



Doing Time on Probation: some experiences of family members

David Coley discusses some findings from a recent research study by Kent, Surrey and Sussex CRC Research and Policy Unit.

The impact of a prison sentence on the family of a prisoner has been increasingly addressed in recent years (Farmer, 2017) and the adverse consequences for children are also well documented (Burke, 2017; Beresford, 2018). Correspondingly, many family members express the view that they themselves are 'doing time' as the enduring upheaval in their lives can feel as if they too have been sentenced. Consequently, this issue prompts questions regarding the extent to which these experiences continue when a service user is released on licence and has to report to probation, or indeed how it feels for family members if an individual is made subject to a community order. In a recent research study undertaken by KSS CRC Research and Policy Unit some partial insights into these questions have been gleaned. The study, entitled 'The Family Involvement Project', was designed to examine the views and experiences of both staff and family members' involvement in probation services within the organisation. Based on interviews, focus groups and questionnaires, the findings include some unforeseen accounts indicating that some supportive family members feel as if they are also on probation. Here we trace some of the study narratives in an effort to understand the emotional, relational and material journeys that certain family members undertake. The final report, due to be completed in the next few weeks, will cover all aspects of the research.

Living their own kind of sentence

The experience of seeing a loved-one being incarcerated is traumatic. For one participant in the KSS CRC research study, Susan, this was a double blow:

"When (my son) was sentenced and taken away, it was like a living funeral, because I had a second son that died...and you don't know what to do...it's a minefield...because nothing made sense to me, and you go on, you haven't got a clue where your son or daughter or husband or wife is, because they're just taken from you".

This graphic picture painted by Susan speaks of a sense of loss, suffused with experiences of confusion as a family's world is turned upside-down. Similarly, the resettlement phase of a service user's release can remain somewhat difficult for supportive families. The thoughts of one participant highlight the challenges of trying to support a loved-one to reintegrate into home life:

"They are a nightmare when they first come out of prison, a nightmare. It takes quite a while for him to settle down and to be home...I think it's because they come out with a bit of a chip on their shoulders, they feel that they're victims, and they're not the victims. They don't think about the trouble they have caused, or what they leave behind for the family I have had to bite my tongue an awful lot, when really I want to give it to him with both barrels. 'Now come on', you know, 'settle down'!....he's not really got any problems at all".

Helen's comments above are concluded with a self-assertive statement in which she makes it patently clear that she is "not just someone who runs a taxi service to take him to his (probation) appointments"! We can see here how living with someone on probation "does affect family members as well....they are living their own kind of sentence, in a very different way" (Georgina).

As the requirements of probation supervision place emotional demands upon service users, so too they can impose unseen pressures on family members, primarily supportive partners or parents. When assisting with attending supervision appointments this can include just getting through the door of the probation office, entering the reception space and perhaps interacting with staff. For those with a less than ideal previous experience of interaction with probation, such as Tammie,

"it was treating you like you were some sort of wrong-doer.... you know, and I didn't like that, not at all. Making you feel like you're all tarred with the same brush.....meaning like if there is one wrong-doer, then you must all be the same, like a den of thieves".

As another study respondent puts it, "I've never been in trouble in my life (but) I feel like I'm going for it with him, you know" (Nala). This cannot but have an emotional impact upon supportive family members. Some indicate that when waiting in a probation office, "I think, 'I shouldn't be here', I feel really bad" (Karen), as mixed feelings of awkwardness, embarrassment and confusion typically surface. Concealed emotional tensions can even extend to undertaking probation 'homework'. For some mothers with sons on probation, in a similar position to Mary,

"some of the sheets that they give them to do as like courses or homework or whatever, he finds difficult. So I spend time doing that. And it's the emotional side of it, they're angry sometimes, upset,...(but)... someone's got to do it".

Whilst it is not the role of the family member to undertake offence-focussed work on behalf of a service user when in the family home, for some it would appear this is all part and parcel of their undertaking some form of secondary, vicarious probation penalty. A further family stressor unearthed by the study relates to secrecy within families:

"I have kept his conviction secret from extended family and friends at home" (Amara).

This issue surfaced within several participant narratives as they wrestled with navigating the subtle and complex dynamics of family life, a challenge that within this study primarily fell upon women in the family.

Perhaps inevitably issues of financial concern arose within personal accounts, especially for those who support service users with impairments. Emma informs us: "Half the time it's me lending him the money to get over there, and I know you get it back when you get there, but it's having the money to give him in the first place", or put more starkly by Sarah, "I can't afford to support us both. Universal Credit pay me £190 per month". Where multiple disadvantage

is apparent, these issues certainly beg the question as to what extent it is in the interests of probation providers to meet the travel costs of significant and supportive others who in many cases facilitate and ensure probation attendance. Equally, families must be viewed in holistic terms as multiple intersecting factors such as health, poverty, and substance misuse may form everyday elements of their lived experiences (Good and Marriott, 2017).

Just a few kind words

At a fundamental level most family members who are supportive simply want to be acknowledged, listened to, and make a contribution to supporting the desistance journey of their loved-one. Communication is key to this. Guidance for professionals on how to build working relationships has been readily available for some years now (ATD, 1996). As Anna explains, her son's probation officer,

"was able to call me up and say, 'Is everything OK? Are you sure? Tell me if there's anything wrong, we can work through this'. Do you see what I'm getting at? Sometimes it's just a few kind words.... It's because she was willing to talk to me, and I phoned her, and I said, 'Can we do this? Can we do that? Tell me what I need to get', you know. She was just brilliant and I felt very, very grateful for that".

Ultimately, the sentiment that most voices who spoke within this study would probably subscribe to is one that supports desistance:

"Crime, it's fast gain but long term pain, isn't it,...I think the whole system has got to liaise with the families. Because if you've got a supportive family, you've got more of a chance of turning your life around, and if you haven't got a supportive family then unfortunately you've got more of a chance that....you're going to go back inside....you need to have an infrastructure around you" (Anna).

Conclusion

It cannot go unnoticed that all the voices within this brief exploration of family members supporting service users on probation are those of women. The gendered response to this study indicates that it is female partners, mothers and grandmothers who bear the brunt of supporting family members on probation, primarily men. The impacts are material, emotional, relational and financial. The study findings signify that female family members need to be seen in more than one-dimensional terms (Terry and Cardwell, 2016). They are more than individuals who passively attend somewhere in the background of any male service user's desistance journey. Further detailed exploration into these issues would appear timely and requisite.

These study findings echo the view that sometimes life can be far from a family walk in the park for those who navigate supportive relationships with someone on probation, with this navigation task falling largely upon the women of the family. This suggests that their stabilising and accommodating role warrants wider attention within front-line probation practice. As such, it can be argued that within any probation supervision a narrow focus on the needs of predominantly male service users may prove insufficient, as they are not the only ones doing time on probation.

To register your interest in the final report please contact: David.Coley@ksscrc.co.uk



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