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'Great Expectations?': A Review of the Role of Prisoners' Families in England and Wales

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<u>**Abstract**</u>

In recent years, stable family relationships and community ties have been recognised as important factors in effective resettlement and reducing offending by ex-prisoners. Active family support can also help to ameliorate the 'pains of imprisonment', thereby potentially reducing the risk of suicide/self-harm. This paper discusses the roles that prisoners' families in England and Wales can play both in resettlement and in helping prisoners to cope during their incarceration. Using various studies and research reports that have emerged over the last 40 years, it examines the difficulties that families have in fulfilling these roles, particularly with regard to maintaining contact

and support through visits, and argues that the main focus of the prisoners' families literature has been on the families' experiences during the imprisonment of a relative, rather than on prisoner perspectives of family relations and their potentially supportive role. It is suggested that the inclusion of prisoners' perspectives may provide a greater understanding of these issues.

<u>Introduction</u>

Families of prisoners have traditionally been seen as the 'forgotten victims' of the criminal justice system in England and Wales (Matthews 1989). They can experience a range of problems due to the imprisonment of a relative, such as economic hardship, social stigmatisation and emotional difficulties, yet no one statutory or voluntary body has had responsibility for assisting families with these issues. Furthermore, despite commentators such as Woolf (1991) and HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCIP) (1999a) recognising family and community ties as important to the stability of prison regimes and the well-being of prisoners, families have often been ignored in debates surrounding the nature and purpose of imprisonment.

Recently, however, several official reports have recognised that stable family relationships and community ties can play a significant role in the resettlement process and in reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners (e.g. HM Chief Inspectors of Prisons and Probation (HMIPP) 2001, Home Office 2004, Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) 2002). In addition to assisting in resettlement, family support during the term of incarceration can help to ameliorate the 'pains of imprisonment' particularly the deprivation of liberty (Sykes 1958). This in turn is likely to improve general prisoner well-being, and can contribute to the prevention of suicide/self-harm. The importance

of maintaining family ties has long been recognised by the Prison Service, but could hardly be described as a priority of the prison system, as keeping in touch with imprisoned family members and being able to support them effectively can be extremely difficult for many families, particularly if prisoners are kept some distance away from their home area. This paper aims to review the roles that prisoners' families in England and Wales are expected to play and the difficulties that they may face in doing so[1]. It will firstly examine the traditional focus of the prisoners' families literature on prisoners' partners and children, before exploring and debating the role of families in resettlement and reducing the risk of suicide/self-harm. Finally it discusses the difficulties in maintaining family contact and visiting prisoners, which may affect the degree to which families can fulfil the expectations placed upon them.

<u>Who are Prisoners' Families?</u>

Before examining the role that prisoners' families can play, it is important to consider what is meant by the term 'prisoners' families'. Studies of prisoners' families overwhelmingly tend to discuss the experiences of prisoners' partners, particularly young wives and girlfriends, and prisoners' children (e.g. Morris 1965, Catan 1992, King and McDermott 1992, Shaw 1992, Woodrow 1992, Codd 1998, Boswell and Wedge 2001, for similar US studies, see Daniel and Barrett 1981, Fishman 1990, Girshick 1996). As Paylor and Smith point out,

> 'we still know very little of the consequences –economic, social, psychological-
> of imprisonment for the parents, grandparents, sisters or brothers, or other kin of
> the imprisoned person or of the ways in which their broader kin networks may
> help in the reintegration of released prisoners back into the community'
> (1994:133).

Furthermore, they argue that the traditional focus of literature on the marital family is misleadingly restrictive as a high proportion of prisoners do not have an active spousal relationship or dependent children. In 2000, NACRO found that 58 per cent of remand prisoners and 46 per cent of sentenced prisoners were single (NACRO 2000a), and the National Prison Survey in 1991 found that only 47 per cent of female prisoners and 32 per cent of male prisoners had dependent children living with them at the time of their imprisonment (Dodd and Hunter 1992) (although more recent figures suggest that just under 60 per cent of prisoners have dependent children (Prison Reform Trust 2004)). Concentrating on partners and children not only excludes the experiences of birth families, which may be similar to those of partners and children, but also ignores their relationships with prisoners, with whom they may still have considerable contact, and the support that they can offer them. They may even be the only source of family support and contact. Similar to other studies,[2] a survey of male prisoners in HMP Camphill carried out for Action for Prisoners' Families found that 51 per cent of prisoners were visited by their parents, 46 per cent received visits from their partners, 42 per cent from siblings and only 36 per cent from children (Murray 2003a). In her study of prisoners' partners in America, Girshick (1996) proposes that relationships with parents and siblings may be of particular significance to female prisoners, as whilst men tend to be visited by their wives and mothers, women are visited by their mothers and sisters. A recent survey in HMP Cookham Wood suggests that this experience is shared by female prisoners in England and Wales as participants were more likely to receive visits from their parents, siblings and children than from a partner[3] (Murray 2003b). There is therefore

a need to think beyond the current literature and to include the wider extended family when discussing the role and experiences of prisoners' families.

The Role of Prisoners' Families

Resettlement

Several US studies have shown that stable family relationships and other community links are key factors in effective resettlement and reducing re-offending (e.g. Ohlin 1954, Glaser 1964, Holt and Miller 1972). In a review of research in this area, Ditchfield (1994) found that prisoners without family support are between two and six times more likely to offend in the first year after release than those who demonstrate or receive active family interest, and policy concerning resettlement in England and Wales has now started to acknowledge the importance of family ties. For example, 'children and families' are one of the seven areas covered in the National Action Plan 'Reducing Re-offending' (Home Office 2004)[4], and the Prison Service Order (PSO) on resettlement, issued in 2001, states that the allocation of sentenced prisoners must take family ties and resettlement needs into account (HM Prison Service 2001a, PSO 2300, para. 4.4). Nevertheless, it is important to consider what kind of support families can offer or might be expected to offer to assist in resettlement, and indeed, whether or not it is appropriate or even possible for them to provide such help. Family members may give ex-prisoners practical support by providing accommodation and employment[5] or can be instrumental in helping them to find a place to stay or a job, often through their own contacts (Paylor and Smith 1994, Garland *et al.* 2001, Niven *et al.* 2004). Discussions of desistance have recognised that social bonds such as family relationships can also provide the incentive and pressure to change (Woolf 1991). American and British studies have suggested that they may give ex-offenders a

stake in conformity, a reason to 'go legit' (Sampson and Laub 1993), or be 'something to say no for' when tempted to become involved in criminal activity (Garland *et al.* 2001: 38). The influence of families on desistance will obviously depend on the perceived strength and quality of such social bonds (Maruna 2001), and it should be remembered that some families may engage in criminal activity and are therefore unlikely to promote effective resettlement and desistance.

Much less is known, however, about the social and psychological support that families can offer during the resettlement process. A study carried out on behalf of the Social Exclusion Unit in preparation for their ex-prisoners report, found that families could provide advice and guidance to help prisoners to settle back into the community, for example, by pointing out the negative consequences of engaging in criminal activity and encouraging a sense of responsibility. They may be able to persuade ex-prisoners to accept help or guidance from other agencies such as probation, and the impact of agencies might therefore be increased if families were more involved in discussions with them and the ex-prisoner (Garland *et al.* 2001). Families can also build up ex-prisoners' self-confidence and help to motivate them to lead a law abiding life, although Fishman's (1990) study of prisoners' wives in America found that such 'nurturing' was generally ineffective in preventing re-offending, and they tended to move on to strategies of active and passive resistance.

Despite this potential support, expecting families to play a significant role in resettlement and desistance does have various unwelcome implications and may place families who are already experiencing considerable social and financial difficulties under further pressure. They may fear that they will be held responsible or blamed if

an offender fails to 'go straight', as they were unable to control him or her in some way. Families are often presumed to be 'guilty by association' (Codd 1998:152) when a family member is in prison, because of a suspicion that they must have known about the criminal activity, but this perception may continue after the offender has been released, increasing pressure on families to ensure that further offending does not occur. They can also be placed into a policing rather than a caring role and may be expected to ensure that relatives living with them on Home Detention Curfew are at home during the prescribed times (Condry 2004). Yet not all families are ready to receive prisoners with open arms at the end of their sentence, as is frequently assumed (Ditchfield 1994). They may 'not want to know any more' especially if they have already supported them through several sentences (Noble 1995), and they may be nervous or even terrified by the prospect of the release, particularly if the offender has committed some kind of crime against them in the past (HMIPP 2001, Barrett 2003).

Even when they are in a position to be supportive, families appear to receive little assistance for their role in resettlement. They are often excluded from the sentence planning process, even though prisoners may wish them to be involved (Murray 2003a), and in her American study, Fishman (1990) suggests that prisoners' wives can be left with very little and often distorted information about how much prisoners are prepared for conventional life on release, due to the lack of opportunities for realistic interaction with them. Problems can occur when prisoners return to their families, as relationships may have changed considerably (Noble 1995). Partners left at home often become stronger and more independent because they have been forced to cope on their own. Ex-prisoners can struggle to adjust to this change (McDermott and King 1992), particularly if it threatens their role as providers and protectors, and this may

destabilise family relations and even lead to relationships ending (Barrett 2003), thereby reducing the chances of effective resettlement. Some voluntary sector groups give families assistance to prepare them for release, as they appear to appreciate the difficulties of readjustment and will support families after as well as during the imprisonment of a relative (Codd 1998), and it has been suggested that such support should available on a wider scale (NACRO 1994).

Finally, stressing the resettlement role of families may lead to the needs of families becoming ancillary to those of the criminal justice system (Noble 1995). Research on prisoners' families in both England and Wales and the US tells us much about the problems they may face during the imprisonment of a family member, such as financial and housing difficulties, social stigmatisation, and problems caring for and disciplining children (Morris 1965, Shaw 1992, Woodrow 1992, Noble 1995, Codd 1998, 2004, SEU 2002), as well as stress-related health problems (Fishman 1990, Noble 1995) and emotional difficulties related to separation such as loneliness and depression (Morris 1965, Fishman 1990, Noble 1995, Prison Reform Trust 2004). Linking family ties with resettlement may mean that any support offered to families to alleviate the problems they face may be given because of 'their instrumental value, not because of any commitment to maintaining families for their own sake' (Codd 2004: 3) or to meeting their health and social needs. Supporting families in their resettlement role could therefore be seen as a manifestation of what Crawford calls the 'criminalisation of social policy' (2002:121), as their social policy related problems are redefined in terms of their implications for crime and their crime prevention potential, rather than being important issues that deserve attention in their own right.

Reducing the pains of imprisonment and suicide/self-harm

Although much of the recent interest in prisoners' families has arisen due to their link to resettlement, the focus on reducing re-offending may lead to other forms of support that families can offer being ignored. Much of the research on prisoners' families in England and Wales looks at family relationships and support from the perspective of families, rather than prisoners' views of such matters and this approach may overlook the emotional help that families can provide to prisoners during their imprisonment. Maintaining family ties may certainly go some considerable way to reducing the so-called 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes 1958). Families may, for example, help to ameliorate the 'deprivation of goods and services' by providing various items often demanded by prisoners such as trainers and clothes as well as food, toiletries etc. It may be difficult, however, for families to afford them (McDermott and King 1992, Ditchfield 1994, Noble 1995), and it has been noted that families, particularly partners and children frequently undergo sacrifices to ensure that they can meet such demands (Action for Prisoners' Families 2003, see also Fishman 1990).

The 'deprivation of liberty' (Sykes 1958), which includes isolation from families and friends, can be the greatest source of distress for prisoners during their incarceration. In a study of vulnerability and difficulties coping with prison life in two prisons in England and Wales, the majority of all prisoners (both those deemed to have special needs/coping difficulties and those without) stated that the hardest part of being in prison was being separated from family and friends. They found it particularly hard to cope with feelings of powerlessness when they were unable to do anything if their families were facing problems on the outside, as well as with the frustration of trying to communicate with friends and family, and the uncertainty of partners' feelings

towards them (Mills 2003[6]). Difficulties coping with the pains of imprisonment such as this isolation, but also boredom and fear of other inmates, can leave prisoners vulnerable to suicide/self-harm and other 'maladaptive' responses such as violent outbursts and victimisation by others (Toch and Adams 1989, Seymour 1992, Toch 1992, Corcoran 1994, Mills 2003). In her studies of suicide in prison, Liebling (1992, 1999, see also Liebling and Krarup 1993) found that prisoners who had attempted suicide or were thought to be vulnerable to doing so, missed their families more, but were less likely to be in contact with anyone on the outside including family and/or friends. They received fewer visits and wrote fewer letters, leaving them feeling isolated and uncared for, particularly as they were separated from important sources of social support. They were significantly keener to receive and send more letters and receive more visits (Liebling and Krarup 1993), but they were also less likely to be able to do anything to alleviate their predicament. When visits did occur they were major events with frequent disappointment particularly when they were over or visitors failed to turn up (Liebling 2001). The combined effects of a lack of resources or contact and an inability to generate a solution to the hopelessness of their current situation distinguished prisoners at risk of suicide from the rest of the population. Furthermore, situational triggers to suicide/self-harm often also relate to families and include missed or bad visits, the breakdown of a relationship, problems contacting family and problems with children (Liebling 1992, 1999, Liebling and Krarup 1993, Howard League 1999).

Prisoners therefore need to find a way to cope with this isolation and separation in order to survive prison life, and it is unsurprising that maintaining family ties is likely to be the principal concern of most prisoners in England and Wales (HMCIP 1990).

The latest Prison Service suicide prevention strategy calls for prisoners to be given the opportunity to speak to their next of kin or have an extra exceptional visit after a serious incident of self-harm (HM Prison Service 2002). However, contact with family and friends may act as a 'protective agent' (HM Prison Service 1997) to minimise the risk of suicide/self-harm occurring in the first place. This has been recognised by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons in the most recent thematic review of suicide and self-harm, which introduced the notion of a 'healthy prison'; that is, one where prisoners and staff can remain healthy and which promotes their well-being (HMCIP 1999a). One test of a healthy prison is that all prisoners should be able to strengthen links with their families and prepare for their release. Additionally, prisoners in a survey in Northern Ireland suggested that family days or extended visits, where prisoners are able to spend a day with their children in a more child-friendly environment, might be a way of reducing suicide and self-harm (McCarthy 2004). Prison staff may also be able to help potentially suicidal prisoners to sort out family issues which are distressing them by, for example, making a phone call to check on the health of a family member. Such seemingly small gestures can have a significant effect on ameliorating despair and are often greatly appreciated by prisoners (Mills 2003).

Despite their potential to help and support prisoners, families remain an essentially 'untapped resource' in relation to suicide prevention. In much the same way as sentence planning, whilst families' involvement in suicide prevention might be beneficial, it can be difficult to achieve and they are often excluded from the process. When prisoners have attempted suicide or are thought at risk of doing so, families are rarely consulted about their care[7] or invited to participate in case conferences where

support plans are drawn up (HMCIP 1999a). Although they are encouraged to pass on information about prisoners who they believe to be at risk of suicide both by the Prison Service and various support groups (HM Prison Service 1997, 2001b), this may be difficult if they do not know who to contact. In Scotland, every prison has a Family Contact Development Officer (FCDO), who offers support and advice for relatives and acts as a named contact for families to talk to if they have concerns about the welfare of a prisoner (Scottish Prison Service 2004). In England and Wales, relatives may get passed around the prison before someone decides to take them and their concerns seriously, and HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCIP 1999a) has recommended that every establishment should have nominated staff to receive calls from people who are anxious about individual prisoners. In some prisons, the local Samaritans are starting to become more involved with families and now go into visitors centres to offer them support (Action for Prisoners' Families 2004). Whilst these provisions will undoubtedly assist families in discussing their concerns about imprisoned relatives, much of what might help to reduce the initial risk of suicide appears to involve improving opportunities for families and prisoners to maintain family ties in general rather than specific suicide prevention measures.

Meeting Expectations – Difficulties of Maintaining Contact and Visiting Prisoners

Families can clearly support prisoners in many ways, both during their incarceration and on release, and for these reasons family contact should surely be encouraged. Yet almost 43 per cent of sentenced prisoners and 48 per cent of remand prisoners in England and Wales lose contact with their family whilst in prison (NACRO 2000b), and the maintenance of family ties may be hampered by a variety of factors. Prisoners

can write to their families, but this may be problematic for those who have literacy difficulties. Telephone calls can be expensive (SEU 2002) and may put increased pressure on already cash-strapped families to provide the money to buy phonecards. Prisoners may not always be able to access telephones or may face a long wait to do so (HMCIP 2000), and some family members do not like this method of contact as prisoners may use telephone calls to control them by insisting that they are at home to receive them (Noble 1995, see also Fishman 1990).

Visits are often used as a measure of family support (Shafer 1994), and studies of both families and prisoners have found that visits are the preferred method of contact (Noble 1995, Murray 2003a). In a study of visits and parole success in America, Shafer described them as 'an essential component of the rehabilitative process' (1994:17) which perform several functions. They may be a reminder of the world outside and its associated responsibilities, allowing prisoners to continue their role as family members. They can smooth the adjustment of both family and prisoner to release and may reflect a promise of continued support on release. In England and Wales, Prison Rule 35 (2) entitles a convicted prisoner to receive two visits every four weeks (HM Prison Service 1999), whilst unconvicted prisoners may receive as many visits as they wish, subject to limits and conditions as the Secretary of State may direct (Rule 35 (1)). However, this is a right or entitlement that is not easy to exercise. In 2001, the Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation found that approximately two-thirds of those in local prisons and just under half of those in training prisons did not get their statutory entitlement of two visits a month (HMIPP 2001). Notably, the number of visits to prisons has fallen by a third in past five years, despite a more than 20 per cent rise in prison population (Prison Reform Trust 2004). Research on the

experiences of prisoners' families in England and Wales has discussed various difficulties that visits may entail, as well as possible measures to ease or enhance visiting, and allows some insight into the reasons for this decline.

Firstly, prisoners may be held some distance away from their local area, often in remote prisons. In 2003, prisoners were held an average of 53 miles away from home. Almost 11,000 prisoners were held over 100 miles away from their committal court town (Prison Reform Trust 2004). Travelling to visit prisoners is therefore likely to be expensive and time consuming, and may be difficult with small children, particularly if the journey involves several changes of public transport. This may discourage families from visiting at all or as often as prisoners are entitled to receive visits. A survey of prisoners at HMP Camphill on the Isle of Wight, one of the most geographically remote prisons, found that 55 per cent of prisoners had not received any visits since arriving there (Murray 2003a). Prisoners whose families lived over two hours away from the prison were much less likely to receive a family visit. Of those who did not receive a visit, 72 per cent said that it was because the journey was difficult for their families, with cost being the second most important factor. The Assisted Prison Visits Scheme will pay for two visits a month, but payment is only made after the visit and some families may find it difficult to find the money to pay for transport, food and possibly childcare and accommodation costs up front. These difficulties may be particularly acute for visitors to female prisoners, who due to the smaller number of establishments holding them, are likely to be held even further away from their home areas, but visits may be even more important to them as they are more likely to have dependent children (HMCIP 2000, SEU 2002). Because of problems travelling to training prisons, some prisoners may even prefer to stay in a

local prison close to their families where conditions are poor, rather than move to a more remote establishment which offers a better regime (HMCIP 1990, 2000, Woolf 1991).

Ensuring that prisoners are held closer to home in the community prisons advocated by Woolf (1991) in order to assist in preparing for their release and to ensure that they receive support when released, would certainly help to overcome many of these barriers to more and better family contact. The government has stated that it aims to create new multi-functional community prisons as the population allows, to provide the opportunities for prisoners to serve much more of their sentence closer to home (Home Office 2002). Yet although family ties and resettlement needs must be taken into account when allocating sentenced prisoners, the recent Prison Service Order on resettlement acknowledges that these needs may be outweighed by other considerations, such as security category and suitability for particular types of accommodation (HM Prison Service 2001a PSO 2300, para. 4.6). Due to overcrowding, prisoners are also likely to be moved around the country to fill available spaces, thereby fulfilling the needs of the system rather than their own training and resettlement needs or the needs of families. Moreover, the government has also recently rejected a recommendation from the Public Accounts Committee to set targets to put prisoners near to their family home, stating that it was not feasible, or always desirable to hold all prisoners close to their home areas or to set targets to do so (Home Office 2003). It is therefore doubtful that visiting will become any easier in the near future as keeping prisoners closer to home is unlikely to be a priority, particularly in the current target driven culture and practice of the Prison Service.

Secondly, security measures, particularly those introduced to crack down on drug smuggling, may discourage families from visiting (Broadhead 2002). Visitors are often subjected to a 'rub down' or even a strip search, both of which can be humiliating and degrading, and can cause considerable distress, especially for children and elderly relatives. In her study of prisoners' wives in America, Fishman (1990) suggested that such security measures give the impression that visitors convey a special low status, and create a sense of shame, discouraging them from maintaining close ties. Some inmates, particularly from minority ethnic backgrounds, may therefore be reluctant to put their families through such an ordeal and may themselves dissuade their families from visiting (HMIPP 2001, Broadhead 2002, Rimmington 2002).

Thirdly, families may suffer from a lack of information on visiting as procedures vary from prison to prison. Booking visits may be difficult, particularly if this has to be done via an often engaged telephone booking line, and poor facilities such as lack of child care, and inconvenient visiting times for those at work or school may all contribute to the challenges of making a visit. Family Contact Development Officers in Scottish prisons can provide families with information on visiting, travelling to the prison, and how to apply for the Assisted Prison Visits scheme and other benefits, as well as putting them in contact with outside agencies and support groups (SEU 2002, Scottish Prison Service 2004). No similar post exists in the English and Welsh prison system, although 109 prisons now have visitors centres, which can provide some of these services. Yet the facilities offered there can vary drastically, ranging from a portacabin for visitors to wait in, to purpose built centres, often run by prisoners' families support groups, where visitors can receive emotional and practical support

and information, use childcare facilities, and attend surgeries with other agencies such as Citizens Advice Bureau, Jobcentre Plus and community nurses. Some administrative tasks such as receiving property, booking in visitors and checking ID may also be performed here (Loucks 2002). However, visitors centres and the prisoners' families support groups that often run them usually have to rely on short term funding from charitable organisations. As such they may have unstable and uncertain futures, and this has led many to call for such centres to be officially funded by the Prison Service (HMCIP 1999b, Prison Reform Trust 2004). The Home Office (2004) has recently accepted in principle that all closed prisons should have a visitors centre, but it remains to be seen what provision will be made for those establishments that currently do not or if it leads to more secure funding for those already in existence.

Even when visits do occur, the support that families can give prisoners once in the visits room may be limited. Commenting on the results of a survey in Scottish prisons, Spencer (1992) notes that it can be difficult for prisoners and visitors to talk freely about problems they may be facing, particularly in such a public arena, when time is so limited and when children may be present. Many family members report sticking to 'safe' topics in order to make the visit as good as possible and so as not to upset the prisoner by broaching more difficult subjects that they may not have time to resolve. Serious family problems may therefore be concealed until release (McDermott and King 1992, Action for Prisoners' Families 2003), and this may contribute to the readjustment difficulties discussed earlier in this paper. In some prisons, Relate runs one day workshops which allow prisoners and partners to discuss relationship issues in a relaxed atmosphere, and cover subjects such as expectations and communication

skills. Such courses can prepare prisoners and partners for release and give them the opportunity to raise any difficulties they expect to have, but this provision is still relatively rare within the prison system. [8]

In the prisoners' families literature, there appears to be little awareness of prisoners' own views of the importance of family ties. Recent quantitative studies have looked at prisoners' views of family contact (Murray 2003a), and how families assist in the resettlement process by helping prisoners to find employment, training or education places (Niven *et al.* 2004), but more qualitative work in this area is needed to ensure greater knowledge and understanding of the meaning of family relationships and support for prisoners, both during their imprisonment and on release. This should ensure that a wider variety of family members who are important to the prisoner and maintain contact with them, including parents and siblings, are discussed. Exploring the reasons why some prisoners might reject visits, such as their unwillingness to put their families through the security measures or because they find parting at the end of a visit too traumatic (Rimmington 2002, Mills 2003), may also improve our understanding of why the number of visits has decreased and what might be done to reverse this trend.

Conclusion

Clearly then, families can play an important role in helping prisoners and ex-prisoners. Whilst there has been some official recognition of their importance, little has been done in England and Wales to support families to fulfil their potential role or to facilitate the maintenance of active family ties. Although individual examples of good practice do exist throughout the prison system, such as Relate workshops,

extended visits and in Scottish prisons, Family Contact Development Officers, still no one agency in England and Wales has overall responsibility for looking after prisoners' families or ensuring the maintenance of links between prisoners and families (Paylor and Smith 1994, Codd 1998, SEU 2002), and this may reinforce the idea that family contact is a privilege to be earned rather than a right or aid to social integration or support (HMIPP 2001).

The establishment of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) may present an opportunity for this to change as both prisons and probation could start to work together with families in the hope of improving their contact with and support for prisoners. As well as preparing families for the resettlement role that they are increasingly expected to play, this may also increase the effectiveness of such agencies if families are involved in discussions between them and ex-prisoners. However, the pressure that resettlement may place on families should not be forgotten, and further research could explore whether the support they are expected to provide during the resettlement process increases the social, practical and emotional difficulties that they already face due to the imprisonment of a relative. There is also a need to be aware of the danger of defining prisoners' families and family issues simply in relation to prevention of re-offending, and it should be remembered that not only do they deserve assistance because of the social and practical problems that they themselves often experience, but they are also able to play a wider, more emotive role in supporting prisoners and improving their well-being whilst they are in prison.

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[1] This paper refers to the position of families and prisoners in England and Wales, however, some reference to studies discussing the experiences of families in Scotland and the US will be made, where they also illustrate the difficulties that families may have fulfilling the roles expected of them.

[2] For example, the National Prison Survey found that 50 per cent of prisoners received a visit from parents in the previous three months, with 43 per cent receiving a visit from a spouse/partner or boyfriend/girlfriend and 41 per cent receiving visits from siblings. Parents/step parents were regarded as the most important visitors, particularly for those under 21 (Dodd and Hunter 1992).

[3] Out of the women reporting visits, 56 per cent received visits from parents, 43 per cent from children, 39 per cent from siblings and only 28 per cent from partners (Murray 2003b).

[4] Other areas covered by the plan include accommodation; education, training and employment; mental and physical health; drugs and alcohol; finance, benefit and debt; and attitudes, thinking and behaviour.

[5] Both employment and accommodation have be found to be significant factors in reducing re-offending (see SEU 2002).

[6] See also Toch (1992) for a discussion of prisoners' feelings of helplessness concerning family relationships.

[7] A survey completed by Boards of Visitors for the 1999 Prison Inspectorate's thematic review of suicide and self-harm found that only in eight to ten per cent of cases were prisoners families involved when prisoners were on at risk forms (HMCIP 1999a).

[8] Relate also runs a one day course for partners and parents of prisoners to help them to reduce the harmful effects of prison on their family. For further details see www.relate.org.uk