

Action for Prisoners' Families submission

Independent Review into Self-Inflicted Deaths in NOMS Custody of 18-24 year olds

Action for Prisoners' Families

Action for Prisoners' Families is the umbrella body for prisoners' and offenders' families and those who work with them across England and Wales. We have 2000 members, 300 family members and service providers from a range of disciplines from public, voluntary and private sectors. Our work is guided by five members' advisory groups: training; voluntary sector; family members; families of serious and sex offenders; evidence and research. We work for the benefit of prisoners' and offenders' families by supporting the development of policy and practice that takes into account the issues that face them. We offer training, networking events and an information service, and develop and publish resources for the sector. Our work as a Department of Health Voluntary Sector Strategic Partner and a Ministry of Justice funded voluntary sector infrastructure organisation, as well as other key partnerships, are important to us in influencing policy affecting prisoners' and offenders' families.

Intimate relationships and wellbeing for young people

When someone is sent to prison their intimate relationships are inevitably disrupted. The Relationship Alliance has set out the importance of relationships in physical and mental health (Meier, R. (2013) *Relationships: the missing link in public health*. London: Relationships Alliance/TCCR). It is estimated that 60% of those with depression attribute relationship problems as the main cause for their illness.

Young people between the ages of 18 to 24 have a particular need for close and supportive relationships but these relationships are complex and fragile. This period of development is characterised by major brain development and relationship and social transition. Secure family relationships can help young people to make the transition to adult successfully. Partner relationships, where they exist, are seen as offering more support than those with parents but they contain more conflict than friendships and less responsiveness than best friend and parental relationships (Furman, W., and L. B. Shomaker (2008) *Patterns of interaction in adolescent romantic relationships: distinct features and links to other close relationships*. *Journal of Adolescence*, 31(6), 771–788).

Approximately 30% of prisoners who take their own lives had no family contact prior to their deaths (NOMS, *Safer custody news*. January/February 2010).

Relationships damaged by imprisonment

Families face long, stressful journeys to visit their relatives in prison, incurring expenses (even where relatives receive payments through the Assisted prison Visits Service, this is only a contribution) when finances are likely to be stretched. Public transport access to prisons is patchy and often unreliable. Telephone calls are expensive and access to phones may be limited and lack privacy. Even letters can be hard to send – some prisons do not sell individual stamps to prisoners and books are very costly.

Many young offenders are parents and imprisonment separates them from their children. Mothers in prison have reported feeling anger, anxiety, sadness, depression, shame, guilt, decreased self esteem and a sense of loss when separated from their children (Keaveny, M.E., & Zauszniewski, J.A. (1999). *Life events and psychological well-being in women sentenced to prison*. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 20(1), 73-89; Pennix, P.R. (1999) *An analysis of mothers in the federal prison system*. *Corrections Compendium*, 24(12), 4-6; Young, D.S., & Jefferson Smith, C. (2000) *When moms are incarcerated: the needs of children, mothers and caregivers*. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 81(2), 130-147). Separation from their children in prison damages mothers' mental health (Hock, E., & Schirtzinger, M.B. (1992) *Maternal separation anxiety: Its developmental course and relation to maternal mental health*. *Child Development*, 63(1), 93-102). Fathers also suffer - it is a myth that young fathers do not want to be involved with their children (Speak S, Cameron S, Gilroy R (1997): *Young, single, non-residential fathers: their involvement in fatherhood*. Centre for Research in European Urban Environments at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.).

Family relationships may already be problematic

The transition to adulthood is a time of strain for family relationships. Power and authority are shifting and peer and partner relationships play an increasingly important role. These relationships can be volatile. Sometimes families themselves are also going through changes – relationships breaking down and reconstituting. Sometimes young people abuse alcohol and drugs or experience mental health problems. Many young people in the criminal justice system have been homeless, or were at risk of homelessness, because of rifts with their families (Randall, G and Brown, S (2001). *Trouble at home*. London: Crisis; Monfort. J, (2009) *Family life: the significance of family to homeless young people*. London: Centrepunt). Half of youth homelessness is caused by a breakdown in relationships between young people and their parents (Homeless Link (2014) *Young and homeless*. Homeless Link, London).

Many young people in custody have undiagnosed and/or untreated attachment disorders as a result of childhood trauma which may affect their relationship with prison officers.

A census of children in custody found that one in eight imprisoned children had experienced the loss of a parent and/or sibling (Jacobson et al. (2010) *Punishing disadvantage: a profile of children in custody*. London, Prison Reform Trust). They are at increased risk of depression and suicidal thoughts (Finlay, I and Jones N (2000): *Unresolved grief in young offenders in prison*. British Journal of General Practice. July 2000; 50(456): 569–570).

Information sharing and effective communication with families

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the criminal justice system tends to treat families as a problem rather than a valuable source of information about issues facing young offenders, ideas about what may help their relatives and providers of practical and emotional support. We have heard reports of concern that family engagement may be time consuming. These attitudes get in the way of effective communication with families.

Where a young adult is struggling, police engagement with families can play a key role in diverting young adults from custody.

Families find it hard to know who to contact if they have concerns about their relatives in prison. Prisons could better benefit from insights and support from families if relatives had a single point of contact to raise issues about young people in prison.

Management of ACCT

Families should be involved when drawing up safety arrangements for those at risk of suicide or self harm.

Management of Vulnerability in Custody

The recent changes to the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme have had a negative effect on family closeness (Day, M (2014) *Punishment without purpose*. London: Prison reform trust) – in particular the restrictions on sending in parcels which have made it harder for prisoners to send letters (because they can no longer be sent stamps or writing materials) or to share books with relatives.

All agencies concerned should communicate and share information with families as well as each other when a young person is transferred from the youth estate to the young adult estate.

Procedures following a self-inflicted death in custody

Families should be informed immediately following self-inflicted death and should be included in the information gathering process. Criminal justice staff should help families to access community based support - Family Engagement Workers should play a key role in this.

Funding for legal representation at inquests and full disclosure of information should be available to relatives.

Staff Training

Staff should receive training on:

- The importance of families for young offenders' outcomes
- How to communicate with and work in partnership with families
- How to help families to access support where they live
- The effects on young offenders of insecure attachment

Family, support network

Early contact with families on admission to prison should be a priority. Prisoners should be located near their homes so that visiting is easier. In-cell phones would help to maintain contact and skype-type contact would make a valuable addition to visits in person.

Where family relationships are fragile or have broken down, prisons should make efforts to repair and support them where possible. Even where offenders are young adults, parenting and relationship support programmes or counselling with a 'through the gate' approach in partnership with support service partners in the community still have a valuable role to play. Prison based Family Engagement Workers can play a key role in this.

There are some cases where families are a source of stress rather than support. Young offenders often separate themselves or are encouraged to separate from these families. Where possible work with these families to address the issues they face and to foster more helpful relationships will produce a more sustainable outcomes for offenders.

Families should be involved in sentence planning. NOMS has acknowledged that this would be beneficial but have said that they are concerned that this may be too costly. Family members have told us that they do not want frequent or intensive participation. Their inclusion in sentence planning would result in better informed decision making and reduce distress.

Local authority health and care services delivered in the prison should take advantage of the role that families can play as advocates for their relatives and develop mechanisms that allow them to alert services where health, including mental health, is causing concerns.

Families are driven by love and a sense of duty to do the best for their relatives. Where someone has died in custody, families have played a vital role in exposing failures in policy and practice. The criminal justice system should make the most of what families have to offer at all stages.

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