

# Families... A Critical Time For Change

Prepared by

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# Introduction

POPS is a registered charity set up twenty years ago by families who were experiencing having a loved one in custody and who formed themselves into a support structure for each other when there was nothing else available. Today, we have grown to be an organisation with over sixty-five full and part-time staff, delivering appropriate services to families at various stages of the criminal justice process. We operate locally within the community, regionally within the North West and nationally as a partner in a national telephone helpline. We are members of various steering groups, working parties and strategic boards and provide a family perspective at all of these forums.

In recent years, stable family relationships have been recognised as an important factor in assisting the effective resettlement of an offender and furthermore has been identified as a factor in assisting the reduction of re-offending by those offenders. However, this recognition has not come armed with a strategic response to their diverse needs and although many families can and do play an informal but vital role in the successful resettlement of offenders, they are also still 'at risk' of social exclusion in relation to their own particular needs.

The true role of families in the resettlement agenda and reducing re-offending can only be realised if we identify them as a particular group 'at risk' and resource their support structures to enable them to be truly utilised and effective.

Firstly we need to identify the risk factors associated with being a prisoners' family. Families experience stigma, isolation, economic hardship, poor health, and also loss and separation issues. They suffer from lack of information about the Criminal Justice System and yet many of them still manage to offer vital support to their loved ones in custody. It is known that family support throughout the custodial period can help alleviate the "pain of imprisonment" for some prisoners and as such can potentially reduce the risk of or at least identify the risk of self-harm for some prisoners. Findings from Woolf (1991) and the HMCIP (1999) recognised family ties as important to the stability of prison regimes and for the well-being of prisoners, yet they are often ignored

in debates around the nature of purpose of imprisonment. In fact, if families are not supported themselves, they can be drawn into what could be described as “prison culture” and become consumed by the issues facing their loved one in prison and become further isolated from their communities. Families are indeed at risk of being seen as the “forgotten victims” of the Criminal Justice System (Matthews, 1989).

However, as stated earlier several US studies have shown that stable family ties are key factors in the effective reduction of re-offending (Ohlin (1954), Glaser (1964), Holt and Miller (1972)). In a review of research in this area, Ditchfield (1994) found that prisoners without family support are between two and six times more likely to re-offend in the first year of release.

Much less is known about the social and psychological support that families can offer during the resettlement process but previous Social Exclusion reports have found that families do provide advice and guidance to offenders and are often the first people to point out to the offender the negative consequences of engaging in criminal activity - families can encourage a sense of responsibility and persuade offenders to accept help from other agencies including Probation. Therefore, it may be presumed that the impact of interventions might be increased if families were more involved in discussions between agencies and the offender (Garland et al, 2001).

Children of offenders are also a particularly “at risk” group. Research suggests that prisoners’ children are more at risk of being the next generation of prisoners. In fact, the Elizabeth Fry Society claims that 6 out of every 10 children of prisoners or ex-prisoners will become involved in crime and/or experience prison.

Children are affected by the characteristics of the areas in which they live, their school, their parents’ values and local customs. The influence of family is an important factor in child development. Family conflict and inappropriate modelling behaviours such as parent involvement in criminal activities may affect whether a child becomes involved in delinquent and/or anti-social behaviour (McCarthy, Laing, Walker).

However, families are also an important source of protective factors and therefore, proper assessment of family structures and relationships can be an essential element in breaking the above cycle.

Information regarding the family responsibilities of prisoners is still not collated centrally. However, from a survey of 1,945 prisoners in 2003 the following information is drawn (Gerry Sutcliffe – Parliamentary under Secretary, Home Office):

- 45% of all prisoners had dependent children (aged 17 and under)
- 50% of female prisoners had dependant children
- 20% of young offenders had dependent children
- 48% of adult males had dependant children

POPS would advocate for agencies that are responsible for the well-being of children to be aware of their particular needs and apply appropriate resources to support them via education, health and children's services. Putting prisoners' children firmly on the agenda of these agencies would begin to reduce the risk factors highlighted earlier in this report.

# 'Families At Risk' Review

Our response to the *Social Exclusion Task Force Families At-Risk Review* is structured about the aims of the review, exemplifying best practice. Each aim of the three aims is explored one at a time.

## **Aim: Set a vision of an effective family support system for families with additional or complex needs**

Our aim is to provide a continuum of care for families throughout their contact with the Criminal Justice System and to meet their various needs effectively. POPS believes that these needs start prior to offending and preventative initiatives should be encouraged. Prisoners' children are said to be at risk of becoming 'the next generation of offenders' if they are not identified and appropriate intervention services are not provided. Below is an examination of each stage of the criminal justice process from the perspective of the offender.

### Arrest

At this traumatic time POPS is aware that families are left anxious, scared and with no form of identified support. There are unanswered questions, a lack of information, grief, bewilderment and an expectation that they will know what to do next. Our model of an effective family support system would include:

Information about support groups available to provide families with answers to their questions

A strategic response similar to the National Victim Support scheme, which would automatically identify and contact such families, offering them support if they wish to participate.

### Court Appearance

It is also known that the court/sentencing stage of the Criminal Justice System is also a time when families need additional support. This can be the time when the reality of a prison sentence becomes imminent or when they realise the full details of any crime committed. Both of these situations can cause families to feel the need for good quality

accurate information about the next stage or for referral to another appropriate intervention. POPS would recommend that courts accept the need for assistance at this stage and would suggest that 'information points' are set up and staffed by family support agencies to offer emotional and practical advice.

### Community Sentence

With a rising prison population and an acceptance that community sentencing may be more appropriate and effective for some offenders, POPS have highlighted the need to develop a Community Family Link Worker. This worker would assist families in understanding the implications of such a sentence including curfew, unpaid work, electronic monitoring, offending behaviour programs, and the avoidance of potential offending triggers.

POPS also provide a Family Link Worker service which advocates the continuation of such support on issues raised during a prisoner's progression through the system. Family Link Workers provide a route into the prison for many families who have concerns about their loved ones during custody. They are based within the prison, have access to the offenders and can be a first point of call for families via a direct telephone number. Issues and concerns raised by families can be immediately addressed and their minds be put at ease. More complex issues can be shared with other agencies working with the prison and the family perspective can be taken into consideration, for example:

- Suicidal/self harm – families can identify 'vulnerable' and lack of coping
- Sentence planning – families can influence and support positive steps in working towards the completion of sentence
- Bereavement issues – families can assist in the bereavement process if offered access to an offender in custody
- Health issues – families can identify and inform agencies of any pertinent health issues if appropriate.

Family Link Workers can be generic in the service provision working with all offender groups or can be specific working for example with families of offenders with drug issues or with juveniles/young offenders' families. Where appropriate, families should be empowered to offer support to the offender during the type of sentence and to do so would require access to general information about the conditions attached to such sentences.

### Imprisonment

In order to alleviate the problems some families face during this stage of a sentence, POPS manage six Visitor Centres across the North West region. In addition to providing a practical role such as shelter from the elements, refreshments, booking in, and lavatories POPS staff engage with families at the first point of entry into a prison. For many it is the first time visiting a prison and as such can be a traumatic and unnerving experience. POPS staff provide advice, support and re-assurance to help overcome these negative aspects. In the previous twelve months our staff supported over 300,000 visitors through the centres. POPS view these centres as 'one stop shops' whereby families can access mainstream services such as:

- Drug advice and awareness
- Health information
- Play facilities for children
- Legal benefits advice
- Access to prison based information

### Release

Preparations for release for both offender and their family members is another area that POPS would like to see fully resourced and developed. Having an identified agency that have been supportive to families throughout the custodial process would also be a benefit for continued support in preparing for release and for a period of time in the community. The experience of imprisonment can cause untold damage to offenders and their families and for those who have managed to maintain family relationships during this period, release can be seen as another anxious time. Even when it has

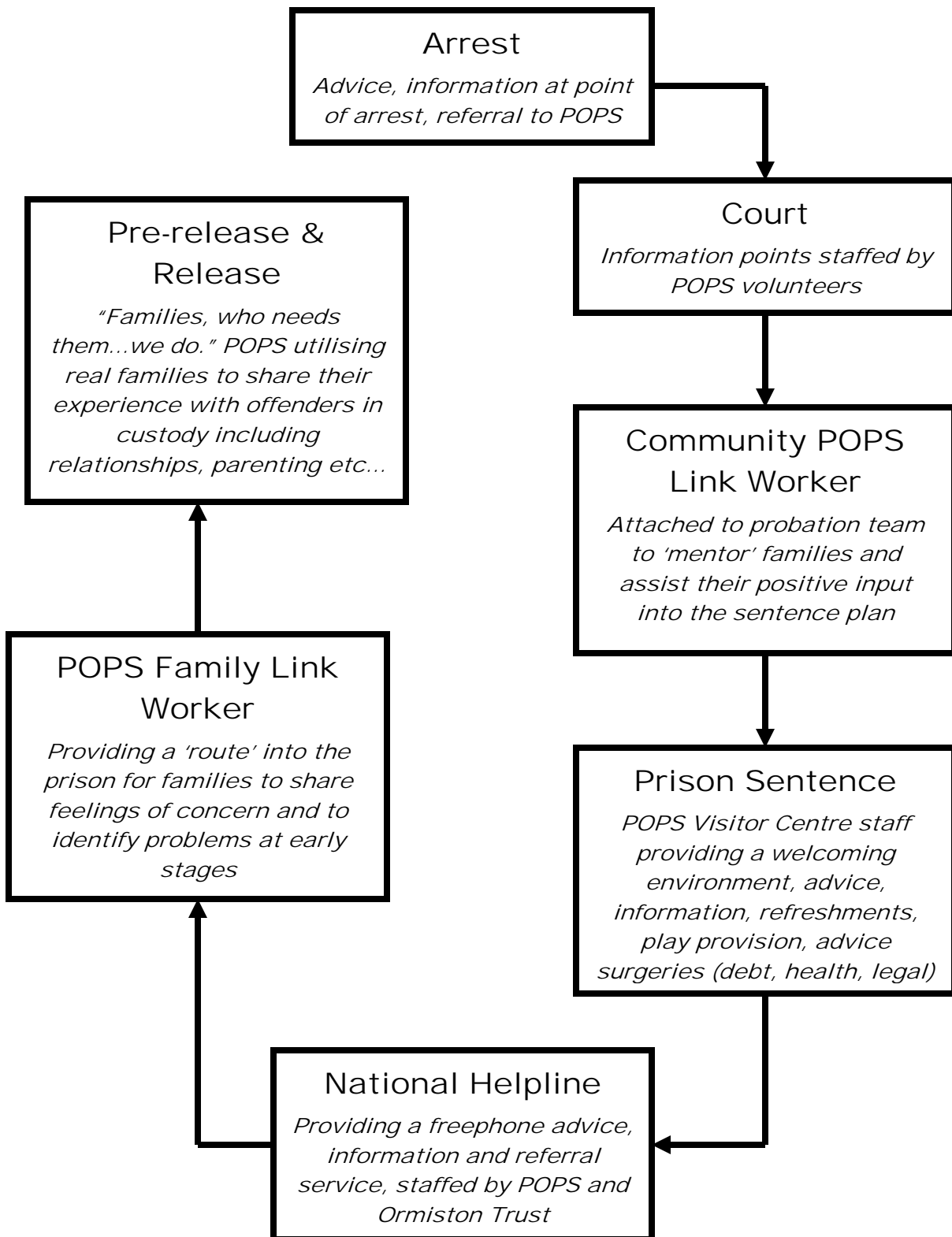
been identified that some families are in a position to be supportive, they receive no assistance in their role in resettlement. Prisoners are also unprepared for life upon release and for many problems appear when they return to their families and realise that relationships have changed considerably (Noble, 1995). POPS would advocate that to assist the resettlement process for prisoners and their families there would need to be an active resettlement programme within prisons that would include family relationships. POPS has delivered 'Families... who needs them.... We do!' courses whereby we have trained people who have experience of supporting somebody in custody to go into prisons with a structured programme and share their perspective in a supportive way. This programme helped to alleviate some of the 'warped' perspective of release and resettlement from offenders who had access to the experiences of families first hand. POPS would also advocate families being a 'critical factor for change' and would support families being utilised at all stages of the process. In order to do this however, families have to be supported and empowered to take on this role and POPS would suggest that the 'continuum of care' model being advocated by NOMS under its new structure would also include, where appropriate, the involvement of families in that process.

All of our services are linked to our National Prisoners' Families helpline which is a free phone service providing information and advice to offender families.

#### POPS' Continuum of Care Model

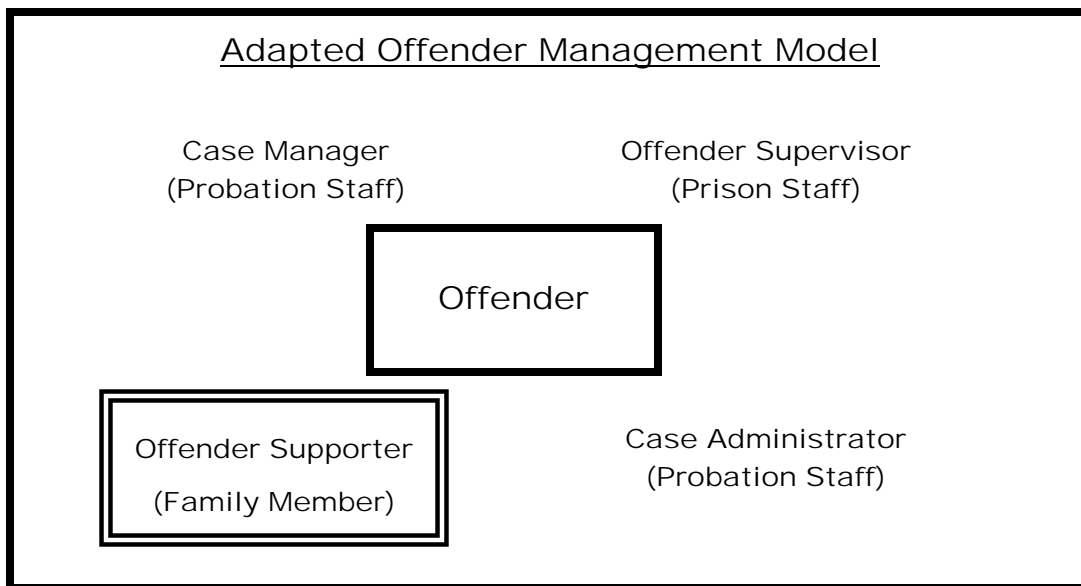
These services are based on a continuum of care model, managed by one agency in a 'one stop shop' concept. Families are then familiar with the support agency (POPS) providing services at every step of the process. Trust is established and positive relationships are formed.

POPS' Continuum of Care Model



## National Offender Management Service

The effective management of offenders is crucial to improving public protection and for aiming to reduce re-offending. Such interventions need to be delivered in a planned, consistent and coherent manner. The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) envisage that the offender will be managed by the same person to address their often complex, multiple and interrelated needs. The offender management model involves a number of individuals to assist this task including the Case Manager (Probation staff), Case Supervisor (Prison staff), Case Administrator and key workers for interventions. The offender is central to this model and should be managed with more consistency and effective communication between these parties. However, POPS feels that there is another stable factor in some offenders' lives and that is a family member. POPS would like to include the family member in this communication process and term them 'Offender Supporter'.



Family stability, if appropriate, can support an offender throughout their sentence and the family role in this needs recognized status (see above). Consistency in method is effective in delivery pro social messages to offenders and their families need to be aware of what those messages are and what the offender manager is trying to achieve in mapping out supervision and interventions for the offender. If families, where appropriate, are included in the process, they can re-enforce the message and influence behaviour. POPS advocates that families need to understand the situation and the terminology used to ensure real communication is happening between all parties.

### **Aim: Identify barriers and practical solutions to the promise of a coherent approach for these families**

#### The Barriers

The first barrier to achieving the vision of an inclusive service for prisoners' families is that of lack of status.

In POPS' experience, prisoners' families are not a priority on the agendas of statutory service providers. There is a lack of awareness of the particular needs of the group of families and training needs to be provided all statutory service providers, therefore:

- Education
- Health
- Children's services

There is no government department that has taken responsibility to the needs of offenders' families. There is a lack of funding/resources attached to the Children and Family Pathway, as part of the Reducing Re-Offending Action Plan. **It has no teeth.** To be truly effective, genuine and appropriate resources should be allocated to provide opportunity for volunteer sector agencies to be involved.

## The Solutions

The solution lies first and foremost with statutory services gaining a fundamental understanding of offenders' families, the beneficiaries, and their needs. With training (from agencies like POPS, who provide services specifically for offenders' families) they will be given the tools to identify offenders' families they are supporting and design a support plan that will fully meet their needs. These needs can be intertwined with many specialist areas, however gaining access to these services is currently difficult for an offenders' family member due to the lack of understanding of the service provider.

The expertise required for assisting offenders' families is prevalent within the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). It is vital that statutory services engage with these agencies for training, signposting and referring beneficiaries to receive support and services. VCS organisations for example, POPS, The National Body of Black Prisoner Support Groups and Clinks hold a wealth of knowledge that can be shared with statutory services to gain much needed insight and for consultation. VCS organisations can act as a 'critical friend' to statutory agencies in order that they can provide appropriate services to offenders and their families. Research projects such as IMPACT (Innovation Means Prisons And Communities Together) also hold an abundance of information that can add value to services.

It is also an important factor - although frequently neglected - to involve beneficiaries, i.e. offenders' families, in the design and development of service provisions. POPS core values are based on user experience and empowerment.

### **Aim: Agree actions to better integrate adult, child and community services around the needs of excluded families in order to tackle the drivers of exclusions**

Offenders' families are now fortunate to have a thematic pathway outlined in both the National and Regional Reducing Re-Offending Action Plans set by the National/Regional Offender Management Service. The direction of this pathway, on a

national, regional and local level, will be solely dependent on prioritising this pathway on the relevant agencies' agendas. The capabilities of the pathway can be met if appropriate agencies are attracted (such as DFES, Primary Care Trusts, Local Authorities, Children's Trust, Police, National Probation Service and Probation Areas, Youth Justice Board, HMPS and other criminal justice agencies) each being committed to integrate their service to fully cater for offenders' families. This commitment should also involve appropriate budgets to allow for new services and partnerships to be set up to support offenders' families. For this to happen there needs to be a culture shift which incorporates better co-ordination of processes within and across agencies. Strategic planning also needs to incorporate beneficiaries and their families to be included in the design and development of support mechanisms.

## Conclusion

A number of steps need to be taken to effectively meet the need of families at risk. We first need to identify families, gaining insight into their dynamic needs through knowledge sharing and consultation. It is then necessary to design services with beneficiaries at the core, developing processes that provide a continuum of care, with consistency being a key underlying principle. It is advantageous, where appropriate to identify additional support mechanisms, such as family members, to assist in the development of a user by empowering them to be able to provide assistance. In most circumstances family members are closer to offenders than any service provider can get. These relationships need to be utilised however, this can only take place with relevant government departments prioritising this on their agendas, backing in with resources and being genuinely willing to join forces with the Volunteer and Community Sector to attain such goals.

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