The Ripple Effects of Imprisonment on Prisoners' Families

Jessica Breen

Introduction

To many in our society, the impact of imprisonment on prisoners and their families is a matter of little or no importance. In the face of everyday issues such as meeting financial demands, finding a balance between work and family commitments, and obtaining access to services in an inadequate health care system, the needs of prisoners and their families is not an issue of concern for many members of the public.

Furthermore, in a political climate where to be perceived as being 'soft on crime' can cost crucial votes, advocating on behalf of the rights of prisoners is not a wise career move for any politician seeking office. After all, prisoners have broken the law and presumably 'gotten what they deserve'. This notion is at the heart of the overly simplistic yet frequently used adage, 'if you do the crime, you do the time'. This one-dimensional retributive attitude towards punishment neither critically questions why we punish as we do nor takes into account the wider effects of imprisonment.

Since the abolition of capital punishment, the deprivation of an individual's liberty through imprisonment is the most severe state sanction available in Ireland. Despite this, imprisonment is used substantially more often than non-custodial penalties.[1] Yet even the most cursory of examinations into the effects of imprisonment reveals a host of negative consequences for both those incarcerated and the loved ones they leave behind on the outside.

The Secondary Effects of Imprisonment

The bedrock of all Catholic social teaching is the protection of the dignity of human life. This principle is based on the belief that all persons are created in the image of God and thus are deserving of 'care and attention that belong to beings of inestimable worth'.[2] However, as research and first-hand testimonies show, imprisonment frequently has a negative and demoralising impact on both the individuals incarcerated and their families. For example, in their Annual Report 2006/2007, the Irish Prison

Chaplains observed that:

[F]or every individual who is incarcerated there is a circle of people directly affected by their imprisonment. Children grow up with one parent absent from their lives. Mothers are often left to rear these children with constant financial struggles. Their lives are often chaotic as they attempt to support their partner in prison and at the same time manage the family home. Children suffer greatly with the loss of a parent from their lives. This suffering is further exacerbated by a visiting routine that is far from family-friendly ... The prison regime, itself ... does nothing to support the family unit that is shattered by the imprisonment of one of its members. The isolation that is experienced gives rise to high levels of distress for all concerned.[3]

The negative effects of incarceration on prisoners and their families cited in the Prison Chaplains' Report are commonly referred to as the 'secondary' or 'collateral' consequences of imprisonment. These secondary effects include high financial, emotional and social costs which prisoners' family members are often forced to pay. Such costs have been termed 'invisible punishment',[4] as they often leave prisoners' families feeling as if they have been penalised for crimes they have not committed. In fact, when family members have been given the chance to talk about their experience they often describe it in terms of 'doing time' with the inmate or serving parallel sentences of 'imprisonment on the outside'.[5] Such unintended punishment of prisoners' families has led to their being described as the hidden or forgotten victims of crime.[6]

The Multiple Effects on Families

Deepening Disadvantage
The families from which prisoners come are very often among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society and the imprisonment of a family member frequently serves to further entrench their disadvantage.

Although there are complex linkages between poverty, imprisonment and diversity of family

form, research has generally found that imprisonment has a negative economic impact on families.[7] A study published in 1965, one of the first to be carried out on the impact of imprisonment on male prisoners' families in England, found that following the imprisonment of their husbands, slightly more than 60 per cent of prisoners' wives experienced a worsening of their financial situation.[8] In a US study published in 2004, Donald Braman found that the annual financial cost for a family of having a family member in prison was $12,680.[9] Despite the different social policy contexts in the US and the UK, a study on poverty and disadvantage amongst prisoners' families in England, published in 2007, revealed a similar level of economic cost arising from imprisonment. It found that families were often forced to depend upon welfare benefits and that the loss of a prisoner's or partner's earnings 'averaged £6,204 over a six-month period … the average personal cost to the family and relatives was estimated at £1,050 over a six-month period'.[10]

Dependence on extended family members for help with the problems arising from imprisonment often results in strained relationships and eventually isolation of prisoners' families. This is because remaining caregivers, most often wives or female partners, are either forced to leave employment to care for children or to take on additional work hours and so burden other family members (such as grandmothers) with childcare responsibilities.[11]

Women Bearing the Brunt
Research on the collateral effects of imprisonment has consistently shown that it is urban women living in poverty who bear the heaviest burdens of a punishment that is supposedly directed at offenders. In addition to the challenges of living in communities often characterised by high levels of unemployment, these women are faced with a number of personal and financial stresses caused both directly and indirectly by imprisonment. They must find ways to cope with losing not only an intimate partner but the person who may have been the household's main breadwinner. And so they are confronted not only by the responsibilities of handling all the family decisions by themselves but by the task of finding a way to support the family financially.

In many instances, the ability of such women to cope with the imprisonment of a loved one is tied strongly to their roles as carers. As in many other areas of social policy, the 'duty of care' for tasks such as maintaining contact between male prisoners and their children, providing emotional and financial support, and providing housing upon release almost always falls upon women.[12] This work of caring for both prisoners and their children is often not only not valued but results in women becoming deeply enmeshed in social service agencies whilst taking on the role of 'powerless negotiator'.[13] These stresses are made all the more difficult because of a constant tacit assumption that something is wrong with them. Judith Brink, a former prisoner's wife and prison chaplain, has argued: 'Most people look at a woman who cares for a prisoner as somehow defective, if not in character then in self-esteem'.[14]

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Stigma
The financial difficulties and social isolation of prisoners' families are made worse by the stigma that attaches to having a family member in prison. The stigma attached to imprisonment and prisoners' families is persistent and '[t]here appears to be a demoralization connected with imprisonment which is not to be found in other forms of involuntary separation other than, perhaps, desertion. Imprisonment carries with it a stigma that is difficult for families to eradicate'.[15] Helen Codd has pointed out that while children may at times be viewed as 'innocent' and thus in need, 'partners become stigmatised [to a greater degree] by their relationship with the inmate.'[16]

Impact on Children
The negative effects of parental imprisonment have been found to be one of the most consistent threats to the life chances of children.[17] An analysis of longitudinal data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD) found that separation due to parental imprisonment during the first ten years of life predicted all antisocial and delinquent outcomes for boys over and above similar types of separation or other individual risk factors.[18]

Parental stigmatisation has been identified as one of the ways in which prisoners' children are socially excluded and can lead to children taking on a deviant self-identification. The increased likelihood that children of prisoners will themselves experience incarceration has led one writer to argue that: 'As evidence of intergenerational crime and incarceration continues to mount, every criminal justice and corrections policy affecting children of offenders should be scrutinised for its long-term implications'.[19]

Prisoners' Families in Ireland

In Ireland we know precious little about the ripple effects of imprisonment on prisoners' families. It is even difficult to know how many families are affected by imprisonment.[20]

What we do know is that the majority of Irish prisoners are young, male and come from Dublin. In 1996, Paul O'Mahony surveyed a random sample of male prisoners at Mountjoy Prison (around 20 per cent of the then current population in Mountjoy). In general, the prisoners surveyed in this study were highly socially disadvantaged and their lives were characterised by instability. Almost a third of the prisoners came from families disrupted by desertion or separation on the part of parents.

Exposure to – and to some extent normalisation of – imprisonment in family life was evident in the fact that 15 per cent of the prisoners had a father who had been in prison and 44 per cent had a sibling who had been in prison. A high degree of disorganisation was found also in the relationships that prisoners formed when they entered adulthood: while three quarters of the prisoners had fathered at least one child, 60 per cent of these fathers played no active role in their families or in relationships with their children. [21]

Although this descriptive information gives us insight into the often strained and chaotic backgrounds of Irish prisoners, it tells us little about the ways that imprisonment itself impacts on families and relates to family life.

Families of Political Prisoners
The small number of studies that have been carried out on the secondary effects of imprisonment have tended to focus on Irish political prisoners and their families. These typically portray the family ties of Irish political

prisoners as being stronger than those of non-political or 'ordinary' prisoners.[22] However, the studies also show imprisonment imposing multiple burdens on prisoners' family members, although there is some disagreement regarding the extent to which political ideology shapes the experience of having a family member imprisoned.

Carol Coulter has described political prisoners' families as being entrapped in a 'web of punishment'. Through in-depth interviews she learned about the practical difficulties associated with incarceration such as financing care packages and family visits to family members in English prisons, as well as the high emotional toll this took on both the prisoners and their family members. She concluded, however, that despite similarities, such as financial hardship and strain on maintaining relationships, the experiences of political prisoners and their families are qualitatively different from those of non-political prisoners.[23]

Families of Non-Political Prisoners
Very little research has been devoted to examining the impact of imprisonment on the families of non-political prisoners in the Republic of Ireland: One such study was undertaken by the Centre for Social and Educational Research at Dublin Institute of Technology. The research was carried out at the visitors' centre at Mountjoy Prison and it documented some of the negative effects that parental imprisonment has on children in Ireland. The researchers found that, as in the US and UK, extended families were the main source of support for primary care givers of prisoners' children. Respondents reported challenges relating to single parenting, financial hardship, difficulties with visiting, and stigma.[24]

In 2007, the Bedford Row Family Project, an organisation established in 1999 to respond to the needs of families affected by imprisonment in Limerick, published a report entitled, *Voices of Families Affected by Imprisonment*.[25] The report documents the findings of semi-structured interviews – forty-one with family members of prisoners, and eleven with ex-prisoners – and provides an insight into the everyday impact of imprisonment on families in the mid-western region of Ireland.

The study's findings echoed those of the research carried out at the Mountjoy visitors' centre, but several new themes also emerged, including the difficulty of arranging visits over long distances

and fear and intimidation caused by feuding gangs or families. Family members also expressed concerns about the lack of after-care for prisoners and the burden this creates for families who are often left with the responsibility of trying to reintegrate prisoners back into both families and communities.

One recommendation of the report was the implementation of Positive Sentence Management, which involves creating a customised plan for addressing needs such as treatment for drug addiction, education and vocational training and family support both while the individual is incarcerated and after release. These dimensions to Positive Sentence Management could help to support and maximise the social capital found in prisoners' relationships with their families, thereby assisting them with both the desistence and reintegration processes.[26]

Recognising the Needs of Families
The conspicuous lack of knowledge about the collateral effects of imprisonment in Ireland exists despite the fact that prisoners and their families have been identified as a highly vulnerable and marginalised group by a variety of both state and voluntary organisations. For instance, in a policy submission to the National Crime Council, the Combat Poverty Agency highlighted the social exclusion of prisoners' families and stated that they 'pay a high cost, through a loss in income, disruption of marital and child-parent relationships, and isolation from friends and neighbours'.[27] The submission pointed out that social exclusion leads to a range of negative consequences such as unequal educational and occupational opportunities, thus creating a 'self-reproducing process of unequal opportunity'. The Government's National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016 recognised prisoners as a group experiencing social exclusion and requiring support and training to increase their potential for labour market participation.[28]

Limited Support for Families
Despite the evidence of some official recognition of the problems faced by prisoners' families, organised state response to their needs has been very limited.

In response to a recommendation in the 1972 report of the Commission on the Status of Women, the Government in 1974 introduced the Prisoner's Wife's Allowance to provide a means-tested social welfare payment for the wives of prisoners and

Visitors waiting outside the Dóchas Centre   © D. Speirs

their children. To be eligible for the payment, spouses had to be under 66 years of age. In 1997, applications for the Prisoner's Wife's Allowance were closed: existing recipients with no dependent children continued to receive the payment and those with children were transferred onto the then new One-Parent Family Payment. Spouses of prisoners (but not unmarried partners) who satisfy the qualifying conditions, including a means test, are entitled to receive the One Parent Family Payment if their husband (or wife) has been sentenced to a prison term of at least six months, or has been in custody for at least six months without being sentenced.[29]

Other than this financial support, however, there have not been specific state initiatives to respond to the particular problems that confront families of prisoners. For example, families are generally not included in sentence management in the same way that families are involved when a family member is placed on probation. It is left up to a handful of dedicated organisations such as the Irish Prisoners' Family InfoLine, The Bedford Row Project in Limerick, PACE, and several visitors' centres around the country to provide the bulk of services for prisoners' families, often in the face of strained budgets and a feeling that their work is under-appreciated.

Roy Light cites two main reasons for providing support for prisoners' families. First, from a liberal humanist perspective, it may be argued that civilised societies have an obligation to care for those who are suffering. Second, from a utilitarian standpoint, it is generally recognised in the criminological literature that prisoners with stronger ties to family members or significant others fare better both inside and outside prison.

Frequent and high quality prison visitation serves to minimise loneliness and other 'pains of imprisonment' for prisoners, playing an important role in the maintenance of order within the prison. Furthermore, prisoners' families can play a crucial role in rehabilitation efforts, increasing the odds that a prisoner will not return to prison when he or she is eventually released.[30] From the perspective of Catholic social teaching, providing care for prisoners' families to help them lead lives of dignity goes to the core of what it means to be on the side of the vulnerable.

Prison Expansion

As already noted, we do not have detailed information on how many people suffer as a consequence of the imprisonment of a family member. Whatever the exact number, it is certain that it will increase over the coming years given the stated intention of the Irish Government to expand the Irish prison population by providing '800 additional new places'.[31] In the debate about the proposed new super-prison in Thornton Hall, which will be the chief means by which this expansion of prison places will be effected, the reality that so many more families will experience the financial, social and psychological costs arising from the imprisonment of a family member has been largely ignored.

At a practical level, prisoners' families have yet to be consulted about the planning and construction of the new prison. While the prison may bring some relief to family members who fear for the lives of loved ones incarcerated in unfit institutions such as Mountjoy, the added burden of financing and planning visits to a location in north County Dublin may mean that prisoners will receive fewer visits and families struggling to stay together will face an even tougher battle. At the very least, proper consideration needs to be given in the construction of Thornton Hall to providing adequate visitors' centres and play areas for children as well as planning efficient and affordable public transport. Such measures are the minimum needed to help support prisoners' families and minimise the burdens of imprisonment on those left on the outside.

Conclusion

Article 41.1.1˚ of the Irish Constitution recognises the family as 'the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law'. The Constitution guarantees the protection of the family by the State.

Imprisonment has been shown to be a significant precipitating factor in both marital and family breakdown. Accordingly, it can be argued that the extent of Irish society's use of imprisonment and the current policy of prison expansionism are in direct contradiction of the stated intentions of the Constitution to protect the family unit.

'I was in prison and you came to see me' (Matthew 25:36). These words remind us of the importance of maintaining the linkages between prisoners and the outside world. While volunteer programmes provide important prison visitation services, it is for the most part prisoners' family members who are faced with the task of sustaining key relationships and acting as a link to the world outside the prison. In fact, the bulk of evidence indicates that imprisonment more often than not serves to further damage already strained and 'at-risk' families.

Women are most often the hardest hit by imprisonment of a loved one and children of prisoners experience diminished life chances and an increased likelihood that they will become a prisoner at some point during their own lifetime. Imprisonment can drain families financially, contributing to an intergenerational cycle of poverty and crime (and imprisonment). Furthermore, imprisonment increases feelings of stigmatisation and alienation between those social groups and geographic areas characterised by high levels of crime and the rest of society.

Without a doubt, crime and our response to it are serious and often highly emotive topics. Many people are directly and indirectly affected by crime each year, the worst crimes plunging entire families into devastating loss. However, as a society we are in control of our response to crime and the way in which we punish. If the evidence shows that the very responses to crime we have been conditioned to accept as natural may in fact contribute to the perpetuation of crime, perhaps it is time that we took a closer look at the way we sanction offenders and reconsider the role which non-custodial penalties can play. In the process, the conception of prisoners as people unattached to anyone or anything can be replaced by a realisation that there are far-reaching ripple effects when a person is sent to prison. More often than not, innocent and overburdened family members suffer for the crimes of their loved ones.

Notes

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3. Irish Prison Chaplains, *Annual Report 2006/07,* Dublin, 2007, p. 8. (Available www.jcfj.ie)

4. Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind (eds.), *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*, New York: The New Press, 2002.

5. Laura T. Fishman, *Women at the Wall: A Study of Prisoners' Wives Doing Time on the Outside*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990; Donald Braman, *Doing Time on the Outside: Incarceration and Family Life in Urban America*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

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7. John Hagan and Ronit Dinovitzer, 'Collateral Consequences of Imprisonment for Children, Communities, and Prisoners', *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, 26, 1999, pp. 121–162.

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9. Donald Braman, *op. cit.*

10. Rose Smith, Roger Grimshaw, Renee Romeo and Martin Knapp, *Poverty and Disadvantage among Prisoners' Families*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007, p. 70.

11. Joyce A. Arditti, 'Locked Doors and Glass Walls: Family Visiting at a Local Jail', *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 2003, 8, pp. 115–138.

12. Helen Codd, 'Prisoners' Families: The "Forgotten Victims"', *Probation Journal*, 45, 1998, pp. 148–153.

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14. Judith Brink, 'You Don't See Us Doin' Time', *Contemporary Justice Review*, 6, 2003, pp. 393–396.

15. J. E. Blackwell, *The Effects of Involuntary Separation on Selected Families of Men Committed to Prison from Spokane County, Washington*, Unpublished Thesis, State College of Washington, 1959, p. 22.

16. Helen Codd, *op. cit*, p. 152.

17. John Hagan and Ronit Dinovitzer, *op. cit*.

18. Joseph Murray and David Farrington, 'Parental Imprisonment: Effects on Boys' Antisocial Behaviour and Delinquency through the Life-course', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 46, 2005, pp. 1269–1278.

19. Denise Johnston, 'Effects of Parental Incarceration' in Katherine Gabel and Denise Johnston (eds.), *Children of Incarcerated Parents*, New York: Lexington Books, 1995, p. 14.

20. A relatively new dimension to this issue for Ireland is the impact on family members of the imprisonment of non-nationals under the requirements of immigration legislation. A significant number of people are now detained each year on such grounds. The Irish Prison Service *Annual Report 2006* records that there was a rise in the number of persons detained on immigration-related issues from 860 in 2005 to 1,196 in 2006 – an increase of 29 per cent (Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2006*, Longford: Irish Prison Services, 2007, p. 15).

21. Paul O'Mahony, 'Punishing Poverty and Personal Adversity' in Paul O'Mahony (ed.) C*riminal Justice in Ireland*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2002.

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Jessica Breen is a PhD Candidate in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin; her doctoral research is an investigation into the effects of imprisonment on families in Ireland.