

UNIVERSITY OF  
Southampton

# SUPPORTING YOUNG FATHERS IN PRISON

## AN EVALUATION OF PACT'S FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICE

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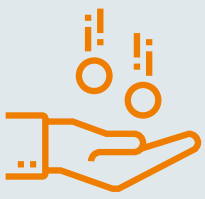


## The Problem

Studies and official reports highlight the importance of maintaining family relationships during imprisonment (Codd 2008; Farmer 2017<sup>2</sup>). However, there are currently insufficient family support services in prisons across England and Wales. This report shows that such services are prerequisites for maintaining and strengthening family relationships.

## The project

The Supporting Young Fathers in Prison (SYFP) project is a family support service delivered by the Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact). The project has worked with 4280 young parents since 2013 using funding of £939,494 made available by the Big Lottery Fund. Dr Pamela Ugwudike was invited to evaluate the project in three prisons and she found that project staff and volunteers facilitate contact between young fathers in prison and their families, advocate on their behalf, broker relevant services and provide therapeutic support. They also help the men improve their parenting efficacy, enhance their relationship skills, and strengthen their family ties. Service users, project staff and volunteers describe the project as an indispensable service and there is currently no alternative provision in place within the three prisons. The report of the evaluation can be read here: [http://bit.ly/PPS\\_PACT](http://bit.ly/PPS_PACT). The following are key findings and policy recommendations.



The consensus amongst all those who participated in this evaluation, including prison staff, Family Engagement Workers, family members and prisoners, is that the Supporting Young Fathers in Prison project is an indispensable service and no other agency in the three participating prisons provides similar family support services.

**FUNDING** Funding is a crucial issue. Staff shortages caused by inadequate funding, limit the delivery and scope of the SYFP project. To support families and strengthen relationships, ring-fenced funding should be made available to prisons offering family support services similar to SYFP. Maintaining family relationships has been linked to improvements in the behaviour of prisoners, successful resettlement, and the wellbeing of prisoners' families including children.

The SYFP project delivers its aim of improving the level and quality of contact between young fathers in prison and their families by organizing extra prison visits in more conducive family-friendly settings. This is the provision the men and their families access the most.

**FAMILY-FRIENDLY VISITS** Prisons should replace normal/ordinary prison visits with more frequent family-friendly visits such as those provided by the SYFP project. SYFP visits strengthen relationships, improve behaviour in prison and enhance prisoners' parenting and relationship skills. By contrast, normal/ordinary prison visits restrict the level of interaction between prisoners and their families, undermine the wellbeing of the visitors and prisoners, and damage family relationships.

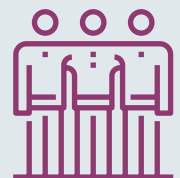


Child-friendly visits organised by the SYFP project improve relationships and bonds between young fathers in prison and their children.

**CHILD-FRIENDLY VISITS** Prisoners' children should be given frequent access to child-friendly visits. Normal prison visits limit the ability of children to interact and bond with their parent in prison. Infants and other very young children who are unable to understand prison regulations may not realize that their father is required to remain seated throughout a normal prison visit. It is therefore quite possible that the children construe their father's inability to move away from his seat and interact with them, as parental rejection and this can be traumatic.

Staff and volunteers delivering the SYFP project provide extensive advocacy services. For example, they liaise with Social Services and they visit schools to explain the impact of imprisonment on children. They also invite schools to conduct parents' evenings in prison and they help prisoners' partners access relevant services in the community.

**ADVOCACY** Prisons should provide advocacy and brokerage services to strengthen family ties. Part of this should involve working with prisoners to address issues that affect their ability to maintain contact with their families. For example, liaising with Social Services where relevant can help prisoners establish contact with their child/ren where it is in the best interest of the child/ren.



The SYFP project is desistance-focused; its role in strengthening bonds between prisoners and their families can encourage desistance. Sections of the desistance literature emphasise that bonds with non-criminogenic family members promote desistance (Farrall et al. 2014<sup>3</sup>; Ugwudike et al. 2017<sup>4</sup>)

**DESISTANCE-FOCUSED FAMILY SUPPORT** Prisons should draw on insights from research on the key role of family members in supporting resettlement and desistance, and develop a commitment to fostering family ties by commissioning services such as the SYFP project and ensuring that their sustainability is not threatened by lack of funding.

Where SYFP staff and volunteers are aware of a prisoner's impending transfer to another prison, they put transitional arrangements in place by providing relevant information to family support services in the receiving prison. SYFP staff and volunteers also provide resettlement advice if they are aware of a prisoner's impending release.

**TRANSFER AND RESETTLEMENT SUPPORT** Prisons should establish operational policies and communication channels in collaboration with family support services such as the SYFP project. This will ensure that prisoners are not transferred to other prisons without transfer plans and transitional family support arrangements. In addition, coordinating resettlement support with SYFP staff can strengthen service provision.



Providing access to domestic violence interventions is one of the SYFP project's aims and some project staff noted that such interventions can support prisoners' efforts to repair family relationships damaged by domestic violence.

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INTERVENTION** The SYFP project should explore the possibility of introducing a domestic violence intervention to help prisoners avoid behaviour that can destroy relationships and sever family ties.

1. Codd, H. (2008) *In the Shadow of Prison: Families, imprisonment and criminal justice*, Cullompton: Willan.

2. Farmer (2017) *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*. London: Ministry of Justice.

3. Farrall, S., Hunter, B., Sharpe, G. and Calverley, A. (2014) *Criminal Careers in Transition: The Social Context of Desistance from Crime*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4. Ugwudike, P., Raynor P., and Annison J. (eds) (2017) *Evidence-Based Skills in Criminal Justice: International Research on Supporting Rehabilitation and Desistance*. Bristol: Policy Press.



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