

Visiting and Family Contact

'It's the best feeling in the world to have your daughter or your son wrap his arm around you on a visit, especially when you haven't seen them for some time. It's good 'cos although it's only a small amount of time, you still get to bond you know.' (Young father in Swinfen Hall)

PRISON VISITS

Visits to prisoners are a vital way of sustaining meaningful family links. This is recognised in the set of rules that govern prison life (known as the 'Prison Rules'), which state that 'special attention should be paid to the maintenance of such relationships between a prisoner and his family as are desirable in the interest of both¹'.

Convicted prisoners are usually allowed visits once a fortnight², whilst unconvicted prisoners can normally receive several visits a week³. However, visiting facilities vary greatly across prisons. Some are family friendly and create an environment that is conducive to a good visit, whilst others can be noisy, busy and intimidating. The older type of prisons particularly can be limited in what they offer.

Facilities for visitors

Prisons may provide welcoming facilities for visitors: some have a visitors' centre immediately outside their gates. Families benefit from having somewhere to go to before and after a visit, especially if they have a long journey from their home to the prison and back. Visitors' centres usually have toilets and baby-changing facilities and sell hot drinks and snacks. Some can offer support, advice and information. However, the standard of services varies greatly across prisons.

Some prisons do not have a dedicated centre or facilities for visitors at all, in which case relatives and friends are left waiting to see prisoners outside the prison gates, without any access to refreshments or toilets. This can be an especially harrowing experience in the cold season and where young kids are present.

Problems with visiting

Despite the fact that family contact is extremely important to the majority of prisoners, many of them do not receive their statutory allocation of visits. In fact, just as the prison population is at an all time high and rising (having broken the ceiling of 80,000 inmates in 2007), evidence indicates that the number of visits has been declining.

¹ Rule 4 of the Prison Rules 1999

² Rule 35(2) of the Prison Rules 1999

³ Rule 31(1) of the Prison Rules 1999

Research indicates that people are not visiting their relatives and friends in prison for a variety of reasons, including:

- The distance of the prison from home, making journeys difficult and expensive. This is particularly problematic in the case of prisons in rural, isolated locations
- Inefficient system for booking visits, which often means relatives are unable to get through to the prison telephone booking line
- The inadequacy of visiting areas for conducive family visits, for example lack of children's areas
- Visiting times are nearly always during the day, which means that visitors have to take time off work and children miss school
- Cumbersome and intrusive security rules and procedures
- Visitors often have to queue to get into the prison, which causes delays and means that the allocated times are not kept to and their visit ends up being shortened.

The following are typical comments by relatives of prisoners:

'I've told him that I'm doing no more visits, it's doing my head in, it's the distance, the hassle, the waiting, it's all just a long drag, he's accepted that... We'll just have to keep in touch with letters and phone calls.'

'This thing is taking over my life. I have to make difficult choices such as if I send him money, which he needs for phone calls and toiletries etc, then I can't afford to go and see him. One visit cost me £100 in total which includes the petrol, then the kids want to stop on the way and I have to get food for them as it's a long journey, I just can't afford it.'

The main challenge that families wishing to visit prisoners face is the distance of the prison from where they live. For example in 2004 over 9,000 prisoners were held over 100 miles away from their committal court town, with male prisoners held an average of 51 miles away, and female prisoners 62 miles away⁴.

Assisted Prison Visits Scheme

Close relatives who are on a low income and/or on receipt of income-related benefits, or who have particular health difficulties, may be entitled to assistance with their travel expenses under the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme, which can cover up to 26 visits a year. Additionally, the prison governor has discretion to allow more visits, if s/he considers them to be beneficial for resettlement reasons and for the welfare of the prisoner or his family.

Under the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme, payment towards one or two visits can be made in advance of travel. Applicants need to give 8 working days notice of the planned visit and a further 5 working days must be allowed for delivery of payment (or rail warrant) by post. For the rest of the visits, costs are reimbursed after they have

⁴ Prison Reform Trust: Prison Factfile November 2006

taken place, which can cause problems as many families find they do not have the financial resources to pay for visits upfront. Details about the scheme are available at: www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk/adviceandsupport/keepingintouch/assistscheme/

Lack of information

The lack of information available to prisoners' families is another factor that can discourage them from attending prison visits. Families experience great difficulties in obtaining accurate information about a range of issues, including how visits are organised, what they can bring into prison, what assistance is available for them (e.g. counselling, debt advice, welfare benefits) or for their imprisoned relative (e.g. mental health, addictions and treatment programmes). Visitors' Centres have a vital role to play in providing both information and support, but tend to suffer from staffing and resourcing shortages.

Family visits and initiatives to help family contact

Visits can be experienced as stressful and upsetting, especially by children, and can be exacerbated by the behaviour and attitudes of prison staff and by the emotional problems in meeting and leaving the imprisoned relative. Prisoners themselves sometimes discourage families and friends from visiting. In the light of this, some prisons now have special arrangements for family visits, which enable prisoners to spend a day with their children in a more relaxed and informal setting, with minimal uniformed staff present. The environment in the visit rooms is enhanced by play equipment for the children and prisoners are allowed to move freely, which encourages family privacy and interaction. Visitors and imprisoned parents have generally responded very positively to this initiative:

'My partner playing with the children. It felt like a normal family environment.'

'It's really good for the kids there, they have a lovely play area and lots of toys and things for them.'

A number of innovative services have been introduced or piloted in some prisons to promote better family ties, such as:

- flexible visits arrangements (for example, where children can come in after school and do homework with the imprisoned parent)
- family fetes and barbecues
- home and town visits (for low category prisoners and those nearing the end of their sentences)
- parenting and family-learning courses (first developed in HMP Wolds, a 10 weeks programme aims at building strong family links during a prisoner's sentence and includes extended family visits. Prisoners can work towards qualifications in social, life and key skills and their partners can also undertake the course through correspondence)

- projects like ‘**Storybook Dad**’ or the ‘**Big Book Share**’ enable parents to make a recording of themselves (on video, CD or DVD) reading bedtime stories or nursery rhymes for their children.

LETTERS AND PHONE CALLS

Letters

The other notable forms of family contact are letters and telephone calls. Letters are an essential way for many prisoners to maintain contact with their families. They give an opportunity to stay in touch with what is happening outside the prison and sometimes to share feelings that would be difficult to express in a visits room.

Generally convicted prisoners and foreign national prisoners are allowed to send one letter at ‘public expense’ a week; young offenders and unconvicted prisoners are eligible to two. There is no limit on the number of letters that can be received. Both incoming and outgoing mail is monitored for security reasons.

Telephone calls

Telephone calls are particularly important for prisoners who may have difficulty in reading and writing letters. PIN phones have replaced phonecards in all prisons. Whilst prisoners are allowed to make as many calls as they wish, in practice they often experience difficulties with prices and access.

The costs associated with phone calls in prison can be prohibitive (especially, but not exclusively, when calling abroad): currently the cost of a call is over 5 times higher than from a public phone box if it lasts more than 2 minutes and 45 seconds.

Additionally, the times prisoners are allowed to use the phone may not fit in with their families’ availability. Prisoners need to present a list of contacts of people they wish to call (for example relatives, friends and legal representatives), which needs to be approved before contact is allowed. All phone calls, with the exception of those made to the Samaritans, are recorded and monitored.

Further information:

www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk

www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk/friendofaprisoner/

www.storybookdads.co.uk/indexnext.htm

www.readingagency.org.uk/projects/children/book_share.html

www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/learnmore.html