

# Connected Communities

## Families disconnected by prison

A scoping study in barriers to community engagement

Lizzie Coles-Kemp



# Background

## Executive Summary

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**The focus of this scoping study is a community composed of families separated by prison and their helping agencies. In this study we explored why some families do not connect with the support offered by that community. The study used an information systems design lens, focused on informational support (support through the provision of information) and explored both the content and the form of information communicated to families.**

This eight month study engaged with two distinct communities of families separated by prison and used participatory research methods to explore particular barriers to engagement. Work with both communities identified information related to travel and financial support for travel as key and identified inappropriate support services and lack of relevant information as barriers to engaging with specific formal support services. The study concluded that low expectation of improvement in circumstances, not assuming an identity of help-seeker or help-receiver and the need for forms of interaction other than those provided where the key barriers to engagement with the support available.

Outputs from the community engagement are collective narratives in two forms of collage. A longer version of this report and a virtual version of the collage will be available from the end of November at:

<http://proboscis.org.uk/4996/hidden-families/>

## Researchers and Project Partners

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**Pallion Action Group and LONELINESS**

## Key words

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Participatory design

Prison

Families

Information systems design

# Aims

The focus of this scoping study is a community composed of families separated by prison and their supporting practitioners and institutions. The aim of the study is to explore *why some families do not connect with the support offered by the families of prisoners community even when they are faced with severe emotional and practical burdens?*

Support services in this context are many and varied and for this scoping study it was necessary to focus on a particular service aspect. As information is key to providing support and families and prisoners often report an absence of helping support (Boswell and Wedge, 2002, p. 134, Salmon, 2005 and 2008) this study used an information systems design lens and focused on informational support (support through the provision of information) exploring both the way that information is communicated to families and the methods of information delivery.

A literature review supported by a participatory engagement was used to carry out the study.

## Literature Review

A systematic literature review was undertaken to address the following questions:

- What characteristics identify a community of families with a family member in prison?
- What type of informational support is available to families with a member in prison?
- What barriers potentially prevent families from engaging with the informational support services available to them?

Key texts in the literature on families disconnected by prison were re-visited using

an information systems design lens and the findings compared with the perspectives of practitioner and community support.

## What characteristics identify a community of families with a family member in prison?

Analysis of the literature showed that whilst superficially the community could be easily identified as a collection of individuals with a family member in prison, families are diverse and have different needs (Codd, 2008, pp.44-79, Losel et al, 2012) and are composed in different ways (DCSF, 2010). The literature shows that these families adopt a complex range of identities. For example, families can regard themselves as hidden or forgotten victims (Condry, 2007, p.173). Also, families often feel stigmatised and outcast (Boswell and Wedge, 2002, p.23, Codd, 2008, p.57) and have a need to re-build identities in the aftermath of arrest and imprisonment (Boswell and Wedge, 2002, p. 26). Another dominant identity is the one of carer. This identity is one that foregrounds the prisoner's needs and backgrounds their own. Whilst these identities diversify the need for informational support, another identity, one of not expecting help or the ability to improve the situation (Boswell and Wedge, 2002, p. 135), is a barrier to seeking that informational support.

The complicated interaction of identities (or personas) is an important consideration (Pruitt and Aldin, 2006) when designing a system for delivering information because the presentation and the content of the information need to respond to the complex mix of individual requirements at a particular

point in time when using the information. Personas are one way to think about design on these individual terms. It is therefore important to understand the particular mix of personas in a particular family in order to adapt how informational support is provided. This perhaps explains why all the literature reviewed pointed to face-to-face support as the most important means of support, as needs have to be identified and information has to be presented in different ways.

## What type of informational support is available to families with a member in prison?

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Given the diversity of identities that families find themselves assuming, it is perhaps not surprising that families often find themselves in a position of needing a wide range of informational support. Three sources of informational support could be identified in the literature:

- Communication between family members separated by prison (Codd, 2008, pp.23-26 and p.146).
- Third sector voluntary support groups and self-help groups (Condry, 2007, pp.154-179, Codd 2008, pp.142-145)
- Formal (government services or prison) support (Codd 2008, p.159-160, Boswell and Wedge 2002, pp.133-136 Corston, 2007)

Much emphasis in the literature was on support of all types provided through family, the wider community, the voluntary sector and self-help groups.

In conjunction with the literature review, a survey of informational support available to this community of families was undertaken<sup>1</sup>. The topics covered by the informational support included: the mechanics of prison visiting, the emotional and practical aspects of separation, support for children with a parent in prison, the technicalities of sentencing, parenting skills for managing and supporting small children during a prison visit, the technicalities of emailing a prisoner, the technicalities of claiming travel for a prison visit and emotional and practical support for coping with prisoner release. Superficially, the method of delivery is predominantly either through a printed information leaflet, form or booklet or an electronic version of these documents downloadable from the internet. However, practitioners also use these forms to support families either face to face or through telephone support and helplines. Additional methods of delivery included: DVD, virtual self-help communities, physical self-help communities and support work. Within the physical and virtual self-help communities the use of storytelling to deliver information was in evidence.

## What barriers potentially prevent families from engaging with the informational support services available to them?

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Whilst the topic was discussed in (Boswell and Wedge, 2002, p.133-134) in the context of engagement with support agencies, the literature did not, by and large, directly identify low take-up of informational support as an issue.

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<sup>1</sup> A list of informational support literature is given at the end of the report.

However, the literature identified that prison has many impacts on families (Codd, 2008, pp.44-79) including relationship and financial impacts (Smith et al., 2006) and the condition of the prisoner can also impact a family's information needs (Corston, 2007). Given this, from a system's design approach it could reasonably be inferred that families require a complex range of information delivered in a variety of ways. It could also be inferred that given the complexity of the impacts (DCSF/ MOJ, 2007) ranging from finance, to housing, travel and health issues (Smith et al. 2006), the ramifications of imprisonment will unfold over time. As a result, families in this situation are likely to need information in a highly individual pattern of delivery. This is further re-enforced by Codd's start point that all families are different (Codd, 2008, p.44.). It is therefore reasonable to assume that families will have an individual set of information needs and require a range of methods of information delivery.

In the case of families of serious offenders, when a family member is imprisoned, families can experience a severe disruption to their senses of security and safety (Condry, 2007, pp26-29). Given this, it is reasonable to suggest that a family's ability to absorb and comprehend information may, in some circumstances, be impeded as they struggle to re-form their identity and sense of reality. This sense of loss of security and safety is also likely to impact how willing individual family members are to disclose information about their circumstances, their sense of trust in the methods they use to disclose information and their willingness to engage with formal institutions.

## Participatory Engagement

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This scoping study used two forms of participatory engagement to further explore the primary research question. The study engaged with two communities of families: one community, who called themselves Hidden Families, was more likely to engage with informational support services and the other, who called themselves LONELINESS, less likely.

Hidden Families is a group composed of visitors to a category A prison in the North East. Participants were recruited through NEPACS (a third sector agency providing support services for families separated by prison). Approximately<sup>2</sup> 20 participants engaged of which 19 were women, aged between 18 and 65. LONELINESS is a group recruited through Pallion Action Group, West Sunderland, composed of people who predominantly have experience of visiting lower category prisons. Five participants engaged of which four were men, aged between 18 and 43. The method used with both groups was one of participatory engagement (Proboscis, 2011 and Durose et al., 2011) where the communities chose how and in what form they wanted to address the research topic. Hidden Families chose to respond to a series of open questions on informational support in the context of the visiting journey and create a 2 metre wall collage with their responses. LONELINESS chose to work through the topic by reviewing the informational support provided for families visiting prison, responding to the same open questions presented to Hidden Families. This group chose to answer the questions by creating a wall of comments.

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<sup>2</sup> The participatory nature of the process meant that some participants posted to the collage independently of the researchers.

## Common issues

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Despite the different approaches to the review, there were a number of issues identified by both communities:

- *The importance of including prisoners in the information flow* – both communities identified the prisoner as an important participant in the provision of information to families and the need to further include the prisoner in the information provided to families.
- *The financial and logistical barriers to visiting* – both communities identified the critical need for timely and accessible information relating to financial support for travel and travel information and highlighted the unpredictability of many aspects to visiting.
- *The lack of relevance of some of the formal information to their circumstances* – both communities identified a lack of relevant information in some areas as a barrier to engagement, e.g. the practical information for visiting was not always relevant for disabled family members.
- *The inappropriateness of formal support services for their circumstances* – both communities identified the inappropriateness of the underlying support service in some areas as a barrier to engagement, e.g. the complicated system of claiming travel costs.

For both communities, whilst barriers to engagement in specific types of formal support were identified, they were not necessarily barriers to engagement with support in general.

## Hidden Families

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In addition to the issues common to both communities, Hidden Families also identified how their information needs can be quite dynamic. Many examples were given of dynamic information needs ranging from complex financial advice, information about prisoner safety and welfare, travel advice and planning for uncertain weather conditions, welfare and benefits advice and sentence planning. It was noticeable that whilst the participants felt the collage was representative of their needs and challenges each had an individual narrative about their range of informational needs that re-enforced the literature theme of diversity and complexity and added to the theme of unpredictability.

The collage articulated a strong narrative about how the current mechanisms for communicating with their family members in prison feel insufficient and that families would derive support from being able to have a richer family communication about day-to-day activities.

Identities of carer, hidden families and stigmatised families were all articulated in the collage and with each persona, a diverse range of informational needs.

Whilst Hidden Families identified challenges that require increases to the quality and flow of information, they were not presented as barriers to engagement.

## LONELINESS

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In addition to the issues common to both communities, LONELINESS expressed an issue with the format and nature of the information as presented in the support material. The majority of the group characterised the information as being useful for their mothers but did not identify it as information useful for them. Whilst they were often the primary carer for the individual in prison, they did not identify themselves as help-seekers or receivers. Interestingly, Hidden Families was primarily composed of mothers of prisoners whereas LONELINESS was primarily composed of brothers of prisoners.

LONELINESS also identified the format of the information as a barrier to engagement and expressed a preference for access to information through a wider range of mechanisms, including DVDs and interactive means such as games. This community also expressed a strong desire to find out information through their own community of friends and neighbours using word-of-mouth. Most also expressed a lack of optimism that the Internet is a useful method in general for information delivery.

A narrative of the LONELINESS group is a general mistrust of institutions and their systems indicating that perhaps the more institutional support structures and helping agencies they found within the family-prisoner community were too similar to the systems and structures that had been of little use to them in the past. Closely linked to this articulation was a sense of low expectation that the situation would change or improve and thus the incentive for engaging with support services was small.

In summary: as with Hidden Families, identities of carer, hidden families and stigmatised families came to the fore. However, unlike Hidden Families, LONELINESS did not perceive themselves as help-seekers or receivers and had low expectations of change. This combined with strong preferences for alternative information formats to the booklet or the download formed strong barriers to support engagement in general.

## Areas for Further Research

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This scoping study achieved much in terms of trust building with communities of participants often excluded from information systems research and eliciting their views on the research topic. The main conclusion from both the literature review and the participatory engagement is that research is needed to develop further means of enhancing and sustaining face-to-face support for families disconnected by prison. In particular, further research is needed to:

- Explore the role of social networks (both face-to-face and virtual) in supporting for families.
- Identify requirements for both family-support information and methods of delivery in the wider community support networks.
- Evaluate the role of prisoners in the communication of family support information.
- Design interventions to improve the quality of information communicated through word-of-mouth networks.



# References and external links

**Boswell, G.** *Imprisoned Fathers and their Children*, 2002.

**Codd, H.** *In the Shadow of Prison: Families, Imprisonment and Criminal Justice*, 2008.

**Corston, J.** The Corston Report: a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system, 2007  
[www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf](http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf)

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**Proboscis,** Agencies of Engagement. 2011  
<http://proboscis.org.uk/projects/2011-2015/agencies-of-engagement/>

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**Salmon, S.** *Prisoners' children matter*. 16-19., 2005

**Salmon, S.** *Children with a prisoner in the family*. Childright. 18-20, 2005

**Smith R, Grimshaw R, Romeo R, Knapp M.** *Poverty and Disadvantage among the Families and Partners of Prisoners*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006

## INFORMATION SUPPORT RESOURCES REVIEWED

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### Downloadable information sheets

**Offenders Families Helpline: Help with the cost of prison visits**  
[www.offendersfamilieshelpline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Help-with-the-cost-of-prison-visits.pdf](http://www.offendersfamilieshelpline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Help-with-the-cost-of-prison-visits.pdf)

**Offenders Families Helpline: Visiting a Prison**  
[www.offendersfamilieshelpline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Visiting-a-prison.pdf](http://www.offendersfamilieshelpline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Visiting-a-prison.pdf)

**Offenders Families Helpline: Keeping in touch**  
[www.offendersfamilieshelpline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Keeping-in-Touch.pdf](http://www.offendersfamilieshelpline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Keeping-in-Touch.pdf)

**Prisoners Families and Friends Service: Visiting Someone in Prison**  
[www.pffs.org.uk/uploads/Visits.pdf](http://www.pffs.org.uk/uploads/Visits.pdf)

**Prisoners Families and Friends Service: Keeping in Touch by Phone and Email**  
[www.pffs.org.uk/uploads/contact.pdf](http://www.pffs.org.uk/uploads/contact.pdf)

### Websites

**Prison Advice**  
[www.prisonadvice.org.uk/](http://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/)

**Unlock**  
[www.unlock.org.uk/main.aspx](http://www.unlock.org.uk/main.aspx)



## Video

### Email a prisoner

[www.emailaprisoner.com/about.cfm?country=uk](http://www.emailaprisoner.com/about.cfm?country=uk)

## CD

### Storybook Dads

[www.storybookdads.org.uk/](http://www.storybookdads.org.uk/)

## Booklet (with downloadable version)

**Action for Prisoners' Families:** *Sent to Prison, Living with Separation, Telling the Children, Preparing for Release*

[www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/Downloads/](http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/Downloads/)





[www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk](http://www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk)