**Families’ experiences in a prison visitors’ centre**

Rebecca Foster

Abstract

This chapter explores the important but often overlooked spaces of prison visitors’ centres. After providing context to the evolution and workings of prison visitors’ centres in the UK, this chapter focuses on one visitors’ centre in Scotland, exploring how it operates and how it is experienced on a day to day basis by visiting families. The chapter discusses the support that is offered in this space through the provision of tailored facilities and activities and dedicated staff, and how these can help those families who need it. The chapter then reflects on how the existence of a designated space offers families the opportunity to establish their own informal support networks, which have, perhaps unexpected, underlying nuance and complexity. In sharing different families’ experiences of using and spending time in the visitors’ centre, the diversity of both prisoners’ families and their experience of prison visiting, and wider experiences of the incarceration of a loved one, are drawn attention to.

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[A] Introduction

Of all the forms of prisoner-family contact, visiting is often seen to be the most important and the most meaningful, from the perspective of prisoners, the prison, and families of those confined alike. For example, it has been described as an “important lifeline for the maintenance of family relationships” (Light and Campbell 2007, 299). However, the small but growing body of literature on this dimension of families’ experiences, documents and emphasises the extensive and “inherent obstacles” families encounter when visiting (Tewksbury and DeMichele 2005, 308).

For the new or unfamiliar visitor, the entire process of entry may be bewildering, which may be compounded by a lack of clear information explaining the procedure; an issue long observed (for example, Kotarba 1979). The procedure for booking a visit can be a source of frustration (Light and Campbell 2007); this may be hampered by the variation in the booking process between prisons, even those managed by a common umbrella agency. Visitors often face long and costly journeys to prison (Sheehy 2010). The visiting times can be inconvenient and restrictive (Light and Campbell 2007), and more specifically, these may be incompatible with other family routines, and with school and work timetables. Visitors can find the wait for the visit long and boring (Sturges 2002). Moreover, while exceptions are highlighted, a common theme in this literature is the negative interactions visitors have with prison officers. Specific complaints include that staff are perceived to be indifferent to their needs as visitors (Kotarba 1979); are said to treat visitors as though they too have offended (Sturges 2002); or quite simply treat visitors with contempt and a general lack of respect (Hutton 2016).

With growing recognition that visiting can be difficult for families, new spaces for visiting families have emerged - prison visitors’ centres - which broadly aim to support visiting families and minimise some of these burdens outlined. The emergence of these spaces has, by extension, created new sites in which to conduct research with families affected by imprisonment.

I conducted qualitative research in one such prison visitors’ centre in Scotland – the Visitors’ Centre at HMP Edinburgh (‘the Centre’). Families’ experiences of prison visiting were elicited through carrying out ethnographic observation and qualitative interviews with Centre staff and visiting families including children[[1]](#endnote-1), in this unique site, over a nine-month period during 2014-2015. While the space provided a means of accessing families affected by imprisonment to speak with, I was also interested in the space itself. I aimed to uncover how the space was used and experienced by visiting families. I aimed to establish if benefit was conferred through the provision of tailored services and facilities ‘put in’ for families, but also to consider if even the existence of a designated space could benefit families.

The Centre emerged as a key site of support, not only in its provision of a comfortable waiting space, but in the formal and informal support offered by its dedicated staff. Moreover, the Centre emerged as a site in which families developed their own informal support networks and friendships.

After providing context to the evolution and workings of prison visitors’ centres in the UK, this chapter discusses how this one particular visitors’ centre works. Consideration is given to the formal support that is offered in the Centre and how this can help those families who need it. Attention then turns to how the existence of a designated space offers families the opportunity to establish their own informal support networks; interestingly, these are networks which have underlying nuance and complexity. In sharing different families’ experiences of the Centre, the diversity of prisoners’ families and their experience of visiting a loved one in prison, as well as their wider experience of familial imprisonment, is emphasised.

[A] The evolution of prison visitors’ centres in the UK

Prison visits typically take place in designated ‘visit *rooms*’ within prisons, which is common practice across jurisdictions. While these spaces “vary enormously” (Moran 2013, 180), common to all is their provision of tables and chairs for visitors and prisoners to be seated at for the duration of the visit; movements of both prisoners and visitors are limited and monitored via this seating arrangement. Many visit rooms offer basic refreshments via vending machines or small tuck shops, and often are also equipped with children’s play areas.

Visitors’ *centres* are areas distinct from prisons and rooms within prisons such as the prison visit room. Visitors’ centres aim to improve the visiting experience of visiting families and to offer support to these families (Loucks 2002). The first visitors’ centre in the UK was established at HMP Pentonville in England more than forty years ago,[[2]](#endnote-2) in part prompted by Baroness Linklater of Butterstone’s concerns about the queues of women and children she observed waiting outside her local prison, unprotected from the elements (Hansard 2002). The evolution and increasing prominence of visitors’ centres in the UK will be discussed shortly, but first a brief introduction to these spaces.

Visitors’ centres tend to be found in separate buildings from the prison they are associated with, but located in proximity to them. Centres offer visiting families a designated place to wait prior to their visit, a place in which to store personal belongings (those items not permitted by the prison), and a space for families to relax after their visit (Families Outside[[3]](#endnote-3) 2010). There is no one model of visitors’ centres (even those found in the same jurisdiction): indeed, as Barry observes, “visitor centres, where they exist at all, mean different things to different people” (Barry 2009, 3). For example, they vary in terms of practices and the facilities offered (Loucks 2002). Some are little more than ‘add-ons’ to prisons in the literal, architectural sense, but also in the operational sense; some simply offer a waiting space to offer protection from the elements, while others also carry out basic administrative functions, as required by the prison they serve such as booking in visitors (Mills and Codd 2007). Others, like the Centre at HMP Edinburgh, are purpose-built, aiming to provide an array of support based services to visitors (Loucks 2002; Mills and Codd 2007).

In the UK, visitors’ centres tend to be run by voluntary sector organisations, often those that specifically support prisoners’ families or aim to raise their profile. For example, ‘Pact’, a national charity which supports those affected by imprisonment, manages the visitors’ centre for five prisons in England and Wales. Staffing arrangements differ between visitors’ centres; centres each have different compositions of paid staff and volunteers (Families Outside 2010). Operational budgets for centres also vary considerably (Mills and Codd 2007).

In England and Wales, good practice guidance for visitors’ centres was formulated in 1998 by HM Prison Service in collaboration with voluntary sector organisations, but had no implementation plan or enforcement mechanism (Hansard 2002). More recently, Action for Prisoners’ Families produced a revised evaluation toolkit (2011); this provides guidance on how visitors’ centres can evaluate the delivery of their services and their impact. There is a requirement in England and Wales for all newly built or contracted out establishments to be equipped with a visitors’ centre (Home Office 2004), though this is the extent of obligatory provision.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government holds devolved responsibility for all aspects of Scotland’s criminal justice system including its prisons. In 2015, the Scottish Government established the National Prison Visitor Centre Steering Group (NPVCSG). The NPVCSG’s purpose is to develop a strategy for the establishment and support of a visitors’ centre for all prisons in Scotland. Further, in November 2015, the Scottish Government awarded £1.8m to visitors’ centres in Scotland to support their work (Scottish Government 2015). While this is a welcome development, currently there is no formal or legal commitment to ensure that all existing or planned prisons in Scotland are equipped with an associated visitors’ centre.

Progressive developments in visitors’ centre provision may be partly explained by the fact that their potential to support families both through the imprisonment of a loved one, and in other ways (for example, via signposting to relevant services) is now increasingly recognised (Loucks 2002). Indeed, in 2004 the Home Office outlined that visitors’ centres have an “important role to play” in helping to keep families together and in helping to foster the rehabilitation process (Home Office 2004, 37), and have been credited with helping to ensure that this contact is positive, not only from the perspective of families’ but also from the perspective of prisoners and prison staff (Woodall et al. 2009).

To turn again to the Scottish context, given the underlying research, at the time of writing seven of Scotland’s fifteen prisons have a visitors’ centre. These prisons are: HMPs Edinburgh, Barlinnie, Perth, Grampian, Addiewell; HMPYOI Cornton Vale and HMYOI Polmont. All centres based at these prisons are managed by voluntary sector organisations, who work in partnership with the Scottish Prison Service (SPS).[[4]](#endnote-4) Given that all are managed by different organisations and are associated with different prisons, each visitors’ centre works differently; this is important to bear in mind.

[B] The Visitors’ Centre at HMP Edinburgh

HMP Edinburgh (‘Edinburgh Prison’) is located to the West of Edinburgh city centre in the Saughton area of the city, giving rise to its local name ‘Saughton’. It is a large prison (the second largest in Scotland), and tends to house approximately 900 prisoners each day, though daily prison populations of course fluctuate (Scottish Prison Service 2016). It accommodates prisoners primarily from the local authority areas of the City of Edinburgh, the Lothians (Midlothian, East Lothian, and West Lothian), the Scottish Borders and Fife; local authority areas which are geographically closest to the prison, but this does not preclude prisoners from other local authorities from being accommodated in Edinburgh Prison.

Edinburgh Prison largely comprises of convicted and remanded adultmenbut also accommodates a small number of adult women (approximately 85). Adult prisoners in Scotland are defined as those aged 21 years and over; those aged below 21 years are classed as young offenders. The lengths of prisoners’ sentences at HMP Edinburgh vary considerably. The prison holds those serving long term (including life) and short-term sentences; serving life sentences and there are some who are serving Orders for Life Long Restriction (OLRs)[[5]](#endnote-5) (Scottish Prison Service 2016). Long term sentences are custodial sentences of four years and over. Short term sentences are custodial sentences of fewer than four years.

The Centre at HMP Edinburgh was the first purpose built centre for prison visitors in Scotland (Families Outside 2006). It is owned by the Onward Trust, which holds a lease until 2035 from Scottish Government Ministers, for the purpose of providing a visitors’ centre for those visiting HMP Edinburgh (Salvation Army 2013). The WRVS held the contract with the Onward Trust between 2000 and 2004, and in 2004 the Salvation Army took over management. Then in January 2016, Barnardo’s took over the management of the Centre, while retaining all members of Salvation Army staff. Since all fieldwork was undertaken when the Centre was managed by the Salvation Army, discussion of the Salvation Army’s management of the Centre in this chapter uses the present tense. Yet it is important to point out that given that that the ethos and aims of the management of a visitors’ centre is likely to shape the operation of the Centre, the space discussed in this chapter may be one which differs, from the Centre that currently operates at HMP Edinburgh; as such the research underpinning this chapter may represent a snapshot in the life of the Centre and those who spent time within it.

In terms of the visiting process for visiting families to Edinburgh Prison, visitors are asked to report to the Centre at least thirty minutes before the official start time of their visit, where they then are invited to wait in the Centre or in their cars. However, the reality is that most visitors wait in the Centre (often significantly) longer than this, largely due to arriving early. There are numerous reasons to explain this early arrival, but this includes the fact that most visitors to HMP Edinburgh rely on forms of transport such as local or national bus services (Families Outside 2009). Families fear arriving late (and in turn risking not being permitted a visit), and this coupled with a concern relating to the reliability of public transport results in families catching earlier buses and trains than technically required.

The Centre is located within the prison environs; it sits directly in front of the prison and next to the car park, but is found in a separate building to the prison itself. Regarding the interior, the environment is spacious, bright and open-plan. There are a range of seating options, including cushioned seats in booths, and tables and chairs. The Centre is equipped with a small canteen, and a selection of areas created for children visitors, including a small outdoor play area, an indoor play room, and Children’s Corner. The latter space is decorated with the children’s own art work and educational posters, and has child size tables and chairs and children’s books, and intended for use primarily for primary school aged children.

Although the Centre is managed by the Salvation Army which has its own aims (which I will shortly discuss), and operated by staff employed by the Salvation Army and therefore independent of SPS, members of staff work in partnership with SPS staff, particularly staff based in the prison reception Family Contact Officers (FCO’s). FCOs are prison officers whose role is to encourage and maintain links with families (Scottish Prison Service 2016), through offering advice, information and support, and through overseeing visits.

[C] *Centre aims and activities*

The Centre’s main aim is to provide support to family members visiting someone imprisoned at HMP Edinburgh. As outlined in its Mission Statement for the Centre (displayed on a board near the Centre’s entrance), the Salvation Army aims to provide a “supportive, friendly, and non-judgemental environment” for those visiting the prison, and to support visitors at “their point of need.”

Underpinning all work at the Centre is a ‘community development approach’ which aims to respond to the needs directly of visiting families. It aims to achieve this through engaging with the families themselves who express their needs and share their experiences (Salvation Army 2013). The rationale is that the families themselves have direct input into the services and activities offered by the Centre. When the development worker (who later became the Co-ordinator of the Centre) came to the Centre, she had three key objectives: to improve the health and wellbeing of visitors via improving the quality and breadth of food and drink on offer at the Centre; to improve facilities for children to improve their overall experience of visiting; and to improve the information and support offered by the Centre.

As regards health promotion, the Centre previously only offered sugary soft drinks and snacks with a high salt, sugar and/or fat content to visiting families. In consultation with families it emerged that families wanted more wholesome and filling food such as soup, baked potatoes, and toasties and paninis. The provision of these small meals is now available, giving families the option of eating dinner at the Centre, which may lessen the time pressure on families for visits after school and work. In terms of information provision, not surprisingly much of the information provided relates to the prison and criminal justice system: for example, families ask about prison healthcare, information about the parents and children’s support project and referrals to external agencies, including Families Outside (Salvation Army 2013, 9). While there are information boards dotted around the Centre which convey this information, Centre staff tend to convey this information orally, often while visitors are welcomed at the reception desk.

In terms of improving children’s experiences of visiting, since 2012, the Salvation Army have contracted Edinburgh based child-care agency ‘Super Mums’ to provide child care workers to provide arts and crafts activities for children three times per week. Structured activities such as making masks, door signs or lanterns are offered, but children are also free to draw, paint and use the materials as they wish. The arts and crafts activities offered in these sessions are very popular with children. Centre staff also invite a worker from the Dogs Trust[[6]](#endnote-6), every couple of months to deliver an educational but fun session to children on responsible dog ownership. The worker offers the children fun activities: for example, brushing the soft toy dog to ‘look for fleas’; playing pairs to match dogs looking for a new home to suitable owners; colouring in worksheets and completing quizzes. These sessions are aimed at raising children’s awareness of the needs of dogs, and how they can help look after their own dog if they have one; the sessions also have a broader aim of developing children’s sense and application of responsibility, and sense of citizenship.

The Centre works in partnership with NHS Lothian Public Health Promotion to offer the ‘Childsmile’ Initiative within the Centre. Childsmile is a national programme aimed at improving the oral health of children in Scotland, and to reduce inequalities in relation to access of services and treatment. Approximately every six weeks, an Oral Health Promotion Worker visits the Centre, offering information and advice to families, as well as free toothbrushes, toothpaste, weaning cups and products for dentures (Salvation Army 2013, 27). Centre staff chat to the worker and take the ‘freebies’, and encourage anyone else present in the Centre to do likewise.

I have aimed here to offer merely a glimpse into the range of initiatives and services offered to families in the Centre, which are often provided in partnership with other agencies. Now I will explore how families experience these, and the interactions families share with Centre staff.

[A] Being in the Centre

[B] *Facilities and activities*

There was a consensus from both families and staff that irrespective of what was offered in the space, having a designated area for families to wait comfortably, and protected from the elements, was essential. Evelyn[[7]](#endnote-7) reflected:

“… thank goodness the Centre is here…I was driving past the old Aberdeen prison…I can’t imagine how it would feel like going to a prison like that, approaching it, and when it doesn’t have a Centre like this.” (Fieldnotes)

An elderly visitor who had difficulty walking said she found the environment “nice and comfortable”, and said that having this space is particularly important if the weather is bad, reflecting Baroness’ Linklater’s concerns. Centre staff commented:

“Most of the visitors that we get in here obviously find- they’ve even said when they’ve been to other prisons and there isn’t this facility and they have to queue up in the freezing cold, they can’t get a cup of tea or coffee and they really, really think this [the Centre] is a good idea.” (Staff member G, interview transcript)

“We get it from the old timers as well, the ones who remember how it was before, when they were just standing outside a grey building...now they’ve got somewhere warm.” (Staff members D and F, interview transcript)

Visitors were very positive about the Centre’s environment, describing it as “comfortable”, “homely and modern”, “very accommodating”, “nice”, and said that the atmosphere “feels relaxed”. Visitors specifically praised the facilities offered by the Centre, including the canteen, the accessible toilets, the play areas and activities for children, and the comfortable seating. Children also expressed an enthusiastic appreciation of the activities and facilities offered by the Centre. Pryha elaborated:

“The kids’ area is good in here for the wee ones and older ones. And you can do stuff. Like you can help your wee sisters. There’s things to read and stuff. There’s comfy seats for the adults here too. The Children’s Corner is good, with pictures and things up.” (Family member interview transcript).

Sisters Amy and Britney enjoyed spending time in the Children’s Corner and the arts and crafts activities offered in it; they liked the arts and crafts activities so much that they said they wanted these to be offered more often. Another pair of sisters, Pryha and Pandora echoed these sentiments. Pandora said, “I like the park bit outside”, the children’s outdoor play area attached to the Centre. There appeared to be broad agreement among the children that the waiting in the Centre was enjoyable because there were opportunities for play and for enjoyable food (the toasties were a favourite), reinforced in my conversations with the children where they enthusiastically reeled off the activities they took part in each time they visited. However, this is likely due to there being an array of activities on offer to keep them occupied, and children’s experiences of the Centre (and waiting in this space before their visit) sharply contrasted with children’s experiences of waiting in the various queues prior to entering the visit room: children were denied the opportunity to “do stuff” and the wait was consequently, though predictably, both dull and frustrating.

Parents were also positive about the activities and facilities available to their children. Katie remarked:

The kids are well entertained anyway…with the playroom, and the staff and their help…Because I know the children, I know they like playing here, and em they can play outside or play in the playroom you know. Or they can do drawings and things like that, you know. And I know that they’re ok, they’re alright you know. It’s a good environment, you know? (Family member interview transcript)

The range of activities to entertain children enabled parents to take up the opportunity to relax in the Centre. Staff members’ D and F highlighted this: “[the Centre gives parents] somewhere for their kids to play, so they get a wee respite from the children for a wee while.” Yet, there is also an irony here: the prison offers, albeit brief, respite from ‘free’ life where there may be a lack of child care and parental support, including *intrusive* parental support via social work intervention; themes I cannot dwell on here but which are important to acknowledge.

[B]*Supportive staff*

I have outlined the formal support and services offered in the Centre. However, much of the support that is offered by staff to families is informal in nature, and often subtler than the very visible facilities and activities offered. This informal support was a common theme in my interviews and conversations with families:

Paisley: The staff are really nice. Like for you Pryha, they got you a cake for your birthday.

All agree that the Centre staff are ‘really nice’. (Family member interview transcript)

In a conversation I had with Dee and Evelyn, Dee said: “they’re [the staff] really friendly. Because we’re here every week, they remember you know, the can of juice that you like.” Dee highlighted how remembering something ostensibly minor such as a visitor’s choice of drink was in actual fact not minor at all; it was very important to families, because it demonstrated that Centre staff cared. This led me to reflect on these many seemingly trivial acts that I had observed or been told about by families, which prompted me to list and reflect on these in my notebook:

There are various little things the staff do that may well go unnoticed; things that are certainly not part of their job description. Like charging phones in the sockets behind the reception desk; storing buggies behind the desk; storing car keys so visitors don’t have to use the lockers just for car keys; holding babies to allow mums to go the toilet in peace; giving visitors a loan of a £1 coin for the locker but not chasing visitors if they do not return it; warming up formula milk for babies; keeping a collection of spare clothes for children in case they have accidents; giving visitors directions to various places and so on. However, these all seem to add up to create the supportive atmosphere I feel the Centre has, which is also felt by visitors I have spoken to. (Fieldnotes).

Relatedly, in another conversation, a visitor said that staff member H told her to phone the Centre when they are at a certain roundabout, so that she can have a baked potato ready for her when she arrives in the Centre. Staff member H does this, and the visitor appreciates it. These small acts of kindness by staff may be easily overlooked and may fail to be captured in formal reports charting developments in the Centre, including the programmes, support services and initiatives it offers. However, it was these friendly and supportive interactions that families raised repeatedly in discussions, demonstrating that these gestures did not go unnoticed, at least by families. It is worth highlighting here then the importance and value of the informal support offered by Centre staff to families, and the informal support between families.

[B] *(Prison) friendships*

As mentioned, since the Centre is the designated space in which families wait, it is also a site in which many social interactions take place, between families and between families and staff. As will be shown, the space itself produces, even impliedly, certain social relations.

As Codd (2002) notes and as I have critically considered elsewhere (Foster 2016) formal self-help groups for prisoners’ families, with the aim of supporting families during imprisonment have surfaced; such groups have been viewed as being empowering to women, through “providing information, practical and emotional support and promoting confidence and skills” (Codd 2003, 16). However, as Codd rightly highlights, describing such groups as empowering for these women may obscure the fact that the state and penal institutions rely on these women to continue contact with their imprisoned partner, during the sentence and after release (2003, 17), to help foster the desistance processs for the prisoner. I observed the natural ‘springing up’ of these informal support networks in the Centre, and sharing Codd’s concerns, found these to be preferable to those created on families’ behalf.

Others who have explored families’ experiences of visiting have identified the “sense of community” shared by visitors, specifically women visitors in Christian’s study (2005, 39). In Kotarba’s study of the visiting process in a county jail in the US, he observed that in the imposed waiting period, conversations naturally sprung up. Amongst acquaintances, typical conversation focussed on the prisoners, and regulars to the jail developed their own “jail friendships” (1979, 85). These ‘jail friendships’ were apparent from my own research in both interviews and ethnographic observation. For example, Bob commented:

They’re [the visitors] all in the same position but for different reasons. We all help each other… “we’re in the same case, because the people we love closely are in jail. You know we’re in the same boat… (Family member interview transcript)

Jamie and Serenity discussed:

 Jamie: The first time I came here, it was awkward you know. You don’t know where to sit, where you’re going, where you book in…. Though the staff are nice. The first time I came here, I was sitting here for like an hour, just at a loss you know. Then someone, I think it was Serenity came over. And that was it. The Wednesday Club [was formed]

Serenity: Aye, the Wednesday Club

Jamie: It’s just a good laugh you know. Just chatting to folk. It’s like a wee family, here every week. Wee random chats, you know. It’s good to see them, catch up, only a quick chat about the imprisonment. (Family member interview transcript)

Jamie later told me that the Wednesday Club “just sort of happened”, that it is “really good” and that he “looks forward” to catching up with the other people in this group. These visitors meet at the Centre on Wednesday every week as they each wait for the same visit session (for Ingliston Hall[[8]](#endnote-8)), and have called themselves the Wednesday Club. Ingliston Hall houses long term offenders or prisoners on protection (which includes individuals convicted of sexual offences ).

Bob also revealed how he developed friendships with other visitors: “… it’s [the Centre] a lovely place, a lovely place. Great people that I’ve met and now I can call friends…” (Family member interview transcript) These examples draw attention to the importance of families who share the experience of incarceration to have a space to talk and offer support to each other, should they require it. In some circumstances, the networks and friendships established in the Centre go beyond this space. For example, Jamie and Serenity kept in touch between visits through texting and social media. Jamie summarised: “it’s all about making friends”.

Dee also shared how she and Evelyn became friends. Dee and Evelyn’s husbands were cell mates, and Evelyn and Dee attended the same Friday afternoon visit to see their spouses:

Because Evelyn and I just started meeting up on a Friday, and we’d have like a toastie and a blether and catching up. And we [Dee and husband Tommy] still keep in touch with Evelyn and Iain. I like text her and see how she’s doing. Because she’s had quite a tough time, because it’s an adjustment to having them back in your house all the time. (Fieldnotes)

My research revealed that the Centre was a fundamentally social space, and demonstrated how through the provision of a designated waiting area, informal support networks and friendships established and even extended beyond the Centre. However, closer inspection of this sociality uncovered complexity and nuance, which I will shortly explore. My interrogation of this space also exposed the inconveniences brought by the obligatory waiting families do in the Centre, and how the cumulative time spent (bearing in mind the fact that many family members are frequent waiters) means time is taken *away* from families, and from involvement in other family activities.

[B] *The families of sex offenders*

As noted, my research was situated in a prison context encompassing a diverse range of prisoners, and by extension, a diverse range of families. One group of family members that emerged to have a distinct and to some extent shared dimension of experience were the family members of those in prison for sexual offences. It was primarily the families of offenders convicted of serious crimes (almost exclusively sexual offences), [[9]](#endnote-9) who discussed in vivid detail their experience of stigma.

Individuals who have committed sexual offences (‘sex offenders’)[[10]](#endnote-10) are treated and perceived by society as “deviants in an already stigmatised population [i.e. criminals]” (Ricciardelli and Mackenzie 2013, 357). Already stigmatised for being convicted of *a* crime, sex offenders experience an added stigma which relates to the nature of the crime(s) they have been convicted of. Sexual offences inflict quite unique violations and harms, spreading stigma to both perpetrator and victim. Moreover, in contemporary Western society, there tends to be a conflation between sexuality and identity where the commission of a deviant sexual act (that is made public and formally castigated through a sexual offence arrest and conviction) leads to the assignation of a deviant identity - the ‘sex offender’ - which is all-encompassing and profoundly negative (Ievins and Crewe 2015). As discussed, by virtue of courtesy stigma, this ‘double stigma’ (surrounding the commission of a crime and a sex offence specifically) attaches to the perpetrators’ families as well*.*  Everyday understandings of the causes of crime, both general and specific, contribute to experiences of stigma (May 2000). These common-sense understandings also relate to the situational characteristics surrounding the commission of a crime: for example, there is often an erroneous yet widely held assumption that the families of sex offenders ‘must have known’ about either the sex offender’s disposition to offend in this way, or about the occurrence of the offence(s) themselves. Families of such offences can experience ‘contamination’ due to their: proximity to the offender; omissions; commissions, and their continued involvement or support of the offender (Condry 2011 [2007]).

Though prisoners and offenders’ families have generally been overlooked in research and policy until quite recently, the families of sex offenders have been especially neglected (Farkas and Miller 2007). With some exceptions (e.g., Howarth and Rock (2000), and Condry 2011 [2007]) [[11]](#endnote-11), the literature that does document their experiences is US centric and focuses on the effects of Sex Offender Registration Notification (SORN) rather than imprisonment per se, although custodial sentences often accompany SORN. Given similarities with registration requirements (with some caveats) this literature is broadly applicable to the Scottish context. This literature highlights the numerous negative impacts on the families of sex offenders which include employment issues, financial problems, and housing issues (this often involves forced re-location) (Levenson and Tewksbury 2009). These effects also impact those in prison for other offences, but may be experienced in more intensive and comprehensive ways by those convicted of sexual offences. It also highlights the pronounced stigma experienced by these families: they tend, compared even with other families with a member in prison to experience especially high levels of stress, the loss of friendships and relationships, and feelings of isolation or loneliness (Tewksbury and Levenson 2009). There are certainly echoes of this in my own study with Scottish families.

For example, Bob, visited his father who had been convicted of a sexual offence against a child. I interviewed Bob on a few occasions, and supplemented these with numerous more informal conversations:

Bob tells me that he has told some really good friends [about his dad’s offence and the subsequent imprisonment]. However, some have been quite judgemental and opinionated about his dad and the offence, and have articulated what they would have done if they were in Bob’s situation. Some have also told other people about the offence. He says he is ok with talking about it to some (trusted) people, but he regards it as confidential and doesn’t want it spreading. (Fieldnotes).

During fieldwork, Bob and his wife were offered a larger house by the housing association in a nearby town, which suited them perfectly since they wished to have children in the near future. He and his wife were both very excited about the prospect of moving to a new house, but anxieties surrounding his father’s impending release diminished the excitement. Though Bob did not have many negative interactions with his former neighbours, he did not want to risk these occurring in his new community. He explained:

He [his father] could come to my house and someone could say…they could notice that you know. And that could bring tension to my house, and I’m no, I’m no daeing that. I’m not taking that chance... I mean, it could come to bite me in the back side… because I’m just not willing to… I just don’t want any trouble. I don’t want anything to… (Family member interview transcript)

Bob resolved that he would manage this by asking his father not to visit him in his new home, offering instead to visit him in his father’s home. Other family members were also careful about who they revealed the familial imprisonment to. Wednesday Club members Serenity and Jamie, both visiting family members convicted of sexual offences, discovered that they had a mutual friend. Jamie told me that Serenity asked him not to “let on” to this mutual friend where they met (the Centre). Though Serenity’s life has been punctuated by multiple familial imprisonments (with different family members sentenced to imprisonment over the course of her life; experiences shared by many of the family members I spoke with, she remained cautious about who she revealed this current imprisonment (her partner’s) to.

My conversations with Judy, a woman visiting her partner convicted of a sexual offence, drew attention to the fact that even where families had prior contact with the prison through previous familial imprisonment, and even where their wider social networks have associations with imprisonment, they remain cautious about whom they ‘tell’:

But more often than not, I always arrive a little bit earlier than is suggested, so that I can catch up with other visitors, that are going through, whether we are all going through the same thing or not. It’s just, knowing that you have that extra support. Because you can’t just blab it to any person out on the street. They then look at you as though you are something beneath their shoe, no matter what your partner’s in for…even if it’s not your partner. For instance, some of my friends, they come into visit. Like brothers or nephews…they can’t tell anybody that they’ve got a member of the family that’s in the jail. There’s still quite a bad stigma to it… (Family member interview transcript)

[B] *Complex solidarity*

Yet, the networks and friendships discussed were particularly noticeable during the visits for Ingliston Hall. The families of sex offenders seemed to gravitate to one another, seeming to interact exclusively or primarily with other families visiting sex offenders. I did not observe such obvious grouping together of families with other visitors in the Ingliston visit, or indeed visitors in any other visit session. Centre staff also observed this phenomenon. As staff member H commented:

Because they’re [the families of sex offenders] gonna be in a community where the offence has generally ‘got out’, where there’s a lot more stigma attached to the offence, there’s going to be a lot of community pressure on them. And that’s the same regardless of any issue of class or anything. And so, they’re coming in and they’re feeling hounded and they feel like they’ve got no support system. And particularly given the specifics of any offence that can be really problematic. If it’s a family offence, then there are obviously huge issues going on there, so they may have literally no support on the outside… and it’s quite interesting to see particularly how the sex offender visiting population have created their own informal support networks. (Staff member H transcript)

Another staff member made a similar observation: “Sex offenders’ families are in a group. Sex offenders’ families are *all* in a group, and they just sit together in one group, and they do not interact with anybody else.” (Staff member G transcript). Staff member G implies that sex offenders’ families are unwilling to interact with other families, and I sensed from this a slight tone of judgement, or frustration, about this. However, this may be a defensive response to feeling that other families are unwilling to interact with *them*. Zena, a family member who had visited her brother in prison, explained:

I mean like the people that commit sexual offences wear different outfits [in the visit room compared to the other prisoners] and they sit in a place that are separate from us…I mean there’s definitely like a stigmatisation, and a rhetoric of ‘we’re all in the same boat, but they’ve [the family member’s imprisoned loved one] done something worse’, a ‘if we had that, we wouldn’t visit them’, but you never know until you’re put in that situation… (Family member interview transcript)

She continued:

My dad would talk to my brother, and they’d be like ‘Oh did you see somebody’s here to visit them?’ ‘I can’t believe they’re actually visiting them after what he did’ or whatever. Like even though my brother’s done something wrong… (Family member interview transcript)

Several families I interviewed employed derogatory language when discussing sex offenders, and expressed concern about occasions when they shared the visit room with them (these related to the Sunday afternoon children’s visits). Staff member H shared her experiences of observing and managing this:

And I’ve been in visits where somebody’s went ‘Oh you know, the dark red jumpers are beasts[[12]](#endnote-12), keep your bairns away from them’, which is…difficult to deal with, particularly given that they’re in with Ingliston 4 [level four] which is a long termer population, so you have families who are quite vigilante almost about not wanting to be in with sex offenders. And occasionally that’s flared up a little bit. (Staff member H, interview transcript).

Though infrequent, families did express these concerns to me, as is evidenced in the following fieldnote:

Katie’s friend tells me that she came in for a Sunday visit recently but did not realise or wasn’t told that the visit included some prisoners from ‘protections’ who she describes as the ‘beasty feasties’. She was horrified. She left the visit after just ten minutes because she was so uncomfortable with her children being there. She tells me that this is ‘not right’. (Fieldnotes).

Although these expressed concerns related specifically to sex offenders and not to their families, this sheds light on courtesy stigma and how the worries of families of those in prison for sexual offences are realised to some extent in the views of other visitors. In addition, Zena’s account reveals how some families subtly distanced themselves from the families of sex offenders. There seems to be a mirroring between prison and wider social hierarchies: sex offenders are firmly at the bottom of the prison hierarchy and are segregated from all other prisoners due to concerns for their safety (Ievins and Crewe 2015). Families also are segregated, with sex offenders’ families visibly separated from the others. In the visit room, sex offenders and their families occupy a particular row, and are separated from all of the other prisoners and visitors. Therefore, the institution imposes a degree of segregation on families by virtue of the visiting timetable- visits for remand prisoners, visits for short term prisoners and so on. Yet, the interactions which follow - the subtle (or less so) distancing which occurs - serve to reproduce and reinforce that segregation. In the same way that the prison represents a moral as well as physical exclusion of the prisoner (Sykes 2007 [1958]), a moral community also exists *within* prisoner ‘groups’- demarcated initially and most powerfully by the nature of the offence leading to imprisonment in which sex offenders start off life in prison; in an almost already an exiled community within an exiled community (Ievins and Crewe 2015). My research with families suggests this extends beyond the prison (and prisoner) and into the Centre: families create, and subtly enforce, their own moral community in this space.

Therefore, this idea of families providing each other with mutual support is to some extent contingent on the nature of the offences involved. This qualified solidarity I observed in the research was evident, though not commented on by the families themselves. I did not observe nor was I told about any explicit confrontations or altercations between families over their loved ones’ offences which leads me to conclude that this segregation of families functioned as defence mechanism triggered self-selectively by the families themselves to protect against experiencing further stigma. Even where offences result in comparable sentence lengths, thus legally treated as identical (or comparable) in terms of seriousness, this does not necessarily translate to how other families view, and then respond to, these offences, suggesting separations relate to social rather than legal classifications of the offence. This reveals much about societal attitudes surrounding certain types of crime and those connected to them, however tenuously or indirectly. In turn, this reveals much about the experiences of families affected by these particular offences. Taking all of this into consideration, the Wednesday Club and other similar formations perhaps emerge as a necessary or inexorable response to the challenges encountered, both within the Centre and in their day to day lives at home and in their communities.

[A] Conclusion

In this chapter, I have aimed to highlight the importance of having a designated and comfortable space for families to wait, and to access services and facilities where they require them. I have discussed how much of the support offered to families by Centre staff is informal in nature, and aimed to convey how valued this to families. I have aimed to offer insights into the range of social interactions that take place in this unique space between visiting families. Findings from my study reinforce the wisdom of investing in visitors’ centres, but also reveal the largely underexplored (bearing in mind key exceptions, not least Comfort’s (2008) influential work) social interactions that can take place in these spaces; interactions which are shaped by a broad range of factors, and which also may both reinforce, and be reflective of, wider societal attitudes and beliefs. More broadly, this chapter and the research which underlies it lends full support to the argument others have made (for example, Morris 1965, Comfort 2008, Jardine 2018) in relation to the diversity of families affected by imprisonment, and of their experiences of imprisonment. As is evidenced by the experiences of the families of sexual offenders alone, families affected by imprisonment have a diverse range of experiences of both imprisonment and day to day lives, and as such have diverse needs; recognition of heterogeneity must be fully translated into how families and their experiences are discussed, and how services and initiatives, are developed and implemented. I have aimed to offer here detailed insights into families’ experiences of one particular visitors’ centre, and in so doing, have evidenced this diversity; yet much more needs to be uncovered about these unique and important spaces, and how families affected by imprisonment experience them.

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1. I engaged children in this research via a drawing and talking activity I developed, which I aimed to make child centric, accessible, and fun as possible. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The exact date is unknown. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Scotland’s national charity which supports families affected by imprisonment. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. With the slight exception of the Families Outside run centre at HMP Addiewell, since Addiewell is run by a private sector company that is under contract to the SPS. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. An OLR constitutes a sentence of imprisonment, plus a post sentencing discretionary period of detention, for an indeterminate period (Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 Section 210F). OLRs are imposed for those offenders deemed to be very ‘high risk’ due to their conviction for serious violent or sexual offences. In effect, the order constitutes a lifelong restriction of liberty: if the prisoner is released into the community, he or she will be subject to lifelong supervision and management. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The Dogs Trust is the UK’s largest dog welfare charity. Among other things, it re-homes dogs and engages in education and outreach activities. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. All family members are referred to in this chapter with participant selected pseudonyms. All members of staff are referred to with letters, to distinguish them from families. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. One of the accommodation halls in HMP Edinburgh, housing long-term prisoners and prisoners on protection, either due to the nature of the offence they have been convicted of, or due to other vulnerabilities. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In my categorisation of ‘serious crimes’, I include all prisoners sentenced for four years or more (‘long term’ offenders) and offenders convicted of sexual offences; depending on the severity of the sexual offence, these offenders may occupy both categories. Interviewees Bob, Serenity and Jamie and other unnamed family members were all visiting family members convicted of sexual offences, including those committed against children. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. As other scholars (Ievins and Crewe 2015) acknowledge, reference to this particular group of offenders as ‘sex offenders’ is for reasons of word utility, and is not intended to essentialise. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Although, these works were broader and the families involved in these studies were the families of any serious offence, and not limited to serious *sexual* offences. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. A pejorative term, often used in the prison context, for an individual who has been convicted of or has been suspected of perpetrating a sexual offence.

**Bio**

Rebecca is currently a Research Fellow at the University of Stirling, working on an NIHR funded study exploring peer support for individuals experiencing homelessness and problem substance use. Prior to this, Rebecca worked as a social researcher in the Scottish Government’s crime research team, and completed a PhD in Criminology at the University of Glasgow, part of the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)