

A photograph showing a woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a black top, holding a young child in an orange shirt. They are standing in front of a large window with light-colored curtains, looking out at a bright, slightly blurred outdoor scene. A solid green bar is at the top of the page.

Connection Campaign 2020: The impact of COVID-19 on prisoner's families.

Penal Reform Solutions

Written by Dr Sarah Lewis

Research Team: Justine Best, Natasha Lazell, Sarah Lewis and Sophi Noble

Email: info@penalreformsolutions.com

Website: www.penalreformsolutions.com



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This connection campaign focused on those with loved ones in prison. It aimed to illuminate the voices of prisoner's families in order to gain a greater understanding of their experiences during COVID-19 and build a greater connection between families and prisons, which is authentic and meaningful. 34 family members anonymously answered the question: *How is COVID-19 effecting you?* The responses were from a variety of family members and the data was analysed by a multi-disciplinary research team, who volunteered to support the campaign. Utilising the words from those that participated, the report outlines the key findings from the thematic analysis. The findings suggested COVID-19 sparked a rupture between the prison estate and prisoner's families, leading to a distancing that magnified the pains of imprisonment for families and those incarcerated. Practical recommendations are presented that aim to repair this rupture, in order to nurture growth and develop a future connection between prisons and families that is strong and meaningful.

“The findings suggested COVID-19 sparked a rupture between the prison estate and prisoner’s families, leading to a distancing that magnified the pains of imprisonment for loved ones and people incarcerated”.

INTRODUCTION

Aim

The Connection Campaign is an ongoing initiative that aims to build relationships and connections with communities, the Criminal Justice System and individuals who have been impacted by the Criminal Justice System. In addition, this campaign aims to raise ongoing awareness of the impact of prison and punishment on wider society and magnify the voices of people, who often remain hidden. To launch this campaign, we captured the voices of families from April 2020 to July 2020 who have a loved one in prison.

Our mission at Penal Reform Solutions (PRS) is to humanise people in prison and those impacted by incarceration. As an organisation, it aims to reduce social harm and increase social good through relationship building, connection and understanding. One of our strategic priorities is to raise awareness of the issues associated with punishment and the societal response to crime. The aim of this report is to create accessible research findings that provoke and initiate discussion and ultimately promote transformational change.

Short Context

According to Kincaid, Roberts and Kane (2019), it is estimated that over 300,000 children will be affected by parental imprisonment in 2020. The Ministry of Justice (2012) found that of the prisoners surveyed, 40% considered familial support and 36% considered seeing their children as important factors, which could support their desistance from crime. However, the problems associated with *quality* connections with families have been frequently raised, particularly in terms of the ability for families to voice worries to prison establishments about their loved ones. Indeed, the Prison Reform Trust (PRT, 2019) found that 37% of prisons across England and Wales do not have a working and dedicated telephone number for families to alert safer custody departments of safeguarding concerns. Alarming, of those which do, over 80% connect the caller to an answering phone and not a member of staff. The report aims to promote growth in this area in order to develop prison practice and build positive, authentic relationships with those who have loved ones in prison.

METHODOLOGY

Families of those with loved ones in prison were asked to submit a response to the question: *How is COVID-19 effecting you?* Anonymous answers were submitted to PRS, who collated the responses spanning from April to July 2020. 34 responses were received in total, which came from the sisters, mothers, husbands, wives, and partners of those incarcerated. The research team co-created the project and disseminated the findings, with the Inside Time supporting the initiative. The team consisted of the Director of Penal Reform Solutions, an academic with practitioner experience, a student social worker and a criminologist who works for the Inside Time. The data was analysed using thematic analysis and a member of the Growth Team (who has a loved one in prison) provided feedback on the findings prior to publication. The Research Team created a Dissemination Strategy in order to magnify the impact of the findings to a variety of audiences, using social media, reports, audio/visual material and blogs. The commitment from the research team was to communicate the findings in various ways, to reach as many different people as possible.



FINDINGS

Several themes were identified in the data that indicate a relational tear or rupture occurred between families and the prison service. This rupture has led to a distancing between both the prison service and families, resulting in communication breaking down. Part 1 outlines the first two themes that were identified. These are believed to have existed prior to COVID-19 and have become exacerbated during the pandemic.

PART 1: THE CONTEXT

WE FEEL INVISIBLE

Families described a state of play that was present across the penal landscape, even before COVID-19 took place. Families expressed a sense that they had been “forgotten” and projected their feelings of exclusion onto the prison service and government at large. For example, one partner stated; "*the amount of politicians I have emailed is too many to mention and nobody responds*", whilst others participants highlighted the absence of an exit plan or strategy for prisons. Families expressed the feeling that the absence prison communication prison and the care of



those in prison symbolised they felt their loved ones were insignificant. Whilst family members expressed this sense of invisibility, they in turn expressed concerns for prisoners as a community, in addition to their own loved ones.

WE FEEL PUNISHED

Adding further context, family members expressed how COVID-19 had exacerbated the already present feeling of being ‘doubly’ punished. One partner stated; “*we are outwardly free, but we are inwardly side by side and doing the stretch with the prisoners,*” with another response proposing that society has created; “*a system which seems to want to severely punish the family as well.*” It is argued here that these feelings of ‘othering’ and punishment contribute to a relational rupture, which significantly magnified the pain of restrictions put in place due to COVID-19. Whilst these experiences existed prior to the pandemic, COVID-19

has rendered the unsettled relationship between prisons and families considerably more fragile.

PART 2: THE REASON FOR THE RUPTURE

THE LACK OF HUMANITY

Several family members referred to the perceived lack of humanity, which is believed to contribute significantly to the rupture between families and the prison service. Families described this by using terms such as; *“barbaric”, “brutal”* and *“like torture”*. They described their loved ones’ conditions by way of providing evidence of their views, stating:

- *“he was isolated for 7 days and not even allowed out for a shower”*
- *“blistering heat and no air / open doors”*
- *“they are not eating, due to a reduction of the canteen”*
- *“the prices of food has increased with limited access”*
- *“we are deprived of hugs, face and body”*

An additional theme associated with humanity was the recognition of how much support family members had previously received from their loved ones in prison. One respondent stated; *“he’s equally a support for me”*, another said; *“I don’t know how we will keep this afloat without him if this continues.”* This removal of support during the pandemic seemed to play a significant role in supporting the wellbeing of family members, who were no longer able to access their loved ones in a meaningful way. Whilst some recognised that the additional phone credit created some link, the limited time and access to phones (for those who do not have phones in their rooms) was not sufficient enough to ease the worry they felt for those they love.

MAGNIFIED PAIN

The pain experienced by families was significantly magnified and expressed as a fear for the potential reality of the sudden death of those they love due to COVID-19. In addition, they feared for a deterioration of mental health (and perceived lack of effective support with mental health) and the effect of separation from loved ones. Families described trying hard to support their loved ones from a distance but how this was nigh on impossible, expressing the situation as; *“heart-breaking”*, or of *“despair”* and *“living a life of constant worry”*. This was

in combination with the demands of family life at home, with respondents explaining how their; “*children are crying all the time*” as well as the pressures associated with work. The language used highlights a desperation for support, kindness and understanding from a prison service that is for them, unattainable, impenetrable and without compassion. For example, one family member said; “*When will this torture end?*”. Whilst small gestures of kindness from prison staff were acknowledged, the insurmountable harm that has been expressed overrode any acts of compassion that were being conveyed.

PART 3: THE RESPONSE OF THE RUPTURE

POWER AND POWERLESSNESS

Relational ruptures lead to a distancing between two parties and in this case, this was observed from the data. Ruptures can either be confrontational in nature (where individuals fight to be heard and seen) or lead to a withdrawal (whereupon individuals isolate and become passive). Both confrontational and withdrawal ruptures were expressed by



the respondents, with family members fighting against a difficult system (e.g. families writing, tweeting and trying to talk to individuals of authority) or losing energy, as one mother said; “*I should be a good protector but I can't be*”. The attempt to gain power in order to see change seemed futile, with family members receiving little acknowledgement or experiencing change. This appeared to have left families feeling powerless, with one participant stating; “*I'm unable to help him in any way and it makes me feel weak and useless.*” And yet, in spite of this, the strength and resilience of families was clear. It seemed that COVID-19 was in some ways, ‘just another fight’, that families have become accustomed to due to their subordinated placement and position within the penal landscape.

HOPE AND HOPELESSNESS

Families expressed a sense of deep disappointment and hurt, which has led to feelings of hopelessness. One partner stated; “*I am beaten*”, another said; “*hope is fading*”. Small events symbolised this sense of hopelessness, for example, a wife expressed the hope of their children seeing their dad for Father's day and then explained how it passed by without any

care, communication or sense of empathy. Respondents explained how a clear, robust road map and exit strategy would provide them with hope, whilst others turned to pockets of their lives where they received hope (for example, family charities and faith).

A LACK OF ORGANISATIONAL COMPASSION

Families highlighted a perceived lack of fairness, communication and compassion during COVID-19, which left them feeling isolated and excluded. They expressed a more general view of prisoner's families, exploring the notion that their relationships with the prison service is shallow, distant, and often tokenistic. One partner explained; "*we are constantly told how family networks are valued and they contribute to reducing re-offending*", and then goes on to express the contradictions that they experience in practice. Families also described a sense that they should be grateful for the efforts made to maintain family ties, with one partner stating; "*We get to speak for 10 minutes per day and the officers expect us to be grateful! Prisoners and their families have been forgotten about during this pandemic and we are still being ignored now. I just want to see my partner*". The lack of ambition, activity and desire to create meaningful connections between families and their incarcerated loved ones were described and whilst some efforts were recognised and valued, there was a deep sense that the prison service, as a system, did not share this desire or commitment. This was in spite of their expressed commitment to families and the academic literature that highlights the importance of positive social bonds. This lack of perceived compassion called families to ask for greater humanity, with one family member stating clearly; "*we need people to care*".

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This connection campaign aimed to illuminate the voices of those with loved ones in prison, through a time of significant challenge. It does not wish to shame the prison service or indeed blame specific individuals. Instead, it aims to raise awareness, provide the prison service with a greater understanding of those that are impacted by incarceration and provide helpful, realistic recommendations that can be applied both now and in the future. These recommendations are directed at prisons and the government respectively.

Recommendations to apply today

FOR PRISONS

1) To have a prison wide discussion

Discuss and critically reflect on the following questions:

- How would we (the prison) describe our relationship with the loved ones of the people in our care?
- How did this change during COVID-19?
- How does it feel reading this report? What is your reaction?
- How do we create meaningful and authentic relationships with the loved ones of the people in our care?
- Why is it important to create meaningful and authentic relationships with prisoner's families?
- Do **all** staff (irrespective of grade or role) understand this importance and how do we know?
- What practices might suggest to families that the prisons relationship with them is tokenistic?
- Which practices might suggest to families that they are visible, important and valued?

From this discussion, how do we demonstrate our commitment to making a difference to the lives of the people in prison and their families?

2) To strive towards quality interactions with families and their loved ones

Discuss:

- What does a quality family interaction look like to us (not within a prison environment)?
- How can we strive to create this level of quality within a prison environment?
- How can we ensure that our actions support change?

3) To review and act on integrating families within prison reform and prison practice, providing them with regular opportunities to inform strategies to support desistance.

Discuss:

- How can we build a system whereby families can communicate and be actively involved in creating practices where their voice is heard and they do not feel punished?
- How can we communicate this outwardly as a sign of your commitment?

Ultimately, discuss and **act** on the question:

How can we narrow the gap between prisoners, their loved ones and the prison in order to create safer prison environments and ultimately, safer communities?

FOR THE GOVERNMENT

- 1) To respond to this report.
- 2) To provide a clear pandemic strategy, which is communicated to families of those who are incarcerated.
- 3) To provide a communication system whereupon families, prisoners and the prison service can share their concerns around prison practice and these concerns are taken seriously.
- 4) To create strategic priorities that focus on building quality relationships with prisoners' families, involving families in its design, implementation and evaluation.

We are happy to support in any way we can.

Please contact us on info@penalreformsolutions.com

REFERENCES

- Kincaid, S., Roberts, M., and Kane, E. (2019) *Children of Prisoners: Fixing a Broken System*. Crest Advisory. Available at <https://www.nicco.org.uk/userfiles/downloads/5c90a6395f6d8-children-of-prisoners-full-report-web-version.pdf> [Accessed 16 August 2020]
- PRT (2019) *Families struggling to share urgent safeguarding concerns with prisons*. Available at <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/PressPolicy/News/vw/1/ItemID/758> [Accessed 16 August 2020]
- Williams, K., Papadopoulou, V., and Booth, N. (2012) *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*. Ministry of Justice Analytical Services. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/278837/prisoners-childhood-family-backgrounds.pdf [Accessed 16 August 2020]