

Forgotten families – the impacts of imprisonment



It is widely acknowledged that children and parents are affected by family separation in many ways. When the circumstances of the separation are traumatic, impacts can be intensified and need to be addressed sensitively to minimise any long-term negative effects. What happens when a family is separated as the result of the incarceration of a parent?

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The purpose of a prison sentence is to punish offenders, not their children. It is likely that disruption associated with parental imprisonment, and the values, attitudes and behaviours that are promoted in the child throughout this experience, will be a very negative experience for the child, and may increase the probability of the child him/herself offending later in life (Reed and Reed 1997: 59; Gabel and Johnston 1995: 83). It therefore makes sense to protect children as much as possible from the potentially harmful consequences of parental imprisonment.

Recently, the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) conducted a study of the needs of children and families of prisoners in Victoria, *Doing it Hard* (Tudball 2000). As well as proactively strengthening the family unit, this article advocates various approaches aimed at minimising the acknowledged negative effects which impact on

families, and describes some of the experiences of prisoner parents and their children.

It is hard to know how many families are affected by imprisonment. Information collected on the parenting status of prisoners is generally superficial and may only involve asking if they are a parent. In New South Wales, a Legislative Council Standing Committee Inquiry into Children of Imprisoned Parents recommended that the prison reception interview should document details of prisoners' children including their ages, legal custody, and whether the prisoner was prime carer prior to imprisonment (Parliament of New South Wales 1997). This recommendation was accepted.

If little is known about prisoners as parents, there is even less known about the children of prisoners. One of the earliest studies to give a profile to the issues faced by the children of prisoners was the 1982 New South Wales Department of Youth and Community Services study "Children of Imprisoned Parents". In their introduction

to the report of this study, Hounslow et al. (1982: 1) state: "Child punishment is often the other side of the coin to parental imprisonment. This is one of those shadowy corners of the criminal justice system seldom spotlighted. In our society, prisoners are marginalised; their spouses and adult friends isolated and hidden; while their children – to all intents and purposes – are invisible."

A total of 221 prisoners and caregivers of prisoners' children participated in VACRO's *Doing it Hard* study (Tudball 2000: xi). Using a questionnaire, 191 interviews were conducted across six prisons in Victoria. One hundred and eleven prisoners (101 male and 10 female), as well as 80 caregivers who were visiting prisons, were interviewed. In addition, 30 prisoners were consulted through focus groups held at Tarrengower and Port Phillip prisons. Information from the study indicated that prisoners had, on average, 1.7 children.

Whatever the exact number of children who have a parent in prison, it is certain that their numbers are increasing. The Australian Bureau of Statistics records a national prison population of 21,714 on 30 June 2000, made up of 20,329 men and 1385 women (ABS 2001: 10). In Victoria, the male prison population has increased by 26 per cent since 1995, with the female prison population increasing by 58 per cent in the same period (OCSC 2001). Increasing incarceration rates, especially for women, mean that more children are being affected.

What happens to the children of prisoners? The answer depends largely on whether or not it is their primary caregiver who is imprisoned. In most cases the children of male prisoners will be in the care of their mothers. Children of female inmates are likely to experience greater disruption to caregiving arrangements, with grandparents and other family members playing a greater role in care. Incarcerated parents often have various children living with different people.

It is also possible that infant children will reside with their mothers in prison, if this is thought to be in the child's best interest and is consistent with the security and smooth running of the prison. The opportunity for women to have their preschool-aged children with them in prison can enhance bonding and avoid some of the negative impacts of separation. However, mothers whose children live with them in prison have little opportunity to have a break from the intensity of caring

for the child, and have less access to programs, education and community work because of limited alternative child care options.

It is certain that parents and children are dramatically and often traumatically affected by arrest, judicial process and imprisonment. VACRO's Family Liaison Staff working at prisons in Victoria are constantly made aware of the impacts of imprisonment on families.

"Tim" had been the sole carer of his two children since his relationship with his partner broke down three years ago. He was arrested on his way to collect the children from school, and during his four days in police cells had been unable to establish their whereabouts. He arrived at the Melbourne Assessment Prison extremely worried about their welfare. Prisoners and their families need reassurance about the welfare of their loved ones at the time of incarceration, when so much is unknown and unfamiliar. (Family Liaison Staff)

Families may be traumatised by the arrest and incarceration of a loved one and feel helpless and confused, especially if there is media coverage. According to Howard (2000: 3): "One of their greatest needs is for information, both to understand what is happening to their loved one, and so that they know what to expect in terms of the procedures for contact. This confusion can be intensified for children whose understanding of the world in general is still developing."

Apart from the immediate decisions about who will look after the children, the question of how to explain a parent's absence arises. A high proportion of respondents in VACRO's *Doing it Hard* study indicated that one of the most difficult aspects of dealing with imprisonment was how and what to tell the children. This was reflected in the large numbers who had provided a false explanation to the children about their parent's absence – on holiday, working interstate, working for the police – or had told the children nothing. Secrecy and deception can lead to mistrust and further confusion for the children.

Incarceration may necessitate relocation for the rest of the family, and hence disruption of schooling and loss of support networks. Moving house may result from economic hardship arising from the loss of the breadwinner, or a desire to escape media or family attention. The stigma and feelings of isolation

ABOUT VACRO



The Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) is a community-based welfare organisation, established in 1872 as the Prisoners' Aid Society.

A range of support services to the families of offenders is provided by VACRO, through family liaison staff at prisons, and counselling and peer support groups for partners and parents of prisoners. Assistance with family travel and accommodation near country prisons is also available. Welfare and practical support services for prisoners and in-prison programs which address anger management, relationships and drug and alcohol issues, are other VACRO initiatives. Post-release support is available on an ongoing basis.

Research carried out by VACRO into the needs of children and families of prisoners in Victoria, *Doing it Hard*, has highlighted the needs of children and prisoner parents. An innovative pilot program has been initiated at Dhurringile Prison in country Victoria for fathers to develop their parenting skills.

The Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders is well regarded in the criminal justice system.

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associated with being the family of a prisoner, of being contaminated in some way by the deeds of the offender, is central to many of the difficulties that children and families face. This may also be compounded by community perceptions that prisoner parents are intrinsically bad parents.

An Australian study concerned with prisoner mothers found that “inmate mothers are not only seen to offend against society, but also against their role as mothers” (Farrell 1998). This may well apply to prison fathers as well. Farrell refers to prison environments or institutional ecologies which impact on families of prisoners. Other research concludes that most visitors to prisons “were made to feel like criminals themselves just for visiting a gaol” (Creghan 1997).

Parents in prison face a variety of challenges to maintaining contact with their children. Many feel powerless, with a loss of parental authority and a sense of losing touch. Their ability to parent is likely to be greatly influenced by who is caring for their children and the role they are prepared to take in maintaining contact.

Even with the very best intentions, there are frustrations because of the security requirements of prisons.

“Josie”, a young mother with her three children, arrived at the Assessment Prison recently to visit the children’s father. In her rush to get to the prison, Josie had left her purse at home. The family was told that without identification they would not be able to visit. The children, who had been anticipating the visit all week, became upset and angry. Fortunately, the VACRO family liaison worker at the prison was able to take the children to visit their father. (Family Liaison Staff)

Visiting prisons geographically distant from the family home can be economically and physically difficult. In this regard, the conflicting interests of parents and children can lead to difficult decisions, as illustrated by a father and son who both enjoyed football.

“Shane” was doing well playing in the under-twelve footy team and his father loved knowing he was involved. But in order to visit his dad at a country prison at weekends, Shane had either to drop out of the football team or not see his dad. (Family Liaison Staff)

It is also frequently very difficult for long-distance telephone contact to be maintained, with the considerable cost of phone calls being borne by the prisoner, often with funds provided by the family.

Parents in prison may have their children in state care. Access to welfare authorities for meetings and information is a concern for incarcerated parents. They also fear that significant meetings and court decisions may be made in the absence of the custodial parent. This reflects and accentuates their often profound sense of powerlessness. Supports are needed for fostering efficient communication between prisoners and the various authorities with which they require contact. These include welfare, education and housing authorities.

Welfare organisations working with prisoners’ families claim there is overwhelming evidence that children, who may already be disadvantaged, suffer discrimination, stigmatisation, and further hardship following the imprisonment of a parent (Lloyd 1995).

The impacts of parental imprisonment on children can result in behavioural and emotional responses including fear and anxiety, sadness, and physical symptoms including increased health problems and regressive behaviour such as bed-wetting (Wright and Seymour 2000: 23). Children can develop a belief that they did something wrong that caused the parent to leave, and experience feelings of anger, shame and guilt, isolation, and confusion about their parent’s behaviour and the conflict between this and how they themselves have been taught to behave.



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Children can be particularly distressed and anxious about their parent’s welfare in cases where they have seen their parent being arrested and forcibly removed, and VACRO has identified the need for a de-briefing service for children who have witnessed their parent being taken into custody, sometimes in dramatic circumstances.

In an extensive United States study of the impacts of parental imprisonment on children, Johnston (1995) concluded that normal developmental stages and growth milestones can be influenced by the trauma of imprisonment of a parent, resulting in aggressive behaviour, learning difficulties and maladaptive behaviour patterns, including offending behaviour.

Nearly half of the prisoners interviewed for the *Doing it Hard* study had previously been in prison and one-third of them had served a Youth Training Centre sentence. Four out of ten had a close relative who had been imprisoned (Tudball 2000). The latest Victorian prison census indicates that 63 per cent of male and 61 per cent of female prisoners have been in prison previously. Of those imprisoned, less than 10 per cent of men and 20 per cent of women had completed secondary education while about 60 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women were unemployed or not part of the paid labour force when in the community (OCSC 2001). Many prisoners in the state of Victoria are poorly educated and have not recently participated in the workforce. To say that many have not had positive parenting role models does not give a full picture of the chaotic lives many have led.

Prisoners who maintain contact with their families are less likely to re-offend after release. Research also suggests that many prisoners are prepared to use their time in prison to reflect on and renew their relationships with family members (Catholic Prison Ministry, Qld, 2000). Participation in a variety of programs offered in prison addressing relationship issues, anger management and parenting can assist individuals develop their skills. However, these programs are usually offered a session a week in six or eight week blocks and may be of limited benefit without longer term follow-up, and are not always available at all prisons. The availability of programs is also dependent on funding and as a result are somewhat ad hoc.

In an attempt to offer greater continuity, a two-year pilot program being run by VACRO in a Victorian

country prison offers fathers the opportunity to develop their parenting skills. Individual fathers will participate over an extended period of time. Child-friendly visit facilities with a relaxed atmosphere and age-appropriate toys and resources provide a venue for guided play. The program features the opportunity for children to visit their fathers without the primary caregiver being present, and participation in group work with other prisoner parents. The program is offered on an ongoing basis and emphasises building on existing parenting strengths and acquiring new skills over an extended period of time. This offers the fathers the experience of developing their parental relationship on a one-to-one basis and within the broader family context and includes planning for family reunion. Upon their release, participants are able to link in with other VACRO programs so that continued support is available.

Parent and non-parent carers may be reluctant to take children for prison visits. Accessing prisons and going through security procedures can be a traumatic experience for children and adults. Providing a sympathetic environment in which parents and their children can meet during the parent's incarceration can contribute to the benefit of the experience for both children and parents.

In the United Kingdom, Save the Children has taken a particular interest in prison visit centres and believes that it can relieve some of the worst effects of custody on prisoners' families, by improving the conditions in which they maintain contact with the prisoner. The model for visit centres established by Save the Children include a supervised play area, canteen facilities, a quiet room where confidential matters can be discussed, a comfortable waiting area, toilets and baby changing facilities. Guidelines for the establishment of centres have been published cooperatively by Save the Children, the Home Office, the prison service, and the Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups. Since 1990, there has been a commitment on the part of the prison service to establish a prison visitors' centre at all new or refurbished prisons (Lloyd 1995).

Children of prisoners have special needs. Although they may come to the attention of welfare services, the particular trauma of having a parent in prison may not emerge. Stigma and secrecy may keep them hidden. To minimise the negative impacts of parental imprisonment on children, their needs must be acknowledged. Children of prisoners and the issues they face have been invisible for too long. The consequence of continuing to ignore these children is to reinforce the generational cycle of crime and disadvantage in which they are enmeshed.

According to Johnston (Gabel and Johnston 1995: 14): "As evidence of intergenerational crime and incarceration continues to mount, every criminal justice and corrections policy affecting children of offenders should be scrutinised for its long-term implications. In the case of parent-child visitation in jails and prisons, it is clear that this beneficial, low-cost intervention reduces the negative effects of parent-child separation and may therefore also contribute to a reduction of future crime and incarceration among prisoners' children."

The data collected in VACRO's *Doing it Hard* study also draws some disturbing conclusions about the likely outcomes for children of prisoners. Based on the

family history of their parents, these children are more likely than children in the general community to be imprisoned themselves, have changes made to their living arrangements, and to develop a negative perception of the justice system. This can translate to anti-authoritarian attitudes, which may impact significantly on the child's schooling and relationships with teachers and other authority figures.

It is this almost inevitable "anti-socialising" of their children that many prisoner parents dread. This is particularly so for those who have undertaken personal development programs during their imprisonment and gained some insights into their own learned behaviours. It is painful enough for these men and women to recognise their own development barriers and obstacles in retrospect. It is more painful still to watch helplessly from inside a prison as their own children begin their journey down the same path. Intergenerational offending needs to be recognised, and treated as a social condition which spreads further with every expansion of the criminal justice system.

Being in prison does not prevent a prisoner from acting as a father or mother.

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Names used in this article have been changed to protect the anonymity of the families.