise concerns, initiatives and possible reforms in the area of prisoners' families.

The work of Morris (1965), published when the average daily prison population was 30,421, is generally credited as the first systematic study of prisoners' families. Forty years on, prison numbers have risen dramatically. So, too, have the numbers of families that are affected by imprisonment. Yet prisoners' families remain largely 'forgotten victims' (Matthews, 1983). There have been numerous developments and initiatives in this field, as well as increased interest from both within and outside of the prison service. The latest of these is the reintroduction of the possibility of community gaols.

Much of the discussion in this area has focussed on the part which can be played by prisoners' families in the rehabilitation and crime control process. While arguments in support of such involvement are valid and may be instrumental in securing a better deal for families, care must be taken in balancing the needs of prisoner, prison service and family. Families cannot meaningfully be given the responsibility for increasing the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. Instead, they should be supported as innocent victims of that system and of the failings of their imprisoned family member. If a fair deal and decent treatment for families lead, as most agree that they would, to other crime reduction benefits, then this is a bonus.

Perhaps the most notable development since 1965 is the establishment, in 1989, of the *Federation of Prisoners' Families' Support Groups*. Renamed *Action for Prisoners' Families (APF)*, this organisation has established itself as a significant resource for the families of prisoners. It has offices in London, Nottingham and Norwich, with a core of full time staff and close contact with a network of support groups around the UK. APF has been successful in helping to raise the profile of prisoners' families. For example, in 2005 it enlisted the cast of the London stage play *CHICAGO* to assist with publicity and fundraising activities. A website is maintained at [www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk](http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk), where APF describes its work as providing a national federation of services which 'encourages the exchange of information, skills and ideas. This informs the development of good practice in support work with families'.

A wide range of activity is undertaken. This includes liaising with government and other agencies in the criminal justice system, as well as providing a range of initiatives such as training, conferences and seminars. For families, it offers a library of publications, a national directory of services and a telephone helpline. The Prisoners' Families' Helpline, co-ordinated by APF, offers information and support to anyone with a relative or friend in prison and takes more than 1,200 calls a month from distressed families. However, as APF acknowledge, much remains to be done. As the Social Exclusion Unit (2002) put it '... support and advice for families is limited, visiting facilities are often inadequate, and families are rarely involved in the process of tackling offending behaviour' (p. 111).

As a campaigning issue, finding support for the families of prisoners is not easy. Such families are the 'hidden' or 'forgotten' victims of imprisonment. They also suffer from 'guilt by association' (Matthews, 1983). Not surprisingly, the issue of the welfare of such families did not feature in any manifesto in the 2005 UK General

Election. This is unfortunate since, even if we ignore humanitarian arguments, support for what are sometimes referred to as 'family ties' has significant implications for prison regimes, for re-offending rates and for the drive to keep young people away from crime (Light, 1993; Ditchfield, 1994). As the Home Office (2004) recognise: 'Maintaining family relationships can help to prevent ex-prisoners re-offending and assist them to resettle successfully into the community' (p. 37).

The prison population of England and Wales has for the first time exceeded 80,000. As the number of prisoners rises, so does the number of people with a family member in gaol. Of most concern are children with a parent in prison. A survey conducted in 1991 revealed that towards one third of male and almost one half of women prisoners had children living with them immediately before they were sentenced to their term of imprisonment (Dodd & Hunter, 1992). Another survey suggested even higher figures; two-thirds of female and 59 percent of male inmates with dependent children aged under 18 (Hamlyn & Lewis, 2000; Hansard, House of Commons, 28 April 2003). Of female prisoners with children, half (51 percent) had pre-school children aged under five. There are no accurate records kept of overall numbers, but the Home Office (2004) estimates that 'Approximately 150,000 children are affected by the imprisonment of a parent each year' (p. 37). The personal accounts of these young people make for unsettling reading (see, for example, Boswell, 2002).

The even more dramatic rise in the rate of women's imprisonment since the mid-1990s suggests that the degree of children's suffering (since the woman is usually the primary carer) has increased significantly. However, other members of the family, not just children, may be heavily affected. Also, for some families the situation is made even more difficult by issues of language, ethnicity and culture (Light, 1995; Mortimer, 2003; Power, 2003; POPS, 2005). There is a clear need for better interpreting facilities and bilingual staff/leaflets. Such families may face racial abuse and even deportation (Prison Reform Trust, 1990). In its 2005 annual review, APF (2005a) cite 'the three top issues raised by families (calling the Prisoners' Families' Helpline) (as) problems about visiting (45 percent), financial difficulties (13.5 percent) and emotional difficulties (14 percent)' (p. 13).

## **Visiting**

As can be seen from the APF figures, families view visits as especially problematic. This is particularly unfortunate, since such visits provide an important lifeline for the maintenance of family relationships. For the family, visits are seen as the best way of keeping in touch since many inmates have poor written skills and phone cards are expensive relative to prisoners' earnings (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). Also, as Niven and Stewart (2005) found, visits appear to significantly increase the prospects for employment, education, training and accommodation for inmates on release. However, despite an increasing prison population, 'evidence points to a decline in the overall number of prison visits' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002, p. 113). This may, in part, be due to the increased size of the prison population. This results in inmates being kept at gaols further from home. In July 2004, 24,581 prisoners were held over

50 miles, and 9,591 over 100 miles, from their home (parliamentary written answers quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2005a). For families relying on public transport, visiting prisons located in remote parts of the country may be impossible.

The cost, time and practicality of travel are major issues for families. Niven and Stewart (2005) found that, of those inmates not receiving visits, 41 percent gave distance and cost as a reason for this. Their suggestion for temporary transfer of prisoners to prisons nearer their family/partner is a good one and is used in some institutions, but needs to be expanded significantly (although full-sentence location in a prison near home would obviously be preferable). The Woolf Report (1991) recommended that community prisons should be developed, in order to ensure, amongst other things, that prisoners serve their sentences as close to their homes as possible.

Visiting procedures are also frustrating and can deter rather than encourage visits. Complications and obstacles—such as constantly engaged phone lines at the prison, rigid time slots, complicated booking procedures, the need to remember to bring necessary identification and other paperwork on the visit and, perhaps most wearisome and unpleasant of all, being subjected to intrusive searches—conspire to dissuade even the most loving of family members from making a visit. There is no privacy and a constant surveillance of visitors. Also, prison staff do not receive proper training in this area and some can be insensitive, unfriendly and suspicious. As one woman put it ‘Going in isn’t easy, I feel like the criminal’ (*The Guardian*, 23rd October 2002). However, families may feel powerless to complain, finding themselves in alien territory and worried that any complaint may cause negative repercussions for the prisoner (Action for Prisoners’ Families, 2005b). Beyond these hurdles, there are also many matters with which the family will need to become familiar, some more obvious than others. For example, an understanding of prison jargon will be needed, as will knowledge of what the prisoner is allowed to receive from a visitor. The latter is often only learned by experience, resulting in disappointment when an intended gift has to be taken home. Full information and easily understood literature are helpful at an early stage. (NACRO, 2002 is an excellent practical guide for families.)

There is also the difficulty of fitting in with the visiting times at the prison. These can be restrictive and are often shortened by administrative procedures and delays incurred when prison staff collect the prisoner. Then there is the nature of the visit itself. This is usually conducted in less than relaxed circumstances. Restricted time, and the starkly contrasting circumstances of the inmate and the family, can result in conversations being artificial and stilted, with everyone keen to make the most of the visit and not to upset the other person. Consequently, issues and problems may go unresolved and even unmentioned. As McDermott and King (1992) put it: ‘To avoid the worst, both parties may conspire to say as little as possible’ (p. 66).

These practical problems produce emotional difficulties which are made worse when visiting conditions are crowded, intrusive and noisy. The visitor can frequently feel that the meeting has been strained and frustrating and may leave with feelings of guilt, violation, distress, anxiety and worry (Action for Prisoners’ Families, 2005c). Not surprisingly, a large number of inmates lose most and, in many cases, all contact with their family, with particularly serious consequences for children (Richards, 1992;

Woodward, 2003). Unless the behaviour of the prisoner is detrimental to the long-term wellbeing of the family, it is therefore in the interests of the prisoners' family, the prison system and society at large to facilitate contact.

Post-Woolf (1991), the Prison Service has increasingly come to recognise the importance of maintaining family ties. For example, Prison Service Standing Order 5 states that 'it is one of the roles of the prison service to ensure that the socially harmful effects of an inmate's removal from normal life are as far as possible minimised' (cited in Boswell, 2002). Also, Rule 4 of the Prison Rules (1999) states that:

- (i) Special attention should be paid to the maintenance of such relationships between a prisoner and his family as are desirable in the interests of both and (ii) A prisoner shall be encouraged and assisted to establish and maintain such relations with persons and agencies outside prison as may, in the opinion of the governor, best promote the interests of his family and his own social rehabilitation.

The Children Act (1989) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 2) have also attempted to safeguard the rights and expectations of children. However, both have been criticised for taking 'little account of the needs of prisoners' children or of offenders' parenting responsibilities when being sentenced to prison' (Laing, 2003, p. 5).

It is recognised by the Home Office (2004) that visitors' centres 'have an important role to play in helping to keep families together and enabling them to contribute to the rehabilitation process in a meaningful way' (p. 37). Visitors' centres provide support and information for those visiting a gaol. They have proved extremely successful, with the Home Office stating, 'in principle, that all closed prisons should have a visitors' centre' (p. 37). In November 2003, of 139 prisons in England and Wales, 112 had visitors' centres (parliamentary answer quoted in Prison Reform Trust, 2005a). All newly-built and contracted-out prisons are required, by the terms of their contracts, to have a visitors' centre. However, as yet the Home Office has placed no such obligation on its own establishments, run by the Prison Service.

The facilities within visitors' centres differ considerably. A review of such centres, together with an audit including examples of best practice, can be found in Loucks (2002). A number of suggestions for improved practice can be raised in relation to facilities. These include allowing families to book their next visit whilst at the centre (avoiding the frustration of jammed phone lines), easy chairs in visiting rooms, staffed play areas, refreshments, baby-changing facilities, approachable prison staff and support for children. Such improvements would enhance the enjoyment and feasibility of visiting, thus encouraging more families to attend. Beyond standard visits, some, but not all, prisons provide 'special children's visits', temporary transfers and family or 'lifer' days. These aim to normalise parent/child interaction, in so far as that is possible in a prison setting (Action for Prisoners' Families, 2005c). For the mothers interviewed by Caddle and Crisp (1997), 'the most important improvements to visiting arrangements for children' (p. 3) were, for 36 percent of them, town visits (where mother and child spend time together outside the prison) and, for 27 percent of them, all day/extended visits.

Visiting facilities vary between institutions, but it can be argued that all need increased resources and more flexible and generous visiting times. Responsibility for dealing with families fairly, courteously and efficiently needs to be fully recognised by the Prison Service. This would include adequate notification to the family if a visit is to be cancelled or if an inmate has been transferred to another institution. It would also include considering families through all stages of the prison's dealings with the inmate—for example, when allocation decisions are made. An officer with overall responsibility for families at each prison could provide a point of contact for families and coordinate family matters at the institution—much like the Family Contact Development Officer assigned to each prison in Scotland (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

It can, of course, be argued that other factors militate against these recommendations. Geographical location, overcrowding, security, staff levels and other operational, financial and physical factors have been advanced to explain the shoddy treatment meted out to families at some establishments. For the institutions, such matters may be very pressing. For the government, they are the natural concomitants of a policy of benign neglect. The Human Rights Act protects the right to family life. While, arguably, the inmate may be said to have forfeited that right to some extent, the family cannot be said to have done so and are therefore entitled to as full an enjoyment of that right as is achievable in a properly administered system of imprisonment. At present, this is not the case.

### **Financial**

Many partners of prisoners find themselves in serious financial difficulty. This may be due to a loss of income and/or added expense incurred as a result of the criminal proceedings and eventual imprisonment. There may also be a lack of experience in dealing with the family's financial affairs and a period when the partner is traumatised by the process of arrest, trial and imprisonment. Dealing with the stigma, children and other immediate issues may cause a partner to lose sight of a deteriorating financial position. Financial issues are often addressed some time after the person has been arrested, when debt has risen significantly. Many partners find themselves in unfamiliar territory, or may find it embarrassing to discuss money issues: 'I felt ashamed, silly really, not just ashamed of where he was but that I didn't know the first thing about how to sort things. I didn't say a word about the money to anyone and so it all began to pile up' (Davis, 1992, pp. 77–78).

Mothers may also be worried that their children will be taken away from them if they admit to financial hardship (Lloyd, 1995). A reduction in benefits, one less wage, legal costs and financial demands from the prisoner can all escalate a dire financial situation to the point where homelessness and deprivation result. For many families, the only source of income will be the benefits system. There is often a lack of knowledge of this system and of how to go about making a claim for support. To add to such problems, the Social Exclusion Unit (2002) found 'a lack of expertise and accountability in Jobcentre Plus and Housing Benefit local offices in dealing with prisoners' families' needs, and a lack of someone with lead responsibility' (p. 116).

Accessible financial advice is important to enabling partners to bring their financial situation under control. Some partners may be unaware that such assistance is freely available to them and may get sucked into accepting 'help' from the myriad loan companies that advertise their services widely to the less well-off. This usually results in high interest rates and a further spiralling of debt. Other agencies involved with the family (such as social services, the probation service, schools and youth workers) could take a more pro-active role in assisting families and in informing them of services that are available, providing supportive rather than exploitative sources of financial help and assistance. For example, the Assisted Prison Visits Unit provides financial aid for travel expenses, childcare, meal and overnight allowances. However, strict and over-bureaucratic procedures can defeat some families and those not eligible have no other official financial assistance.

Many partners are forced to stop work or to reduce their working hours in order to accommodate child-care responsibilities and prison visiting. On the other hand, some may feel so stigmatised or emotionally troubled that continuing to work is not possible. Those able to continue working require employee rights which recognise that, while employers may be sympathetic to the bereaved and those with family health or relationship problems, the families of prisoners often are viewed less sympathetically.

Another method of assisting with the financial difficulties faced by families is to increase the amount of work, wage or job opportunities that are available to prisoners, thus allowing them to contribute to the household income. Alongside this, root and branch reform of work and education inside prisons could allow the more constructive use of an inmate's time and the possibility of useful employment on release.

## **Emotional**

Emotional difficulties can arise during every aspect of the imprisonment process. Initially, there is the experience of arrest and trial. This is followed by the trauma experienced by some families in coming to terms with the experience of having a family member sent to prison. Then comes the suffering involved in the separation, which may vary in nature and intensity with the length of sentence that is being served. Difficulties will arise and distress may be caused as families attempt to keep in touch and to maintain some sort of relationship with the inmate while at the same time struggling for their own survival. Then, with release, comes the process of 'starting-over', which can often pose its own emotional difficulties (Light, 1989).

Inevitably, some relationships break down during the sentence and this in itself can cause additional distress and feelings of isolation. It has been estimated that some 48 percent of remand and 43 percent of sentenced prisoners lose contact with their families (NACRO, 2000). Where children are involved, a further dimension is added (for example, see Gibbs, 1971). As Seymour (1998) found: 'Children whose parents are incarcerated experience a variety of negative consequences, particularly in terms of their emotional health and wellbeing' (p. 472). For male prisoners, some female partners may feel the pressure of gender stereotypes which suggest that they 'stand by

their man' (McDermott & King, 1992). For others, divorce occurs. This can be the second traumatic event: 'Within minutes (of arrest) my mother was saying "That's it. I want a divorce"' (Boswell, 2002, p. 18).

Jealousy, anger and suspicion may be experienced by both the partner and the prisoner, as both adjust to coping with celibacy and to the loss of 'couple status' and intimacy (Action for Prisoners' Families, 2005d). APF lists a catalogue of feelings that family members may experience. These include anger, rejection, guilt, loneliness, inadequacy, anxiety, disappointment, betrayal, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, isolation, denial, stigma, shame, distrust, loss, abandonment, grief, helplessness, fear and frustration (Action for Prisoners' Families, 2005d).

New responsibilities must be learned and, in many cases, childhoods compromised: 'I had to ... grow up quickly ... help mum a lot with the chores' (Boswell, 2002, p. 18). With the best of intentions the parent at home may lie about the whereabouts of the prisoner, thinking that it is better for the child not to know: 'Some [prisoners' families] go to great lengths to hide the true reason for the absence of the spouse from friends and family, perhaps fearing very negative reactions' (Richards, 1992, p. 10). Such an approach can increase the separation between prisoner and child, since it removes the possibility of prison visits. It can also lead to detrimental effects when the truth is discovered, especially if the child is informed of the real location of their offending parent by someone from outside the family. Deceiving a child in such circumstances can have 'far reaching consequences and is universally condemned as harmful' (Woodward, 2003, p. 44). It adds to the range of difficulties already faced by the children of an imprisoned parent. In terms of concrete behavioural impact, such difficulties can lead to a lack of concentration, bed wetting, lowered academic performance and increased truancy, and destructive or delinquent behaviour (Shaw, 1987). Moreover, dietary deficiencies in the partner—and, consequently, the children—may result from depression, poverty and neglect: 'In the beginning I was in bad shape. I went down to six stone. The doctor had me on tranquillisers' (McDermott & King, 1992, p. 58).

Overall, it has been estimated that almost 30 percent of prisoners' children suffer from significant mental health problems. This compares with 10 percent of the general population (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). Further, as one Australian review has concluded:

The children of female prisoners' experience greater disruption as a result of incarceration than those of male prisoners, as women are often the primary caregivers and in the majority of cases, the sole parent before imprisonment. Early maternal separation and interruptions to the attachment-bonding process have been identified as causing serious long-term emotional difficulties. (Woodward, 2003, p. viii)

Such children may have to adapt to a new primary caregiver, which can clearly cause upheaval for both parties. These new caregivers, often members of a prisoners' family, are left with the complex and difficult tasks of providing for a child's material needs, explaining parental absence and developing and maintaining a caregiver-child relationship. Several studies (for example, Shaw, 1987; Woodward, 2003) refer to a



range of problems experienced by these caregivers. Such problems include financial hardship, overcrowded accommodation, feelings of being overwhelmed and loss of independence or employment (Gursansky *et al.*, 1998). They also include strains on relationships and friendships, isolation, major disruption to their own lives and plans, anxiety, and lack of information and support (Woodward, 2003). Support that could relieve the difficulties facing relatives when they take over the care of prisoners' children could help to reduce the number of children taken into care and the number of siblings who are subsequently separated.

However, the emotional difficulties involved are not easy to address and may be made worse if disapproval of the prisoner leads to a closing of social and wider family support. Views such as that quoted in Davis (1992) are not uncommon: 'If you're having him back, don't expect us to bail you out when he lets you down again' (p. 83). Also, the ways in which families will be supported by relatives and friends will often depend on the nature of the offence that led to the imprisonment. In some cases, the immediate family can find itself isolated. In such circumstances, support groups can offer effective assistance through being non-judgemental and having shared experiences. So, too, can the family doctor and the social worker (if there is one). However, some families find health professionals to be unsympathetic to their situation. Some have even reported being struck off their GP's list (Federation of Prisoners' families' Support Groups, 1996). In the wider local community, an enlightened school and teachers can assist children of school age. However, proactive anti-bullying policies and teacher training in dealing with these children may be needed in order to facilitate such help. Improving contact between the imprisoned parent and the school could, if sensitively handled and focussed on the child's interests, be part of the support offered.

One of the difficulties in the field of wider community support is that families may be reluctant to use 'official' services because of the stigma attached to imprisonment and for fear that reports may be made on them and that matters may be taken out of their hands. Again, support from prisoners' family support groups can be helpful here. Such support can come in a range of ways. For example, the rhythm and routine of family life can be disrupted by the incarceration and family members may be at a loss as to how to establish new and effective patterns. Many members of support groups will already have dealt with similar experiences and can provide advice that helps families to steer through the pitfalls. Other, wider organisations can also help. For example, The Ormiston Trust, which works for a range of disadvantaged children and families, including those of prisoners, has produced a series of 'work booklets' for children that are aimed at providing children with an understanding of the situation in which they find themselves. These have proved successful in reducing levels of anxiety, confusion and apprehension

## **Conclusion**

Since the ground-breaking research published by Morris (1965), a substantial body of literature has been produced on this subject. Academics, criminal justice practitioners

and government departments recognise both the injustice inflicted by the criminal justice system on the families of prisoners and the benefits that can accrue from the maintenance of family contact and relationships. Innovations such as visitors' centres have appeared and grown and support groups have survived and prospered, often against difficult odds. Action for Prisoners' Families is now firmly established and organisations such as Save the Children and the Ormiston Trust have provided valuable support. NACRO and the Prison Reform Trust have worked hard to raise the profile of prisoner's families (The Prison Reform Trust, 2005b, recently produced a special issue of its *Prison Report* on the subject of prisoners' families).

However, successive research studies have continued to show a lack of provision and responsibility for the needs of prisoners' families. They remain, as Matthews (1983) termed it over 20 years ago, the 'forgotten victims' of crime who suffer the stigma of 'guilt by association'. In a world of competing demands on finite resources, and in an atmosphere of heightened concern over crime, prisoners' families continue to come some way down the order of priority for help and support by government and by society more generally. Many of those with an understanding of the issues involved continue to strive to raise the profile of these families, but progress has been slow. At the centre of the problem lies the prison. The prison service can point to stretched resources and the huge increase in prison numbers as factors inhibiting progress. At times of crisis and with limited resources, family contact may be the first to suffer. Security and control remain the overriding criteria. Recognition of the evidence that good family contact can have a positive effect on prison regimes has seen some, but limited, improvements.

This article has examined issues of particular concern to the families of prisoners and identified some possible reforms. A review of the literature has identified two priority areas. First, there remains a lack of knowledge about both the extent and nature of the suffering endured and the problems faced by prisoners' families. For example, there is insufficient data on the number of children with a parent in prison and on what happens to these children when the parent is incarcerated. Fuller information is needed on who looks after them. For example, whether they stay in their own homes, with other members of the family, or with friends or neighbours or in foster care. Other information gaps concern the support systems needed to ensure family unit survival in such circumstances, including the welfare of those who subsequently come to care for the children of prisoners' families.

Secondly, an integrated response from interested agencies is required. However, there are complex difficulties in formulating and delivering such a response. Different agencies have different agendas, funding issues and responsibilities, which can obviously lead to conflict: 'Both child welfare agencies and the criminal justice system need an understanding of the other's processes, responsibilities and concerns, but both are often overextended and have limited resources to invest on collaboration' (Seymour, 1998, p.481). There are organisations that seek directly to represent prisoners' families, such as APF, but while attempts have been made to coordinate efforts between groups, there is a need for improved contact and harmonisation between the main responsible bodies (primarily child welfare agencies and the

criminal justice system). This could even lead to some economies in expenditure through reducing duplication. These official bodies also need to liaise more effectively with the relevant support groups and voluntary organisations. Such a coordinated approach could facilitate more effective service delivery and could also produce crime reduction benefits by improving the prospects for effective rehabilitation. As Woodward (2003) has contended, an environment needs to be provided that is conducive to rebuilding, renegotiating and maintaining ongoing family relationships. A partnership approach would make this a more realistic prospect. This would aim to establish a nationwide network of social and economic services and to increase the involvement of other community services such as residential workers, community development workers, youth workers and others to 'operate locally, amplify regionally, and influence nationally and internationally' (POPS, 2005, p. 4).

In the meantime, although there is a pressing need for further research on the ways in which such partnership work can best operate, there is a more pressing need for a number of practical issues to be addressed. Many of the factors affecting prisoners' families reinforce each other, making it artificial to try to address them separately. Some of the answers lie, more prosaically, with keeping prisoners close to home, providing families with easily accessible, non-judgemental information and support and reducing the number of people sent to prison. For this reason, community prisons—provided *instead of*, rather than in addition to, existing prisons—would be a positive move towards improving the lot of prisoners' families.

However, families should not become part of the apparatus of crime-control. There is a risk that perceptions of an improved prison system as diminishing the severity of the sanction will lead to harsher sentencing. The punitive penal system that was crafted by Michael Howard and embraced by Jack Straw and David Blunkett has witnessed an escalation in prison numbers and family suffering. A brave Home Secretary would seek to reverse this trend. The introduction of community goals, as part of a new deal for prisoners' families, could be a major part of such a reversal and could also show positive results for crime reduction.

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