

# The Importance of Social Visits to Prisoners

*Sacha is Reader in Criminology in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Westminster.*

*Carl is a PhD student in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Westminster.*

**Good quality visits have many social and psychological benefits. These include improved prisoner behaviour, improved mental health, and better relationships between prisoners, their families, and the wider community.<sup>1</sup> The challenges of enforced separation faced by long-term prisoners and their families are particularly concerning.<sup>2</sup>**

At the time of writing (May 2022), one of the authors (Carl) is about to start his 18th year in prison in England. Carl is also a PhD student working with Sacha, whom he first met at HMP Coldingley where they both participated in a convict criminology study group delivered at the prison by the University of Westminster.<sup>3</sup> Carl was originally imprisoned in 2005, at the age of 18, and by the time he finishes his studies, will have spent over half of his life in prison. He has so far served at 13 different prison establishments, from category A to category D. One thing that has kept him half sane throughout his sentence is having contact with the outside world through visits. He personally cannot stress how important it has been for him, and for other prisoners, to keep interacting with people in the outside world, not only to maintain a certain level of normality in their lives, but also to attempt to hold onto the ties they have with their professional, and especially personal, contacts.

However, in England and Wales even the most compliant prisoners are entitled to no more than five one-hour social visits from friends or family a month. Social visits often end up being no more than 30 minutes long by the time everyone has passed through security and is seated. Prisoners are usually entitled to two one-hour social visits every four-week period.<sup>4</sup>

Most academic literature on prisoners' lack of contact with the outside world focuses on the negative

effects on their families. In a recent review of studies on the families of long-term prisoners, Kotova refers to how some relatives of those incarcerated for long periods of time are able to recover from the initial trauma of imprisonment quickly, but others remained in a state of 'chronic bereavement' (p. 244) throughout their loved ones' sentences.<sup>5</sup> The impact of having a family member in prison is especially strong for partners and children. Not only do prisoners' partners have to get used to living and bringing their children up alone, but they must also re-adapt to having their partners around again once they are released. The effects of separation from an incarcerated parent are even stronger. According to McKay et al., a child is, 'more likely to experience internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression when a parent is incarcerated and exhibit more behavioural and academic problems' (p. 97).<sup>6</sup> Importantly, the child-parent role and dynamic inevitably changes. Birthdays and other special occasions are missed too, in some cases causing resentment. In effect, prisoners' families are punished for crimes they did not commit. The case for increasing families' contact with their imprisoned parents and partners is strong.

This paper focuses on the case for increasing contact with the outside world from the viewpoint of prisoners, the subject of Carl's doctoral research. The curtailment of visits negatively affects a prisoner's prospects for successful post-release reintegration. Research indicates that receiving visits from family members or partners significantly reduces a prisoner's likelihood of reoffending by up to 40 percent.<sup>7</sup> Family relationships have been described as the 'most important resettlement agency' by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (p. 3).<sup>8</sup> The curtailment of visits also has more

1. Comfort, M. (2007). *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison*. University of Chicago Press.
2. Adams, M., & McCarthy, D. (2022). The needs and experiences of prisoners' families during long sentences. *Prison Service Journal*, 261, 45–50.
3. For detail on the study group and its basis in convict criminology, see: Darke, S., Aresti, A., Faizal, A., & Ellis, N. (2020). Prisoner university partnerships at Westminster. In S. S. Shecaira, L. G. B. Ferrarini, & J. M. Almeida (Eds.), *Criminologia: Estudos em Homenagem ao Alvaro Augusto de Sá* (pp. 475–498). D'Placido.
4. National Offender Management Service (2021). PSI 16/2011 *Providing Visits and Services to Visitors*. NOMS.
5. Kotova, A. (2018). Time, the pains of imprisonment, and 'coping': The perspectives of prisoners' partners. In R. Condry, & P. S. Smith (Eds.), *Prisons, Punishment and the Family: Towards a New Sociology of Punishment?* (pp. 244–257). Oxford University Press.
6. McKay, T., Lindquist, C., Feinberg, R., Steffey, D., Landwehr, J., & Bir, A. (2018). Family life before and during incarceration. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 57(2), 96–114.
7. Booth, N. (2021). Gendered prisons, relationships and resettlement policies: Three reasons for caution for imprisoned mothers. *British Journal of Criminology*, 61(5), 1354–1371.
8. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2016). *Life in Prison: Contact with Families and Friends*. London.

immediate implications for a prisoner's experience of the 'depth of imprisonment'.<sup>9</sup> Described by Crewe in terms of distance and polarity from freedom,<sup>10</sup> the depth of imprisonment involves the sense of being 'buried alive far away from society's eyes, ears, and mind' (p. 373),<sup>11</sup> in 'a 'bubble' away from normality, and having to cope with the alien and unreal social world of prison... physical aloneness and feelings of separation that routinely occur in prison life' (p. 3).<sup>12</sup> Most important, we contend, is the stigma that accompanies incarceration. As Sykes emphasised in his classic study of prison life in America, *Society of Captives*, it is not so much the loss of liberty as loss of civil and social status that hits hardest.<sup>13</sup>

*The basic acceptance of the individual as a functioning member of the society in which he lives... the loss of that more diffuse status which defines the individual as someone to be trusted or as morally acceptable is the loss which hurts most. (p. 66)*

Therefore, good quality prison visits, including all day and private family overnight visits, help prisoners as much as their families. Thomas and Christian explain:<sup>14</sup>

*The incarceration period itself has great import as an experience that is exceedingly harsh, degrading, and painful... Sykes argued that prison inflicted not only physical separation from society, but social isolation and rejection: powerful symbols of condemnation and deeply painful invisibility from the rest of society. One way to bridge this invisibility and separation for incarcerated men is visits from family members. (p. 273)*

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Ironically, considering the lack of visiting rights afforded to prisoners, the English and Welsh HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and Ministry of Justice also stress the importance of family and pro-social peers when it comes to rehabilitation, to the extent that these relationships are used to assess a prisoner's risk of reoffending and the danger they pose to the public not only while in custody, but more importantly when released. Indeed, it has long been a key topic in reviews, reports, and recommendations on how best to deal with prisoners, reduce reoffending, and tackle current issues surrounding the criminal justice system. For example, the white paper *Custody, Care and Justice* stated that, 'prison breaks up families.... imprisonment is costly for the individual, for the prisoner's family and

for the community' (paragraph 1.16).<sup>15</sup> In possibly the most significant UK government inquiry into prisons, Lord Woolf partly attributed the country's largest ever prison riot, at HMP Strangeways in Manchester, to prisoners' lack of contact with their families.<sup>16</sup> Among 12 major recommendations, Woolf proposed 'better prospects for prisoners to maintain their links with families and the community through more visits and home leaves and through being located in community prisons as near to their homes as possible' (paragraph 1.167). Irrespective of these recommendations, a third of prisoners were still being held 100 miles or more from their

homes twelve years later.<sup>17</sup> Woolf's recommendation was later picked up by Lord Farmer in a government review that focused specifically on strengthening family ties with prisoners.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, Farmer emphasised that the importance of visits is widely known by prison governors and their staff. After all, Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 16/2011 (*Providing Visits and Services to Visitors*)<sup>19</sup> states that:

9. Downes, D. (1988). *Contrasts in Tolerance*. Oxford University Press.
10. Crewe, B. (2021). The depth of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society*, 22(3), 335–354.
11. Wacquant, L. (2003). The curious eclipse of prison ethnography in the age of mass incarceration. *Ethnography*, 3(4), 371–397.
12. Schliehe, A., Laursen, J., & Crewe, B. (2022). *Loneliness in prison*. *European Journal of Criminology*, 19(6), 1595–1614.
13. Sykes, G. M. (1958). *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*. Princeton University Press.
14. Thomas, S. S., & Christian, J. (2018). Betwixt and Between: Incarcerated men, familial ties, and social visibility. In R. Condry, & P. S. Smith (Eds.), *Prisons, Punishment, and the Family: Towards a New Sociology of Punishment?* (pp. 273–287). Oxford University Press.
15. Home Office (1991). *Custody, Care and Justice: The Way Ahead for the Prison Service in England and Wales*. HMSO.
16. Woolf, H. (1991). *Prison Disturbances, April 1990: Report of an Inquiry*. HMSO.
17. Cavadino, M., & Dignan, J. (2006). *The Penal System: An Introduction* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
18. Farmer, M. S. (2017). *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*. Ministry of Justice.
19. See footnote 4: National Offender Management Service (2021); footnote 18: Farmer, M. S. (2017); HM Prison and Probation Service (2020). *Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties Policy Framework*. HMPPS.

*Regular and good quality contact time between an offending parent and their children/partner provide an incentive not to re-offend, and helps prisoners arrange accommodation and employment/ training on release... Visits also assist in maintaining good order. Good quality visits in a relaxed environment make a significant contribution to the wellbeing and attitude of prisoners and generally help to build better relationships between families and staff to the point where families are encouraged to share sensitive information which may have an impact on the welfare of the prisoner. (paragraphs 1.2 and 1.3)*

Amongst the recommendations made by Lord Farmer were extended day-long visits, and visits being granted irrespective of custodial behaviour, and not treated as a privilege subject to being partly withdrawn under the prison service's IEP (Incentive and Earned Privileges) scheme.

For these reasons, many prisoners, including Carl, are perplexed that social visits remain so limited. To his and thousands of others' frustration, the current systems in place do very little to promote ties with the outside world, and despite years, if not decades, of research and recommendations from government sanctioned reviews, it does not appear that much has been done. In the following section we will see that, if anything, things have got progressively worse over the years in which Carl has been in prison. These failings in prison practice were brought into sharp focus during the Covid-19 pandemic, to which we also turn our attention. In the conclusion, we explore possibilities and limitations for the types of reforms promoted by Woolf and Farmer. The fact that their recommendations regarding social visits have yet to be implemented raises the important question of why, if it is suggested through decades of research that improved family and community ties would make the experience of prison a little less painful, and improve prisoners' prospects for successful future reintegration, more has not been done? Does the government really

want to achieve these goals or are there conflicting agendas at play? In a political climate in which government policies are so focused on the punitive elements of punishment, it is questionable whether the supposed objectives of building family ties could ever coincide.

### **Carl's lived experience of prison**

I have personally experienced the consequences of a lack of emphasis in promoting ties between family and friends. This is represented by the extortionate costs of phoning people outside of prison, which Farmer found to be, "a recurring theme and a cause of considerable resentment in every prison [he] visited".<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the limits on what you can earn and spend of your own money to pay for these costs is not sufficient and has not kept up with rising costs and inflation. For example, a 1st class stamp has gone from 27p in 2005 when I began this sentence to 95p in 2022. Yet, while the cost of a stamp has more than tripled, what a prisoner can spend or earn has not. If anything, the wages for certain jobs have been reduced dramatically.

Another aspect of prison that has impacted my relationships and contact with the outside world is the distance prisons are from prisoners' homes. My family and most of my remaining friends live in London, so unless I have been in a local remand prison or decided to use the accumulated visits scheme,<sup>21</sup> my visitors have had to travel over 100 miles to see me. Luckily, most of my visitors can afford to do so and can also find the time to do this. Unfortunately, this is not the case for a large proportion of the prison population. This is despite the recommendations mentioned in the previous section, made by Lord Woolf after the Strangeways Riots over three decades ago. These experiences plus much more, are what led me to study these issues empirically, with a focus on my own personal experiences.

In addition to the long travel times that visitors must endure (on average, four-hour round trips in my case), the visit quality, duration and frequency, and limits on the number of visitors on each visit all fail to

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20. See footnote 18: Farmer, M. S. (2017), p. 104.

21. Under National Offender Management Service (2021), paragraph 3.2, you may save up to 26 visits in a twelve-month period. You may also apply to be temporarily transferred closer to home to use these intensively. See Footnote 18.

support the maintenance of relationships. Prisoners are only entitled to two visits each month, with a maximum of three adults attending. These visits are meant to last one hour but, as we emphasised in the introduction, are typically little more than 30 minutes long. However, depending on your IEP level, most prisons will facilitate two 2-hour visits a month as standard (or more if you are on the enhanced IEP Level), but you will only be eligible for the minimum if your behaviour is deemed to be 'not up to scratch'. Visits are also subject to availability, so in highly populated prisons it is most likely you will not always get a space on all the sessions you book, again emphasising the lack of action taken on this issue since both the Woolf and Farmer recommendations.

The Covid-19 pandemic helped to highlight how unfit the current prison system is when it comes to prisoners maintaining contact with the outside world. During most of the pandemic, at a time when contact became even more important than usual, visits were instead massively reduced if not cut out altogether. For the first few months I was only able to leave my cell for 15 minutes per day, and this was just for exercise. Showers were every three days and food was delivered to our cells. HMP Coldingley, where I was for much of the pandemic, does not have phones or toilets in the cells. I

cannot start to describe how horrendous the conditions were as a result. It was near enough impossible to call our families. For the most part, visits were not available and when they were, over a year into the pandemic, they were socially distanced, once a month, for an hour. Remarkably, at the time of writing, this is still the case.

As a result, I only saw my parents twice, my partner once, and my friends not at all for over two years during the pandemic. The process of entering a prison often cuts these visits in half if not more, as all prisoners' loved ones are assumed to be bringing in contraband and therefore need to be searched. This searching procedure results in some prisoners having even less than 30 minutes for their actual visits during this time. These Covid-19 experiences helped shine a light on the lacking structures needed to facilitate and maintain quality contact with the outside world in normal times. Private family visits could have provided the appropriate facilities that would have ensured prisoners and their families were kept in their 'bubbles', which could have reduced the risks presented by the pandemic.

Indeed, family visits are one of the few positive opportunities for social bonding that most prisons offer during normal times. Family visits are often as long as five hours and may offer a bit more of a relaxed environment. The requirements to gain access to these visits generally include being on enhanced IEP status and having at least one child on the visit. In my case, I have not been able to access these visits as I have no children. But some prisons do also offer other special visits a few times a year, like 'lifer visits' or 'adult only visits', which I have been able to access a few times over the course of my sentence. Once in 2007, whilst at HMP Swinfen Hall, then again whilst at HMP Coldingley from 2017 to 2019, I was able to have visits like these two to three times a year. Due to these current practices

throughout the prison system, which have been further exacerbated over the last three years because of Covid-19, it has been incredibly hard to maintain relationships with people on the outside. I have witnessed most long-term prisoners lose their partners and many forfeit visits all together. In fact, most of my friends that visit me now are ones who I have made from prison, something that is not always looked at favourably by the prison system. This reality is in stark contrast to what PSI 16/2011 says it intends to achieve through prison visits.

Another major issue, which seems to be more in the spotlight in recent times, is the impact prison has on mental health. I have personally noticed an increase in the cases of self-harm and suicide over the last decade, and even more so during the Covid-19 lock-down. I have lost a few friends to suicide or overdoses over the years, including foreign nationals who did not have much support, if any, from the outside world. Many foreign national prisoners do not receive any visits at all, not only due to the high costs incurred from travelling between countries, but also because of family and friends being refused visas. One foreign national, life sentenced prisoner I know has not physically seen his family since 2006. While at HMP Coldingley, a relatively small prison with around 500 inmates, amongst my peers there were three suicides and a fatal overdose. In the height of the lock-down whilst also at HMP Coldingley, a prisoner had a mental health episode where he began to cut off parts of his body including his nipples. In 1991, Lord Woolf stated that lack of contact prisoners had with their families was viewed by those who helped inform his review as a key factor in violence, self-harm, suicide, and the

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deterioration of mental health.<sup>22</sup> According to Lord Farmer, one fifth of men in prison have attempted suicide. At first sight, these are surprisingly high numbers. However, in the last month alone there have been three suicide attempts by people on the landing I currently reside on. Visits, contact with the outside world, and improving ties with prisoners' loved ones should be at the forefront when considering how to tackle this epidemic we are currently experiencing in the prison system.

### Can things be different?

The Barlinnie Special Unit (BSU) was a unit within Barlinnie Prison in Scotland, since closed, that was opened in the early 1970s to house some of the most dangerous and disruptive prisoners in the country. These included the infamous Jimmy Boyle, who later wrote that he gave up fighting the system the moment, on his first day at the Unit, when he was handed a pair of scissors by an officer to open clothes parcels he had arrived with.<sup>23</sup> The BSU was opened to deal with these individuals, but in a much different way to the conventional methods used in UK prisons. They did not use restraint or solitary confinement, instead encouraging good behaviour through trust and responsibility, art, education and — our focus in this paper — private family visits, which were unsupervised and held within an environment that was as close to what they would be like if they were at home.<sup>24</sup> All in all, the BSU was a great success, to the extent that of the 36 prisoners held there during its 21 year history, only four were ever re-convicted.<sup>25</sup> Citing debates in the UK Parliament from 1980 and research published in the early 1990s, Wilson and Brookes<sup>26</sup> explain:

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*the outside world and which are operated by more highly trained prison officers, were likely to have a positive impact on the rising tide of violence in British prisons. (p. 51-52)*

Yet the BSU was closed after a media exposé of prisoners being allowed to have sex with their partners.<sup>27</sup> The clear success of the prison — and its closure for one of its most progressive practices — further highlights the need to question whether UK policy makers are genuine about rehabilitation. On this matter, Sparks highlights an 'ambivalence within the higher echelons of the Scottish Prison Service'<sup>28</sup> that had hung over the unit throughout its history. Wilson and Brookes cite a prison chaplain from the unit who had criticised his colleagues for regarding 'a changed, articulate Boyle [as] more of a threat than one who lived like a caged animal'.<sup>29</sup> Wilson and Brookes continue:

*What was true for clerics was also true for other members of the public — defined in the very broadest sense — who might want prisoners to change their behaviour, but not if this was done within a regime that was seen to be 'soft' or 'easy'... The public did not want prisoners to experience conditions inside that were better than they might have*

*experienced on the outside. (p. 48)*

As UK-based penal abolitionists such as Carlen and Ryan and Sim have pointed out for decades, certain sections of government and the public may want prisoners to change, but they want this done through force, punishment, and harsh conditions that they feel will work as a deterrent, as opposed to genuine change through better opportunities and relationships with those in the community.<sup>30 31</sup> Progressive practices, Carlen stresses, are invariably 'clawed back' in time. Prison, she explains, is the central symbol of the state's

22. See footnote 18: Farmer, M. S. (2017).

23. Boyle, J. (1977). *A Sense of Freedom*. Pan Books.

24. Wilson, D., & Brookes, M. (2021). A failed success: The Barlinnie Special Unit. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 17(1), 31–41.

25. See footnote 24: Wilson, D., & Brookes, M. (2021).

26. See footnote 24: Wilson, D., & Brookes, M. (2021).

27. Sparks, R. (2002). Out of the 'Digger': The warrior's honour and the guilty observer. *Ethnography*, 3(4), 556–581.

28. See footnote 27: Sparks, R. (2002), p. 573.

29. See footnote 24: Wilson, D., & Brookes, M. (2021).

30. Carlen, P. (2002). Carceral clawback: The case of women's imprisonment in Canada. *Punishment & Society*, 4(1), 115–121.

31. Ryan, M., & Sim, J. (2007). Campaigning for and campaigning against prisons: Excavating and reaffirming the case for prison abolition. In Y. Jewkes (Ed.), *Handbook on Prisons* (pp. 697–718). Willan Publishing.

power to punish, and its main function is the delivery of pain. The BSU was an exception, and many Scottish prison officials resented this. As Norrie emphasises, as a radical alternative that worked, the BSU served as an 'alert to the overall failures of penal power in theory as well as practice' (p. 133).<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, it was never regarded as more than an experiment. Its emphasis on 'innovation... and transformation'<sup>33</sup> was not replicated in other prisons and is certainly not reflected in most UK prisons today.

This is not to say that there are no recent or current examples of progressive practices to learn from. These include units where prisoners can spend extended periods of time with their families, mainly children, under reduced supervision. For example, before the Covid-19 pandemic, HMP Askham Grange included an overnight child contact facility where mothers could spend up to 48 hours with their children in a separate building (Acorn House) with no intervention from staff.<sup>34</sup> A similar facility was opened at a second women's prison, HMP Drake Hall, in 2015. A few prisons allow prisoners' visitors to come onto the wing so they can see how their loved ones are living, including HMP Grendon, where Sacha coordinates a second convict criminology study group.

HMP Warren Hill, and quite a few private sector prisons, including HMP Five Wells, HMP Park, and HMP Oakwood, allow prisoners access to 'lounge visits'. These consist of a separate room from the main visits hall. These are mainly used for prisoners, their children, and partners to have a more private visit for at least an hour, with no CCTC or prison officers in the room, but with staff close by doing regular 'walk by' checks. These examples demonstrate that in theory all UK prisons could allow private family visits.

Unfortunately, often when pressure is applied, instead of allowing all prisoners to access these benefits, they are cut out altogether, as was the case

with the Barlinnie BSU. This may be the case today with HMP Askham Grange's Acorn House, which received positive inspectorate reports in the months before the Covid-19 prison lockdown by HM Inspectorate of Prisons and Ofsted,<sup>35 36</sup> but had still not re-instated overnight visits by the time this paper was submitted (February 2023). HMP Drake Hall has also stopped receiving children overnight. In January 2021, the Ministry of Justice announced it would include overnight facilities in plans to provide up to 500 new places across the women's prison estate. However, the Ministry of Justice did not repeat this pledge when it later provided more specific details — 456 places across 18 women's prisons — in its response to the House of

Commons Justice Committee's report *Women in Prison*.<sup>37</sup>

Carlen used the phrase 'carceral clawback' in the context of failed prison reforms in Canada.<sup>38</sup> We conclude our paper with reference to one region of the Global North that has managed to sustain progressive policies towards prisoners' contact with their families for more than half a century: the Nordic countries of Finland, Sweden, Greenland, Iceland, and especially Norway. Norway has the lowest recorded reoffending rate in the world and its prison system is intertwined

with its social welfare system.<sup>39</sup> Norwegian prison staff need a minimum of an undergraduate degree and three years training to work with prisoners. Open prisons are widely used to hold men and women on shorter sentences. Typically, individuals with a sentence of two years or less are housed in low-security prisons, the justification being that no one should be held under stricter conditions than necessary, which is surprisingly the same criteria used when categorising prisoners in English and Welsh prisons, although rarely followed. Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, private overnight family visits are standard practice. The same is the case across the Nordic region.<sup>40</sup>

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32. Norrie, A. (2022). Restoration, abolition and the loving prison: Jimmy Boyle and Barlinnie Special Unit. *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 61(1), 103–116.

33. See footnote 27: Sparks, R. (2002), p. 571.

34. Raikes, B., & Lockwood, K. (2019). Acorn House revisited: 'Think family, up and down and side to side'. In M. Hutton, & D. Moran (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison and the Family* (pp. 295–315). Palgrave Macmillan.

35. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2019). *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP & YOI Askham Grange*.

36. Ofsted (2020). *Inspection of Acorn Family Centre*.

37. House of Commons Justice Committee (2022). *Women in Prison*. HC265.

38. See footnote 30: Carlen, P. (2002).

39. Smith, P. S., & Ugelvik, T. (2017). Introduction: Punishment, welfare and prison history in Scandinavia. In P. S. Smith, & T. Ugelvik (Eds.), *Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice: Embraced by the Welfare State?* (pp. 3–31). Palgrave Macmillan.

40. Condry, R., & Smith, P. S. (2019). A holistic approach to prisoners' families: From arrest to release. In M. Hutton, & D. Moran (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison and the Family* (pp. 99–118). Palgrave Macmillan.

New Zealand criminologist John Pratt sparked intensive debate when he described the Nordic prison system as exceptionally progressive.<sup>41</sup> Some criminologists in the region have implicitly or explicitly accused Pratt of understating, even ignoring, a range of aspects of imprisonment in their countries that, in comparison to England and Wales, for example, are clearly regressive. Examples include their relatively high levels of remand and foreign national prisoners, their disproportionately long sentences for drug-related crimes, their common use of short prison sentences in place of community sentences, high use of solitary confinement, and high levels of self-inflicted death.<sup>42</sup> There are also signs that the region is drifting slowly in the direction of punitive populism.<sup>43</sup>

Still, the Nordic prison model is clearly one we in the UK should aspire to, in general and especially in regard to the emphasis put on prisoners maintaining contact with their families. Important in our view is the extent to which — in contrast to the experiences of failed reforms in the UK and Canada we have highlighted in this paper — Nordic prison systems still manage to distance themselves from negative media headlines and to operate with little interference from politicians. As Thomas Ugelvik explains in a recent interview that focused on Norway, the external agencies that are legally obligated to provide prisoners with social welfare equivalent to those they provide in the community simply ‘refuse to provide a second-rate service’, while the graduates who commit to two years’ training to enter the prison service train continue to do so ‘because they want to make a difference’.<sup>44</sup>

Equally important, — and again, in sharp contrast to the situation in Anglophone Northern countries like the UK and Canada — is the extent to which Nordic prison systems maintain closer ties with universities and

are generally more receptive to prison researchers. In an inspiring paper, Smith outlines how a long-term research project he was involved in eventually led to the introduction of children’s officers and parental courses across the Danish prison system.<sup>45</sup> When the project began in the late 2000s, Danish politics was dominated by a populist government that ‘seldom missed a chance to appear ‘tough’ and talk about ‘zero tolerance’’,<sup>46</sup> including at one point proposing legislation that would have introduced an automatic three-month ban on home leave for any prisoner who arrived back late. The project quickly moved forward when the Social Democratic Party returned to power in the early 2010s. The researchers engaged with both prisoner support groups and senior state officials, including the Danish

Minister for Justice, implemented four pilot projects with the support of local prison officials, and made specific efforts to get the issue of the impact of imprisonment on children into the national media. Throughout the paper, Smith emphasises the importance of engaging all relevant actors in continuous ‘criminological engagement’ and dialogue throughout the research process. Interestingly, he does so with reference to the work of mostly British criminologists and British prison reformers who are similarly prepared to work with state representatives, including some who were involved in the research that unintentionally led

to the demise of the Barlinnie SPU in the 1990s.

How and to what extent a participatory research activist agenda that included stakeholders and focused on the absence of private family visits in the UK could work is the subject matter of Carl’s doctoral research. There are major political, institutional, and cultural differences that will likely make both the research and activist stages of such an agenda more difficult in the UK than in Denmark, as Pratt’s Nordic exceptionalism thesis testifies. Carl takes heed of the warning by many

## Nordic prison systems still manage to distance themselves from negative media headlines and to operate with little interference from politicians.

41. Pratt, J. (2008). Scandinavian exceptionalism in an era of penal excess: Part I - The nature and roots of Scandinavian exceptionalism. *British Journal of Criminology*, 48(2): 119-137.

42. Mathiesen, T. (2012). Scandinavian exceptionalism in penal matters: Reality or wishful thinking? In T. Ugelvik, & J. Dullum (Eds.), *Penal Exceptionalism? Nordic Prison Policy and Practice* (pp. 13–37). Routledge.

43. Smith, P. S. (2012). A critical look at Scandinavian exceptionalism: Welfare state theories, penal populism, and prison conditions in Denmark and Scandinavia. In T. Ugelvik, & J. Dullum (Eds.), *Penal Exceptionalism? Nordic Prison Policy and Practice* (pp. 38–57). Routledge.

44. Darke, S. (2021). Global criminology: Comparative criminology. In S. Case et al. (Eds.) *The Oxford Textbook on Criminology* (2nd ed., pp. 375–407). Oxford University Press.

45. Smith, P. S. (2015). Reform and research: Reconnecting prison and society in the 21st Century. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 4(1), 33–49.

46. See footnote 45: Smith, P. S. (2015), p. 40.

British — and, indeed, Nordic — penal abolitionists that positive reforms are always vulnerable to being undone in time, and radical prison reformers who push too hard are eventually ‘silenced’<sup>47</sup> and ‘defined out’<sup>48</sup> as idealistic and irrelevant by prison authorities. Still, the more he reads about prison reform in the Nordic region, the more convinced he becomes that there are lessons to learn from Smith and his colleagues’ experiences.

In summary, the criminological case for the value of improved and increased prison visitation is simply too strong to ignore, especially regarding the impact on children. In any one year, 300,000 children in the

UK will go through the experience of having a parent in prison. Most of these parents are fathers. At the same time, as social visits help people cope better in prison, they also help children cope better outside. Fortunately, the children of prisoners are not stigmatised in the media or in politics as they might be in the playground. A radical research agenda that begins with their needs surely has a chance of success in any national context.

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