

Families affected by the imprisonment of a parent

Towards restorative practices

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Over the past decade imprisonment rates in Australia have substantially increased. As imprisonment rates rise, so too do the number of families affected by the imprisonment of a parent. Yet the needs of parents in prison and their families have received little attention in social policies and service delivery practices. As the specific issues faced by parents in prison and their families cross many areas of government and community services responsibility, they all too easily slip from policy agendas. This paper outlines the challenges to, and potential for, restorative practices with families affected by the imprisonment of a parent. It draws on recent research undertaken by the authors into the family support needs of parents in prison and their families.

During the past decade most countries across the world, including Australia, have witnessed steep increases in imprisonment rates. As rates of imprisonment rise, so do the numbers of families affected by the imprisonment of a parent. Yet the concerns of parents in prison and their families have been accorded inadequate attention in policy making and service delivery across corrective institutions and human services fields (Hairston & Lockett, 1987; Seymour, 1998). Astonishingly, information about the parenting status of prisoners is not included in the routine and extensive data collection about them. Policy and practices in corrective institutions and across human service institutions are developed in the absence of this crucial information.

Drawing on research undertaken in Queensland into the family support needs of parents in prison (Healy, Foley & Walsh, 2000), in this paper we will discuss the barriers to and potential for developing restorative approaches to policy and practice with parents in prison and their families. Restorative approaches draw on restorative justice principles (see Zehr, 1994). A core principle is that crime and imprisonment damage relationships and this damage, not only the crime event, requires a response (Palk, Hayes & Prenzler, 1998; Zehr, 1994). This framework focuses on the interpersonal and social contexts of crime and imprisonment and so brings the family and community environment of the prisoner into the focus. The paper will begin with an overview of the international evidence about the growth

in prison populations and the effects on families, particularly children, of parental imprisonment. We will then outline the principles underpinning restorative approaches to practice.

PARENTS IN PRISON AND THEIR FAMILIES: THE SCOPE OF THE ISSUE

Throughout the world many countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, are experiencing unprecedented rates of adult imprisonment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999; Home Office, 1998; Seymour, 1998). In 1997, the imprisonment rate of 120 per 100 000 population in England and Wales was the highest ever recorded in the region (Home Office, 1998). In 1997 the imprisonment rate in the USA reached 645 per 100 000 population (Home Office, 1998). In Australia the prisoner population increased by 62% between 1988 and 1998 (ABS, 1999a, p.8). In 1998, the Australian rate reached 139 per 100 000 population (ABS, 1999a, p.1). Across the country, imprisonment rates per 100 000 vary from 78.5 in Victoria, 85 in Tasmania to 119.2 in Queensland and 455.7 in the Northern Territory (ABS, 1999a; see also Criminal Justice Commission (CJC), 1999, p.11).

According to the 1998 Prison Census (ABS, 1999a), the prison population in Australia is characterised by:

- a much greater proportion of male compared to female prisoners. 1998 census data indicates that 94% of

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prisoners are male and 6% are female;

- a young population. The 1998 census indicates that the average age for prisoners was 33 years for males and 32 years for females. Both males and females aged between 20 and 24 years had the highest age-specific imprisonment rates;
- the disproportionate representation of indigenous people. Moreover, the proportion of indigenous prisoners increased from 15% in 1988 to 19% in 1998, although indigenous people comprise about 2% of the Australian population (ABS, 1999b);
- an average aggregate sentence of 4.6 years for Australian prisoners. However in some states, particularly Queensland, there is considerable variation in length of sentence due to the high proportion of people imprisoned for fine default offences. For example in the early months of 1998-1999, 37% of prisoners were imprisoned for fine default only offences (CJC, 2000). By contrast, Victoria and New South Wales have very low rates of imprisonment for fine default only offences.

Although no reliable data exists about the numbers of parents in Australian prisons, researchers consistently estimate that between 60% and 85% of prisoners are parents of dependent children (see Farrell, 1995; Kaplan & Sasser, 1996; Phillips & Bloom, 1998). Given the relative youth of the prison population, it can be assumed that prisoners who are parents often have children who are young and dependent. There is substantial research to indicate the deleterious effects for children of their parents' involvement in crime and of parental imprisonment (see Clark, 1995; Farrell, 1998; Hairston, 1998). Prior to the imprisonment of a parent, children are likely to have suffered as a result of lifestyles of crime, poverty and drug dependency so frequently associated with incarceration (Clark, 1995, pp.309-310). The processes of arrest and incarceration are, in many instances, traumatic for children. Young children are likely to experience distress when separated from their mothers (Catan, 1991; Hatty, 1984; Woodrow, 1992). Older children are frequently expected to assume adult role

responsibilities (Woodrow, 1992). The children of women prisoners are vulnerable to separation from siblings and to instability in care arrangements over the course of their parents' imprisonment (Hatty, 1984; Kaplan & Sasser, 1996; McDermott & King, 1992; Woodrow, 1992).

As the majority of imprisoned parents will resume parenting responsibilities upon release, it is in the interests of families affected by imprisonment that these parents leave prison as able to resume parenting roles, if not more so, than when they arrived.

As the majority of imprisoned parents will resume parenting responsibilities upon release, it is in the interests of families affected by imprisonment that these parents leave prison as able to resume parenting roles, if not more so, than when they arrived. Research evidence suggests that many prisoners are prepared to use their time in prison to reflect on and renew their relationships with family members (see Bauhofer, 1987; Clark, 1995; Clement, 1993; Hairston & Lockett, 1987). Rather than recognise and build upon parenting roles and capacities of prisoners, many aspects of prison culture damage them. Prisoners' ability for mature problem-solving is impeded by the violent cultures that frequently dominate prisons (Russell, 1995) and by rigid disciplinary regimes which foster dependency and passivity. Eastaek (1995) observes that 'there is little opportunity for the imprisoned mother [or father] to make amends to her children or to learn better parenting skills' (p.56). If policy makers and funding bodies are to assist prisoners and their families to create opportunities for positive change, they must achieve

improvements in the level of service provision and community based support for them.

A RESTORATIVE APPROACH TO PRACTICE WITH PARENTS IN PRISON AND THEIR FAMILIES

The Catholic Prison Ministry, with which the authors are involved, has had a long-standing interest in the potential application of restorative justice principles to work with families affected by imprisonment. Restorative approaches recognise that crime violates people and relationships. Justice therefore requires a response to the damage to these relationships, which includes responses not only to the consequences of the crime itself, but also to the antecedent lifestyles and to the impact of imprisonment. Restorative justice encourages collaborative practices which involve stakeholders, such as victim and offender, as well as family and community members, in defining and participating in rebuilding relationships damaged by crime and imprisonment (see Palk, Hayes & Prenzler, 1998, p.139). It challenges individuals to take responsibility for the harm their lifestyle choices and options have done to others. While we recognise that these are shaped by limited resources and opportunities, we believe that it is also vital to recognise individuals' capacity for choice which requires accepting some responsibility for the outcomes of their actions or failure to act. Family conferencing and conferencing between victim and offender provide one possible forum for such acknowledgment to occur (see Graber, Keys & White, 1996; McCold, 1999).

In addition to the recognition of personal responsibility for crime and effects of an offending lifestyle on family members, a restorative framework draws attention to the societal context of much offending behaviour. Those working within a restorative justice framework are required to consider the effects of conditions such as homelessness, poverty, abuse and neglect on crime rates (see Lazarus, 1995; Palk et al, 1998, p.152). An important part of restorative responses is that of creating opportunities for both offender and victim to address the past, such as

histories of abuse, and to create new possibilities in the present through, for example, supporting employment and housing options for prisoners on release.

In recent years, interest has grown in the application of restorative justice principles to working with families affected by crime and imprisonment (see Fraser & Norton, 1996). In relation to working with families, restorative practice involves recognising the harm done by crime and offending relationships. The authors recognise concerns about whether restorative practices can be applied in situations of power imbalance, such as in families affected by domestic violence (Graber, Keys & White, 1996; Martin, 1997). However, we respond by pointing out that restorative work should not involve the resumption of abusive relationships. Rather, in restoring relationships, it is often necessary to redefine family relationships to prevent violation.

Restorative approaches share a number of features, including, firstly, a focus on understanding the needs of prisoners and their families. The needs of parents in prison and their families have been fragmented across a number of areas of social policy and service delivery and so receive inadequate attention in each. Additionally, by focusing on redefining and rebuilding relationships, restorative approaches can contribute to reducing the costs of repeated imprisonment. Previous studies have indicated that strong family and community relationships contribute markedly to social reintegration of prisoners and to reducing recidivism (see for discussion Farrell, 1998; Lazarus, 1995; Martin, 1997).

Secondly, a restorative framework can assist policy makers and practitioners to recognise the complexities of the lives of prisoners and their families (see also McQuaide & Ehrenreich, 1998). This is particularly important for dealing with the polarisations such as those between victim and offender lobbies that split the corrective services field. Restorative justice recognises the importance of a dual focus on social and personal accountability. The recognition that prisoners bear some responsibility and capacity for change is useful for working with prisoners and their

families without colluding in minimisation of the effects of abuse or violence and the impact of lifestyle options frequently associated with crime. In addition a restorative justice approach encourages recognition of the capacity of individuals to contribute to change. McQuaide and Ehrenreich (1998: p.239) remind us in their discussion of women prisoners that:

People retain the ability to act despite what may seem like overwhelming powerlessness; they both act and are acted upon. As women tell their stories, they narrate how they have survived and created arenas of choice.

DEVELOPING A RESTORATIVE APPROACH: WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

As one of a small number of agencies Australia-wide dedicated to support and advocacy for families involved in the corrections system, workers at our service frequently encounter the lack of responsiveness of corrections and human services institutions to the needs of parents in prison. In order to pursue our interest in developing restorative responses with families affected by imprisonment, between 1997 and 1999 we undertook a study into the family support needs of parents in prison and their families (see Healy, Foley & Walsh, 2000). The research was undertaken in South East Queensland. During the 1990s Queensland had the fastest increase in imprisonment rates of any state or territory in Australia (CJC, 2000). The research yielded important insights into the barriers to restorative practices with prisoners and their families. The study involved:

- in-depth interviews with male prisoners and female prisoners across four corrections institutions in South East Queensland;
- focus group with eight family members affected by imprisonment;
- interviews and focus groups with fourteen social service and legal professionals working with families affected by imprisonment.

Sampling

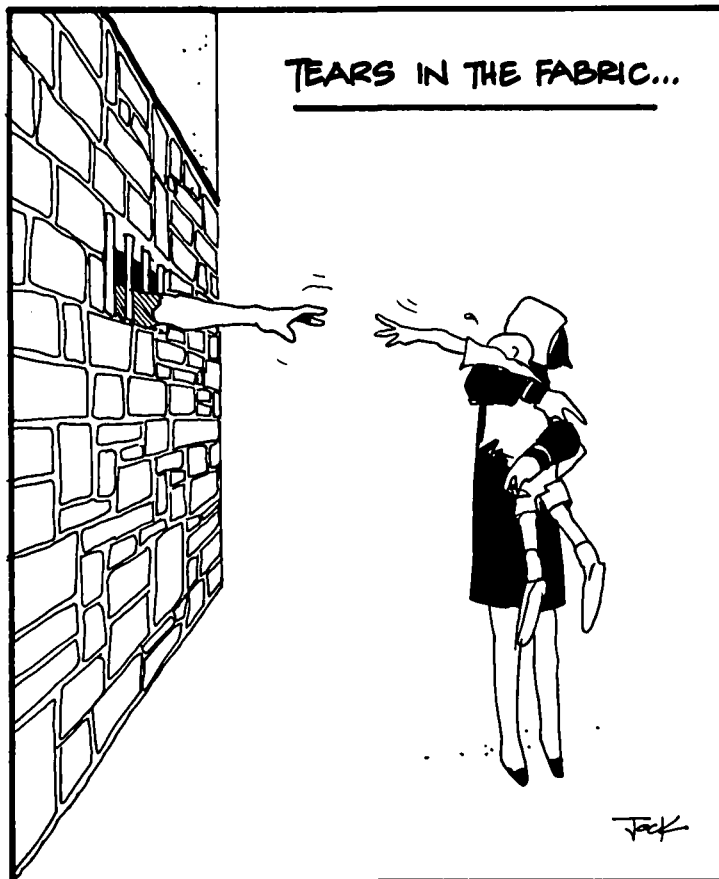
a. Parents in prison

In the absence of reliable information about the parenting status of prisoners

in each prison, a non-random convenience sample was used. The sampling method involved prison administration staff identifying prisoners who are parents and from these lists working with the research team to ensure that prisoners from diverse cultural backgrounds, age groups and length of incarceration were included. The characteristics of the sample of prisoners who participated in the study are:

- 19 male and 11 female respondents;
- respondents' ages ranged from 17 to 52 years, and the average age of respondents was 32.5 years, similar to the national average of prisoners;
- average number of children was 3.3, and the number of children ranged from 1 through to 7. Age of youngest child amongst the sample ranged from 3 months to 15 years with 7 years as the average age of the youngest child;
- most respondents (n=28) were Australian born and 4 of these identified as indigenous Australians;
- the average length of time in custody amongst respondents was 3.5 years, though almost one quarter of the sample (n=7) were incarcerated for less than three months;
- two-thirds of the respondents (n=21) identified that they had been imprisoned previously. Most (n=14) had served one or two sentences previously, though a minority (n=3) identified that they had served 5 or more previous sentences.

Our sample had a number of limitations. For various reasons, including very limited research funds, we were severely constrained in our sample size. A much larger sample could contribute to enhanced understanding about the issues facing prisoners and their families. Additionally, a small number of prisoners of Asian descent declined to participate in the study. As the team was unable to speak to them directly we cannot elaborate on their reasons for non-participation. However, we would suggest that all efforts are made to include a wide range of cultural groups in future research.



b. Focus group

The research team conducted a focus group with eight members of an ongoing support group for families of long-term prisoners. These respondents were partners, parents or support people to prisoners.

c. Professionals

Focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted with fourteen human service and legal professionals. All respondents in this category were involved in service provision to prisoners and/or their families. These professionals were drawn from government and non-government agencies. Those from government agencies were primarily associated with corrections or statutory child protection. A small number of professionals from government agencies associated with income security and housing declined to participate on the grounds that prisoners and their families constituted an insignificant proportion of the populations they served. Additionally, professionals were also drawn from non-government agencies such as non-profit community services or legal services. In total, six non-government

community service workers, five government employed human service workers and three solicitors, all in community legal services, contributed to the study.

The barriers

Data gathered in the study was extensive and a full analysis of project results can be obtained (Healy, Foley & Walsh, 2000). In this paper, we will focus primarily on the barriers to and potential for restorative approaches to working with families affected by the imprisonment of a family member.

Disenfranchising prisoners from parenting rights and responsibilities

A restorative approach to practice in the corrections field brings into focus the prisoners' interpersonal and societal context. Consistent with previous research, our study found that the parenting status of prisoners is given little recognition at every stage of the imprisonment process, from arrest through to incarceration and release.

Particular concern was raised by all three sets of respondents (prisoners, family members and professionals)

about the vulnerability of children at the point of parental imprisonment. Respondents reported that prisoners were unprepared for imprisonment themselves because of the chaos surrounding the period of arrest and incarceration. Additionally, concern was expressed about the practices, such as 'on the spot' detention of fine defaulters, that limit the capacity of prisoners to make preparations for their children. Some prisoners believed that legal counsel had failed to inform them of the likelihood of their incarceration and this constrained them in arranging care for their children. There would appear to be an obligation upon professionals involved in arrest and incarceration to inquire about the care plans for children of prisoners and to ensure that prisoners have adequate opportunity to make such arrangements.

Prisoners in Queensland have a statutory right to receive at least one personal visit per week. Additionally there is provision within the law for prisoners who have extra responsibilities, such as parenting responsibilities, to receive additional visits related to these roles. However, respondents consistently commented on the limited support available to prisoners to achieve quality contact with their families. All sets of respondents observed that parents in prison are largely reliant on the goodwill and capacity of the parent and/or caregiver on the outside to ensure ongoing access to their children. In the event of relationship breakdown with the other parent and/or caregiver, parents in prison have the right to seek access to their children through the Family Law Court. In reality, however, prisoners face significant difficulties accessing parenting rights via this avenue. In the context of increasingly constrained Legal Aid funds, prisoners have limited options for representation. One solicitor remarked:

I sometimes think that the Legal Aid attitude is, we've given this person assistance through the criminal process, there's no way we're going to give them any assistance through the Family Law process (Legal Professional).

Even if prisoners access the Family Law Court, they may find that being a prisoner is prejudicial to the outcome of

Table 1. Location of primary placements of children contrasted with gender of prisoner

Location of primary placement of children	No. of male prisoners	No. of female prisoners
Other parent	13	3
Grandparent	1	3
Aunt/uncle	0	2
Foster parent	1	3
Other (current partner)	3	0
N/A	1	0
TOTAL	19	11

their case. One respondent reported that she'd been told 'you don't stand a chance for custody or access while in prison'. A solicitor reported that even when parents in prison do achieve orders for contact, the prisoner has little recall to enforce contact orders in the event that the outside caregiver resists access to the children.

In the absence of clear rights to access, prisoners are reliant on the willingness of the person providing care to their child, be it a partner or carer, to maintain ongoing contact. This means that prisoners must find some way of maintaining contact not only with their children but also their caregiver. This can be at substantial personal cost to the prisoner or to family members on the outside. For example, legal and human service professionals commented on frequently observed patterns of control between male prisoners and their partners on the outside. Conversely, one female prisoner reported that she had to deal with emotional manipulation of her

Table 2. Number of primary placements of children contrasted with gender of prisoner

No. of primary placements of children	No. of male prisoners	No. of female prisoners
1 placement	17	4
2 placements	1	3
3 placements	1	2
5 placements	0	1
8 placements	0	1
TOTAL	19	11

former partner in order to maintain contact with her children. She stated that:

he [former partner] controls me through the kids and he is trying to enforce a relationship under his terms. He uses them against me. I play along with him to see the kids.

Some prisoners and professionals identified that the presence of a third 'neutral' party, such as a statutory authority, helped to ensure ongoing access between parents in prison and their children. Ironically, as child welfare authorities are obliged to support family contact, children under statutory orders may have a greater chance of contact with their imprisoned parents than those not involved with statutory authorities.

Gender differences in support needs

Our study confirmed the significance of parents' gender in determining the stability of care arrangements for children of prisoners. Consistent with previous research (see Gabel, 1995; Kaplan & Sasser, 1996; Koban, 1983; Woodrow, 1992), amongst the prisoners we interviewed, women were more likely to have been primary caregivers prior to incarceration; indeed, some had their infant children placed with them. The greater direct care responsibilities faced by women prior to imprisonment had implications for the quality of care for their children during incarceration.

Our study found that children of male prisoners were more likely to be cared for by the non-incarcerated parent than children of female prisoners. Women prisoners had to rely on a range of people, including grandparents, aunts, uncles and foster carers to provide care for their children. Table 1 contrasts the gender of the inmate with the care arrangements of their children.

Table 1 demonstrates that male prisoners were more likely than female prisoners to be able to rely on the other parent or a partner to provide care for their children. The parenting support of partners continued even when their partners were not parents of the children

concerned. By contrast women prisoners' options for care of their children were spread over a wider range of people including extended family and foster carers. These differences in the care arrangements for the children of male and female prisoners are consistent with the findings of international research on the subject (Mumola, 2000).

Despite similarities in length of time served by male and female respondents, there were substantial differences in the likelihood of their children experiencing placement disruption. These differences are illustrated in Table 2 which contrasts gender of inmate with the number of primary placements experienced by their children.

Table 2 demonstrates that even in this small sample, there were substantial differences in the placement disruption experienced by children of female prisoners compared with male prisoners. It was apparent that women were unable to rely on the other parent or current partner to assume a primary caregiver role in their absence. Their partners were reported as unreliable for a range of reasons, including drug or alcohol addiction and mental illness. The involvement of statutory authorities did not provide any protection against placement disruption. As this table demonstrates, one female prisoner reported that her children had experienced eight placements. This woman had been imprisoned for 30 months and most of the disruptions to the placement of her children had occurred whilst they were in statutory care.

If policy makers and funding bodies are to support the well-being of families, particularly children, affected by parental imprisonment, then they must recognise and address the needs of women as carers. Women on the inside and on the outside frequently play a linchpin role in keeping families together through the stresses of imprisonment. Our research suggests that current policy and practice in corrections, and more broadly in human services departments, does little to support these women and this in turn limits their capacity to ensure the well-being of children with an imprisoned parent.

THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT: PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS

The physical and social conditions of imprisonment place significant stresses on family relationships. Respondents identified that the physical aspects of the prison visiting environment were intimidating to the extent that they impacted on the quality of contact between parent prisoners and their families. The features identified included:

- the constant and overt surveillance of visits;
- the large, impersonal character of the environment;
- the visible signs of security such as razor wire at the entrances and around the prison;
- signs prohibiting touching between visitors and prisoners; and
- static seating arrangements.

Respondents indicated that there is considerable variation in visiting areas across prisons. Although arrangements for young children extant in some prisons are welcome, there continues to be a lack of attention to the needs of older children as visitors. The intimidating physical environment of prisons coupled with their remote location diminishes the possibilities of quality contact (Clement, 1993; Hairston, 1998; Lainer, 1991; Larman & Aungles, 1991).

Although prison administrations in many states of Australia are required by statute to consider the parenting role of prisoners in developing visiting policies, practices around visitation remain inadequate. In her comparative study of prisons, Farrell (1998: p.109) commented that in Australian prisons studied, 'There appeared to be an underlying view with the prison that family visits were a privilege rather than a right'. Respondents to our study remarked that the behaviour of custodial staff towards family visitors to the prisons was often highly inconsistent, rigid and a source of stress for them. Family members reported that their access to prisoners was reliant on the goodwill of prison staff, rather than on any enforceable rights to access. The following extract, illustrating the rigidity with which prison regulations

are applied, is taken from a focus group discussion with family members of long term prisoners:

The day my son put in for a special visit we had car trouble, so I got a cab and the cab was running late. We were ONE MINUTE late through the gate and they would not let us in. I stood there with three kids crying, 'help me', and I said: 'can I speak to the Head Officer?' [he said] 'yes, I'm speaking WHAT DO YOU WANT?', I said 'excuse me, please have a heart and let the kids see their father, it's a special visit' [he replied] 'heart's got nothing to do with it, go home', I said, 'how do you expect me to go home, I can't even ring a cab', he said 'I'm sorry, I can't do anything for you'. So we had to walk all the way to the railway station. OOOH, I was BOILING, I spent all the money on the cab.

In a field fraught with tensions between victim and offender lobbies, as well as simplistic representations of prisoners as victims or villains, a restorative approach brings the interpersonal and societal contexts of imprisonment firmly into focus.

The rigidities and inconsistencies by some staff towards visitors to the prisons appear to be institutionalised through an absence of mechanisms to ensure fairness and equity in the application of prison regulations. Respondents indicated their appreciation of custodial staff who supported quality contact through the flexible application of prison regulations. Some respondents had also developed strategies for dealing with rigidities and inconsistencies through, for example, negotiating arrangements via senior non-custodial staff.

Families affected by parental imprisonment are placed under additional strain

by prison policies and practices that are all too often insensitive to diverse family structures and needs (Hairston, 1998). Visitation policies of prisons, particularly the strict limitation on the size of family groupings allowed access to the prisoner, are constrictive for those whose family arrangements fall outside the nuclear family norm (Hairston, 1998; King, 1993).

The majority of prisoner respondents to the study asserted a positive view of prison support staff. Frequent comments were made that these professionals enabled the prisoner to sustain links to the outside world and were critical to beginning the rehabilitation process with them. Almost a third of respondents expressed concern that there are too few support personnel in the prison and there was common dissatisfaction with the lack of support services once released.

The human services workers and members of prisoners' families we spoke with commented on the limited ability of many prisoners to offer support to their partners on the outside. At the very least the distancing and disenfranchisement from the parental role contributed, in some instances, to the prisoner losing touch with reality and thus being unable to empathise with the difficulties faced by family members. This contributes to unrealistic expectations between partners and between parents and children and places additional strain on relationships. One community worker described the effects of imprisonment on relationships between partners in this way:

[it's] devastating! I'd like to be able to say that I can think of a number of positives, but I honestly can't. One thing... I've seen a number of times is that the partner on the outside... develops some coping mechanisms, some communication and stress management type skills and even budgeting type skills, and then when their partner comes out, they're put down. They've developed in a different way to the partner and the partner wants things to go back to how it was before and that's sort of denying the growth that's happened. So I see these relationships as being at very high risk.

Human service workers reported that women partners of male prisoners can be vulnerable to control and abuse precisely because her prisoner partner is threatened by changes and is seeking to maintain the relationship in its former state. Indeed, the inadequacy of rehabilitation services within prisons, coupled with the dysfunctional aspects of prison culture, does little to enhance prisoners' capacities to function as supportive partners and parents.

DIRECTIONS FOR DEVELOPING RESTORATIVE APPROACHES TO FAMILY SUPPORT PRACTICE

Recognising the complexities of the lives of prisoners and their families

Restorative justice approaches begin from a position that prisoners' capacities and roles in addition to those of prison should be recognised and built upon. In particular, identifying and building upon the parenting capacities and potential of parents in prison provides one pathway to creating new lifestyle choices and options upon release. Similarly, recognising the rights and capacities of prisoners as citizens demands that policy makers and service providers examine ways for these alternative identifications to be acknowledged and supported, through, for example, help in finding employment and sustainable housing. Very often these identifications, capacities and responsibilities are neglected in policy and practice across corrections and human services fields (Farrell, 1998, p.101; Hairston, 1998, p.628).

Promoting a 'whole of government' approach

A 'whole of government' approach integrating diverse areas of social policy is necessary to address the needs of parents in prison and their families, as well as to address the extreme poverty and social dislocation associated with crime. The needs of parents in prison and their families are complex and cross many areas of government responsibility in addition to corrective services, including child protection, family support, income security, health and housing. In the absence of an integrated policy approach, the complexity of these needs means that parents and their children fall through gaps in social policy and service

provision. In essence the needs of parents and their children are not seen as the primary responsibility of any single government department and, to this point, there has been a failure of governments to provide a comprehensive response to their needs. The persistent under-resourcing of family support issues in the corrections field means that there is a yawning gap between the stated policies in prisons and the actual practices. This is particularly evident in relation to the inadequate quantity and quality of infant accommodation options in prison and limited support of quality family contact (see Farrell, 1998).

Reducing the costs of imprisonment for families and for society

Children are often harmed by the imprisonment process. This harm can be reduced. At the point of arrest, police personnel and professional officers should be sensitive to the presence of children and mindful of minimising the trauma to them as witnesses to the arrest process. In addition, it should be routine practice for professional officers involved in arrest to inquire into the parenting status of the offender and arrangements for children. Courts and prison reception centres should have support processes in place to enable prisoners to make care arrangements for their children.

It is also in the interests of families and long-term community well-being that imprisonment is used as a very last resort. Professor Tony Vinson (cited in the Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1997, p.34) observes that:

Any weighing up of the social gain of short-term punishment by incarceration, against the deterioration so frequently induced in offenders as well as harm caused to their families, should dictate an alternative course of action. In the community's interest, we must substitute other, less noxious forms of punishment for relatively short sentences...

There should be immediate review of the practice of imprisoning fine-defaulters and others on short sentences. Where imprisonment is unavoidable, there must be active attempts by corrections institutions in contact with human services organisations to promote quality contact between

prisoners and their families. Prisoners should be placed as close as possible to social and family support networks and, where this is not achievable, support should be available to ensure quality contact during the course of imprisonment. We support Farrell's (1998) recommendation that families are supported in meeting the costs of maintaining contact by phone and in arranging travel to prisons in locations remote from families' residences.

Special attention should be paid to the role of custodial and prison support staff who are the points of contact between prisoner parents and their families. It is important that staff involved in overseeing visits receive specialist training and that attention is given to making the contact environment as positive as possible (Farrell, 1998). In recognition that ongoing contact with a parent is vital to the long term well-being of children, it is important that family visits are exempt from the disciplinary regime of the prison. Independent, confidential and accessible process for appealing against unreasonable actions by custodial staff towards prison visitors could also assist in achieving quality contact. The vital role of support staff in facilitating contact between prisoners and family members should be recognised and resources allocated to support roles in prison.

A restorative approach demands that much more attention is paid to the social reintegration of prisoners. Prisoners frequently need assistance to re-establish themselves in the community. The assistance required is of a practical nature, such as access to housing and income, as well as to opportunities for addressing relationship issues. Such support is crucial to reducing the devastating personal, social and economic costs of repeated offending and imprisonment. These costs are borne not only by prisoners, but also their children and society generally.

CONCLUSION

As rates of imprisonment continue to climb, policy makers and practitioners in the corrections and human services fields must develop strategies for effective and appropriate service

provision to families affected by crime and imprisonment. Even by the most conservative estimates we know that in Australia families affected by the imprisonment of a parent number in the tens of thousands. In a field fraught with tensions between victim and offender lobbies, as well as simplistic representations of prisoners as victims or villains, a restorative approach brings the interpersonal and societal contexts of imprisonment firmly into focus. This approach allows for the emergence of a more complex picture of the identifications, capacities and rights of parents in prison and their families. Restorative approaches provide a way to recognise the damage that crime and imprisonment do to relationships and make these connections an important focus of intervention and positive change. □

This article draws on information from a research report by the authors entitled 'Parents in prison and their families: Everyone's business and no-one's concern', published in 2000. A full copy of the report is available from:

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