

Dr. Nancy Loucks on behalf of The Robertson Trust

Three Innovative Projects: Learning the Lessons



Families Outside

in brief

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Introduction

The imprisonment of a family member has a significant impact on those left outside. This includes financial hardship, division of the family, and disrupted schooling; difficulty with prison rules and prison staff, and a lack of awareness of procedures and of available supports; and poor physical and psychological health, insecurity, and acting out of children through physical and emotional problems, disruptive behaviour, and rejection of parental authority.

Research

Research and debate internationally supports the view that the maintenance of prisoners' family ties reduces the risk of reoffending. Long-term partnership and parenthood can be stabilising influences in themselves. In addition, prisoners who maintain contact with supportive family or friends have a useful 'safety net' upon their return to the community. Closer relations often benefit prisoners' families as well, who tend to be the 'forgotten victims' of incarceration. The generally young age of prisoners and the high frequency of disrupted relationships in their own backgrounds means the risk of disrupted relations between prisoners and their children is especially high. Further, prisoners who maintain positive relations with their families tend to be more settled while in custody and are at lower risk of suicide. Taken together, then, the research shows that prisoners' maintenance of family ties can offer mutual benefits for the prisoner, the family, and the prison.

The Robertson Trust

With this in mind, The Robertson Trust funded three pilot projects from 2005–2006 designed to support prisoners and families. These were the Lighthouse Foundation Family Support Project at HMP Kilmarnock; HOPE Family and Addictions Support at HMP Barlinnie; and the Families United Programme (delivered by One Stop Child Care, now Smile Child Care) at HMP Edinburgh.

This edition of In Brief describes these projects and their impact on those who took part.

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Lighthouse Foundation Family Support Project

The Lighthouse Foundation is an independent charity based in Kilmarnock that offers support, counselling, advice, and information to families of people who misuse drugs or alcohol, a high proportion of whom end up in prison. Lighthouse received funding from The Robertson Trust to extend its work by employing two part-time workers based in the prison Visitors' Centre for Family Support Work at HMP Kilmarnock. The type of support covered a wide spectrum, from simply being a friendly face at the prison to long-term in-depth counselling for a range of family members. Lighthouse was able to support families through individual support and advice, massage and aromatherapy, overdose prevention and drugs awareness training, family holidays, children's parties, fund-raising events, and referral to other support services. Support concentrates specifically on families rather than on prisoners.



“They’ve been fantastic”

“I don’t know what I would have done without them”

“They’ve put my mind at ease about a lot of things”



Feedback from families clearly reflected the value of Lighthouse’s presence.

Comments such as these were commonplace: “They’ve been fantastic”; “I don’t know what I would have done without them”; “They’ve put



HOPE Family and Addictions Support

HOPE (Helping Offenders Prisoners Families) is a charitable organisation based in Glasgow that offers a range of emotional and practical support to people affected by imprisonment (prisoners and families). Similar to Lighthouse, The Robertson Trust funded two part-time support workers from HOPE to offer support to families of prisoners at HMP Barlinnie. HOPE’s approach differed, however, in that contact with families

my mind at ease about a lot of things”; “I can’t praise them high enough”; “If it hadn’t been for that woman at that desk, I think I’d gone off my head”; “Any help I need is just at the end of the phone.”

The value of an independent organisation for this work was also clear: “...because they’re not prison officers; it’s nice that someone is there who is separate from that, who asks ‘Hi, how are you?’”; “It makes you feel like there’s somebody on your side”; “It’s good to sit and talk with somebody who doesn’t judge you because your partner is in prison.”

Virtually all clients learned about Lighthouse through the workers’ presence at the prison Visitors’ Centre, which showed the benefit of direct, personal contact in offering assistance to prisoners’ families. The project also showed benefits in engaging a hidden population in support that is not only much needed but also neglected without the work of such organisations. The pilot clearly indicated that the Lighthouse Family Support Project fills a gap and fills it extremely well.



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was made primarily through prisoners taking part in addictions courses at the prison. Workers from HOPE compiled an introductory course on parenting and relationships and delivered this for two hours once a week over four weeks to prisoners on the addictions programme. They depended initially on referrals from participating prisoners and ‘word of mouth’ to make contact with families, though later extended this to include sessions in the visitors’

waiting area to talk briefly with visitors and hand out leaflets. A large proportion of HOPE's client base consists of prisoners rather than family members, though HOPE maintains that helping prisoners helps the families as well.

Feedback from clients showed that HOPE's project workers provided an invaluable service to them that would otherwise have been completely lacking at Barlinnie.

A partner of one prisoner commented that HOPE was the first service that helped her as well as him.

Prisoners also praised the parenting course in its own right. Support work has since been extended to HMP Low Moss, and the project continues to be evaluated.



Families United (Smile Child Care)

In December 2005, One Stop Childcare (now Smile Child Care) initiated a series of meetings with prisoners in HMP Edinburgh to engage the men in looking at their role as fathers or carers of children. The aim was to "identify how they could better support the caring partner while still in prison, and to help them gain confidence in taking up their fathering/caring role on their return to the community". The Robertson Trust subsequently funded a pilot programme one afternoon a week for 12 weeks. Ten prisoners took part, six of whom successfully completed the course. Two prison officers also participated. The original intent was for a family member to take part in a small number of sessions as well, though only one did so.

The pilot showed the need for support for people who want to be effective parents regardless of family structure; varying family structures and breakdown in relationships mean that support for people who want to be better parents cannot realistically exclude people who do not have a partner. Feedback showed clearly that participants enjoyed the content of the course and learned from it; indeed, most wanted sessions to be longer or more frequent. Course work included child development and communication, trust, loss, and changing roles of men and women. Responses from both prisoners and staff were extremely positive and perhaps surprisingly optimistic about the direct impact they believed the course would have on their future behaviour.



Prisoners commented that the course made them realise the importance of their family to them and the fact that their families needed them. One said the course made him realise he had been selfish, while another said it gave him an entirely different outlook and helped him appreciate the views of others.

The evaluation of Families United did not attempt to 'measure' its effectiveness. Instead it described the value of the course to the prisoners who participated and identified the need for such work to be done in prison. The course appeared to offer valuable support for prisoners in their role as parents and for the staff who work with them. Further development of this, particularly in collaboration with outside agencies for longer-term support, potentially has great value for the reintegration of prisoners and support for their families.

Summary

All three projects show innovations in support for both families and prisoners and that this support is clearly of value to those who take part. At the very least the projects ensure that families and prisoners have opportunities for support with issues they have often never discussed with anyone before. Such provision remains patchy, but the need for and benefits of support for family members on both sides of the prison walls remains clear.



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HOPE, 18 Stevenson Street, Glasgow G40 2ST. Tel. 0141 552 0229

Smile Child Care, 4/2 New Lairdship Yards, Edinburgh EH11 3UY. Tel. 0131 476 7800

This briefing is based on the following reports available from The Robertson Trust:

Loucks, N. (2006a) Evaluation of the 'Families United' Pilot Programme at HMP Edinburgh: Final Report.

Loucks, N. (2006b) HOPE Family & Addictions Support Project: Final Report.

Loucks, N. (2006c) Lighthouse Foundation Family Support Project: Final Report.

Loucks, N. (2004) 'Prison Without Bars': Needs, support, and good practice for work with Prisoners' Families. Dundee and Edinburgh: Tayside Criminal Justice Partnership and Families Outside.

Available from Families Outside.



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Families Outside provide a free confidential national Helpline available to anyone who has a family member or friend in custody in Scotland which enables and empowers families by offering information, support and a signposting service.

We undertake research, development and deliver training independently and in partnership with a range of agencies which have a role to play in meeting the needs of families affected by imprisonment.

We work positively with the Scottish Prison Service, Scottish Executive, Local Authorities and other statutory and voluntary bodies in order to achieve positive change for families affected by imprisonment.

Scottish Prisoners Families Helpline

Freephone number **0500 83 93 83**

Monday–Friday: 1pm–5pm
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