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Support for prisoner-child relationships: a reflection on two decades of research evidence. Professor Gwyneth Boswell & Emeritus Professor Peter Wedge.

Introduction

Fifteen years ago, the authors commenced an extensive study in England and Wales, entitled 'The Parenting Role of Imprisoned Fathers', under the Department of Health's Research Initiative on 'Supporting Parents'. The study was completed in 1999 and published in book form in 2002 (Boswell & Wedge, 1999; 2002). Against a background of children's needs and rights, it examined the place of fatherhood in their lives, the meaning of paternal absence to a child, and the particular significance for children of a father who was absent by reason of imprisonment.

The study also looked at the effect of a father's imprisonment on the children's mothers/other carers, and upon the fathers themselves. It chronicled the range of facilities available to children to help them maintain contact with their father during his imprisonment. Not unlike the early pioneers in this research field (Morris, 1965; Shaw, 1987; 1992), it concluded that, despite pockets of good practice depending largely on the interest of individual prison staff and the voluntary sector, this group of children remained under-prioritised and ill-supported by statutory child care and criminal justice policy and practice.

Since this study was completed, we have continued to research the topic of the children and families of prisoners. We find some facilities improved, others worse than before, and others much the same. Depressingly, we find ourselves at research conferences, listening to accounts of contemporary (usually small-scale) research findings which show, overall, that little has changed for children and families since we reported 12 years ago.

We surmise that there are 3 main reasons for this relative lack of progress. In this brief reflection, we address the lack of official statistical information, the shortage of longitudinal research, and the politicisation of crime, concluding with three main recommendations for future development.

The lack of official statistical information

For as long as we can remember, researchers, practitioners and campaigning groups, have been asking relevant Ministries to make provision for the collection of data about numbers of prisoners with children, and the numbers of those children. Only in this way, can it be possible to make informed comment on this population and its scale. Very few countries do this, Sweden being a notable exception within Europe, and some level of information being available in the United States (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). In the UK, the National Offender Management Service, established under New Labour, almost reached the point of incorporating this information category into its proposed new computerised database, but when that system failed, the impetus was lost.

The shortage of longitudinal research

A great deal of qualitative research has been conducted in many countries on the circumstances of prisoners' children and families. None, to our knowledge, has concluded anything other than that the majority of families are economically, physically and emotionally disadvantaged, and receive little support from statutory agencies, though many good examples of individual and voluntary agency-based good practice are reported. In some cases, visiting arrangements have improved physically but, in terms of what really counts to families – the atmosphere and the levels of respect with which they are, or are not, treated by staff – the visiting environment remains very variable.

Parenting programmes and family and kinship support projects have been more of a success story in terms of their reported positive impact on both young and adult prisoners, partners and children. (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Boswell, Wedge & Poland, 2009; Boswell, Poland & Price, 2010; Boswell, Poland & Moseley, 2011). Some of these studies provide short-term outcome data in terms of attitude, behaviour, parenting styles and early impact on children. For practical reasons, however, most are unable to identify a comparison group of the general population (Murray *et al.*, 2009). It is rare that the level of funding required to remedy this, or to study the field for much longer than a year, is made available, and so it is difficult to gauge levels of impact, say 2 – 5 years after a prisoner's release. It is hoped that the current longitudinal study on 'Risk and protective factors during resettlement of imprisoned fathers with their families', being conducted by the Ormiston Children and Families Trust and Cambridge University Institute of Criminology will, in due course, help to fill the longer-term evidence void.

The politicisation of crime

In many countries, crime has been increasingly politicised over the last two decades, and its perpetrators and all those associated with them have become even more unpopular than hitherto. This, of course, relates partly to the wide-reaching aftermath of events such as the al Qaida attacks on the US World Trade Center on 11th September 2001 and their subsequent smaller-scale replication in other capital cities. As a consequence, the preservation of security at every level has become paramount. Earlier developments, such as the outcries following the murder of toddler James Bulger in the UK in 1992, and the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, have also contributed to the gradual hardening of policy and public opinion. In a visit to Rwandan prisons overflowing with 'genocidaires' in 2002, we discovered that children and families were allowed to visit only for 3 minutes and had to stand on one side of a line while the prisoners stood on the other, with no touching allowed.

During the course of our own national study, 18 years of a Conservative Government with a hardline Home Secretary at its helm for its last few years, was replaced by a New Labour administration also determined to be 'tough on crime', though never, seemingly 'tough on the causes of crime' its accompanying epithet, which might have led to some change for prisoners' families. Since coming to power in May 2010, the present Conservative-led Coalition Government's priority has been to make deep spending cuts across most ministries, including the Ministry of Justice, set up by the previous administration. Despite his initial enthusiasm for a (cost-saving) 'Rehabilitation Revolution' set out in a Green Paper (Ministry of Justice, 2010), the present Minister has been obliged by his harder-line colleagues to quash proposals to reduce the number of people sentenced to prison over the next 3 years. Such monies as were once available to spend on Visitors' Centres, crèches, the staffing of extended visits, parenting programmes, family and kinship support work and the like, are now severely curtailed and liable to be subject to a newly-introduced 'Payment by Results' policy. In the case of children and families, the main outcome measure appears likely to be whether or not the prisoner is re-convicted, rather than the maintained/improved well-being of the child. In terms of the rights of the child, this is probably the lowest point reached by criminal justice policy since our own researches began some 15 years ago.

Conclusion

Despite cumulative bodies of research findings to the effect that prisoners' children and families suffer considerable hardship, but that they can benefit from a range of programmes set up to support them and their family ties, Governments, the media and, thereby, public opinion remain unconvinced. It will take reliable statistics, hard evidence, and statutory compulsion to bring about any real change in this situation.

Annex with Recommendations

1. Research and Planning

Policy-makers in this arena have to balance society's need for justice, retribution and protection with children's needs and rights to sustain contact and, thereby, loving and meaningful relationships with their incarcerated parent. In the interests both of the children's future emotional stability and of discovering more about the links between sustained family ties and subsequent reoffending, it is apparent that further longitudinal research needs to be funded and conducted. It would be valuable to know, for example, how effectively prisoners returning to their families are able to assume the role of responsible parent at home – to the best advantage of their children. This kind of information should be fully integrated into policy formation with a mutual exchange which entails policy-makers facilitating the collection of important demographic information for researchers in the field. Research frameworks should be international, so that action can be informed by successes and failures elsewhere, to save scarce resources and avoid 'reinventing the wheel'.

2. The Enhancement of Public Understanding

The general public is justifiably concerned about, and sometimes fearful of, prisoners, prisons and all of those associated with them. They need to understand that to ascribe negative labels to prisoners' families, and their children in particular, is not to solve the problem but to perpetuate it; they, too, are entitled to hear serious rather than salacious facts which may help them form more objective and ultimately more compassionate and supportive attitudes. Public relations has never been the strong suit of the criminal justice system; the politicisation of crime has, to some extent, obviated the need for it. Researchers, practitioners and campaigners can all work to inform the public both about the needs and rights of prisoners' children, and about the importance for long-term community safety of supporting released prisoners' reintegration into their families and communities.

3. Statutory compulsion

As is well-known, measures to support the human rights of children to maintain contact with a parent from whom they are separated are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; the principle of respect for family life is incorporated in the European Convention on Human Rights. Most countries have ratified the former and included the latter in human rights legislation, but have been slow, and probably reluctant, to apply these measures to prisoners' children. Case law and Children's Ombudsmen are beginning to challenge this situation, and those in the field should use all legal means to ensure that their countries take proper state responsibility for implementing these measures at all stages of the justice process.

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