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‘Staying Connected’: Families’ experiences of visiting an imprisoned relative and implications for social work practice

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Abstract

This article details research carried out into the experience of families visiting an imprisoned relative. The purpose of the study was to uncover possible implications for the practice of social work with this group. Interviews were conducted with individuals who had experience of prison visitation. The importance of visiting is explored and factors which support or mediate against families’ experiences are examined. The research identifies a number of obstacles currently faced by visiting families and offers observations relevant to the service provided by social workers who assist prisoners’ families wishing to maintain contact through visiting.

Keywords: Prisoners’ families; imprisoned relative; social work practice

Introduction

The population of prisoners in Ireland has ‘increased exponentially since the 1960s’ (O’Mahony, 2000: 17). The Irish Prison Service Annual Report states that during 2006, 9,700 persons accounted for the total of 12,157 committals (Irish Prison Service, 2006: 3). The effects of imprisonment on the families left on the outside can be profound. In fact, many authors refer to families serving a ‘sentence’ themselves (Bedford Row Family Project, 2008; Codd, 1998; and Wedge, 1996).

Visiting helps families to carry out their caring role during imprisonment. Prisoners often rely on their families to be ‘their link to the outside world’ (Condry, 2007: 4). Family ties have been identified as ‘a protective factor’ (POPS, 2008: 3). The support that they receive through visits can help ‘alleviate the pain of imprisonment for some prisoners’ (POPS, 2007: 2). Many families, (particularly where the prisoner is a mother) ‘will be re-united with their children upon release’ (Lewis, Bates and Murray, 2008: 29). The Scottish Minister for Justice, for example, stated that ‘the more family-friendly our prisons become, the more we can increase the chances of a prisoner returning to a stable family environment’ (Families Outside, 2004: 2). Recent research in the UK found that ‘receiving family visits was associated with reduced chances of prisoners re-offending after release’ (May, Sharma and Stewart, 2008: 1).

Imprisonment of a relative can mean that family structures often change and roles need to be renegotiated (Condry, 2007; Healy, Kelly and Hart, 2005). Concerns have been expressed regarding a ‘strong association between parental imprisonment and adverse outcomes for children’ (Lewis, Bates, and Murray, 2008:18). All parents have practical and cultural-symbolic elements to their role. They are responsible for ‘nourishing and supporting’, ‘guarding and protecting’ and ‘stimulating and rearing the child’ (Eurochips, 2006: 26) as well as creating and maintaining a ‘parent-child relationship’ (ibid: 28). Imprisonment by its nature hampers the ability of parents (imprisoned and not imprisoned) to fulfil their parenting role. Many offenders ‘conduct relationships with their children that are characterised by continual interruption or separation’ (Walker, 2008: 10). This can hinder the development of parent/child bonds and attachments.

Currently, social work support for prisoners’ families in Ireland often only occurs if there are child protection or mental health concerns. This does raise the question: is risk only being addressed at crisis stage? The focus of the Probation Service on client-centred practices, together with limited resources and time pressures, mean that the ‘broader relationships of an inmate become secondary concerns’ (Codd, 1998: 150).

Attention was also given to the legal/human rights context. According to Article 41.1 of Bunreacht na hEireann (1937) ‘The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law’. It can be seen in theory to support the maintenance of contact with an imprisoned relative; though Irish policy and legislation may not be seen to reflect this strongly.

Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms maintains that ‘Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life’. However, provision is made for interference with this right for the purpose of preventing disorder and crime. Support for visitation is justified by the view that ‘the rights of the child and family are being ignored if they are unable to have appropriate access’ (Lewis, Bates and Murray, 2008: 10).

Article 3.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that ‘the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration’ in all actions taken relating to children. Article 9.3 commits to respect the right of a child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child’s best interests. This provision explicitly supports the maintenance of contact through visiting.

Factors that support families visiting an imprisoned relative

Families receive support from a variety of sources. Hashima and Amato (1994) note that even the ‘perception that social support will be available, if it is needed, can have significant benefits for those living in disadvantaged circumstances’ (cited in Jack and Jack, 2000: 96). Support from kinship networks can be practical (Codd, 1998), emotional (Codd, 1998), or indeed financial (Smith et al, 2008).

According to the literature, many families rely on support from community based service providers (provided predominantly by voluntary organisations). Provision for visiting families varies across the country’s prisons. PACE and Focus Ireland address

the shortfalls in such provision and recommend that, ‘facilities within the prison system should have a range of ‘family-friendly’ facilities to encourage family visits’ (Hickey, 2002: x).

Obstacles that militate against families visiting imprisoned relatives

Location

Visiting can be daunting, particularly for the first time. The experience is complicated by insufficient information regarding visiting procedures and protocols (Codd, 2007; Condry, 2007; Eurochips, 2006; Loucks, 2005). Visitors go ‘through a process of socialisation, learning how to do it and do it properly’ (Condry, 2007: 6). The costs of visiting, and providing for imprisoned relatives put additional pressure on already limited incomes (Breen, 2008; Eurochips, 2006). Inflexible benefit systems further complicate families’ abilities to visit regularly (Smith et al, 2007). Visiting costs can also be increased by structural factors such as ‘learning or physical disability, and increasing age’ (Smith et al, 2007: 20).

Visiting costs reflect the distance of prisons from families’ homes. Many of Ireland’s prisoners are housed in prisons located in areas poorly served by public transport. The logistical difficulties created by prison location are, of course, most challenging for families with children or people with mobility difficulties or disabilities.

Stigma is a recurring theme in the literature (Codd, 2007; Condry, 2007; POPS, 2002). Families affected by stigma can be ‘drawn into what could be described as ‘prison culture’ and become consumed by the issues’ facing their relative in prison thus causing them to become ‘further isolated from their communities’ (POPS, 2007: 3). Fear and shame can sometimes result in a child ‘being kept at a distance [from the imprisoned parent] in the belief that contact is not in the child’s best interests’ (Eurochips, 2006: 48), thus damaging the relationship.

The care of many children upon imprisonment of a parent is often assumed by other family members (Walker, 2008) or by foster carers (Lewis, Bates and Murray, 2008). The National Standards for Foster Care provide that in such cases, the social worker

will ensure ‘that contact is maintained with family members’ and that this will be included within the care plan (Department of Health and Children, 2003:11). However, not all imprisoned parents will have rights of access with their children which can also complicate matters.

Physical environment

Prison environments impact upon families’ experiences of visiting (Eurochips, 2006; Loucks, 2005; Peart and Asquith, 1992; Kent, 2007; Short, 1979). The absence of appropriate waiting facilities mediates particularly against families with children (Peart and Asquith, 1992). Cramped conditions can inhibit privacy within the actual visiting area (Eurochips, 2006; Short, 1979).

Emotions can run high before, during and after visits for all involved, particularly children (Wedge, 1996). Visitors often face ‘a visiting routine that is far from family friendly’ (Irish Prison Service, 2007: 8). Open prisons such as Loughan House and Shelton Abbey, however, are examples of reduced security units that do offer family friendly visits (www.irishprisons.ie).

Visiting times and frequency vary at each prison. The scheduling of visit times also varies. Most institutions offer visits (which must be booked in advance) on certain weekdays and Saturdays; only the open prisons offer Sunday visits (www.irishprisons.ie). Visit times can be inconvenient for families when children are at school (Eurochips, 2006; Loucks, 2005). Families of remand prisoners making shorter, more frequent visits find that ‘the significance of time, distance and transport is all the greater’ (Peart and Asquith, 1992: 11).

Attitudes of prison staff can contribute to the quality of families’ visiting experience (Loucks, 2005). Families often feel viewed as somehow ‘guilty by association’ through their relationship with an inmate’ (Broadhead, 2002 cited in Codd, 2007: 257). Search procedures are now commonplace. The experience for some has been ‘intrusive and not always handled sensitively’ (Condry, 2007: 6).

Some families will choose not to visit, or bring children to visit prisoners with addiction problems (O’Loingsigh, 2004). Visitors can often be ‘vulnerable to requests for drugs, or high-value items’ that can be ‘used as currency within the prison’ (Smith et al, 2007: 20).

UK policy promotes the provision of improved services for families visiting an imprisoned relative (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004) in contrast to a distinct lack of emphasis on this within Irish policy. In 1994 *The Management of Offenders* was published by the Department of Justice, detailing the intention to roll out a scheme of Positive Sentence Management. It recognised prisoners’ families as a resource and planned to engage them in sentence management. However, this scheme has not yet been implemented (Bedford Row Family Project, 2008).

Social work supports

Social workers are often involved with prisoners’ families and are therefore well placed to assist them. The literature, however, recognises the need for ‘training and awareness-raising for professionals’ is (Lewis, Bates and Murray, 2008:45). The lack of appropriately tailored training for social workers and foster carers is noted; many of the skills they develop for working with prisoners’ children are gained ‘by experience on the job’ (Lewis, Bates and Murray, 2008: 39). The ‘Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families’ identifies prisoners’ children as a group existing in ‘special circumstances’, who

may become lost to the statutory agencies, whose wellbeing or need for immediate services may be overlooked and for whom subsequent planning and intervention may be less than satisfactory (Department of Health, 2006: 47).

Research undertaken in Scotland found that social workers, particularly those based within prisons, provide vital support to prisoners’ families, often fulfilling a role similar to that of a prison chaplain. Families were appreciative of this type of support (Peart and Asquith, 1992). Professionals can also provide families with ‘access to psychosocial support services outside of the prison to cope with the impact of

imprisonment' (Eurochips, 2006: 54). Some European professionals focus on improving support systems for families by offering 'consultations and support groups' for them, as well as working with children through more practical, direct work to 'familiarise them with the prison environment and prepare them for visits ahead of time' (Eurochips, 2006: 54-55).

Methodology

This research explores the experience of prison visits by family members and the implications this may have for social work practice. It addresses the following:

- 1) What factors come into play when family members visit a relative in prison:
 - a) What supports them in this process?
 - b) What mediates against them?
- 2) What is the role of social workers in prison visiting?

Interpretivism was chosen as the research paradigm for this study, as it sees that 'the study of social phenomena requires an understanding of the social world that people have constructed and which they reproduce through their continuing activities' (Blaikie, 2007: 124). This approach enables an exploration and understanding of the social world of the participants, i.e. the families of prisoners, through their own perspectives, while bearing in mind that 'explanations can only be offered at the level of meaning rather than cause' (Snape and Spencer, 2003: 23).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a means of extrapolating information from participants. An interview schedule was drawn up covering the broad themes, however, interviewees had a 'great deal of leeway in how to reply' (Bryman, 2004, p.320) which enabled a flexible interview process where participants were encouraged to explain how they 'frame and understand issues and events' (Bryman, 2004: 320).

Qualitative methods of research were deemed best suited to this study as they are built upon the belief that:

reality depends on how people experience and interpret life. From this point of view, reality is ‘socially constructed’ and so cannot be separated from experience or measured from the outside (Alston and Bowles, 1998: 10).

The narratives of research participants help to convey ‘their complex worlds...in an holistic manner using “thick description” rather than particularistic categories and variables’ (Padgett, 1998: 2). Typically, as in this study, qualitative researchers ‘treat their accounts as one of a number of possible representations rather than as definitive versions of social reality’ (Bryman, 2001: 276).

Non-probability sampling was chosen as it is ‘useful and justifiable when the researcher is seeking information in a new area and targets subjects or cases who typify the issue to be studied’ (Alston and Bowles, 1998: 87). Five participants were chosen, complying with the criteria that they had in the past (not currently) visited a family member in prison, thus enabling more opportunity for objective reflection on their experience:

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| Participant one | (P01) – Female former partner of male prisoner |
| Participant two | (P02) – Sister of male prisoner |
| Participant three | (P03) – Mother of male prisoner |
| Participant four | (P04) – Mother of male prisoner in open prison |
| Participant five | (P05) – Father of male juvenile prisoner. |

According to Bulmer, a researcher must always ‘take account of the effects of his actions upon...subjects and act in such a way as to preserve their rights and integrity as human beings’ (Bulmer, 1982: 3). Given its small-scale nature, this study has limited generalisability and it must be acknowledged that it focuses solely on familial relationships, neglecting therefore prisoners without these connections.

Findings

The interviews conducted by the researcher provided valuable first-hand insights into the experience of visiting, i.e. the reasoning behind families’ decisions to visit; what,

in their experience, supported or constrained them; and the views of family members on the role social workers could play in assisting families in the visiting process.

Factors that support families visiting an imprisoned relative

Continuation of bonds and attachments

Respondents tended to focus on the needs of the prisoners around visiting rather than on their own needs. They reported that they fulfilled what they felt was a duty of care to their relative by visiting, helping the prisoner to ‘*stay connected*’ (P02) with family and the outside world during a sentence.

Grief and loss emerged as palpable themes during interviews. P02 remarked that ‘*when someone dies you grieve, but when someone is taken away from you, what are you supposed to do, ‘cos you do the same grieving, you’ve still lost them*’. Visiting for her, helped to ease this sense of loss. For P03, 04 and 05, just seeing their relatives was a relief, reassuring them that they were ‘*safe and well*’ (P04). Family contact helped to ease the loss and isolation experienced by both prisoners and families.

Family life for many would resume following a sentence. Visiting allowed families to maintain a relationship, so it did not feel as though they were ‘*letting a stranger*’ (P03) into their homes upon release. Resettlement with the family was reported as a frequent conversation topic during visits one which encouraged both prisoners and families.

Visiting a relative in prison – Supporting factors

Family and friends

All participants viewed informal support networks provided by friends and family as invaluable. P01 for example noted that her family offered her practical help such as babysitting which enabled her to visit her partner alone. They also assisted her financially where possible. Respondents noted that visiting could provoke intense emotions therefore having ‘*someone to talk to*’ (P04) strengthened them. Sharing experiences with friends who had been in similar situations also helped as they ‘*knew what [they were] going through*’ (P01).

Voluntary service provision

Several research participants noted the presence of voluntary agencies in some prison waiting rooms as a supportive factor. Having a ‘friendly face’ (P02) to talk to could have a calming effect on confused and stressed visitors, especially on a first visit. Children too benefitted from the provision of play materials and refreshments. P03 noted that ‘*children don’t understand, they are so excited and it’s important for them to be there ‘cos they bring life to the prisoners*’ (P03).

Help from Prison Staff

Participants’ experiences with prison staff varied across the prisons. P01 for example noted that she received little help from staff at one particular prison, believing that ‘*the officers looked down on me you’d swear I had done something wrong*’. However, at another prison, she had a distinctly different experience where she stated: ‘*an officer came with me through the whole thing, and explained everything... I thought that was really brilliant... it just made the whole thing easier for me*’. Having such assistance no doubt removes some of the complications involved in visiting.

Obstacles that militate against families visiting imprisoned relatives

All participants reported poor availability of information regarding the visiting process. This complicated their visiting experience, particularly the first time. P03 reports that: ‘*The first time I went to see [her son] I was very frightened, I didn’t know where to go, what to do*’. Similarly, P01 said: ‘*I had no idea what to expect. I didn’t know anything about the searches and what that would be like. I didn’t even know where to go when I got there*’. Participants found their ‘own feet’ (P04). In P04’s experience, this was ‘*very isolating*’.

Participants report being affected by stigma and shame during their visiting experiences, and in everyday life. P03 for example said she ‘*sat down with a book in my hand and covered my face with it*’, as she believed others were talking about her while she waited for her visit.

There was a sense that families were sometimes made feel ‘*guilty*’ (P04) for visiting. As confidence and experience grew over time, participants felt that they were better able to deal with the stigma they encountered. P02 for example said that she learned to ‘*ignore people who didn’t have the courage to say what they thought to [her] face*’.

The sample of participants chosen for this study consisted of individuals whose relatives were housed in several prisons around the country. Close proximity of the prison to home meant that visits were more frequent. The opposite was true for those whose relatives were housed at a distance. Long travel times impeded visiting. P05 stated that he was not able to see his son as much as he would like because each visit consumed an entire day. Travel distance was further complicated by prison location. Access to a car was imperative for P04 whose son was housed in an open prison located away from public transport routes. She viewed the journey as ‘*absolutely horrific*’ (P04) and maintained that it deterred her other children from visiting.

Complicating visitors’ experience of the visiting process were the cost of travel, as well as costs incurred through loss of earnings and provision of money to their imprisoned relative. According to P02, she ‘*has to make sure he [her brother] has enough money*’, adding further pressure to her experience. P05 maintains that in his case, visiting costs mean that his family ‘*can’t all go on visits*’. Some reported that limited incomes can make visiting costs unmanageable.

Inadequate waiting facilities in some prisons can make waiting times feel longer and inadequate play facilities makes occupying children complicated. P01 said ‘*it was always easier to visit on my own, to be honest*’. Policies within the visiting area regarding touch and contact with prisoners created unnatural visiting experiences. Although they understood the justifications for such rules, participants reported that they caused problems for children visiting. P01 noted that her child ‘*could never understand...why that barrier was there and he used to be upset then on the drive home*’.

Actual visit time can depend upon how busy the visiting area is (P05) and the attitude of staff towards individual prisoners (P02 and P03). The open prison setting is viewed more positively as it allows for longer visits (P04). The impact of feud-related activity on visiting experiences was discussed by two participants. Interestingly, experience of this issue was confined to one prison location and did not reflect the experience of all participants. P03 and P02 both reported encountering the issue.

Participants appreciated the need for search procedures however, many expressed difficulties with how they were undertaken. P05, for example maintained that searches could be lengthy, causing particular difficulty when visiting with children. Sniffer dogs are now commonplace in Irish prisons, however, some participants expressed that this caused them anxiety at times.

Relationship breakdown and family conflict were viewed by some participants as factors which mediate against their visiting experience. P01 noted that when her relationship with her partner ended, she found it difficult to facilitate visits for their child as *'she didn't really want to have to see him'*.

Views about the role of social workers in prison-visiting

Research participants displayed strong views regarding the role of social workers in assisting families visiting an imprisoned relative. Of the five participants, only two had been involved with a social work service. This involvement ceased when the offenders were imprisoned. P02 claimed she had approached a social worker and probation officer for support during her brother's sentence but was told *'there were no resources'*. She was frustrated by the fact that she felt she had to *'fight for everything'* (P02).

Participants not involved with social work expressed feeling neglected. P01 for example, believed that people like her who had no social worker, *'kind of get forgot about'*. She believed that had she received the opportunity, she would have benefitted from professional support around rights and entitlements and emotional support regarding visits.

All participants believed that as a profession, social work was most suited to assisting the families of prisoners regarding visiting. This was due to a perception that it had a preoccupation with ‘*helping people in difficult circumstances*’ (P05). All participants believed that limited access to social work services curtails an important opportunity for support, advice and assistance. P02 and P04 both interestingly mentioned that social workers need to show ‘*compassion and understanding*’ when working with this group. Greater sensitivity was identified as a key area for improvement. P02 felt that:

Social workers need to know how hard it is for a mother to go in there and talk to her child for 30 minutes and to leave them and walk away, that’s the hardest thing for a prisoner and the hardest thing for families’.

P02, P03 and P05 all believed that social workers needed to receive training to help them work better when confronted with the issues related to visiting.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of both the literature and research largely corroborate. However, a number of points emerged which advanced the research questions by raising possibilities for further exploration. It was clear from both literature and findings that visiting can benefit prisoners, families and by default, society. Both literature and research findings, in the researcher’s opinion, tended to dwell on the variables that mediate against families’ experiences of visiting and stressed the importance of kinship networks in providing assistance to families wishing to visit. This prompted the researcher to consider those individuals lacking such support. Perhaps an interesting topic for future research would be to consider how the social work profession could support visiting families without the support of strong kinship networks.

The literature found that prisoners’ families require professional support to enable them to achieve positive visiting experiences. This was supported by research findings which maintain that families need this kind of assistance. Social work as a profession with its interests in child development, focus on ecosystems perspectives and

commitment to empowerment and the pursuit of social justice, therefore, is ideally placed to assist families in achieving positive visiting experiences. However, the Irish experience lacks a social work service provision targeted towards the promotion and support of family contact through visiting.

The research findings suggest the following implications for social work practice vis-à-vis the service it provides to families who visit a relative in prison:

1. *Education:* Understanding and sensitivity towards the issues visiting families face are key as the actions and attitudes of agencies and professionals ‘can either reinforce or buffer negative feelings’ they experience (Eurochips, 2006, p.83).
2. *Training:* Skills training for social workers is needed to ensure that families’ needs around visiting are responded to appropriately
3. *Information:* Better systems of information provision and liaison between agencies and authorities are required to ensure that improved visiting experiences are achieved by families
4. *Emphasis on family support work:* Supporting families as providers of invaluable resources is essential.
5. *Research:* Further research into the Irish context is needed. This would serve to bring the issues of prisoners’ families to the fore and would put pressure on policy makers to consider their needs for improved services and provision.

The researcher, through this study, has uncovered answers to the stated research questions and has gained a valuable insight into the experiences of visiting for prisoners’ families. She has also become acutely aware of the need to support this group so that visiting experiences can be positive. However, the researcher is concerned by the lack of attention given to this subject and worries that in the current environment of cutbacks and resource shortages, their need for professional assistance and intervention will be overlooked. This paper itself may in some small way encourage increased discussion and interest in the subject and perhaps in the long run, stimulate ameliorative action.

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