

Children Heard and Seen

Evaluation of 'Family Contact' in the IMBs 2019-2020 Prison Reports

1. Abstract

This report seeks to analyse the findings of the most recent set of Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) annual reports to analyse and evaluate the consistency, or lack thereof, of the experiences of children and families with a parent currently serving a sentence in a UK prison. The report shines a light on the most egregious examples of prisons failing to recognise the importance of family contact, whilst also noting that some institutions 'do it right'. Children with a parent in prison are wholly innocent, and it is grossly unfair that the experiences of these children should depend so heavily on where their parent is ordered to carry out their sentence.

2. The role of the IMB

*"Inside every prison, immigration removal centre and some short term holding facilities at airports, there is an Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) – a group of ordinary members of the public doing an extraordinary job. IMB members are independent, unpaid and work an average of 3-4 visits per month. Their role is to monitor the day-to-day life in their local prison or removal centre and ensure that proper standards of care and decency are maintained."*¹

The IMB are an independent body, appointed by the Secretary of State to ensure the humane and just treatment of those held in custody. The body is required to inform the Secretary of State promptly of any concerns it has, and report annually on the performance of each prison, determining whether or not it has met the standards and requirements placed on it.

3. The Purpose of Our Report

This year, the IMB introduced a dedicated section to their annual reports which analyses each prison's approach to facilitating family contact as it relates to the progression and resettlement of prisoners. Before this, no real mention or exploration of the family contact available to prisoners was mandated by the IMB in its assessments. Our report seeks to summarise the findings of the new assessment criteria in a number of locations to highlight the significant inconsistencies in the use of family contact in UK prisons in 2020.

Whilst the acknowledgement of the value of family contact is an important step forward, the majority of the IMB reports fail to engage with the subject in any real depth. Generally

¹ <https://www.imb.org.uk/independent-monitoring-boards/>

speaking, the 'Family Contact' section appears sparse in many of this year's reports, highlighting the fact that the IMB, as the main independent body of scrutiny for UK prisons, does not sufficiently mandate the prioritisation of investigating family contact practices. Maintaining family bonds is essential from the point of view of the prisoner, as studies have long shown that the maintenance of family contact is one of the most effective factors in reducing the likelihood of recidivism upon release (Ditchfield, 1994)). However, this contact is also essential for the wellbeing of the families themselves, who are often left to fade into the background of the discussion around imprisonment. Children with a parent in prison are at a much greater risk of experiencing mental health problems, which often manifest as depression, anxiety, insomnia, and eating disorders. Despite this, there is currently no statutory framework in place designed to support, or even identify, these children. It is estimated that 65% of boys with a parent in prison will go on to offend during their lifetime, highlighting the cyclical nature of intergenerational offending. With such a large number of children being impacted by parental imprisonment each year (estimates are around 312,000) it is unfortunate that the IMB has not sought to scrutinise and investigate modern practices in maintaining family bonds in their most recent reports. Despite this, we welcome the step forward and hope that the scrutiny of prison practices towards the maintenance of family contact is developed significantly in future IMB reports.

Whilst many of the IMB reports available offer limited information regarding the state of family contact in prisons, the insight they do give is deeply troubling as it highlights a great degree of inconsistency between establishments. This inevitably leaves children with a parent in prison effectively facing a lottery as to the conditions that they will face in attempting to maintain ties to their parent on the inside. Whilst some prisons were able to offer consistent communication, visitation, and rehabilitation services, many regarded familial contact as a low priority, failing to recognise that, in limiting contact, they inevitably punish children who are wholly innocent of the crimes of their parent. This lack of consistency adds to the overall sense of hopelessness and confusion faced by children with a parent in prison. Our report seeks to investigate the nature of the inconsistencies in services delivered in UK prisons by highlighting a number of the 'best' and 'worst' examples from the perspective of a child facing parental imprisonment. Positive and negative examples have been selected primarily on the basis of the findings of the most recent set of IMB reports.

Perhaps the key limitation of this report lies in the limited information provided in relation to some prisons, with the 'Family Contact' section ranging from a few lines to a side of A4. In some reports, it was not included at all. It was particularly concerning to see that, in the IMB's Annual Report at HMP Ranby the extent of discussion regarding familial bonds as limited to the line: "*We do not have any meaningful data to report on this topic*". It is for that reason that we are apprehensive about labelling certain prisons as the 'best' or even 'good' with regards to facilitating family contact, as there is a clear risk that shorter and positive accounts may be more reflective of a lack of proper investigation into the treatment of families rather than actual good practice. Despite this, we hope to highlight

the overall inconsistencies faced by children with a parent in prison, highlighting the need for both an improvement in practice and in scrutiny.

4. The Pains of Imprisonment from the perspective of prisoner's families

The experience of children impacted by paternal imprisonment is largely under-researched despite estimations that around 800,000 children across Europe are separated from a parent by imprisonment on any given day (Ayre et al. 2006). Whilst we may confidently say that the number of children in the UK affected by parental imprisonment is significant, the lack of any nationalised database means that the exact size of this group remains unknown, contributing to sentiments that prisoner's children represent an invisible demographic.

The effects of parental imprisonment on dependants is resoundingly negative and has been linked to poor mental health and a trend toward antisocial behavioural outcomes (Murray, 2009). The root of this decline in emotional wellbeing may largely be attributed to a sense of ambiguous loss following the incarceration of a parent; the loss is unclear in that there is no certainty when or if the parent will return. Ambiguous loss feeds on the initial pains of separation and represents an enduring trauma that can continue for many years after the parent is released. This form of loss is particularly problematic in that it flows from long-term situation that traumatizes and immobilizes children (Boss, 1999: 24) and undermines hopes that the future will bring a return to normalcy. The experiences of children of serious offenders are characterised by feelings of intense grief and ambiguous loss that leave no corner of the child's life untouched. Parental incarceration is frequently accompanied by a decline in material welfare, a breakdown of familial bonds and the limitation of social mobility and ability to engage with peers (Oldrup and Frederiksen, 2018). The lack of adequate systematic and structural support for these children undermines their faith in and commitment to civic systems and contributes heavily to a sense of being forgotten. The title of victim in relation to these children marks a key recognition of their suffering, however we must go beyond this initial recognition if we are to understand "the array of important consequences that flow from parental incarceration" and the bearings that said consequences have on child and family wellbeing (Arditti, 2012: 99).

5. Negative Findings of the IMB Reports

Whilst the majority of this year's IMB reports glossed over the topic of family contact, one theme that did emerge in the often-brief discussions were the difficulties faced by families in communicating with their family member on the inside. Long wait times to be allocated phone PIN codes, week long delays in email receipts and administrative backlogs all worked to slow down the process of communicating with a loved one. These are problems that will inevitably have been exacerbated by the pandemic, however the true extent to which these problems have impacted the ability to maintain family bonds will likely not become obvious until the end of the next reporting year.

5.1. Belmarsh Report July 2019 – June 2020

The prison uses the national prison visits booking system. Most of the historic issues have been resolved, but occasionally, slots are shown as available when they are not. The prison is reported to have dealt with the majority of its email backlog, however, it was noted that several disturbances occurred between prisoners in the visits hall because of conflicts that had not been identified beforehand.

Concerns were raised about individual incidents where family visitors who arrived late were turned away from their sessions. The prison argued that it was necessary to adhere to specified times on the grounds of maintaining security. The maintenance of security is, of course, an important consideration, however, turning families away from visiting sessions fails to pay due respect to the difficulties faced by many families in getting to the prison in the first place. Generally speaking, families often find visiting an incarcerated family member expensive, as a combination of long distance journeys, poor transport links, and having to take time off work all contribute to the overall difficulty in reaching the prison. As these difficulties can impact on a family's ability to reach the prison on time, it is unfortunate to see that the prison does not offer sufficient recourse to work around such difficulties, instead turning families away and preventing a child from having access to their imprisoned parent.

This institution's report briefly examined the response of the prison to this year's pandemic and resultant lockdown

"During the pandemic, visits staff were redeployed to other areas in the prison. They were, however, responsible for the production of one-minute video messages, where prisoners are filmed and are able to send messages to their families."

5.2. HMP/YOI Downview Report - May 2019 to April 2020

Downview is an example of a prison in which PACT maintains the contract with HMPPS for managing the visits centre and providing family engagement programmes and casework. The IMB report for this prison in particular criticises the service offerings provided by PACT, citing a "significant waiting list for PACT family casework support". The primary issue with PACT's service delivery in this prison is attributed to staffing and volunteer shortages, prisoners have complained about delays in responses from PACT staff and a lack of consistent communication and programmes.

PACT is tasked with offering parenting/family support sessions designed to ease a prisoner's re-entry into society and assimilation back into their family unit. The IMB report, however, shows that this goal is not being met satisfactorily, with sessions being sporadic and unhelpful.

“There have been almost no parenting/family support-related courses or initiatives available (which form part of the PACT contract) during the reporting period. PACT ran a course (‘Coming Home’) which specifically deals with preparation for reintegration into family life for prisoners who are six to nine months away from release. This course was held for just one day during the reporting period, in summer 2019.”

These issues are shown to have existed prior to the lockdown brought about by COVID-19, however, it is made clear in the report that PACT responses to the lockdown were also extremely damaging to the maintenance of family ties. The approach taken is summarised in the following passage:

“At the time of the lockdown due to COVID-19, PACT casework staff immediately stopped visiting the prison and all face-to-face appointments stopped. It took over a month for alternative PACT contact and support arrangements to be publicised to prisoners – at a time when family contact was particularly important, given the cessation of social visits.

These breaks in contact have also been extremely damaging to the mental wellbeing of families at home, many of whom were offered little to no information about the safety or wellbeing of their family member in prison. This lack of clear communication with families contributes to broader feelings of helplessness and loss of control that accompanies the imprisonment of a parent. The harms of this helplessness are highlighted in our ‘Life in Lockdown’ Report. Here, our families recognised the importance of family visits:

“The family days were very important to us. They had a good amount of time to play freely with daddy. He could interact properly.”

Whilst also highlighting the difficulties arising from a lack of clear communication regarding their suspension:

“Just feel so helpless no control and no answers.”

It is perhaps to be expected that any organisation or prison would struggle to facilitate the maintenance of familial bonds whilst maintaining social distancing and ensuring the safety of prisoners and staff, yet the lack of regard for transparency and openness with families impacted by parental imprisonment is particularly worrying.

The IMB Report on Downview explicitly recognises the importance of maintaining family ties for prisoner rehabilitation, stating that *“Often, until prisoners are reassured about their children, they are unable to make progress in other areas”*. It is unfortunate then, to see these family ties not be given sufficient emphasis in the managing of the prison and its contracted resource of PACT. Of all IMB reports on UK prisons released in 2020, HMP/YOI

Downview appears to have performed the worst in the context of supporting the maintenance of family ties.

For children dealing with the shame, stigma and isolation that is inextricably bound up in parental imprisonment, a lack of family support services, both prior to and during the lockdown highlight the significant shortfalls of the approach taken by Downview prison. It is extremely disappointing to see families not receive support that they desperately need, as their voices remain unheard and underappreciated.

6. Positive findings of the IMB Reports

The pains of parental imprisonment are harsh and difficult to manage for any child, regardless of sentencing, however, the inconsistency in the approaches of UK prisons towards maintaining family ties means that in many cases, children are left feeling that the odds are increasingly stacked against them in attempting to maintain meaningful contact with the incarcerated family member. Whilst the previous examples highlight some of the most egregious and troublesome instances of disregard for the wellbeing of family members left behind, the following accounts highlight the potential for better practices in the future. The inclusion of a prison in the following list in no way means that the overall experience of prisoner's families at these institutions is perfect, merely that the IMB Reports for these establishments noted particular qualities worthy of praise.

6.1 HMP Wandsworth Report June 2019 – May 2020

Whilst the IMB report for this prison showed significant scope for improvement, HMP Wandsworth was credited with taking steps to improve the environment in which family contact takes place, which is likely to materially improve the experience of children visiting the prison environment. Often, visitation can represent a frightening and dehumanising experience for children, as the often-stark structuring of visitation environments are designed wholly with security in mind rather than seeking to provide a comfortable and intimate environment for children to visit (Dixey and Woodall, 2012). It is a welcome sight, then, to see that the lockdown inspired an innovative programme which involved the visits hall and access stairwell being repainted by the prisoners “to a very high standard”, to ensure that, once visits resumed, the environment would prove to be far more welcoming to children and families. The promise of this work is shown in the report as follows:

“New colourful and child-friendly murals have been painted to enhance the visiting experience for children.”

Whilst the lockdown has inevitably inhibited the prison's capacity to host family visits, this scheme had the potential to give prisoners a sense of pride in creating a better environment for their families, possibly helping them to visualise better times to come.

Whilst repainting the visiting hall will be no means eradicate the overall difficulties faced by children with a parent in prison, it appears to be a welcome step in mitigating the difficulties faced by children in the visitation context for the future.

Prior to lockdown, the prison was also credited with a “good capacity” to house visitors, stating that “numbers regularly exceeded 100 per two-hour session”. Whilst there have notably been some delays in gaining telephone contact, with waiting times to receive telephone PIN codes averaging 5 days, this is still significantly better than a number of other prison offerings. It was estimated that, at the time of the report, approximately 200 telephone PIN codes were being generated daily. The implication of this is that real efforts have been made to ensure that telephone contact was available to children and families worried about their parent in prison during the reporting year.

6.2. HMP Lincoln Report – February 2019 to January 2020

The contract for general resettlement services at HMP Lincoln is provided by the Purple Futures Community Rehabilitation Company, however, services relating to family connection lays predominantly on the shoulders of LAT, which is responsible for:

“deliver[ing] the ‘Supporting People After Remand or Conviction’ (SPARC+) project, the children and families departure lounge, Fulfilling Potential, Healthy Foundation and CFO3 (Employability) Services and Being a Dad course.”

It is noted that the scope of family services that this institution may provide is somewhat limited in that the majority of prisoners incarcerated here are serving shorter sentences, with around 60% of prisoners having a stay of 6 weeks or less. Despite this, LAT successfully facilitated completion of the ‘Being a Dad’ course by 56 prisoners, with each of them receiving a certificate. From a child’s point of view, the availability of such courses for a parent in prison is likely to make the parent’s eventual re-entry into the family unit far smoother on release. The course hopes to better equip the imprisoned parent to support their children by:

“offer[ing] an opportunity for the prisoners to share their experiences of being a father in prison. It also covers communication, child development, perspective taking, family activities and planning for release.”

One of the most impressive aspects of LAT’s service offerings come in the form of the support they offer to families during prison visits, with support being offered “before, during and after visits, both for the prisoners and for their families”. The IMB Report describes a holistic approach to family support, something that is incredibly encouraging to see, particularly given the fact that many children and families remain unidentified on account of a lack of statutory frameworks for support.

“The support includes information about ways to keep in contact, emotional support, liaison with other agencies, including children’s services, liaison with schools and



signposting to special legal advice. It also includes practical support to mitigate the impact of a family member going to prison. During the reporting year, the children and families team supported 2,342 prisoners, through 2,864 interventions.”

Not only is the nature of familial support offered at HMP Lincoln extremely impressive in relation to other UK prisons, but the number of families accessing such support is also encouraging. By providing families with the tools to access the necessary support and services, LAT is materially improving the wellbeing of children whose parents are serving a sentence in HMP Lincoln.

6.3. HMP Oakwood Report April 2019 – March 2020-10-18

During the assessed year, IMB reported that 69,244 visitors attended the Family Pathway Centre (FPC) at HMP Oakwood. The FPC is maintained by the prison staff as well as benefitting from the presence of the charity RESTART. One of the main difficulties often faced by families is the difficulty in reaching an imprisoned family member for contact, as many prisoners are housed many miles from their local community. It is encouraging to see that RESTART has sought to alleviate some of these difficulties with the introduction of a mini-bus service.

Overall, the IMB report is resoundingly positive in its assessment of family contact at HMP Oakwood, concluding that: “The team is to be commended on the range of support that is given to prisoners, visitors and children, to enhance and maintain family contact.” As the emotional and practical needs vary greatly in relation to contact with a prisoner, the breadth and availability of options offer at HMP Oakwood is welcomed and represents a real commitment to ensuring prisoner’s families are adequately supported. The breadth and success of events offered is highlighted in the following passage:

“Throughout the reporting period, the Family Intervention Team offered a wide range of events, including Family Days, Partner Days, Homework Clubs, Father and Baby Bonding, Outside Visits, Gym Visits, Healthy Living, Lifer Days, Quiz and Karaoke Nights and many more. 2,903 prisoners attended a family event or activity; of those 558 attended a Family Day, 93 Family Learning, 779 were Homework Clubs, 1268 were Kids Clubs, 156 were lounge visits and 49 were Scout sessions.”

HMP Oakwood appears to represent an ideal for other UK prisons to work towards, both in their ability to actively engage with families to facilitate meaningful contact, and also in the way that services are “constantly reviewed for ways to improve”. It is perhaps this attitude of recognising the needs of families and striving to meet these needs that makes the work being done in this location so promising. The IMB Report for this establishment also notes that the prison has held conferences in attempts to highlight the importance of families ties for prisoner rehabilitation, with Lord Farmer delivering his keynote speech to 130 guest attendees in 2019. The lack of statutory framework in place to identify and support children and families impacted by parental imprisonment often leaves this demographic to feel voiceless in larger discussions surrounding imprisonment and crime

management. The fact that HMP Oakwood is actively addressing these issues and seeking to amplify the voices of these families by recognising their needs is fundamental to the success of this location compared to other UK prisons.

7. Conclusions

Perhaps the biggest impediment in our ability to assess the differing experiences of children with a parent in prison within the UK in this report lies in the inconsistency of depth and quality of our source material. Whilst it is clear that a number of the IMB reports paid close attention to the experiences of families and the recognition of family contact, these cases were, in fact, few and far between. It is evident that a number of reports simply glossed over the issue of family contact, checking briefly what services were available without doing the legwork to understand the realities for families involved. On the whole, this inhibits our ability to gain a fully contextualised understanding of the breadth of experiences of families with parents in UK prisons. However, the source material does provide enough evidence to show clearly that the experience of these families is by no means universal, and differs greatly depending on the particular institution that a family member is sent to.

Issues like geographical distance, lack of day-care, poor transport links, lack of on-site food, costs of taking time off from work and school and more all operate as barriers that make maintaining contact with the imprisoned family member increasingly difficult. It is clear that some prisons have sought to alleviate these difficulties, creating a welcoming and family friendly environment in which meaningful contact can be had.

One point that is particularly concerning is the impact that COVID-19 has had on the experiences of children with a parent in prison with relation to maintaining contact. It is likely that the full extent of this impact will not become apparent until later, however, those reports that do comment on the response of prisons in adapting to the lockdown is far from promising. The Downview Report paints a particularly bleak picture in this regard, highlighting the immediate suspension of family visits and contact alongside a lack of communication from the prison and PACT to the families as key focuses of concern. The pandemic and resultant lockdown has negatively affected children and families with a parent in prison, exacerbating existing feelings of isolation and developing feelings of intense worry and anxiety over the wellbeing of their incarcerated parent. These children are wholly innocent of the crimes of the parent, to sever contact so abruptly has undoubtedly caused extreme pain to children and families with a parent in prison.

The overall message being delivered by the most recent IMB reports on UK prisons in relation to 'Family Contact' is that provisions differ greatly between institutions, leading to a great degree of inconsistency in support offered to children with a parent in prison for them to maintain bonds with the incarcerated family member. The experience of children with a parent in prison should not be subject to a lottery of where their parent is required to serve their sentence, and the extent to which provisions differ is particularly worrying.

In order to break the intergenerational cycle of offending, it is essential that, moving forward, children impacted by parental imprisonment are sufficiently identified and offered adequate and consistent support. In order for this to happen, not only do prison practices need to improve across the board, but so do the IMB overall efforts to scrutinise prison practices as they relate to the maintenance of family contact.

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