



Thames Valley Partnership and  
Revolving Doors Agency

# **The Support Needs of Offenders and their Families**

Sam Wright and Sajida Khan  
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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

In November 2009, Revolving Doors Agency commissioned Thames Valley Partnership to undertake a small-scale research project examining the unmet support needs of offenders and their families and to explore potential methods of addressing these needs. The main aims of this work are thus to highlight the difficulties facing families of offenders and to examine the potential for the improved integration of work to address the complex needs of these vulnerable families.

## The policy background

The support needs of offenders' families has been a neglected area of social policy – although recognition of the crucial role that children and families can play in supporting an offender to reduce re-offending is beginning to grow. In addition to this 'reducing re-offending' driver for policy change, there is also an acknowledgement that the stressed and/or fragmented nature of many offenders' family relationships results in an increased likelihood of inter-generational transmission of offending behaviours. As such, offenders' families need support in their own right – as part of an early intervention effort to reduce social exclusion and the potential for future offending.

## The scale and range of support needs

A 2007 joint priority review on the children of offenders<sup>1</sup> revealed that approximately 160,000 children have a parent in prison each year - a figure two and a half times the number of children in care. These children are three times more likely to have mental health problems or to engage in antisocial behaviour than their peers and nearly two thirds of boys who have a parent in prison will go on to commit some kind of crime themselves. Relatively little is known about the situation of offenders' families and the true scale and breadth of their support needs remains largely hidden. But commonly, support needs relate to: financial/debt issues, health problems, domestic violence, substance misuse, mental health difficulties, feelings of stigma and social exclusion.

The four case studies developed for this research cast some light on the types of hidden support need that exist and highlight:

1. How an individual's imprisonment impacts upon their family.
2. The pre-existing support needs of these families and how they are exacerbated by the criminal justice system.

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<sup>1</sup> DCSF and MoJ 2007 Joint priority review on the children of offenders.  
[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social\\_exclusion\\_task\\_force/families\\_at\\_risk/review\\_analysis.aspx](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/families_at_risk/review_analysis.aspx)

## **Provision of support across Thames Valley**

Like the 2004 Family Matters report, the interviews conducted for this research identified pockets of good practice being delivered by some organisations across the Thames Valley – not just by visitor centres and prisons, but also by schools, children’s centres and the probation service. But provision remains hugely variable, with significant delivery gaps and little collaboration or shared learning between practitioners. This patchy service provision arises because of a lack of joined-up working between the resettlement and Every Child Matters agendas. This results in inequality of access to support for families and strategic coordination is required to drive this area of social policy forward.

## **Implications – potential to develop Family Matters**

The Family Matters project supports the resettlement of offenders across Thames Valley and seeks to break the cycle of offending within families by:

- Improving access to information for offenders’ families;
- Integrating the work of the criminal justice agencies and family and children’s services in support of vulnerable families; and
- Strengthening family ties to aid prisoner re-integration into their family and community (where appropriate).

The work of Family Matters was described in very positive terms – identifying a range of beneficial impacts in terms of raising awareness, producing useful information materials for families, spearheading change and helping to develop good practice.

However, the research also found a small number of barriers to the development of Family Matters:

- The ‘invisibility’ of prisoners’ families means that their support needs remain largely hidden - and a systematic method of identifying these families, assessing their needs and putting support packages in place is required at point of sentencing.
- It is critical that Social Services, CAMHS and Family Matters work together due to the real need for family support and child protection.
- There is a continuous need to roll Family Matters training out systematically across statutory, voluntary and faith sectors, targeting frontline staff through to senior management. One priority group should be Headteachers, SENCOs and Home-School Link Workers. Every age group of child/young person should be able to access support – throughout the whole year and during weekends.

The stakeholder interviews uncovered numerous recommendations about how to develop approaches to address offenders' families support needs more effectively. These recommendations relate to:

- Identifying families in need of support
- Providing support to vulnerable families
- Developing interagency coordination
- Policy development
- Building the evidence base

### **Summary and conclusions**

The potential scope for positive family relationships to contribute to the reducing re-offending agenda is slowly being acknowledged. Family circumstances – whether providing the informal support and security that facilitate desistance from offending, or causing the chaos, stress and trauma that foster further offending behaviour – need examining as part of any strategy to address both re-offending and child welfare.