

## Book review

**Gwyneth Boswell and Peter Wedge** 2002: *Imprisoned fathers and their children*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 175 pp. £15.95. ISBN: 1 85302 972 6.

During the 1990s the authors carried out research to elicit the views of a large sample of prisoner fathers, partners/carers and prison staff regarding the effect that imprisonment was having on their children. More than 125 000 children in the UK alone are 'sentenced' every year to separation from their imprisoned parents, mainly fathers. The authors draw on extensive research and experience to examine the impact that this kind of separation can have on the emotional development of a child and on family relationships. They make suggestions for work with prisoners and families in the light of current policy and practice and consider how best to support children coming to terms with conflicting emotions arising from fathers' imprisonment. They concentrate on imprisoned fathers, since imprisoned mothers have been the subject of much research attention yet account for only 5–6% of the imprisoned population.

An examination and analysis of the evidence regarding the effects on children *per se*, who are separated from a parent, is followed by an exploration of work by other researchers on the harm done to children by the incarceration of their father. Unsurprisingly they conclude that parental separation leaves a child bereaved, but for prisoners' children there is the added trauma of possibly witnessing violence through the arrest process.

Racism within prison is also discussed. In addition some of the methods used in the prison visiting process can distress children further, such as witnessing the strip search of their mother or being searched themselves. Prison visits are described as still being seen as a privilege, rather than it being seen as the moral right of a child to

have access to their parent, or as an integral part of the rehabilitation process of the prisoner.

This book appears to be aimed at those working directly with the children of prisoners and their families. However, for those who work in primary care and other public services, it presents a sound research base for what practitioners may have observed in their own practice. For example, evidence is presented to indicate that the children of prisoners, through their distress and lack of support, have a higher than average chance of an early drift into youth offending and of becoming future prisoners.

There are other powerful messages coming through this research and the reviewed literature. Both prisoners and their families feel unsupported by professionals and calls for pro-active support systems both in and out of prisons have been recommended since 1987. Yet the authors describe their most recent research findings of existing measures thus: 'A landscape of restricted statutory and unpublicised voluntary help emerges, with inmates partners and carers having low expectations of such help.'

The book is well written, easy to read and well referenced. It states clearly the problems that children encounter and finishes with concrete recommendations such as incorporating issues for children and young people with an imprisoned family member into existing training programmes for teachers, social workers, police and probation officers, health workers and voluntary agencies. For any agency, particularly workers or commissioners of services aimed at increasing service access for this vulnerable group and looking for an evidence-base of effective work, this is a useful resource. For all in primary health care it is a very thought provoking book.

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