

Strengthening ties between prisoners and their families: A consultation on behalf of Lincolnshire Action Trust

Introduction

The topic we have chosen for our research is the relationships that people in prison have with their families and friends and what factors might influence how often they communicate with one another. This topic of research has significant importance as previous studies have found that there is a significant relationship between the strength of family ties people in prison have, and other factors such as mental health of people in prison and recidivism rates. This project has been conducted alongside a local charity called Lincolnshire Action Trust (LAT). LAT works with prisons within Lincolnshire to build connections between people in prison and their communities. LAT have supported this research by distributing the survey which we created to people in prison and their families/friends, so we were able to collect a large sample of data.

Relevant research in the topic area:

- Maintaining contact with family whilst in prison is an important method for preserving family ties (Homer, 1997).
- Evidence shows that maintaining marriages and relationships on the same level whilst in prison was difficult (Brodsky, 1975).
- Maintaining contact can be difficult, especially for families as factors outside of their control can prevent visitations, such as distance of prison from home town (Baunach, 1985).
- Preservation of communication with people outside of prison is an important element of helping manage the mental health of people in prison serving long-term sentences (Richards, 1978).

Aims of Research

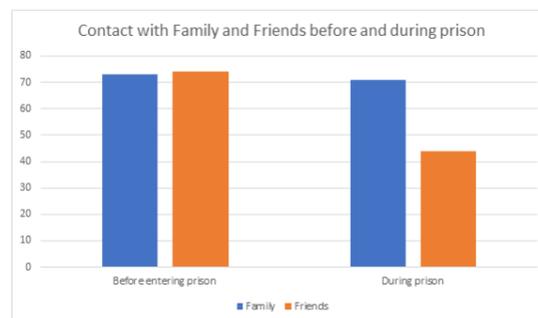
- To Raise awareness of the importance of family ties to both people in prison as well as relatives on the outside.

Research Methodology

- Method: Questionnaire. Mix of both qualitative and quantitative answers.
- Participants: 121 total. 81 people in prison in Lincolnshire, all male. 40 family members/friends of people in prison, 31 female, 3 male and 6 unknown. The sample size was reduced however as two of the prisons which the survey went out to were not able to collect a large enough sample to use.
- We collectively constructed a survey on word which included both open-ended and closed questions. We chose to make the survey on word rather than a programme such as Qualtrics so it could be printed out and distributed to people in prison. This was a barrier that we had to overcome as the access to communication with people in prison is limited, so a physical survey was the only option we could use. However, once we received the results of the survey we put them onto an Excel sheet for analysis.

Results and Findings

The graph shows if being inside prison has affected contact with family on the outside:



- 37.5% of respondents in our family and friends survey stated they were visiting a spouse/partner in comparison to 5% visiting a friend.
- A common theme amongst people in prison contacting family and friends is that they are limited on how many contacts they can have and see a month, so several decided to prioritise family.
- 49.4% of people in prison were not aware of LAT and the support they provide to help maintain family ties
- Around 10 participants in the family and friends survey expressed how helpful the support LAT gives to them is.
- 61.7% of people in prison arrived during the COVID-19 pandemic. 38.3% of people in prison have not had visitors during their time in prison during the pandemic.
- When asked how the COVID-19 pandemic affected visits for them, a common theme was found among 23 people in prison which was the impact lack of physical and verbal contact has on their mental health.
- Similar themes were found in the Family and Friends survey as 13 participants expressed how it was hard not to engage in physical contact with the person they were visiting. Furthermore, 5 respondents highlighted the negative impact it had on children of prisoners as they have no contact with their parent for a long period of time.

Limitations of the Research

One issue with this study was the sample size as 121 people (81 people in prison and 40 family members) is not enough to draw representations from. A larger sample would allow a wider generalization to take place and give more of an insight into the importance of family ties. Furthermore, there was significantly more participants from the people in prison condition compared to the family meaning an equal perspective may not have been gained.

Furthermore, there was no female representation within the prison sample resulting in no generalizations being able to be made about both females and males.

Future Research

Future research needs to take into consideration gender. This current study only looked at males whereas looking at females may produce different results. For example, Koban (1983) found that 54% of the fathers within prison never saw their children, unlike the mothers. Mothers may have a stronger bond to children thus making it important to raise awareness of this and strengthen the tie.

More Recent Research

The findings of more recent research show that the issues identified when trying to maintain family ties are still consistent. This suggests that little has changed to improve family ties for people in prison. A study by Dixon and Woodhall 2009 found:

- Travelling to prison takes up too much time due to "insufficient public transport links", especially when bringing young children.
- Travelling and visiting costs become too expensive with many providing money for their family member in prison too.
- Visitations are too short, with many spending more time travelling than visiting.
- Restrictive visitation rules make open visits feel like closed visits
- Many families unaware of financial support schemes or are not eligible for them.

Conclusions

The main conclusion to be drawn from this study is that family ties are important. Furthermore, that the work LAT does is crucial to strengthening ties, however not many people in prison have heard about their work. The COVID-19 pandemic has definitely had a massive impact on people in prisons mental health and being able to stay in contact with family and friends. There is also a massive impact on children not being able to see their fathers.

Recommendations

- Access to more phone calls
- Access to call both family and friends as many people in prison had to prioritise one over the other
- In cell telephones
- Reintroduce online booking system for ease of access
- Introduce a queuing system on phone lines
- Longer time in purple rooms

References

- Richards, B. (1978). The experience of long-term imprisonment. *British Journal of Criminology*, 10 (2), 162-169.
- Homer, E. (1979). Inmate family ties: Desirable but difficult. *Federal Probation*, 43 (1), 47-52.
- Brodsky, S. (1975). *Families and friends of men in prison*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Baunach, P.J. (1985). *Mothers in prison*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books
- Hairston, C. (1991) *Family Ties During Imprisonment: Important to Whom and For Family Ties During Imprisonment: Important to Whom and For What? The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 18(1). Available from <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1970&context=jssw> [accessed 17 September 2021].

Student: Eloise Quayle & Angela Harwood

Supervisor: Dr Helen Nichols, Dr Lauren Smith & Dr Gary Saunders