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PRESS RELEASE

DATE: Tuesday 31st March

TOPIC: 25 years on. The 'Strangeways Riots': From the other side of the wall.

Wednesday April 1st marks the 25th anniversary of the disturbances at HMP Manchester which became known as the 'Strangeways riots'. The rooftop protest catapulted the living conditions of prisoners into the media spotlight. As well as marking a turning point in the treatment of prisoners the events of that day brought to the fore an awareness of the issues facing offenders' families.

The prevailing attitude towards prisoner's families at the time assumed 'guilt by association' and ignored the potential contributory role of families to positive outcomes. The recommendations arising from the subsequent Woolfe Enquiry, to which POPS contributed, assisted POPS in addressing issues of decency and inclusion.

25 years on visiting a prisoner is a much more humane, decent process. The role of the Visitor Centre came about as a response to the way families were treated at the time of the riots. We have crèche areas, play workers, refreshment areas, family days: all an improvement on the experience of visiting at the time of the riots. The Children and Families pathway was established under the Reducing Re-offending Action Plan.

However current public spending cuts threaten this progress. Lord Woolf has further underlined the present challenges in his recent comments on the anniversary;

"For a time after the riot things were much better and numbers were going down, [but] unfortunately prisoners are again being kept in conditions that we should not tolerate, they're a long way from home and their families can't keep in touch with them."

POPS doesn't condone the riots but recognises the impact of that action on penal reform. The riot at HMP Manchester was a catalyst for change. It is unfortunate that it took a negative situation to prompt an acknowledgment of the notion of decency and how to treat people. The Woolf report brought us to where we are today 25 years on but we need to keep listening to the people who are affected by imprisonment in order to avoid another riot situation.

"Conditions were horrific; three men to a one man room and one bucket as a toilet emptied once a day with 23 hour lock downs. You can't expect people to live like that and for them not to eventually rise up. Visits weren't very often due to staff shortages...so we relied on letters to keep in touch with family, letters we didn't always receive".

Former Prisoner serving time at HMP Manchester at the time of the riots

We must continue to offer support to families, especially at time of cuts in prison based services, recognising their specific needs, mitigating the impact of the criminal justice system and acknowledging families as our greatest asset in assisting the rehabilitation of prisoners.

Editors notes:

For further information or, to request an interview please contact:

E: lynnk@partnersofprisoners.co.uk

T: 0161 702 1000

Additional Information

POPS (Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group) had been established two years prior to the Strangeways riots by prisoners' families. Reflecting on that day one family member recalls the shocking images that confronted her:

'Several prisoners were on one of the very high rooftops of the prison shouting protests of inhumane conditions and negative treatment by prison staff.

'I found myself surrounded by very distressed family members who were upset and concerned for the safety of a loved one as the prison had lost control. The families were on the streets outside the prison as emergency services had taken over the visitors centre for negotiations. The city had come to a standstill and was waiting to see what happened next.

'Whilst standing outside the prison watching the scene unfold I was struck by the lack of information and support that the families were receiving. Many families were calling to the prisoners to end the protest and could have been a good tool in the negotiations but they were ignored and not utilized.'

*If you are a family member supporting a relative within the Criminal Justice System and you require information or support you can contact the **National Offenders' Families Helpline** for free and in confidence on **0808 808 2003** or by email on [**info@offendersfamilieshelpline.org**](mailto:info@offendersfamilieshelpline.org)*

*If you are a professional supporting a child of an offender and require information or advice contact the **i-HOP** helpdesk delivered by POPS in partnership with Barnardo's on **0808 802 2013** or visit the online information hub [**www.i-hop.org.uk**](http://www.i-hop.org.uk).*