

**COUNTING THE TWO IN QUEENSLAND:  
EDUCATION IN PRISONS AND THE ISSUE OF FAMILY**

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Warren came to the education building on an irregular basis. He was not a full-time student and, like the majority of inmates in the gaol, he worked in one of the industries. One Friday, returning from a visit, he walked into the education office; his face was ashen. His three-and-a-half year-old son had shattered him. "Dad, when I grow up and go to gaol will I ...?" After this, Warren came to every possible class. "I've got to do this," he said, "for my kid".

Prior to my current position as Senior Education Officer within the New South Wales Department of Corrective Services' Adult Education and Vocational Training Institute (AEVTI) my work included a focus on women and children. I was interested therefore when the issue of fatherhood began to seep into conversations/interactions/discussions with inmates in gaol. A casual survey I conducted during the course of my work in 1994 in a maximum-security gaol of approximately two hundred and seventy male inmates revealed the disproportionately high number who had children in comparison with population trends in the general community. These young families were evident in the constant trails of visitors making their way to the prison gates. Over a period of weeks I asked inmates who came into my office whether they had any kids. I was staggered. "Yeah, I've got seven" was not an unusual answer and, as I climbed back onto my chair, "yeah, and that's not counting the two in Queensland". These were often the replies of young inmates who had been in boys' homes and were now in adult prison. A rough calculation based on my brief survey and tentatively supported by the Children of Prisoners' Support Group indicates that, at any time, there are possibly eight thousand children in New South Wales with a father in full-time custody. There are no statistical

records for this group of children who, according to school counsellor colleagues, are not identified as at risk in the community. An incarcerated father is a secret.

Current research and recommendations of a recently-tabled report initiated by Ann Symonds MLC of the Parliament of New South Wales Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, into the Children of Imprisoned Parents, highlight the needs of children whose parents are in custody and the needs of inmates who are parents. The report outlines the minimal support structures which exist and recommends expansion. It stresses the findings of research in Australia and other countries that the separation of children from their mothers in custody has profound and devastating consequences. As the number of women in full-time custody in New South Wales is relatively low (approximately 350) identification of these problems has been possible and services established which provide some support. The situation of incarcerated fathers, however, is unknown as statistical information is currently lacking. Random information gathered during the course of my work indicates that a remarkable number of male inmates also have custody of children who are in some form of care.

The subject of my paper has been prompted by the perceived need for education in prisons to address the issue of family. Persistent and earnest requests from inmates for education to facilitate programs for incarcerated parents and the heralded success of these inmate/education initiatives strengthen the case presented in this paper. I discuss the role of education in addressing problems created by the incarceration of parents and emphasise the need for recognition of the social context of gaol education programs and their participants. A proposal is made for education programs to complement the work of other disciplines and service providers in this area. Successful post-release reintegration is aided by family support networks. It is appropriate therefore that the needs of inmates as family members be recognised and included in program planning. The Symonds report indicates the complexity of need and the necessity for an interdepartmental and interdisciplinary approach to the issue.

Family-based education programs and projects fit well within the flexible AEVTI framework. Literacy, language and communication skills are major strands in the AEVTI provision through the Victorian Certificates General Education for Adults (CGEA) which already provides appropriate ground for family-focused work. Other curricula and learning materials are developed for use within a life skills framework which includes workshops and visits from community representatives, conflict resolution, goal-setting, stress management and cooking. Life skills programs are coordinated with other disciplines such as psychology as well as other service providers. The social context in which gaol education is offered is outlined in this paper and the impact of incarceration, the hidden grief and loss of family and relationships, issues of violence and recidivism are identified as influences which shape the profile of the adult learner in a gaol classroom.

Within my current role as Manager of AEVTI programs for inmates identified as special needs who are participating in short-term intensive psycho-educational programs, the issue of family is a common thread. Inmates identified as at risk due to incidences of self-harm, those with a history of violence in prison, the HIV or HEP C+ and those engaged in a voluntary intensive program which addresses self-defeating behaviours, others with intellectual disabilities and high-security inmates in strict protection identify family as a critical issue. Communication and contact with families are constrained by limits on phone calls and visiting conditions. Inmates speak of strained relations that occur during visits due to delays, searches, conflicting demands for attention and lack of facilities for children who have to remain seated in chairs bolted to the floor. More often than not, visits are occasions on which to exchange drugs rather than rebuild families. For many inmates, experiences have been of dysfunctional families, perhaps with other members also serving time. Eighty per cent are imprisoned for drug-related offences; participating in functional families has not been their experience. Not having the opportunity to learn to relate within functional families, there is a regret and persistent need to belong to a supportive family grouping. Gaol marriages are not uncommon, frequently include step-children and have an almost one hundred per cent failure rate. A

study of these alliances, entitled *Dream Lovers: Women Who Marry Men in Prison* was published in this city of churches in 1997.

Changes in the concept of family and fatherhood in the general community are evident among those affected by criminal justice. Families tend to be defined by what a particular group of people does rather than the specific relationships and blood ties which exist between them. Media and literary images of fatherhood focus on the comic or absent: An article in a *Sydney Daily Telegraph* (Saturday 14 March 1998 p.21) detailed the option chosen by media star Jodie Foster to select characteristics desirable for the fathering of her child from a lengthy list of anonymous donors. The accompanying image showed her alongside a faceless (male) cut-out, reducing fatherhood to a mere biological necessity. Inmate fathers give some indication of the lack of connection they experience willingly or otherwise, with their children. Characterised by multiple partners, the patterns of fathering by inmates are also indicative of sexually active youth.

A high proportion of inmates are early school leavers with minimal literacy and language skills, (sixty per cent below functional levels in reading and writing) unemployed at the time of their arrest. There are inmates who have experienced abuse, physical or sexual, within families and institutions and others who have been convicted of violence against women and children, often within a family. Patterns of male violence in families are observable in strings of family members serving time. The absence of male role models, and a prevalence of fatherhood as a biological function only, contribute to the high numbers of young offenders currently entering juvenile detention centres.

In prison, attacks on officers and other acts of violence, attempted suicide, drug use, sexual abuse, depression and escapes are frequently prompted by family crises and the position of powerlessness in which most inmates find themselves. It is also stated by inmates that their role as father is one reason for restraint from violence and the consequent possibility of temporary suspension of visiting rights or phone calls. An inmate's children are often his only stated reason for maintaining a thread of hope during a custodial sentence. Like Warren, inmates are motivated to attend programs in order to

gain skills and qualifications on behalf of their children and in doing so experience an unaccustomed sense of achievement, commitment and self-worth. This positive experience assists the inmate to support his partner. Recognition of the hardships imposed on families by imprisonment has been a starting point in parenting discussions. Recently an inmate spoke of his gradual recognition of the hardship his girl endures in order to see him: an arduous three hour journey with the two kids, the possibility of changed visiting conditions that day, a brief visit then the journey in reverse. It was raining when the visit ended and Tony could run to the Wing. His wife struggled with tired children in the wet. Unlike him, she had no mates to catch up with at the end of her journey. An inmate's fusion into gaol culture will often cloud his ability to perceive the consequent struggles of his partner and inhibit the possibilities of support for her.

A survey undertaken by the Research Branch of the Department of Corrective Services in New South Wales, Kemp in 1981 outlined the impact of incarceration on partners and children: "Punishment can have various aims - to exact retribution, to deter offenders from further crime, perhaps even to rehabilitate them - but in Western societies, at least, these have never included inflicting suffering on a criminal's family. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that when a married man receives a long term of imprisonment, dramatic burdens of financial and emotional deprivation often fall on his wife and children, who lose a key member of the household. On the grounds of social equity alone, there is justification for giving attention to these unwitting casualties of crime and punishment. [...] from its very nature, imprisonment imposes extreme limitations on what a husband can do to prevent family relationships from deteriorating. Most of the time the wife alone must take on the burden of coping with the separation and its impact on the family..." . Community-based networks such as the Children of Prisoners Support Group and CRC Justice Support were established following this and other research reports on the impact of incarceration. They provide assistance to families affected by the criminal justice system and work in conjunction with education and other staff in facilitation of programs.

Inmates who come from dysfunctional families or have lost family connections during the course of a prison sentence express apprehensive about their chances of post-release survival. Patterns of recidivism reveal that inmates returning to gaol are frequently those who are unemployed and with minimal or no family support networks: "I was going all right, but, it's lonely, you know? In here I know there'll be someone, someone I can yarn to. But out there, out there, there's no-one". As community-based support structures are negligible it is left to family members to provide an essential base for living back in the community. Parole requirements operate as an extension of custodial sentencing. There is no commensurate continuity or parallel of custodial contact following release.

Over five years of working with maximum-security inmates, I am convinced that the majority of inmates do not want to return to gaol. Many leave the prison system with hopes for their future. Continuing high unemployment and the decreasing availability of labour market programs contribute to recurrent prison terms. Underlying the theme of this paper is the observation that, in addition to employability skills, family support is critical in assisting inmates to reintegrate and remain as functional members in the community. This is more likely to occur if all service providers address the issue of incarceration and its implications for family structures.

The following is an outline of a diverse range of responses to inmate requests to education for programs, participation and support in inmate-initiated projects: the diversity is indicative of, first, the range of need, and second, the infinite possibilities.

Within the special-focus units at Long Bay, AEVTI has co-facilitated the program 'Maintaining the Family Unit' (or more frequently 'Kids and Dads Days') established and coordinated by the Children of Prisoners Support Group. These events enable children to spend a day with their fathers; provision of play activities and the sharing of a picnic lunch provide an opportunity for valuable interaction. Inmates reflect the benefits of these days in feedback: for one thirteen-year-old boy, contact to arrange his attendance was the first knowledge he received about his father's incarceration. Because the first visit took place over a period of hours in the relaxed environment of a 'Kids and Dads

Day', in the presence of supportive staff, the father was able to deal with his guilt and the boy his apprehension and the relationship was maintained.

Another boy, aged nine, prone to nightmares about visiting his father in maximum-security, overcame his fears after attending a Kids and Dads Day. Cooking and other shared activities engendered an atmosphere of normality in contrast to the restricted environment of standard visiting conditions. Understanding the needs of children and learning how to play are integral to this program. The success of these events and the break, if brief, for the carers of young children, contribute to strengthening ties among families. These have become regular events in a number of correctional centres in New South Wales and provide a contact point for education to work with inmates in a wider field of inmate development. Other regular family-based events are arranged by custodial staff; these family days take the form of informal barbecues. As these days have become part of the gaol calendar, AEVTI has been asked to participate, invited to attend and provide appropriate games which facilitate interaction.

A screening process for inmates and children is conducted prior to these days to check for court-orders and other reasons for restriction of access.

Within the AEVTI's program at Long Bay a presentation skills class includes improvisation and non-verbal communication skills. Directed by a teacher/graduate of the Le Coq School in Paris, the class includes performance of short scenes devised by the inmates. The father of the child who suffered nightmares told the story of his son's birth. One particular night his wife had begged him not to go out on "a job" because she felt the child's birth was imminent. Ken's mates were expecting him; it was a safe job which promised easy pickings. Despite his wife's protests, he departed and was gone all night. The child (his first and only) was born in his absence. His wife's resentment was short-lived but he still winces as he tells his tale. In the class, Ken directed others in playing out the scenario. He played the role of his wife and felt the disgust and despair which she had experienced. Roleplays are an effective form for exploring issues. Inmates are willing participants.

As a component of a pre-release program which included parenting, the Sydney Action Roleplay Theatre, a group coordinated by the Le Coq teacher, prepared three scenarios about common experiences of inmates during visits and in the first few days' tumult in adjusting to life at home. The audience was invited to stop the action at any time to comment on the characters and what they were doing. Gradually inmates took over the roles of the family members as they struggled to establish and re-establish their positions in the family constellation. Alternative dialogue prompting different responses were discussed and performed, and for a moment family life in front of the telly was present in gaol.

Other oral and written communication program components contribute to family contact. Apart from visits, contact with families is by telephone. Timed calls create pressures on the caller. As Darrell said: how do you get kids to talk on the phone? Especially when there are other family members waiting? One solution has been found: each morning (or as possible) Darrell watches his six-year-old son's favourite cartoon (or part of it, he hastens to add). This provides a basis for interaction which has deepened over time as Darrell has learnt which Wayne's favourite character is and gained an insight into the reactions and responses of his young lad. "It gives me a buzz. It's almost as if we're watching telly together". Two weeks ago Darrell proposed writing a handout for his peers about this and other family-related ideas. This project may also include the updating of a visitors' handout which outlines current services and how to access them. Input from inmate committees may be appropriate in production of updates on Visitors' Handouts; CRC Justice Support report visitors' bewilderment at different procedures and processes for visits and reluctance to have contact with other visitors but willingness to pass on experience. Visitors tend to side with their inmate contact or family member against "the authorities", which contributes to the tension inherent in the experience of visiting in gaol. Projects such as these not only fill a need but form the basis of valuable literacy and language exercises which take place within a collective framework of inmates and staff.

Performing as peer educators is a popular form of program participation for inmates. A literacy project established in a prison near Philadelphia in the US is based on this concept. Operating through a federally-funded grant, a Reading is Fundamental (RIF) program offers literacy support to children who visit the centre. With staff supervision, the prisoners work with visiting children on reading and writing. In a paper presented at the New South Wales CRC Justice Support's 1997 conference entitled 'Hidden Victims of Crime: Families of Prisoners', disruption to schooling is outlined as one of the effects of imprisonment on families. In addition to coping with social stigma and isolation, children may have to travel long distances, perhaps over a weekend, to visit a parent in gaol and may be too tired to learn effectively. The concept of learners as teachers in family-oriented literacy projects, such as the Philadelphia model, is in line with the popular role of peer educators.

In the context of a conference which takes as its theme 'Setting the Standard' discussion of education programs and the issue of family is timely, for New South Wales program providers at least: a new Visitors' Management Plan has recently been formulated; within the Symonds report a number of recommendations refer as a matter of urgency to the conditions for visits within correctional centres; current expansion of special-needs programs led by psychologists provides opportunities for implementation of a planned pilot program for families which takes a cross-disciplinary approach; the commencement of data collection on families affected by imprisonment and departmental support within AEVTI offers scope for programs to be negotiated with their adult learner participants. Other reports and enquiries provide a framework for planning such as the documentation of the devastation of family break-up in the Stolen Generation report and the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody which also address the importance of family. 'Not Counting the Two in Queensland' sets a case for gaol education programs to include a family-focus in their planning. The complexity of needs of inmates and their families signals the necessity for establishment of family-oriented programs with integration from welfare, parole, alcohol and other drugs workers, psychologists, chaplaincy and education.

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