



Get It Off Your Chest

Families of prisoners share the impact of lockdown and the resulting restrictions.

Collated by Rebecca Cheung



facebook.com/popsfsg



www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk



twitter.com/POPSFamilies

Get It Off Your Chest

Families of prisoners share the impact of lockdown and the resulting restrictions

'We still believe in justice. But it's wrong to call this justice. They want people to change, based on no consistency, clarity or communication.'

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused world-wide loss of life, severe social disruption and economic instability. The general public in the UK have relied on government communications to understand the emerging situation and the guidelines and legal restrictions that currently govern our lives. Whilst the crisis has spared no-one, the public discourse has persistently excluded some groups, providing little to no hope for individuals and families who felt they have been left in limbo. Too often ostracised, prisoners' families have felt completely overlooked, symptomatic of society's lack of concern, or worse, active antipathy as to their wellbeing.

For families of prisoners, the impact of the coronavirus has gone far beyond multi-week lockdowns. The limited choices around social contact that society has faced have extended for over a year, as social visits to prisons ceased in March 2020 and secure video calls were implemented in a staged manner. As society opened up again and 'cautious hugging' became part of the public roadmap, prisoners and their families hopes of being reunited in some meaningful fashion, have been repeatedly dashed with no mention of prisons in the Government daily briefings and limited information available online¹. POPS acknowledges that throughout COVID 19 restrictions, HMPPS hosted regular meetings and shared communications with national Family Service Providers in order to ensure they could continue to support families throughout the duration of restrictions. These meetings also covered a wider range of other matters, including suggestions for improved wider communication with prisoners' families and friends. Despite these efforts, communication still emerged as a key area of frustration for families.

Visits were given the go ahead to resume in August 2020 but with social distancing measures strictly in place. Sadly, subsequent restrictions have meant that face-to-face visits for most families - mask-muffled conversations taking place across 2 metre gaps - have only been possible since April 2021. For many families, the agony of such limited contact after such a lengthy period of time, has been worse than no contact at all.

Peer support underpins the work of POPS. Established in 1988 by families supporting their loved one in custody, our work grew from acknowledging and supporting families to addressing their presenting needs. In early 2021, POPS was approached by a family member who had attended an online family forum run by POPS at a local prison. They were keen that after such a difficult year, the opportunity to access peer support and for issues to be aired and responded to, should be made more widely available. In response POPS worked with interested family members to put together the 'Get It Off Your Chest' campaign, which launched in May 2021. The objective was to give families the opportunity to share their experience of lockdown, to access peer support and to inform this report.

The aim of this report is to provide a platform for families to express the difficulties and challenges they have faced as well as the anecdotes, moments of hope and the support that has helped family members survive 2020-21. Our hope is that the report will help families feel heard. But in order for their voice to be amplified, agencies involved in the criminal justice system and beyond must consider the role they could have in bringing about constructive and rapid change so that families of prisoners can feel like an equal voice around society's table.

REBECCA CHEUNG

On behalf of the families behind 'Get It Off your Chest'

POPS' Communications and Training Coordinator

¹ An overarching framework for prisons was published in June 2020 [COVID-19: National Framework for Prison Regimes and Services - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-framework-for-prison-regimes-and-services)

Contents

- Introduction // 2
- Process // 3
- Acknowledgements // 3
- Key themes // 4
 - ∞ Visits // 4
 - ∞ Secure video visits // 5
 - ∞ Communication // 5
 - ∞ Health // 6
 - ∞ Children // 7
 - ∞ Financial // 8
 - ∞ Release // 8
 - ∞ Judicial process // 10
 - ∞ Other themes // 10
- Summary // 11
- What next? // 12
 - ∞ Actions Arising
 - ∞ What can you do?

Process

The ‘Get It Off Your Chest’ campaign was devised in conversation with family members who wanted to shine a light on the injustices that have emerged throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. At the heart of the campaign was a desire for families of prisoners to be able to share their thoughts, hopes and concerns in a safe and supportive environment. This report was conceived as part of the process but its content has been driven entirely by the families who contributed to the campaign.

We provided various methods by which families could engage with the process and share their experiences, recognising the fears families often carry about being identified and disadvantaged. These included an anonymous questionnaire, email submissions, voice notes and three Zoom conversations facilitated by POPS’ team members. Promotion of the campaign via POPS’ social media channels meant that the process was open to participants across the UK. 26 individuals submitted responses or took part in face-to-face discussions.

The Zoom discussions were loosely structured around three themes emerging from initial conversations with family members. The themes were Lockdown, Health and Release. Family members were given the option to join the online

conversations with their cameras off and to change their screen name should they so wish. All of these measures were considered to promote the comfort and engagement of participants. The facilitator of the session also encouraged family members who wanted to contribute via the chat function to do so throughout the discussion. Participants were encouraged to avoid specific references to individuals, prisons or locations to further preserve their anonymity.

A designated note-taker recorded the discussions in written form. No visual-audio recordings were taken of the sessions based on feedback from families prior to the sessions taking place.

In explaining our methodology, we hope to promote further understanding of the impact of stigma on families of prisoners and the importance of providing safe spaces for them to be heard.

Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks to all the family members who contributed to this report. Your courage and strength through the turmoil of recent years is immeasurable. These are your words.

KEY THEMES

Visits

'We have not had a visit since [the] beginning of February 2020 this has put undue strain on our relationship and has definitely caused us to grow apart and made it almost impossible for us to support each other through this tough time.'

When the UK was put into lockdown in March 2020, prisoners' families, like so many, were disconnected from meaningful contact with their loved ones. Practically speaking, this involved the immediate cessation of face-to-face 'social' visits. As Zoom calls and doorstep visits began to take off in communities, as a means to maintain all-important social contact, prisoners' families were suddenly limited to prisoner-initiated phone calls² at unpredictable times and written correspondence.

Families of prisoners have faced the same daily challenges as everyone else during the course of the pandemic but with the added frustration and pain of being separated from their loved ones for over 12 months. As lockdown has eased and the general public have enjoyed the freedom to reunite with loved ones, prisoners' families have remained in limbo with the resumption of social visits delayed seemingly indefinitely. Visits have only been possible in prisons who had achieved stage 3 status in line with the National Framework for Prisons³. Whilst this meant some families were able to visit in August 2020, many were not able to have contact until April 2021, with strict social distancing measures in place, preventing any physical contact. This had been one of the main threads of discussion throughout the 'Get It Off Your Chest' campaign. Families have repeatedly expressed their agony at being kept separate from their loved ones. The reluctance to reinstate social visits, or ease social distancing measures, has been justified due to prisons being classed as 'high risk' environments. Yet families noted that care homes with the same classification have seen visits reinstated with

physical contact, such as hand-holding and hugging, allowed (supported by hand-washing protocols and other guidance). Families have expressed their frustration at the lack of clarity and consistency in the decision-making process sat a local level and the perceived motivation behind some decisions relating to prisons *'(If) the issue is that they are high risk environments, they should have been vaccinated first. But (that) doesn't make good headlines! Can you imagine if the whole prison population got vaccinated at the same time as care homes? They haven't done what they should have done and now we're paying the price.'*

Acknowledging that not all prisoners, or their families, will want to take up the vaccine, family members also shared their thoughts on testing. Families have repeatedly stressed to us their willingness to get tested prior to, and following, a social visit if it means that they can then have physical contact with their loved ones *'I would have a test the day before, on the day and the day after if I could have a visit and a hug. Prison has the best track and trace available ever. They know you haven't lied about any of your data.'* Initial pilot schemes designed to enable this involved two tests prior to entry and mask-wearing as mandatory but maintained the requirement to socially distance. It is perhaps unsurprising that with a lack of incentive, i.e. no physical contact, some families were hesitant to take part. Subsequent pilots have included limited physical contact (following a negative test) with the results under consideration. As this report was being finalised it was announced that the Scottish Prison Service would allow physical contact for all visitors at the start and end of visits, with physical contact allowed throughout for the under 5's. The requirement to wear masks has also been revised to enable families, once seated, to remove them to facilitate conversation. HMPPS also announced a resumption on physical contact for all children under 11 in English and Welsh prisons but the disparity in policy has caused exasperation and disbelief amongst families based in England and Wales.

Frustrations were expressed about elements of planning that have contributed to the delays in

² Additional PIN credits were issued to every prisoner to enhance phone contact.

³https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/889689/prisons-national-framework.pdf

visits resuming. Whilst improvements to prison environments are welcome, one family member noted *'they haven't started visits [at the prison] because they've been revamping the [visits] hall. Contractors have put a delay in. They've known that it's [the end of lockdown] been coming and they've chosen to do it right at the end.'*

Secure Video Calls

Secure Video Calls, also known until recently as Purple Visits, were instigated as a measure to ensure families were able to retain some form of face-to-face contact with their loved ones during the pandemic. The service is currently free-of-charge to families and prisoners. It is not yet known when charges will be introduced and what those charges might be.

Secure Video Calls were rolled out to prisons across England and Wales in tranches from May 2020. Whilst recognising the technical challenges such a roll out involves, families were understandably frustrated at the pace of delivery. The Ministry of Justice announced on the 18th January 2021⁴, 10 months after lockdown began, that secure video calls were now available at all public and private prisons.

Feedback concerning the video calls from the 'Get It Off Your Chest' forums has been mixed. Families have been grateful to have sight of their loved ones but have struggled with technical issues and the short duration of the call *'It has a place – if you're poorly or elderly, it's amazing. But 30 minutes, you blink your eyes and its gone.'* Families with small children, in particular, noted challenges relating to the technology and how it responds to movement, *'the purple visits are rubbish because a small child can't keep still and the picture goes off.'* Sometimes the difficulties in accessing a visit and the lack of contact have proven counterproductive *'Purple visits have been horrendous, the children have got so stressed, crying....it actually caused more upset in our house.'*

Other families reflected on the benefits of the system and its potential uses in connecting family members in prison to important family events *'I have a friend who said it was the best thing for her. It meant the boys [in prison] could attend [virtually] the funeral of their grandfather.'*

Purple Visits' (the current provider of secure video visits) terms & conditions give individual prisons the autonomy to decide on the length of the video visit⁵ with most opting for a 30-minute duration. However, with video calls limited to one call per month up until December 2020 this has meant that most (convicted) prisoners have not received their normal visits entitlement of at least two 1-hour visits every four weeks during this time period, a frustration reflected by families, *'Video calls have helped but wish they had more and they were longer.'*

Communication

Like many, families of prisoners looked to the daily government briefings, published documentation (including latterly the 'roadmap') and news reports for information that would assist them in understanding the government's approach to their particular situation and specifically how face-to-face contact with their imprisoned loved ones was to be re-established (and when), *'We are missing from the media. I wait on the edge of my seat waiting for the announcement, saying something about us, and have become more and more frustrated and angry.'*

The lack of effective communication has been a source of constant frustration for families *'I don't feel part of society. Human Rights? They clearly don't apply to us. Prisons don't even speak to us. Someone should be talking to us.'* As has been the inconsistency of approaches across prisons as restrictions have begun to ease. Some prisons have been quick to share information even if it is not to the families' advantage. Others have maintained an unhelpful silence. Families attending POPS' 'Get It Off Your Chest' events have repeatedly called for clearer, more frequent communications from HMPPS and individual prisons so that they might

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/secure-video-calls-help-all-prisoners-maintain-essential-family-ties-during-pandemic>

⁵ <https://www.purplevisits.com/terms-and-conditions/>

better understand the decisions being taken that so materially impact them and their loved ones.

A common theme that came up in our discussions with families related to data protection. Families who make general enquiries either to the prison, or the prison ombudsman, have been asked to provide personal details (and information relating to the prisoner they support). Whilst the enquiries submitted have been sufficiently broad not to warrant such information, families state that answers have been refused based on the family member's reluctance to share information which they feel could disadvantage their loved one in some way. There is little trust that the justice system will protect their data, or their loved one. Even enquiries which relate solely to the family member have prompted questions concerning the imprisoned relative, an approach which immediately shuts down communication and increases the vulnerability of prisoners' families *'there's no empathy at all levels. My partner was imprisoned during lockdown, it's all I've ever known. I've sobbed my heart out, no-one is listening.'*

Health

Discussing the topic of health with families who attended the 'Get It Off Your Chest' events prompted a diverse discussion. For families themselves the repeating theme was one of increased anxiety and paranoia *'paranoia exists anyway for prisoners' families – it's too much to cope with on top of covid.'* The impact of increased and sustained anxiety has predictably had a detrimental impact on individuals' physical wellbeing *'I am anxious and stressed all the time and constantly find myself on the verge of tears. Sleep is non-existent due to my high stress levels.'*

Families also reported feeling isolated as a result of having no contact with their imprisoned relatives due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions *'I have done most of my pregnancy alone and covid restrictions then made it 10 times worse.'* This isolation has been experienced by family members of all ages *'my granddaughter can't cope with what's going on in her mind'.*

Despite some individuals being pro-active in seeking help families shared that they struggled to find services that understood their specific circumstances. One family member was looking for a counsellor who specialised in the needs of prisoners' families *'[our] situation causes anxiety. [I have] panic attacks about the process...fear of not having the visits'* but was unable to find an appropriate individual with this particular area of expertise. These health concerns are further compounded by fear families hold concerning the potential repercussions should they challenge the system.

Families also carried concerns, similar to those held by the relatives of loved ones in other 'closed' environments, namely care homes, that their loved ones were not receiving appropriate care, *'mental health issues are sweeping through prisons much faster than any Covid virus. In many prisons the officers are very young, and unable to cope with it.'* Pre-existing and emerging mental health concerns will inevitably have been exacerbated by 23 hours lock-down *'My partner's prison has had as many suicides as Covid deaths. My partner said he didn't suspect they were people who would do that...and there have been numerous others who've had failed attempts.'* Families also expressed concerns, based on reports from prisoners, that a return to a pre-Covid 'normal' regime would be unlikely due to apparent reductions in violence *'What benefit is there to being on an enhanced wing? They don't have an outbreak, they're all in cohorts, but now being banged up most of the day.'*

Prisoners' physical wellbeing similarly has been affected by long periods of time in cells, *'[he has] no in cell sanitation, [and now has] bladder issues caused by not getting to the toilet.'* Families reported that the assistance on offer has often fallen short of what might be expected *'It took 8 months for my partner to be able to speak to healthcare (during covid)...he said he was struggling and they gave him a stress ball!'*

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons notes *"the prevalence of mental health problems among the prison population before the pandemic was well-*

documented. The effect of covid-19 restrictions on this population had (sic) therefore been significant”⁶.

Of particular concern to families was the government’s refusal to declare prison staff ‘key workers’, and prisoners as a vulnerable population, excluding them from priority access to vaccinations⁷. Residents and staff in care homes were prioritised but prison staff and prisoners themselves were not, despite calls from contributors to the BMJ who noted, ‘our recent analysis of HMPPS data suggests that people in prisons in England and Wales are three times more likely to die from covid-19 than people in the general population, after accounting for age and sex differences...This higher mortality rate is despite the very stringent infection prevention and control measures that have been deployed by the prison service throughout the pandemic.’⁸

The writers went on to stress that ‘prison officers also hold a role similar to that of social care staff, with many having contact with clinically vulnerable prisoners under the care of their institution...Prisoners are held in settings determined and delivered by the Government, who hold a duty of care for their residents. By failing to offer strategies to enable prisons to lift lockdown restrictions at a similar pace to the lifting of restrictions in the community, including widespread vaccination, prisoners are, in effect, being served a second punishment in addition to the deprivation of liberty.’

Families have carried the worry and concern of this policy, being quick to note that ‘it doesn’t make sense that the prison officers can go home, hug their family and come back in.’ Since visits have resumed families have also noted that pat down searches of visiting families have been allowed but contact between family members and their imprisoned loved one remains prohibited ‘I think it’s great they

have all that [security] but should they have been patting us down? In a Covid situation I wasn’t safeguarded.’ These disparities are a source of great frustration for family members unable to visit or have physical contact with their loved ones and concerned for their wellbeing ‘I worried about his general health as he was in cell with a person who had the virus and was very ill with it, plus [a] prisoner and prison officer died with virus.’ The suggestion was made by family members that just as vaccinations will become mandatory for Care Quality Commission-registered care home in England from October, this should also apply to prison staff.

The internal management of Covid-19 within prisons, which by their nature limit social distancing, was also critiqued ‘[His] cell mate caught the covid virus but my son wasn’t moved and remained in same cell to look after his cell mate.’

Children

The impact of parental imprisonment on children has been further exacerbated by the current restrictions. It should be noted that for some children, the cessation of contact with an imprisoned parent may be their choice or in their best interests. However, the families POPS spoke to in order to inform this report, overwhelmingly spoke of the negative impact lockdown restrictions have had on their children and their relationship with their imprisoned parent ‘I have had our daughter whilst my partner has been in prison, she is three months old now and only just seen him two weeks ago. He was unable to hold her and this has caused him so much heartache and distress. He wants to cuddle her more than anything and get a connection with her. It’s heart-breaking...’

The current crisis and resulting restrictions have had particular repercussions for young children, who have struggled to form a meaningful attachment to their imprisoned parent ‘[Our] youngest only just being 2 years old she has not seen her daddy since she was 9 months old and has absolutely no bond with him due to this...the impact this is having on their relationship is horrific and I honestly don’t

⁶ <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/02/What-happens-to-prisoners-in-a-pandemic.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-the-health-and-social-care-secretary-on-covid-19-vaccination-phase-1-advice/letter-from-the-jcvi-to-the-health-and-social-care-secretary-on-further-considerations-on-phase-1-advice-1-march-2021>

⁸ <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/03/25/early-vaccination-of-prisoners-and-prison-staff-is-important-to-reduce-mortality-and-protect-the-rights-of-prisoners/>

know how she'll adapt when he is released home as she has no idea who he is...' Phone calls and video calls have enabled some contact but do not replace the 'timely, consistent and appropriate' physical touch⁹ understood by the scientific community to be so essential to secure attachment 'My son thinks the phone is his daddy, his daddy last held him when he was 6 weeks old he's now 17 months old!!'

The pan-European COPING study which explored the psychosocial impact of parental imprisonment drew particular attention to the factors which support the mental wellbeing of children and young people, 'for most of the children involved, regular contact with their imprisoned parent was crucial for their well-being and resilience'¹⁰. Observations made during the COPING study, concerning the impact on children's wellbeing and behaviour, have been reflected in POPS' conversations with families 'My daughter has become quite an angry emotional child since her dad has been in prison and my son has become an anxious panicked child. Their emotional wellbeing has been highly affected not being able to visit their dad.'

The final COPING report underscored the wide-ranging and diverse impact of parental incarceration 'children's distress may be evident from interruption to sleep patterns, by withdrawing in on themselves, or in aggressive behaviour at home or elsewhere'⁸. In particular it was noted that 'children's behaviour at school often deteriorated', a theme picked up on by the families involved in the 'Get It Off Your Chest' campaign 'our eldest children have really been struggling not seeing their dad and are now rebelling at school at home and outside the home with behaviours.'

Financial

One of the themes that emerged from the 'Get It Off Your Chest' conversations was the financial consequences of family member imprisonment which were further compounded by lockdown restrictions '[my] partner's in prison after an extended lockdown trial. No financial support. No

*jobs in prison so completely financially reliant on me despite me losing my job due to the situation.'*¹¹

The fallout from a loss of income can be devastating and immediate 'there have been many challenges including loss of income, relationship breakdowns, threat of homelessness, suicidal thoughts.' The effects extend beyond the families' material circumstance to their relationships as well 'I lost my job the day the first lockdown was announced which led to financial collapse and was almost made homeless. All very stressful with 3 people in a small house with no income aside from the pittance the government deem enough to live on. This left everyone tense and led to arguments.'

The number of families that became homeless during the pandemic 'increased by 28% in England last summer despite measures to prevent evictions'¹². As a result, families of prisoners have struggled alongside many others to access the help they need 'since my husband has been in prison myself and my children have lost our home... We are still waiting on help from the council.'

Release

'Due to Covid my partner's parole has been extended by two years. The inconsistency between the inside and community probation [has been] marked. My partner's therapy has been stopped due to COVID with no support inside. It's a worry as if he doesn't satisfy the parole board that will be a difficulty. He doesn't get a chance to address the issues he has as the groups aren't running.'

The impact of Covid-19 on the criminal justice system is deep and wide-ranging. One of the areas specifically addressed by the 'Get It Off Your Chest' forums was the topic of release. Families were frustrated about the lack of consideration given to the length of time served and the absence of any reductions to sentence length to compensate for the slowing down of the system during the pandemic 'My partner is a discretionary lifer. He was meant to move prison which didn't happen...26

¹¹ HMPPS note that all prisoners have received a basic wage, additional pin credits and supplementary food packs.

¹² <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/number-of-families-becoming-homeless-increased-by-nearly-30-between-spring-and-summer-last-year-government-data-shows-69348>

⁹ https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv5vdvd.5?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents

¹⁰ <https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/COPINGFinal.pdf>

months later he has turned his life around. Now he's been told it doesn't count for any kind of reduction. He's had 4 applications go missing.'

Building towards release families also raised concerns about the apparent lack of support for prisoners attempting to fulfil courses and other requirements expected of them *'my son has never been offered a course. Communication seems to be mostly Chinese whispers.'* Equipment has also been restricted despite much of the evidence now underscoring the minimal contribution of surface transmission in the spread of Covid-19¹³ *'[My partner] started a uni course in prison and was desperate to type up his essays. Some prisons allow laptops but they were using Covid as an excuse as to why he couldn't [have one].'* It was noted that simple measures, such as hand hygiene and 72 hour quarantine of affected items, can mitigate such spread.

Families have stepped in to fill gaps in the system in order to help their loved one's progress through the system *'I found an organisation who could potentially help my partner and gave the details to the probation officer but they had never heard of the organisation. Families are [the ones] helping the prisoner find courses outside of the prison system!.'* Families were keen to see the technology instigated for visits adapted to assist prisoner progression *'They need to start running courses on video links. It shouldn't matter which prison you are in. Right now, it's a lottery as to whether you can access a course, hug your family, have an in-cell phone.'*

'[My partner was] at an open prison, he had no address to return to. The through-the-gate team didn't know what they were planning to do [but] I was able to provide info on housing associations.' POPS are aware that HMPPS recently commissioned hubs to support prisoners upon release with the concept of a 'one stop' shop aimed at bringing together all the agencies involved in an individual's transition back into the community. Family support is a key contributor to the successful reintegration of many prisoners, particularly during the current crisis, and therefore should be included as a central

element of these hubs. This is supported by Lord Farmer's Review¹⁴ which underlined the importance of family work as the *'third leg of the stool that brings stability and structure to prisoners' lives'*. Where such support is absent families find themselves once again excluded at a key transition for their loved one. Oral evidence provided to the House of Commons Justice Select Committee, as part of their enquiries into the impact of coronavirus on the justice system¹⁵, included discussions concerning release. References to prisoners' families were scarce, majoring instead on the families of probation staff members. This lack of acknowledgement seriously underestimates the important role of families at the point of release *'[It] was a challenge sorting probation out before release of son, they are a nightmare and he had no meetings with them and no exit review or support from prison, I had to sort it all. Many prisoners have no one to help.'*

Literacy was an additional issue addressed in the forums. Prisoners who have limited reading ability are in a vulnerable position when it comes to interpreting and ensuring the accuracy of reports concerning them. Families queried whether it was the prisoner's responsibility to address errors, *'He's having to go through his report with a fine-toothed comb to check the factual basis, otherwise anything untoward becomes 'fact'.'* This lack of literacy also extends to digital realms *'digital literacy an issue. It's a shock coming out anyway and then you've got to sort out and understand how to use a smartphone.'*

Most concerningly a family member raised concerns about racial disparities within the system *'my son applied for ROTL. The prison said no but probation said yes. Nothing has happened for 18 months. 8 weeks ago, he appealed and the prison has said yes [but now] probation have said no...My son only has a few months left to serve...White prisoners with longer to serve have successfully received ROTL. My son has been very up and down as a result. It's not acceptable.'*

¹⁴https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/642244/farmer-review-report.pdf

¹⁵ [How has coronavirus impacted the justice system? \(shorthandstories.com\)](https://www.shorthandstories.com)

¹³ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/more/science-and-research/surface-transmission.html>

Judicial Process

The pandemic and consequent restrictions have had a severe and continuing impact on the expediency of court processes, *'due to the backlog of cases pending in the crown court system my partner is yet to be sentenced and has now been on judges remand since July 2020.'*

This has caused significant upheaval and uncertainty for families *'he was arrested shortly after we met but his case remained unconfirmed due to the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19. We lived 9 months in complete limbo trying to get on with our lives knowing that our hopes of building a future together ...was more than likely to be torn away from us at any minute. We hoped that we were wrong but we were not and with four days' notice given to us for his hearing he was jailed...as he had been bailed not on remand there was no consideration given to our 9 months of waiting...hence he embarked on serving his full sentence. No consideration was given by the judge or system as to how on earth he had managed to survive, let alone live for 9 months without any guaranteed benefits or even somewhere to live.'*

The House of Commons Justice Select Committee report, published in August 2020¹⁶, exploring the impact of coronavirus on the justice system highlighted numerous areas of concern. These included the backlog of unpaid work and court reports, brought to the committee's attention by Justin Russell, Chief Inspector of Probation *'There will be a huge backlog of unpaid work, for example, that will still need to be done, and there is a deadline for delivering that within 12 months of sentence. There will be a backlog, as you say, of accredited programmes, which won't have been completed...It is the same with court reports, as well. There is a real focus on just delivering the priority work in courts and the public protection work, but there will be a backlog of breach actions to catch up with as well, as they return to normal.* These backlogs will inevitably cause further delays

for individuals and their families with relational, health and financial consequences.

Other Themes

The 'Get It Off Your Chest' campaign was designed to give families space to share whatever was affecting them. Broad themes were provided to help structure conversations but facilitators were briefed to give space to all contributors to share as they felt able. This generated new threads of conversation which have been gathered here.

One of the key themes that emerged was that of broader failings in society *'failures across the services have ended up with people in prison.'* Families felt let down by wider society, tracing the lack of support back to childhood and a lack of resources, *'early intervention to identify issues and to provide effective support is crucial to...mental health and wellbeing. Without this our children of today can so easily become the prisoners of tomorrow. Statistics currently do not give any indication of just how many prisoners cannot read nor write, nor whom have underlining mental health conditions...nor do we have any statistics on the families who have continued for decades to [to be] failed by...the core system of our society'.* Families expressed concern that the situation would only worsen following the Covid-19 crisis.

Discussions also arose about the persistent belief that friends and families visiting loved ones are the main entry point for contraband into prisons. Families expressed an interest in the data around seizures of drugs and other items over the course of the period during which visits have been prohibited. The general feeling was that such data may assist in establishing the true source of illegal items and help direct prevention efforts where they were most needed.

¹⁶ <https://houseofcommons.shorthandstories.com/justice-coronavirus-impact-on-probation-prisons-courts-legal-professions/index.html>

SUMMARY

'I can only hope [the pandemic] has enabled many to understand the meaning of prison, locked in, away from those they care about. I can only hope that prisoners' families' voices will be heard and then just maybe then our society/politicians will grasp the fears we have!'

Families contributing to the 'Get It Off Your Chest' campaign expressed time and again their distress at being excluded from the public discourse concerning the Covid-19 crisis and the lack of humanity extended to prisoners who are potentially exposed to far worse outcomes as a result of the virus.

Communication emerged as the thread uniting all the discussions; in short *'have a plan, stick to the plan, communicate the plan'*. Throughout the crisis our collective desire for accurate and timely information has been a key contributor to individual wellbeing. This has been a factor noticeably absent in relation to prisoners and their families resulting in severe and enduring consequences *'my son has lost it all, lost his motivation. I'm meant to feel reassured that he can come out and return to his family. I feel he's been failed. The pandemic means we've been failed even more. I see no-one talking about the damage.'*

The Covid-19 pandemic has further exposed weaknesses in the criminal justice system and has practically left its mark in severe delays, restricted resources and inadequate release processes, all of which have a knock-on effect on families of prisoners *'Covid's going to bring more mental health (issues), more job losses...we need to invest there rather than in building new prisons. It's the 21st century and men are being locked up for 23 hours a day.'*

Some progress was noted in the form of secure video calls, welcomed in principle by families, but to date, inconsistent in implementation and user experience. At the most basic of levels families simply want to be able to see their loved ones face-to-face again, to hold them and to speak free of

masks and without fear of repercussions resulting from social distancing infringements. Families and their imprisoned relatives were limited in their face-to-face contact prior to the pandemic but the crisis has built an almost impenetrable wall between them.

When asked if they would ever be the same person again there were many who echoed this sentiment *'I cannot imagine ever being so, this situation has taken a toll on my family far beyond anything I could ever have imagined.'*

Giving a platform to families of prisoners has always been at the heart of POPS' mission. The 'Get It Off Your Chest' campaign gave voice to families whose lives had already been torn apart by the imprisonment of a loved one. The Covid-19 crisis and consequent restrictions have added layer upon layer of confusion, heartache and isolation. It is our sincere hope that family members reading this will feel their voices have been heard and amplified and that those professionally employed across the criminal justice system and beyond will take note of the impact this crisis has had on prisoners and their families and act accordingly to address the concerns raised in this report.

WHAT NEXT?

Actions Arising

The outcome of the numerous conversations triggered by the 'Get It Off Your Chest' campaign has been a desire expressed by the families involved to raise awareness of the issues presenting with both local and national decision makers. The hope is to promote understanding and bring about change, particularly concerning the clarity and consistency of communications, the restrictions on visits and the general visibility and engagement of families, particularly at the point of release. POPS is positioned to support this activity and agreed to undertake a number of actions on families' behalf:

- Collate all the families' feedback into this report which will be made available on POPS' website.
- Feedback to HMPPS and through our local prison partnerships, the concerns and queries of families via this report and POPS' regular meetings.
- Write to the Director of Public Health England requesting clarity as to the reasoning behind decisions relating to visits and social distancing measure.
- Share the report with POPS' local MP and other parliamentarians.
- Share the report with Lord Farmer.
- Share the report with Police and Crime Commissioners, Metro Mayors and other regional leaders.
- Provide ongoing support to families involved in the campaign.
- Develop regular online forums. In particular, to provide space for families with protected characteristics and marginalised groups, who may have additional needs and requirements, to access support and to have their voices heard. For more information visit <https://thezmt.org/2021/03/31/a-record-of-our-own-lockdown-experiences-of-ethnic-minority-prisoners/>.

What can you do?

Think Family. Key to bringing about the change that families are so desperate to see, is to encourage all individuals and organisations to 'Think Family'. POPS has encouraged this approach in the prisons with whom we partner aiming to incorporate this mantra into all areas of strategy, delivery and partnership working. To explore and understand the evidence-base for the role of families in desistance and resettlement. To reach out and engage directly with family members, involving them in the decision-making processes that impact their lives. And fundamentally to reflect on our shared humanity and how individuals and organisations, policies and procedures can become so far removed from the people and communities they serve.

Consider your communications. One family member summarised it succinctly, *'have a plan, stick to the plan, communicate the plan'*. Communicate with compassion; this doesn't just relate to tone. It is also about timing, consistency and providing reasoned explanations for decisions, particularly the difficult ones. Sharing the science and/or rationale that sit behind the day-to-day decisions relating to current restrictions (and all future guidelines) in an accessible, understandable format.

Seek support. In many prisons across England and Wales specialist family service providers, such as POPS, are funded by HMPPS to provide services to the family and friends of prisoners. If you lack specialist support services, source and fund support from those best placed to provide it. Supported families, support families!

Raise awareness. The default for too long has been to overlook families, their needs, concerns, and potential contribution. Organisations, like POPS, seek to raise awareness through our service delivery, strategic engagement, social media presence and training offer. Increasing individual, organisational and public awareness of prisoners' families, and the difficulties of supporting a loved one through a prison sentence, builds compassion and understanding, promotes effective partnership working and contributes to better outcomes for prisoners, their families and society as a whole.