

Family ties for prisoners: A consultation

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Abstract

The project presented here was funded by the University of Lincoln's UROS scheme, providing undergraduate students with the opportunity to work alongside academics on research projects to help develop their scholarly and employability skills. Maintaining family ties during incarceration is a key factor in supporting desistance from crime and is posited as the 'golden thread' of rehabilitation during a custodial sentence. Yet, despite the importance attached to family ties, maintaining them during a custodial sentence is often a difficult prospect for prisoners and their families and friends. There are multiple reasons for this, including problems with prison infrastructure, technologies and regimes, and the impact that incarceration has on prisoners' families. This project was part of an annual evaluation of prison visitations based in three prisons, evaluating the support provided by a children and families' service to support these visits. The research found that staying connected with family and friends remains difficult for prisoners and confirmed that this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic. The evaluation further concludes by recommending that more needs to be done to support contact between family and friends, and the important role this has on desistance. The project was funded by the University of Lincoln's UROS Scheme, providing undergraduate students with the opportunity to work alongside academics on research projects to help develop their scholarly and employability skills.

Keywords: Prison, Families, Friends, Criminal Justice, Incarceration, Prison Visits, COVID-19.

Introduction

The project was undertaken with support from the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme (UROS). UROS is a competitive bursary scheme which provides opportunities for students to work alongside academics on research projects during their undergraduate studies (University of Lincoln, 2022). UROS is based on the principles of Student as Producer which considers the university as a special and unique place wherein teaching and research happen together (Neary and Saunders 2016). This process is referred to as scholarship (Neary 2020), which entails: (a) the production and dissemination of new knowledges, new technologies and new

processes; (b) that scholars involved in this process, including academics, students and professional staff, are grounded in the notion that we all have a lot to learn from each other. In practice, Student as Producer entails scholars to be meaningfully engaged in: (i) research and research-like activities; (ii) curriculum design, delivery and evaluation (iii) engagement in the democratic decision-making processes of the university. The project fostered these principles by meaningfully involving and supporting students in all aspects of the consultation process, including survey design, data analysis, writing and disseminating findings and community engagement, in this case through a third sector provider of family support services within prisons.

Project Background

In 2017, Lord Farmer published a landmark report into the services provided to prisoners and their families to support the maintenance of family ties while a person is detained (Farmer, 2017). The report highlighted that family support should be the 'golden thread' for rehabilitation throughout all aspects of prison. Since the report was published, children and families' services, often delivered by a variety of third sector providers, have been commissioned in prisons across England and Wales (NICCO, 2018). These services exist to support prisoners and their families to maintain contact during custody. This includes providing support to assist with prison visits, to liaise with other agencies, such as Children's Services, and to mitigate the impact of imprisonment on families (LAT, 2016). Third sector providers involved in providing these services are contractually bound to undertake consultations to inform continuous service improvement. The project worked in partnership with one such provider of services and undertook the design and analysis of consultations in three prison establishments where services were delivered. The consultation was conducted as an interdisciplinary project drawing from theory and practice across criminology and forensic psychology. The aims of this study were to investigate the barriers that are in place for people in prison to maintain family ties. More specifically the consultation sought to understand relationships of people visiting, visiting facilities and the impact of COVID-19.

Review of literature

The impact of incarceration on prisoners' families is a source of concern within desistance literature. For example, failure to maintain familial relationships can increase prisoners' emotional instability during imprisonment and limit social capital for release (Cochran, 2012), which can result in negative behaviours including violence (Burnett and Maruna, 2004). Familial attachments and contact during prison sentences are crucial for helping people in custody cope with the pressures of prison, such as isolation (Agnew, 1992); can contribute towards decreased misconduct (Maruna, 2001); and provide support and hope for release (Rocque, et al., 2013). Furthermore, prisoners who improve their family relationships during their sentence demonstrate decreased recidivism, increased employment rates and decreased drug use on release (Brunton-Smith and McCarthy, 2016).

Families also suffer from imprisonment and must cope with practical, financial and emotional consequences, which can have a negative impact on relationships with prisoners (Mumby, 2017). Loss of income, isolation, relationship deterioration and extra childcare commitments can increase the sense of loss and hopelessness experienced by families (Codd, 2007; Loucks, 2005; Murray, 2005).

Despite the importance of family ties, prisoners have limited means to contact their families. This is through visits, phone calls and letters which have been available for several years but are often fraught with challenges around access and literacy (Codd, 2007, Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, 2014). The COVID-19 Pandemic has provided even more restrictions within prisons and many prisoners have been contained in their cells for the majority of the day (HM Inspectorate of Prisoners, 2021). The restrictions further saw a suspension of all social in-person visits, except on exceptional compassionate grounds (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2021). Such limitations also affected partner agencies, such as those providing children and families services who had their access to prisons restricted (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021). However, prisoners could still communicate with friends and families using email, letters, and phone calls. The current project explored the experiences of prisoners and families during this time with consultation carried out in July 2021.

Methodology

The consultation was based on the analysis of questionnaires completed by prisoners and their families at three adult men's prison sites (one Category B local prison and two Category C training prisons). For purposes of confidentiality, the names and locations of the prison sites will remain anonymous.

Self-completion questionnaires were completed by prisoners and their families at each prison site. This was an advantageous method for three reasons; the reduced cost in comparison to conducting interviews (Bryman, 2015); to follow the format of previously conducted consultations by the children and families' service; and, to remove requirements for participant contact during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The questionnaires were distributed by and returned to the children and families service at each prison site and entry into a prize draw was offered to encourage participation. The children and families service were responsible for all recruitment to the consultation. They collated and anonymised the questionnaires prior to returning them to the University of Lincoln for analysis. Anonymisation was undertaken prior to transfer of the questionnaires to avoid unnecessary sharing of data between the two organisations.

The questionnaire data was analysed using SPSS with quantifiable data analysed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis to extract key themes (Bryman, 2015).

Each participant was provided with a participant information sheet to read prior to completing a consent form with support offered to those with low literacy levels via the family and children support teams or prisoner peer supporters. The completed questionnaires were collected by a member of the University team from the children and families service's Head Office and scanned onto the University's One Drive with access only available to the research team. An Information Sharing Agreement was put in place between the University of Lincoln and the children and families' service prior to the commencement of the consultation. As the questionnaire was part of a contracted consultation requirement, HMPPS National Research Committee approval was not required. A letter to confirm this was included as part of the university ethical approval process.

Results

The current study investigated the importance of maintaining family ties during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Several themes were identified in the research, but three major key themes relating to maintain family ties will be discussed below.

Prisoners prioritising ties with family over friends

The project acknowledged that before entering prison, prisoners stayed connected with both family and friends equally. However, it was found that contact with friends declined during a custodial sentence with 85.7% found to still be in contact with family in comparison to 60.7% in contact with their friends. It was important to uncover the reasons for this and when prisoners were asked why the struggle to stay connected with friends they stated, "*...it's expensive to call both family and friends and family comes first.*" One individual also said, "*...I do not know their contact details.*" Previous research, such as Cochran (2012), has highlighted the importance of maintaining family ties, however the importance of maintaining friendships is often disregarded. Future research should investigate friends as well as family as they can play a crucial role in a person in prison's life if they do not have any family on the outside.

Visiting Facilities

The project also found that family members visited monthly rather than weekly, and when prisoners were asked what would help to increase the number of visits, most responded, '*...being closer to home.*' Prisoners were also asked what could be improved about the facilities when they receive visits and they said, "*...officers attitudes need to change as when visitors ask for assistance, they receive hostile or ignorant attitudes.*" and '*...better refreshments*'. These factors can negatively affect and impact family members visiting with family and friends not wanting to visit as much due to the poor visiting facilities within the prison. When family members were asked if they were satisfied with the facilities in one of the prisons, 58.5% stated they were not satisfied. They were then asked about the specific issues they had and the most common responses were: no refreshments or play available for children; lack of

water, and; closed due to COVID-19. It is extremely important that can children continue to visit their parents in prison, where appropriate, and if the facilities are not up to a certain standard it could result in the children not being brought to visit their parent anymore. It is vital visiting facilities are to a good standard as it impacts family and friends visiting the prisoner.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 Pandemic affected all three prisons by impacting the contact prisoners had with family and friends. The consultation found that 50% of prisoners had not received any visits during the pandemic. Previous research found that family contact during prison sentences is vital to help people in prison cope with the feelings of isolation during imprisonment (Agnew, 1992). Prisoners were also asked how COVID-19 directly impacted them and responses included: “ *...family do not want to visit as they don't want to experience the restrictions.*” and “ *...my family ties went bad.*” Restrictions from COVID-19 resulted in prisons suspending all social in-person visits (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2021). Family and friends were also affected as when asked about COVID-19's impact and responses included: “ *...we've not had a hug in over a year it's very difficult also can't see their faces behind masks.*” Staying in contact with the outside world is a challenge, regardless of the COVID-19 Pandemic so with the restrictions in place it makes it a lot harder to keep the ties with family and friends.

Changes to the prison system to facilitate maintaining contact could be focused upon as one means to improve the lives of prisoners and their family and friends. One limitation to maintaining family ties in prison is accessibility with the communication system within prison often found to be too expensive or inefficient. This could be resolved by increasing the number of phone calls allowed per week, reducing the cost of phone calls and creating more consistent access to online booking systems for visitation. However, it is recognised that this would require additional resourcing from HM Prison and Probation Service.

UROS Experience

Whilst doing our UROS project we were given the opportunity to develop a range of skills, such as working alongside a research team, effective communication, working to a tight deadline and expand our knowledge on a range of new programmes such as Excel, SPSS and Qualtrics. We have found this experience especially useful as it has helped prepare us for our future within academia. We are both now in our third year of university and will have a better understanding of how to conduct proper and thorough research proposals, investigations and programs, which will help us analyse the future data we collect for our dissertations. It has also helped us feel more confident in the creation of our own new ideas that could be researched, as well as working alongside others, especially those older than us. This will be very beneficial for us in the future when in employment or further study. A particular experience that was incredibly useful was going through the process of gaining

ethical approval. Our supervisors were incredibly communicative and transparent with us about the stages of approval our research proposal was going through and what issues or boundaries it may have faced. This is valuable experience for us to have in the future if we wish to complete a masters or PhD as we will need to go through the ethical approval process ourselves then too and will now be more familiar with the process.

Conclusion

Family ties hold significant benefits in helping improve the lives of prisoners both during their sentence and after release. Research such as Folk et al., (2019) has shown that maintaining positive family ties whilst within prison help benefit the mental health of prisoners by boosting morale and providing events to look forward to such as visitations. Based on previous literature (see, for example, Farmer, 2017) it is argued that maintaining family ties has a continuing positive effect after the completion of a sentence by helping increase the chances of successful reintroduction to life outside of prison by reducing the likelihood of reoffending and drug misuse, alongside higher levels of employment. The results of the consultation show that the COVID-19 Pandemic has also had an adverse impact on the ability for prisoners to maintain family ties and highlighted several areas of potential improvement to combat this issue.

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