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THE IMPACT OF ENFORCED SEPARATION ON PRISONERS' WIVES

by Barbara Kemp

SUMMARY

The long term imprisonment of offenders who are married can have unintended as well as intended consequences. These include considerable financial and emotional deprivation to the inmate's wife and children. Society has an interest in attempting to mitigate the extent of this damage. Research has shown that if a long-term prisoner's marriage survives, it reduces the likelihood of his return to crime.

The present study interviewed 48 long-term prisoners and their wives to assess several factors which overseas research has shown to be critical for the survival of their marriages. It confirmed that imprisonment creates considerable strain and turmoil, particularly for the wives, and that this intensifies after 1 to 2 years of separation. Contact, especially through visits, is critically important to both partners. Although using available avenues of contact fully, wives and prisoners both were dissatisfied with the quality of contacts, especially with the lack of privacy during visits. The strains of single parenthood were reflected in high rates (around 80%) of emotional and physical health problems reported by the wives. Social and emotional isolation also was common.

Recommendations which build on and extend existing initiatives are made for allieviating the problems of wives of prisoners. These include:

(a) improved publicity for travel assistance for visits;
(b) extending the use of volunteers (eg. to provide child-minding and transport);
(c) further improvement to visiting facilities;
(d) introduction, but on a selected basis, of conjugal visits;
(e) early provision to wives of information on the community supports available;
(f) extension of Departmental counselling services to prisoners' wives;
(g) introducing community-based marital and family counselling services into New South Wales prisons.

Introduction

Like most social institutions, long-term imprisonment has unintended, as well as intended, consequences. Punishment can have various aims – to exact social retribution, to deter offenders from further crime, perhaps even to rehabilitate them – but in Western societies, at least, these have never included inflicting suffering on the criminal's family. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that when a married man receives a long term of imprisonment, dramatic burdens of financial and emotional deprivation often fall on his wife and children, who lose a key member of the household. On the grounds of social equity alone, there is justification for giving attention to these unwitting casualties of crime and punishment.

On a more practical level there are even more powerful considerations. As a number of studies have shown, a prisoner's relationship with his wife and children can be critical for helping him overcome the negative effects of a long term in gaol. These include social isolation, loss of personal initiative and self-sufficiency, dependence on institutions and – most important of all from the community's point of view – the tendency to return to crime. It is in society's own interests to be concerned about the marriages of men it incarcerates, and to ensure that these are given every chance to survive.

Because of these factors, prison administrators throughout the world are focussing attention on processes which seem to be contributing to the breakdown of prisoners' marriages. Overseas research indicates that, whatever the initial state of a marriage, every long-term inmate's relationship with his wife seems to undergo a crisis within the first two years of separation. This is supported by prison officers in New South Wales. They observe three typical phases in long-term prisoners' marriages: first, initial commitment and mutual support; then weakened ties, withdrawl and suspicion; finally, total breakdown. In response to these reports, the New South Wales Department of Corrective Services initiated its own project, to identify problems in marriages of its long-term prisoners and arrive at practical policies for helping allieviate them. A major Research Publication on this project is now in press (Kemp & Cheron, 1981). This Bulletin summarises the research, its major findings and recommendations.

Design of Study

In addition to the findings discussed earlier, overseas studies have revealed several key factors concerning the husband-wife relationships of long-term prisoners. These are that:

* quite independently of what happens in gaol, some long-term prisoners' marriages have much better chances of survival than others. The key factor is

the wife's own assessment of the marriage at the point of separation. Marriages assessed as unhappy had little prospect, marriages assessed as happy had much healthier chances of surviving;

* even among "happier" marriages, chances of survival were considerably enhanced if:

(a) the prisoner's role as a husband and father could be kept open for him;
(b) the wife was able to maintain emotional stability during the separation;
(c) the wife was able to use "positive" and "strengthening" methods to cope with problems, rather than negative avoidance or escape mechanisms (eg. alcohol);
(d) regular contact — visits, exchanges of letters, phone calls — could be maintained. Indeed contact seemed to be the critical factor in the survival of most prisoners' marriages.

The Corrective Services study was designed to take account of, and test, all these findings. Intensive interviews were conducted with 48 long-term prisoners (who were serving a minimum of three years before release) and their wives, to obtain information on:

* the current sense of closeness in the relationship as perceived by the couples;

* the recalled happiness in the marriage prior to separation;

* the degree and method of contact during imprisonment,

* the couple's assessment of the father's involvement in family matters;

* difficulties and stresses experienced by the wife during separation, and how she coped with these pressures.

Additional data on some of these variables was also obtained from 21 long-term prisoners whose marriages already had ended in divorce and, to help identify critical phases when marraiges were at risk, findings on couples who had undergone different periods of separation were compared.

THE FINDINGS

Retrospective Assessment of Marriage

The study supported the thesis that marriages assessed as "happy" prior to separation were more likely to survive than ones assessed less favourably. In particular, divorced prisoners perceived the quality of their marriages as having been less satisfactory than did inmates who were still married. Only a minority of wives still married to prisoners (14 out of 48, or 29%) perceived their marriage as having been "unhappy" or even just "OK". Most saw them as being either "very happy" or "happy" when the separation occurred.

Current Assessment of Marriage

Even though most marriages initially had been seen as happy, it is clear that long-term imprisonment was having a deleterious effect. Of the 34 which started off in this category, only 24 wives felt their relationship was still close. Even among these "close" wives, four expressed uncertainty — fears, for example, that their husbands may have become homosexual, or concern that they may never be able to live together again — and a further six in the "now distant" group shared these concerns. A significant proportion of marriages appeared to have entered a vulnerable stage — a point further confirmed by discrepancies between prisoners' and their wives' assessment of the current state of the relationship. For the 19 wives who now felt distant, 15 husbands maintained the marriage was still close. This was one of the few areas of the questionnaire where noteworthy differences were found between the matched responses of partners.

Contact

As mentioned earlier, quality of contact between long-term prisoners and their wives is critically important for maintaining relationships. Of the married prisoners involved in the study, just over 7 out of 10 (71%) were receiving weekly visits, and a small percentage (8%) of those who were divorced still had occassional visits from their ex-wives. In addition, more than half the married prisoners telephoned their wives on a weekly basis, although one in five did not use this facility at all because the spouse did not have access to a phone.

At first glance, these data seem encouraging. However, when questioned more closely about the quality of the contacts available, prisoners and their wives both had severe criticisms.

Almost half (48%) of married prisoners stated they found intimate conversation during visits difficult. A number of inhibitory factors were mentioned: lack of privacy; presence of staff observers; insufficient time; sexual frustrations, feeling nervous or depressed; too much noise from other visitors and children. In addition, more than one in five had not received any visits from their wives at one or more of the gaols where they had been held. The stated reason was that distances to travel to the gaols had been prohibitive.

From the wives' point of view, the situation was even less satisfying. The majority had often felt frustrated, tense and unable to discuss intimate matters with their husbands during visits (whether contact or non-contact) — the reason most commonly cited was "lack of privacy". More than half the wives reported experiencing physical or financial difficulties travelling to gaols at some time during their husband's incarceration, and just under 50% often or always had such problems. Such factors had restricted the number of visits for more than a third of the sample.

These findings are particularly disturbing when it is considered that several marriages clearly had deteriorated since the separation, and a significant number were at a vulnerable stage. The problems are driven home even further when data on partners' attitudes to visits are considered. Almost all (98%) prisoners expressed a great need to have regular visits from their wives. The overwhelming proportion (85%) were eager and excited prior to a visit and most (72%) felt the need to be alone afterwards. Similarly, 70% of wives were excited and eager prior to seeing their husbands, and two out of three were comforted by the contact. Clearly, visits and other contacts played a critical role in keeping relationships alive: a point reinforced by the fact that "close" wives seemed to make greater use of visiting time and entitlements, and to take fuller advantage of all the avenues of contact available, than "distant" ones.

The policy implications of these findings are unequivocal. Improvements both in quality and quantity of visits are essential, if more fragile relationships are to avoid disintegration. In particular there is need for more frequent, longer and more private contacts between long-term prisoners and their wives. While recent extensions to contact visits in some gaols constitute a step towards this goal, more remains to be done. Recommendations at the end of this Bulletin outline further possible initiatives.

Efforts to Keep the Husband's Role Open

One reason contact is critically important is that it enables the husband, though imprisoned, to maintain a role in his family. From the interviews, it is clear that most wives were aware of the need to keep the husband's role alive, and made every effort to ensure that this occurred. More than fifty percent, for example, had held discussions with the children about their father, and approximately three in four said they always attempted to answer openly any questions about his absence. During visits, about half the wives discussed the childrens' development with their husbands, and one in three prepared the children for seeing their father before taking them to the gaol.

Wives' Emotional Functioning

Despite these efforts it must be recognised, however, that from its very nature, imprisonment imposes extreme limitations on what a husband can do to prevent family relationships from deteriorating. Most of the time the wife alone must take on the burden of coping with the separation and its impact on the family. This simple fact helps explain the divergence between many prisoners and their wives in current assessment of their marriage. It is further underlined by data on emotional and physical problems these women were experiencing.

At the time of the study, over two thirds (69%) of prisoners' wives had recurrent health problems, and more than seven out of ten (71%) had continuing emotional difficulties. Problems were particularly severe for women with young children. Eighty-five percent of wives were in this category, and of these eight out of ten expressed difficulties, due to emotional illness, in performing the dual roles of "mother" and "homemaker". The majority (77%), moreover, stated that their emotional health had worsened since their husband's incarceration.

Sources of Emotional Support

These findings are particularly disturbing in the light of McCubbin et al's (1975) report that wives who cope well emotionally, and function satisfactorily during the separation, have much better chances of making their marriages survive. It prompts supplementary questions about the types of support wives are getting as they pass through this critical phase. Again, data from the study are not encouraging. Most of the wives surveyed were not aware of potential sources of emotional and physical contact and assistance. As a result they had become socially isolated and withdrawn.

More than half (54%) of wives interviewed, for example, could not recall even talking to other people in similar situations and relatively few (only 27%) had taken part in activities specifically arranged for wives and families of prisoners. In many instances (39% of total) wives had become cut off even from activities involving friends, most were not involved in sporting (70%) or church (73%) activity, and fewer than one in five reported they were undertaking any type of course, etc.

The only positive source of practical assistance to most wives of prisoners was their immediate family. The majority (77%) of the sample interviewed said they could obtain help from this source, and three out of four had been involved in social activities with relatives. However families, though important from a practical point of view, were much less valuable for emotional support. Almost half the wives interviewed, for example, said they did not seek encouragement, guidance or support from parents or parents-in-law.

Other potential sources of assistance either were untapped or unavailable. Most (72%) of the sample had neither initiated nor received professional counselling, and only one in four wives had ever met their husband's parole officer (of these only half had found the contact helpful). During 1980 the Corrective Services Welfare Division counselled 3,524 prisoners, but only 17 wives were contacted during that period (Robertson, 1980).

To interviewers, this social isolation of the majority of wives was especially poignant, because the small number who had utilised a wider range of resources had found them helpful. Self-help and supportive groups for single parents do exist — one such organisation, the Families of Prisoners Association (FOPA), caters specifically for prisoners' wives. Nonetheless, in some instances the need for practical and emotional support was so clearly desperate that researchers themselves felt compelled to give immediate individual assistance, and subsequent to the study all wives interviewed were sent information about services available.

Clearly such stopgap measures can only be a first step. A comprehensive review of professional support and counselling available to wives and children of prisoners, to help them cope with the effects of separation, is essential. In addition, greater efforts must be made to ensure that these families are better informed about the support and the services available. These and other possible initiatives are discussed in greater detail in the recommendations.

Time Phases

If a decision to build up the services available to long-term prisoners and their families is taken, it will be essential also to take into account the individual needs of relationships — and in particular the time which has elapsed since initial separation. This emerged clearly when responses from couples at different stages after the husband's imprisonment were compared.

Couples were divided into three groups: those where the husband had served 1—12 months; those between 14 and 31 months; and those where husband and wife had been apart for 33 months or more. The middle time span — 14 to 31 months — was the critical phase. During this period many wives experienced increasing difficulties in dealing with family responsibilities.

Because of the wide-ranging nature of the present enquiry, this finding is less precise than similar results from other research. In the United States, for example, Merriman (1979) has identified a much narrower critical period, of 18 months to two years. However the current data does confirm that close attention must be given to timing the delivery of support services for married prisoners and their families, and to ensuring that services are of the type that can be intensified during critical periods. Two possible initiatives immediately suggest themselves: marriage guidance counselling for prisoners and their wives during the separation period, and weekend marital workshops. Workshops are made available by the Kansas State Pen-

itentiary for prisoners serving their final six months. Objectives include assisting couples to begin evaluating their relationship prior to release, helping them to enhance communication skills and discover resources available, and allowing them to work through effects of stress and tension. Though still at the early stages of implementation in Kansas, workshops and other similar initiatives, if carefully evaluated and accompanied by further research to more closely identify problem areas and critical phases in long-term prisoners' marriages, could be most effective in increasing marital stability through guidance in open communication and understanding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Impact of Enforced Separation Study presents powerful arguments for closer attention to the marital problems of long-term prisoners and their wives. Many of these difficulties are, of course, the result of pressures and prejudices in the broader community, which Corrective Services is powerless to control. The basic reason, for example, that many wives interviewed had been compelled to travel long distances to visit husbands in country gaols was that metropolitan communities were unwilling to accept prisons. Many of the state's gaols have been built outside the major cities, and the department has no option but to use these facilities efficiently.

Within these ultimate constraints, however, the department could take further steps to improve the lot of long-term prisoners and their wives. Research indicates that ultimately such reforms will benefit the whole of the community, through reduced recidivism rates. The steps include:

a) *Giving greater publicity to existing schemes for assisting wives to travel long distances for prison visits.*

For several years the Department of Corrective Services has issued travel warrants to relatives and close friends of prisoners to allow them to visit country gaols. This concession is available to any applicant receiving a pension of social security benefit. Departmental accounting figures indicate, however, that relatively small amounts are being expended on this vote: clearly, as the research suggests, many wives and relatives are not aware of this benefit.

b) *Making greater efforts to involve volunteers in assisting the wives and families of prisoners.*

Over the past few years the Corrective Services Commission increasingly has called on volunteers to supplement services the Department provides. With specialist skills and flexibility, volunteers can often find ways around problems which are difficult to solve through normal bureaucratic means. In the current context, volunteers could be particularly helpful:

i) in providing child-care facilities for wives with very young children, thus freeing them to visit their husbands;
ii) in helping transport wives and families who, due to illness or some other reason, are unable to utilise normal public transport.

c) *Increasing efforts to provide more relaxed and private facilities for prison visits.*

The department already has made significant achievements in this respect: any further initiatives must, of course, take full account of the balancing requirement of security. One possible initiative would be to introduce play areas for children, within full view of parents, in visiting complexes. Initially this could be done on an experimental basis, in one maximum security gaol.

d) *Following the example set by many western countries, and allowing conjugal visits for some long-term prisoners.*

As His Honour Justice Nagle, Royal Commissioner into New South Wales Prisons, observed (1978), the ideal location for a conjugal visit is completely outside the institution – for example by allowing a prisoner home on day leave. Day leave, however, is not feasible for many long-term inmates serving the initial 12-18 months of their sentences: the most vulnerable time for marriages. The only alternative for prisoners in this category is conjugal or family visits within the gaol. Such visits would, however, be subject to the following conditions:

i) in accordance with Commission policy of using incentives rather than coercion as a system of control, conjugal visits should be seen as a privilege to be earned by prisoners, rather than as an automatic right;
ii) full consideration must be given to security aspects;
iii) conjugal visiting schemes must take full account of the husband and wife's right to self-respect and dignity. In Victoria, the Department of Community Welfare Services' Private Visit Facility shows how this can be achieved: it has been in operation for a number of years and could provide a suitable model for New South Wales.

e) *Issuing the wives of all prisoners with comprehensive information about prison rules, visiting services and community resources available, as soon as the husband has been imprisoned.*

It is possible that volunteers could help with this task.

f) *Making further use of the Corrective Services Welfare Branch, and Probation and Parole staff, to counsel and assist prisoners' wives.*

The Welfare Branch was established twelve months ago and already has assisted many prisoners with welfare problems. Recently its effectiveness has been increased by rostering staff to work in gaols on weekends. This makes them more accessible to the families of prisoners. The practice should be extended and, if possible, officers from the Probation and Parole Service also made available on a weekend basis.

g) *Introducing marital and family counselling into New South Wales prisons.*

Specific support services that might be implemented are mentioned in the body of this report. Before this type of policy initiative is undertaken there should be close consultation with an expert community based organisation, such as the Marriage Guidance Council of New South Wales. As soon as possible the Council should be requested to introduce its counselling services into at least one major gaol in New South Wales, and to assist in training departmental officers in appropriate skills.

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