

The impact of the IPP sentence on families and friends of people in prison

This information document has been produced by Associate Professor Harry Annison and Senior Research Assistant Christina Straub from the University of Southampton and summarises research findings on the experiences of families of people serving IPP sentences.¹ It gives Parole Board members an insight into the experiences of these families. It also has broader relevance: being an acute example of many of the general strains experienced by families and friends of people in prison.

It may be helpful for members to be aware of the following points, particularly where family members or friends are attending oral hearings as observers, or in some cases to give evidence as witnesses. It may help contextualise the emotions and anxieties demonstrated on the day.

Injustice

Many families report finding it difficult to cope with their family member continuing to serve a sentence that was abolished in 2012. They often expressed feelings of having been forgotten, with a lack of official acknowledgement of the harms caused by IPP. One family member spoke of the injustice of the law 'eating away at you'. It is a situation that, for many, lacks legitimacy.

Uncertainty

IPP prisoners, and also their families, should not be assumed to experience their indeterminate sentence as life-sentenced prisoners (often) do: IPP tariffs are often relatively very short; and recalled IPP prisoners are by definition post-tariff. This causes most prisoners and families to struggle to plan ahead, to work towards realistic goals, as the path towards release (likely encompassing delays and setbacks) is far more uncertain.

Hope/lessness

A particular feature of the IPP sentence is its engendering in many families a sense of what one described as 'chronic loss'. Many families of IPP prisoners find themselves in an 'in-between' state, hopeless but unable to fully abandon hope; hopeful but worn down by constant setbacks.

¹ We adopt an expansive notion of 'family member' to encompass blood relatives but also (for example) close family friends who are primary supporters, in order to capture the variety of individuals heavily involved in providing ongoing support to IPP prisoners, and who consider themselves to be, or to be acting akin to, 'family'.



Release does not bring relief

Families of released IPP prisoners reported 'living on the edge', being 'in constant fear' and sometimes having to act as a constant 'helper' because of the stringent nature of the licence conditions. They often felt that they had received little advice about the licence conditions or how these related to the possibility of recall. One mother described herself as 'a broken person' when her son was recalled on the third occasion without her understanding how she could have prevented it.

The value of involvement and acknowledgment

Some families of people sentenced to IPP want to play an active role in supporting their relative; they want their 'expertise by experience' to be recognised and utilised as part of the solution. This aligns with the Farmer review, which made clear that families should be treated as 'valued allies in the rehabilitation cause'. Equally, Parole Board members might wish to reflect on the reasons for non-involvement by some families: some families reported 'falling away', with the pains set out here becoming too acute to bear.

Delays and communication

It was also commonly reported that families did not receive the level of communication they required from relevant organizations, primarily probation and prisons. This caused particular anxiety when this related to urgent concerns about their relative's wellbeing.

Families often feel immense frustration and distress when parole hearings are adjourned or rescheduled for a future date. This reflects concern for the strains placed on their relative in prison, and also a perceived lack of accountability by individuals and institutions for the reasons behind the delays.

Underpinning publications

Annison and Straub (2019). *A Helping Hand: Supporting families in the resettlement of people serving IPPs*. London: Prison Reform Trust Available at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/A%20helping%20hand.pdf>

Annison and Condry (2018). *The Pains of Indeterminate Imprisonment for Families of IPP Prisoners*. Available at: <https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/425364/>