

The cost of keeping it in the family

Drug addicted prisoners leave shattered lives in their wake. What happens to the wrecked families when their relative is off the scene and in the arms of the law?

Shame, guilt, isolation, stigma and stress-related illness are some of the experiences family members are left with, when a relative goes into prison.

Sometimes the experience affects them so badly that they are unable to function at work or in education; sometimes they are worried by drugs or paraphernalia left at their house. In many cases they are facing financial hardship and enormous debts – including to their family member's drug dealer – and are left to cope with children who are themselves struggling to come to terms with the absence of their parent.

While compiling a report for the Home Office, published in August, Karen Whitehouse heard many family experiences of before and after arrest. Apart from the arrest itself being traumatic, many families had lived for some time under the terrifying reign of their addicted relative. As well as the mood swings and violence of their relative, they suffered their belongings being stolen, needles and paraphernalia being hidden around the house, and lived in dread of dealers or the police arriving in the night. Some reported waiting until their relative was asleep, then calling the police to come and arrest them – anything to change the situation and put their loved

one in the path of some help.

The trauma usually lasts far beyond the drug user being removed to prison. One mother summed up her fear while talking to Whitehouse: 'Whatever I do now, I'm always wondering if the police will turn up. I can't take a long bath, sleep without clothes or even go to the loo in peace. I never relax anymore. The police have even turned up looking for my son when he's in prison. I'm a nervous wreck, I really am.'

Another described the moment of arrest: 'We were in bed when they came to arrest my boyfriend. My little girl was only three and she was in another room. I could hear her screaming but they wouldn't let me go to her. They had my boyfriend on the floor with his hands behind his back so they could put handcuffs on him. He was shouting. It was really scary. I don't think my little girl is over it yet 'cos she clings to me like mad.'

The purpose of the Home Office report, which ends in a consultation questionnaire, is to inform commissioners of how they can improve services for families locally, regionally and nationally. Some action points shine through the research, such as the arresting officers needing to show more sensitivity to families

during arrest. Others will need resources so that family liaison workers can offer help with the immediate emergencies of child support, debt containment and feeling safe at home – as well as the longer term but no less crucial matter of preparing for their relative's release from prison. Too many families, it seems are living with the consequences of drug addiction without receiving any of the treatment.

Vivienne Evans, chief executive of the family support charity Adfam, says as well as needing support themselves, families are a neglected resource in achieving positive outcomes for their convicted relative.

'Families are a starting point for interventions,' she says. 'If you're a service provider, what you've got with a family is a readymade support service.' She stresses that investment in family support services will reap the benefits of improved outcomes: 'Providing practical, emotional and financial support means a much improved likelihood of retention and successful outcomes.' And as Evans points out, families' involvement offers the best chance of ensuring a seamless transition for prisoners from treatment to aftercare.



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Becoming a family man

Safe Ground's drama courses are giving fathers the skills to rebuild relationships with their families from within prison.

When a father goes into prison he can become mentally detached from his family, as well as being physically separated. Selfishness and hopelessness can set in, as the usual boundaries of the day don't matter any more – there's no shopping to fetch, no collecting the children from school, no bills to pay.

Hearing these experiences informs Antonia Rubenstein's work at Safe Ground, the training organisation that visits 23 prisons in the UK to deliver their Family Man or Fathers Inside courses. Using drama, discussion and role-play, the sessions

encourage prisoners to look at their situation in relation to their families, and to plan an alternative life to re-offending.

Taking part in the group gives opportunity of a new outlook to many men who have been brought up in fractured families or in care. Many of the men, it was found, were not in contact with their own fathers, or had a member of family in prison, and seemed doomed to repeat the cycle of family breakdown.

Based on evidence that parenting education motivates fathers to keep their families together and

find legal ways of supporting them, the courses have been developed with prisoners themselves, and are designed to explore difficult subjects in a supportive environment made up of their peers.

The drama levels a class of mixed educational ability and lets prisoners try out the skills needed to maintain family relationships from prison. Learning the skills of trust, problem-solving and taking responsibility for their actions can give them a flying start over their old way of life and bring their family back into the picture with real hope of change.