

**THE PARTNERS OF PRISONERS: THEIR REALITY,  
HOW THEY CONTRIBUTE TO THE CRIMINAL  
JUSTICE SYSTEM AND PRISONER  
REHABILITATION AND HOW WE CAN ASSIST**

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of the paper is to raise awareness of the issues arising for the partners of prisoners. This is not an academic research paper it is simply a workers perspective.

First I will give you an overview of the organization I work for Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation Services commonly known as OARS SA and the Program that I co-ordinate, The Partners Of Prisoners Program commonly known as POP.

OARS SA has a very long history dating back over one hundred years. The Association was incorporated in 1923 as Prisoners Aid to assist discharged prisoners. In 1977 the new name was adopted placing an emphasis on rehabilitation. OARS SA has expanded its range of services and now offers case work, family counseling and support, financial counseling, drug counseling, emergency assistance, prison visiting and provides accommodation for single homeless men across the state. OARS is a key provider of services for prisoners and their families and is takes a pivotal role in research and resource development for this group.

The Partners of Prisoners Program has been funded for the past six years by The South Australian Department For Correctional Services (DCS) and The South Australian Department for Human Services– HIV and Related Programs Unit. (HARP).

*POP's core business is to:* Facilitate access to and delivery of relevant support services and programs which promote the health, well being and family life of partners of prisoners who are at risk of HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis C or are people living with HIV or Hepatitis C.

As I said I'm here to day to raise awareness of the work done by the partners of prisoners. When I read that there was going to be a Conference on Women In Corrections I immediately thought of the many partners across the globe that help maintain the justice system. Today I will share with you their reality. Although I have read widely but my paper is not academic I have based it on the feminist research model that experience is empirical evidence. (Girshick 1996).

What I offer today is an insight to this experience that is echoed in literature from across the world. My aim is to raise understanding and empathy and point out the ways that we can assist partners and their children. Remembering that in the absence of a partner there may be a parent.

The families of prisoners have been recognized as pivotal to the prisoner's rehabilitation and resocialisation. It makes sense then to support this valuable resource.. (Aungles 1994, Babbal 1994, Blake 1990, Boudouris 1996, Cannici, Glick & Garmon 1989, Fishman & Alissi 1979, Hairston 1988,89, Healy 2000, Hosteller & Jinnah 1993, Jorgensen, Santos & Warren 1986, Kawasaki 1994, Light 1985, 95, Marsh 1983, Mathews 83, Miller & Hobler 1996, Standing Committee Parl. NSW 1997, Stanford 1993, Voorhis, Braswell & Lester 1997)

## **The Culture**

Ninety six percent of POP's clients are women partners of prisoners. We do not see many men simply because when women go to prison they have forsaken their assigned gender role and have been ostracized by their loved ones and shunned by the general community. In our culture 'she is a wicked women' but the boys are simply 'sowing their wild oats'. The partners of male prisoners stay and nurture and provide, as a woman's gender role requires.

I'm not going to try and profile these partners as they are indeed a diverse group but it is important to hear how other writers have seen them. The majority do share many experiences in common after the sentence is imposed on them. On that I would like to say that they do indeed share the sentence. They have been called the invisible victims, secondary victims of the forgotten victims and are often treated as guilty or deviant themselves by their association with a criminal.(Aungles 1994, Babbel 1994, Blake 1990, Cannici et al. 1989, Codd ?, Girshick 1996, Kawasaki 1994, Mathews 1983) One phrase I hear many people say is 'cop it sweet' I call this the "phrase of powerlessness".

Isaacs's Report about the risk for partners of HIV in the prisons system was pivotal in getting this program funded. This is how she saw the culture.

*It is important to be aware of the nature of the culture in which the women live. Most of them appear to be drawn into the goal system. Their lives are often ruled by the partner in prison rather than their own needs. They can be very much at the mercy of their partners; for example, the tyranny of phone calls can dictate how they spend their time. When the phone rings they must be there to answer it, or risk the consequences, which might include their partner sending some of his friends round to check up on her. They often feel they have no life of their own. There are occasions when women are expected to take supplies of drugs and syringes into the prison. They do this in fear of what might happen to their partners if they do not comply. It is difficult for them to break out of these restrictive conditions, as they generally do not have the energy or motivation to do so. (18 p36)*

Isenberg (1991) sees the relationship as a type of soap opera, where the partner experiences the longing and yearning of unattainable love. She also talks about the low self-esteem of some women who become involved with a notorious prisoner and the status and attention that they derive from such a relationship. I reflect on the safety of such a relationship, where there is love, caring and sharing on an emotional level but one does not have to deal with the day to day practicalities of living with the person and sharing ones life and space.

Indeed the literature gives many examples of how some partners may be better off when their male partners go to prison. Often these families are violent and dysfunctional before incarceration occurs. The women will use this time to revitalize the family unit, catch up with finances and get the children into a routine.(Hostetter et al. 1993, Jorgensen et al. 1986) If there are drug addictions often partners will put pressure on the male inside to take advantage of drug rehabilitation programs and they themselves will enter into drug rehabilitation . Most of the women I see have the notion that prison will be a savior in that it will force the inmate to address drug issues and they get very angry and frustrated if the prison is seen to be doing nothing to help.

From court / sentencing, during the prison sentence and in post release, families are literally sucked into the vacuum of the penal system. Light (1989) explains that these families are 'doing time' he suggest that there are three elements in doing time; 'coming to terms', 'keeping in touch' and 'surviving the sentence'. From the time of arrest the trauma begins. With sentencing the shock sets in followed by grief. Then the families must survive the day to day practicalities of life while coping with disenfranchisement and dismemberment, discrimination and stigma. (Aungles 1994, Babbel 1994, Codd?, Fishman et al. 1979, Hostetter et al. 1993, Jorgensen et al.1986, Mathews 1983, Monahon 1993, Pope ?). Many

women and children keep their partners incarceration a secret for fear of being ostracized and marginalised further. (Aungles 1994, Babble 1994, Blake 1990, Hostetter et al. 1993, Jorgensen et al. 1986, Light 89).

Partners of prisoners must be mothers, fathers, lovers, counselors, and negotiators and keep the home fires burning. They must also be fast learners, and be very good at adapting to change.(Aungles 1994, Babble 1994, Blake 1990, Fishman et al. 1979, Hairston 1988, Healy 2000, Hostetter et al. 1993, Jorgesen et al. 1986, Light 1989, Mathews 1983, Willcox 1997)

Imagine, you are sitting watching TV one night and the Police knock on your door to arrest you partner. You have no idea of your rights, your house is searched, you and the children a scared and crying and your man is taken into custody. You are told he will appear in court the next day. Where, can I see him? Can he take any thing with him? What does the inside of the court look like? What should I wear? Should I take the children? Should I tell the children what has happened? Should I tell my family or wait to see what happens in court? Who will be in the court room? Can I speak? How do I get a Lawyer? Then he gets sentenced and then you have to cope with the first visit. How do I organize the visit? How long can I see him? What can I take in? What can I wear? Can the kids come? What sort of identification do I need? Can I touch him? Can he hug the kids? How do I get to the prison? Can I give him some money? Then you can bet once she has learned how to cope with that prison, he will no doubt be transferred elsewhere and the family will have to learn new rules and adjust to more changes.

All this while they cope with a myriad of emotions including, fear, loneliness, isolation, anger, hostility, frustration, grief, bewilderment, humiliation, depression, hopelessness and powerlessness. All this adds up to unhealthy stress levels that inevitably reduce the partners' ability to cope thus increasing their vulnerability. They must also be resilient to negative attitudes from extended family, friends and the general community. (Aungles 1994, Babble 1994, , Fishman et al. 1979, Hairston 1988, Healy 2000, Hostetter et al. 1993, Jorgesen et al. 1986, Light 1989).

One of the most reported areas of conflict is the attitude of prison officers. There has always been the 'us' & 'them'.

This statement sighted in Healey's recent research has the essence.

*Some people say there are wonderful prison officers and they are VERY nice and courteous and others are like little Hitlers (2000, p20).*

I also agree with the other observations made by Healey.

*Inconsistency and, in some instances, rigidity with which custodial staff applied regulations leave families with a sense of powerlessness in ensuring their rights to maintain contact with the inmate...rigidity and inconsistencies are institutionalized in the prison environment through an absence of adequate appeal mechanisms to ensure fairness and equity in the application of prison regulations.(pp20-21).*

These attitudes are based in Bio-Anthropological theories: Here crime is based in genetic inferiority, that which produces the feeble minded and morally inept deviants. Aungles (1994) maintains that:

*Both the parents and siblings and the wife and children then are categorized as socially inferior and potentially socially polluting.(P78)*

Aungles also presents an argument that:

*With the rise of neo-classical economic policy and the retreat from welfare in Australia, US and Europe since the 1970s, the particular attraction of a biological explanation of criminal behavior that relocates the focus of law and order back to the characteristics of the offender, fits well with the ideology of the New Right.(p79)*

Here is the mechanism that places the onus on the individual and fuels images of the 'undeserving' thus legitimizing the disenfranchisement of these families.

### **Issues Arising for Partners of Prisoners**

The issues arising for partners are many. POP statistics of the issues arising for clients has shown pretty much the same pattern for the past three years. These same scenarios are echoed in literature from all over the world. (Aungles 1994, Babble 1997, Blake 1990, Fishman et al. 1979, Healy 2000, Hostetter et al. 1993, Mathews 1983, Vooris et al. 1997)

When one party is incarcerated we have identified what we call the two-month "trough" that partners fall into when the household income changes. The families income is significantly reduced and the only expenditure that is reduced is the food bill, but expenditure increases because now she must find the money to support her partner in prison and make weekly trips to the prison.

SA has nine prisons, three of these are near the city and suburbs the others range from one hundred to eight hundred kilometers from Adelaide. Often the partners own cars but with the family mechanic in prison and cars are usually unreliable or unsafe. Visits can cost as little as a bus fare to a city but most partners will try to take at least ten dollars on a visit so the family can share refreshments. It can cost hundreds of dollars to visit a partner in country facilities. Our Department for Correctional Services has recognized the high needs of families visiting Cadell Prison Farm and fund OARS to provide transport to the prison which is not near a main bus route. Other country prisons are closer to main bus routes and services.

### ***Here is a Scenario***

The fact is that many partners just cannot make the trip on a regular basis. They often go alone leaving the children behind to save costs. And what if she has a drug habit? What if he does and he is pressuring her to supply drugs? Then the budget is broken. As you can imagine it is very difficult to keep a functional relationship or family finances intact under these conditions

## **Domestic Violence ‘by Remote Control’**

The definition of domestic violence accepted by the National Committee on Violence Against Women is: Behavior by the man, adopted to control his victim, which results in physical, sexual and/or psychological damage, forced social isolation or economic deprivation, or behavior which leaves a woman living in fear. (Report into National Crime Prevention 1999)

A prisoner does this by remote control. He can dictate her movements, friendships and finances by emotional blackmail, by threats of violence to her or to harm himself and through manipulation and coercion. (Aungles 1994, Babble 1994, Cooke?, Healy 2000, Hostetter et al 1993, Jorgesen et al. 1994, Willcox 1997)

Standford (1993) concludes that:

*These women partners are very much ‘victims of crime’, imprisoned both physically and mentally by the actions of their partners. This imprisonment impinges on all aspects of their lives. Partners of prisoners, health and well being cannot be addressed in isolation from their male partners in prison.(p21)*

It is important to note the consequences of prisonisation because in my observations this phenomenon is partly the force behind the domestic violence.(Blake 1990, Cannici et al. 1989, Cooke, Baldwin & Howison 1990, Jorgensen et al. 1986, Pope ?)

Deane (1998, p4) maintains that:

*The experience of imprisonment does not occur in isolation for a man with a family, and the prison wall can never be a complete barrier to emotional currents that flow between a man and his wife and children.*

Deane also sights Clemer (p9) who developed the theory of prisonisation. He argues that: “the longer individuals stay in prison the more they become emotionally separated from the outside world and acquire the values and standards of other prisoners”. As I see it, the male in prison becomes insecure, they are simply afraid that they will loose their family. They feel helpless to control the situation. They begin to exert control through emotional abuse, threats and demands, which only serve to alienate the couple further.

One of my colleagues observed that:

*“Love and fear are powerful emotions, put together they can, to some people, be overwhelming and destructive” (.Stagg, 1998)*

POP has done some research on the partners of child sex offenders because we needed to train our volunteers how to best support these women who are ostracized by the community and who live in shame and secrecy. The other reason was to educate them and where they are in denial we aimed to plant the seed of awareness in an effort to facilitate prevention. Our literature search found very little, there was a mountain of information on the perpetrator and the child victims but very little about the partners of these offenders. POP has since developed ‘Growing Strong’ A Manual for workers and agencies, supporting women partners and families of child sex offenders (Tulloch, 1998).

Our research showed that the women who attract the attention of the child sex offender do have traits in common that make them vulnerable to a relationship based on power and control, sometimes the most passive and covert forms of domestic violence are perpetrated in these relationships. Yet we never learn about the grooming process of the child sex offender in domestic violence courses. I brought this up in conversations with other professionals and researchers they all agree this is a very grey area.

## **Home Detention**

Home detention is an area of great concern. Partners are usually keen to have the prisoner return to the family home. However, many are scared because he will just come home, no resocialisation or reunification programs are in place. In South Australia the female partner usually spends about forty-five minutes with the Home Detention Officer, she is asked if she is aware of the conditions of home detention. She is asked if she is willing to support the prisoner to fulfill his obligations and they check to see that the phone is connected. That's it. In the process leading up to home detention the partner is given very little information or feedback. Many report to me that their inquiries are met with contempt.. The process does not take the needs or concerns of the family into account. This is an area that needs to be addressed.

The most conclusive and recent work based on the Australian context comes from Aungles who is scathing on the topic of home detention. She argues that the boundaries between home and prison are becoming more blurred as programs such as probation, community service orders and parole have been introduced. She sights home detention as the most invasive form as it brings the "domestic sphere into the prison realm".(p66) The family becomes defined as a "naturally related community resource". Aungles argues that in a time where privatization and deinstitutionalisation are seen as ways to cut costs Families are being exploited. (p67).

*This considerable caring work could save the state up to \$20,000 in every household...The recommendation made by the Attorney General of the ACT is that eight out of ten of ACT offenders should be transferred from NSWs prisons to electronically monitored imprisonment in their own homes, in order to save approximately \$600,000. (p, 69).*

In this proposition the risk is of implementing the situation envisaged by Terry Dorsey who said:

*If the sole motive for programs such as home detention is the reduction of numbers and costs, we could be accused of creating a myriad of three bedroomed prisons spread through out suburbia.(sighted in Aungles p, 70)*

Quinn and Holeman (1991) who explored interfamilial conflict where the offender is electronically monitored recommend that; professionals pay greater attention to offender household issues, that pre and post home detention counseling be offered to the offender and family, a need for correctional supervision to be sensitive to the likelihood of conflict in these households.

In my observation the home becomes the prison and partner becomes the officer in charge, so naturally when the offender is angry, frustrated or hanging out for drugs, the partner is the focus of his rage.

## **Conclusion**

All the literature argues that this is an under researched group and that more research is needed. I however have been reading Literature, research, arguments and recommendations dating back fifty years that state the needs of partners and their the value of their influence on the prisoner, and contribution to rehabilitation of offenders. Do we really need more evidence? Should we not now be moving on to action? While programs like POP and others like it around Australia can help make a difference to individual partners, it is not until we have state and national policy for intervention for these families that things will really change. That is utopia, and although there is a huge ripple happening in regards to the children of prisoners here in South Australia at present, the big picture is always slow to change for the disadvantaged and particularly slow to change in the justice system. The role played by these partners is crucial and should be supported. This requires that we consider their issues and needs in our practice an interventions and at policy level.



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