The Importance of Family Prison Visits

Maintaining family relationships during a period of imprisonment is vital for the well-being of offenders and their families. 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 prisoner suicide or self-harm.

In a review of research in this area Ditchfield (1994) found that prisoners without family support are two to six times more likely to offend in the first year after release than those who demonstrate or receive active family interest.

All the evidence suggests that the chances of successful reintegration into society and cessation of crime will depend to a large degree on the quality and frequency of the family contact. However, both prisoners overseas and their families have difficulty in maintaining contact due to distance and expense. Prisoners are usually not allowed to receive a phone call in prison. Phone calls from a prison in England and Wales to Ireland at 66c/minute is six times what they would cost from a public phone box. Phone calls from other countries are generally strictly controlled, with some having little or no access to the phone. For example, in France people can spend up to two years in a remand prison and those prisons do not have phone facilities for prisoners.

Prisoners need an income for living expenses such as phone cards, stamps, toiletries, clothes, renting a television, supplementing their diet, buying tobacco and, in rare cases, paying for their cell. The average wage in UK prisons is around £2.50 per week. In other countries, prisoners may not be allowed to work while they are on remand, or even when they are sentenced because there is no prison work available or because they do not speak the language. In the majority of cases, the cost of providing for the prisoner is borne by the family (in some countries, supplementary food is required to augment inadequate prison food). In most cases, the imprisonment overseas of a family member is a financial burden for families. In addition, travelling overseas to visit a family member can be extremely costly as well as being emotionally demanding and time consuming. Due to these and other factors, for example, poor health, commitments because of young children, many prisoners receive few, if any, visits from families.

A report by the National Social and Economic Forum, "Reintegration of Prisoners" in 2002 recommended that low-income families travelling long distances to visit prisoners should be given additional supports, including "adequate financial supports to make regular visits". This recommendation is even more pertinent to family members who have to travel overseas to visit an imprisoned relative. In addition, an ICPO survey found that the cost of a visit was a significant obstacle for families of Irish prisoners overseas who would wish to visit their relative in prison.

There is a need generally to broaden our understanding of "close family" for the purposes of supporting prisoners and their families. Family should not just be confined to that of spouse and children – many do not have either, or relationships have irretrievably broken down many years ago. Very often family of origin may be the only constant in a prisoner's turbulent life.

The value a visit has on the emotional wellbeing of a prisoner and their family cannot be overstated.