



Prisoners' children and families: Can the walls be 'invisible'?

Evaluation of Invisible Walls Wales

Summary of key findings

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1. Overview

This is a summary of the key findings of an independent evaluation of Invisible Walls Wales (IWW), a Big Lottery funded project based in HMP Parc, aimed at maintaining and improving relationships between male prisoners and their children and families.

The overall conclusion was that IWW has been an exceptionally successful project, which has had a positive impact on the lives of participating prisoners and families, and has the potential to have a major effect nationally (and even internationally) on thinking, policy and practice regarding the children and families of prisoners.

2. Background

IWW adopts a 'whole family' approach, providing support to offenders, partners and children for up to 12 months pre-release and six months post-release via three integrated 'hubs' of activity (prison, transitional and community). Key elements of the project are the Family Interventions Unit (the first of its kind in a male prison in the UK), interventions-led family visits, through-the-gate casework by Family Integration Mentors, and partnership with community-based agencies. The main partners working with G4S are Barnardo's Cymru, Bridgend Social Services and Gwalia.

The IWW project has three over-arching objectives, namely to:

- Increase quality of life and community inclusion for whole families.
- Reduce the likelihood of offender participants returning to crime and imprisonment.
- Through working with children, impact positively on issues relating to the risk of intergenerational offending.

While initial funding for the project has ended, IWW has evolved into an ongoing service, albeit reduced in scale, with joint funding from G4S and HM Prison and Probation Service.

3. Aims of the evaluation

The evaluation had the following aims:

Process evaluation

- To assess the efficacy in practice of the individual components of the delivery model.
- To examine the extent to which the three 'hubs' of the service combine to deliver a coherent, multi-agency service which meets the needs of prisoners and their families.
- To assess the quality of contact between IWW prisoners and their families during the custodial phase of the project.
- To explore the views and perspectives of IWW participants regarding their experiences of the IWW project.

Impact evaluation

- To evaluate the extent to which Invisible Walls improved the quality of life and personal relationships of prisoners and their families.
- To examine the impact on re-offending of prisoner participants (within the constraints of the IWW sample size).
- To evaluate the impact upon factors associated with intergenerational offending.
- To evaluate the cost-effectiveness of the project.
- To explore issues of sustainability and the potential for replication of the IWW model.

KEY FINDINGS – PROCESS EVALUATION

- IWW participants received a much enhanced quality and greater frequency of family contact during the prison sentence than prisoners not participating in the project.
- Participants were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences of IWW both in prison and after release. The vast majority reported that contact with the project had been positive and productive, with particular value attached to the emotional support.
- Individually, all three hubs of the project worked effectively.
- Partnership working was generally collaborative and effective across the prison and community hubs, and participants experienced the IWW service as ‘joined up’. The roles of individual staff members were developed creatively to respond to gaps or newly identified needs. At times, however, capacity was an issue for all partners in IWW.
- Some concerns were raised about split responsibilities for management and the supervision of staff. There were also some indications of ‘clashes of culture’ between partner agencies, caused by differences in policies and working practices.
- One of the key successes of the project was the engagement of schools, which led to direct links between IWW and individual teachers of child participants, successful parent/teacher school showcase events held in the prison, and the development of a new formal partnership with many schools, the Invisible Walls Accord (IWA).

KEY FINDINGS – IMPACT EVALUATION

The quantitative and qualitative data collected during the evaluation together indicate that the IWW intervention had a substantial positive impact upon its participants, both ex-prisoners and family members. This included:

- Substantial reductions in the numbers misusing substances.
- Improvements in accommodation and employment status.
- Statistically significant positive change in ‘Family Star’ parenting scores.
- Statistically significant positive change in parental Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) scores, indicating improvements in children’s emotional well-being, attention levels, behaviour and peer relationships in the home.
- Re-offending rates will not be available until sufficient time has elapsed for them to be calculated. However, statistically significant positive change (compared with little change in a comparison group) was found in measures of prisoners’ attitudes to crime, with changes occurring in custody being sustained over the post release period.

There was evidence of positive impact upon factors associated with risk of intergenerational offending:

- Statistically significant positive change in teacher generated SDQ scores representing the child’s wellbeing in the school environment.
- A fall in the number of children needing support from Social Services post IWW.
- Statistically significant positive change in children’s school attendance rates.

All replication milestones for the project were exceeded, with partnerships established, and elements of IWW adopted, in several prisons in the UK and elsewhere.

IWW is also beginning to have an influence on prisons policy at national (UK) government level, while in Wales the working relationships that IWW has developed with many devolved agencies, including a high level of engagement with schools, suggests that its influence on practice will last.

4. Methodology

A key source of data for both the process and impact evaluations was a total of 642 semi-structured interviews conducted with (1) G4S and IWW managers and staff (senior managers, managers, support workers and mentors across the partnership), (2) managers and staff of partner organisations and schoolteachers, (3) IWW offender and family participants (interviewed on joining IWW, on release, and on exiting the project). The main aim of the interviews was to gather information about the operation and effectiveness of IWW from a variety of perspectives, as well as providing both qualitative and quantitative information about its impact on participants, with a focus on perceived changes to their quality of life, social inclusion and family relationships.

In interviews with both prisoner and family participants, a variety of psychometric instruments were used to produce quantitative measures of aspects of their progress. These included the Outcome Scaling tool, Family Star assessment, the Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties measure, the Intermediate Outcomes Measurement Instrument (IOMI) and the Crime-Pics II questionnaire.

A comparison group of fathers not participating in IWW was also drawn from the main prisoner population at HMP Parc and interviewed twice by the researchers: once between twelve and six months prior to release, and a second time shortly before release. The interviews gathered information about the prisoners' experiences and perceptions of family interventions and the visiting process at HMP Parc. They also completed 'before and after' questionnaires measuring their attitudes to crime, motivation to change and perceptions of their children's wellbeing.

Two focus groups were also held during half term and summer holidays with children from the IWW and CSOF¹ projects to obtain accounts of the impact of their fathers' imprisonment and of the help received from IWW. Further information was gathered from child participants by collating drawings completed during one to one sessions that the children attended with a FIM, YISP and/or Barnardo's worker. Pictorial data was coded from each of the drawings to interpret the child's perceptions of themselves and their families before and after joining the IWW project.

Another key source of evaluation data was records and assessments completed by IWW staff. These included detailed information on participants and interventions from the prison hub IWW database² and live client files maintained by the Family Integration Mentors. Quarterly one to one meetings were also held by the researcher with each FIM in order to gather updates for every family as they graduated through the prison, transitional and community hubs of the service.

Finally, a short and informal email survey was conducted with a variety of people identified by the G4S Head of Family Interventions as having visited or been influenced by the project. These included politicians, policy-makers and prison governors in the UK and overseas. The aim of this survey was to gain a broad picture of the extent of the 'ripples' created by the IWW project, including its influence on criminal justice policy and the extent of any replication elsewhere.

¹ Community Support for Offenders' Families (CSOF) is jointly funded by Barnardo's and HMPPS to provide support in the community for the children and families of offenders.

² This was an internal system to track all participants from joining through to exiting the program.

5. Findings: Impact and Outcomes

349 participants from 83 families (83 prisoners, 94 adult family members and 172 children) participated in the project. Of the 349 participants who commenced IWW, 324 went on to fully engage with the intervention (defined as remaining in post-release contact with the IWW team for a minimum of 3 months) and only 25 'dropped out', disengaged or were removed. This represents a full engagement rate of 93%.

The following summarises the findings of the evaluation relating to the impact and outcomes of the project, presented under each of the main research aims.

➤ ***To evaluate the extent to which Invisible Walls improves the quality of life and personal relationships of prisoners and their families:***

Significant improvements were found in the accommodation and employment status of both prisoner and family member participants:

- The percentage of prisoner participants classified as of No Fixed Abode fell from **17%** on entering prison to **1%** post IWW. **87%** of family members were living in permanent/rental accommodation on joining IWW; this rose slightly to **91%** on exiting.
- **80%** of prisoner participants were unemployed on entering prison; this fell to **25%** on exiting the project. **69%** of adult family members were unemployed on joining IWW; this fell to **46%** on completion of the project.
- No prisoner participant was engaged in education/training/volunteering on joining the project; this rose to **10%** post IWW. **3%** of family members were engaged with education/training or volunteering on joining, rising to **14%** on completion of IWW.
- **89%** of prisoner participants were assessed as actively misusing substances (alcohol and/or drugs) on entering prison; this fell to **20%** on exit from the project. Among adult family member participants, **15%** were assessed as actively misusing substances on joining the project; this fell to **5%** on exiting.
- Analysis of Family Star (parenting) scores show statistically significant positive change in the scores obtained for both ex-prisoners and family members.

To examine the impact on re-offending of prisoner participants:

While it is too early to determine the re-offending rates of IWW participants, interim outcome measures known to be related to the risk of reoffending have been analysed, with positive results:

- As noted above, significant improvements were found in the accommodation, employment, education/training and substance misusing status of prisoner participants.
- Prisoner participants' scores on the Crime-Pics II questionnaire show statistically significant³ improvements on three of the four attitudes subscales (general attitudes to crime, evaluation of crime as worthwhile and anticipation of re-offending) between the times of joining IWW and leaving prison. Average scores were sustained at similar levels after release, meaning that there was also statistically significant change on the above scales over the whole period between joining and exiting the project.

³ Using paired sample t-tests.

- Significant change was also found in scores on the Crime-Pics II subscale measuring levels of perceived life problems, supporting the conclusion that IWW helped prisoners with the practical issues many faced as they approached release.
- In contrast to the positive change achieved amongst the IWW prisoner participants, the average scores for the comparison group remained largely unchanged.
- As far as could be determined from prison records and the knowledge of the mentors, only 10% of the ex-prisoners (n=8) were back in custody six months after their release.

To evaluate the impact upon factors likely to be associated with intergenerational offending:

- Paired sample t-tests show statistically significant improvements ($p < 0.01$) in Goodman's Strength and Difficulty (SDQ) questionnaire scores for child participants as rated by 'mum', 'dad' and teachers on joining and exiting the IWW project. These indicate positive change in emotional wellbeing, behaviour, hyperactivity/attention levels and peer relationships.
- On joining the project, **43%** (n=58) of the 138 school age children were experiencing attainment or attendance issues, including six who had been excluded or placed in alternative education; this fell to just **12%** (n=16) of children at the point of exit. Average recorded attendance rates among a sample of IWW children also rose from **86%** to **93%**.
- Four children were suspended or excluded from school at the point of joining IWW, but at the point of exit no child was.
- Prior to IWW, **16%** children were registered as 'at risk' by Social Services, 1% were 'looked after' and 3% were assessed as 'child in need'. On exiting the project, **7%** remained on the 'at risk' register, 2% were officially, 'looked after' and 2% were assessed as a 'child in need'.
- The number of children assessed as requiring no additional support from Social Services and/or related support agencies rose from **40%** (n=69) prior to IWW to **69%** (n=118) post IWW.
- Pre-IWW, **41%** of children were assessed as having problematic or inappropriate peer relationships, **18%** as having limited social networks, and **8%** as isolated. In addition, **10%** were experiencing bullying. At the point of exit, only **8%** were assessed as having inappropriate peer relationships, **3%** as having limited social networks and **1%** as 'isolated'. Only one child reported still being bullied.

To evaluate the cost-effectiveness of the project

It is not possible to undertake an accurate analysis of cost-effectiveness until re-offending data are available. A supplementary report will be produced at this time. However, some preliminary work has been done (by Andrew Rix and Richard Gaunt, external consultants) which indicates that, even if it emerges that there was zero reduction in re-offending by the prisoner participants, the project would still be shown to be cost-effective.

To explore issues of sustainability and the potential for replication of the project

IWW has been successful in disseminating the ideas behind the project, as well as elements of its practice model, having developed communication and partnerships with other prisons in both the private and public estates across the UK and in other countries. Representatives from over 60 UK prisons have visited HMP Parc to learn about IWW and the family model. All replication milestones for year four (2016) had been achieved by the end of year one (2013) and exceeded by year three (2015). Examples include:

- Close collaboration with HMPs Maghaberry, Erlestoke, Berwyn, Altcourse and Oakwood has contributed to the opening of Family Intervention Units, Intervention Led Visits and the development of partnerships with external agencies in each establishment.
- Several other prisons in the UK, including HMPs Birmingham, Low Moss, Winchester, Wandsworth, Hull, and Eastwood Park have also adopted elements of Parc's family-focused support model.
- In 2015, the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) undertook a six-month pilot to implement the Intervention Led Visits approach across public sector prisons in HMPs Leicester and Norwich.
- Elsewhere in Europe, prisons in the Irish Republic (Limerick, Midlands, St Patricks) and the Netherlands (Leeuwarden and Het Poortje Young Offenders prison) have implemented elements of the IWW model. Following a visit by its President and senior officials, the Maltese government plans to include a comprehensive package of interventions based on the IWW family support model in its specifications for a new prison, while serious interest in the model has also been expressed by key decision-makers in Finland and Sweden.
- Further afield, HM Port Philip in Melbourne is planning to introduce elements of IWW, and there has been strong interest from prisons in Singapore, Washington DC and Uganda.

As well as influencing thinking, attitudes and practice in custodial institutions, IWW has begun to have an impact on other agencies and professionals working in the community. This is particularly evident in the high level of school engagement with the project and take-up of the Invisible Walls Accord, through which prison staff link with teachers to support children who (often previously unbeknown to their school) may be affected by a parent or family member in prison. The mutually beneficial working relationships developed with staff in Social Services, Probation, the Local Authority and Third Sector agencies also highlight how the children and families work in HMP Parc has helped to 'shine a light' on the needs of prisoner's families across a wide range of community-based agencies.

IWW has also helped to raise awareness of the needs of children of prisoners among a wider range of audiences at a national – and to some extent, international – level, and is beginning to attract serious attention from policy-makers:

- The approach taken to family support in HMP Parc was described in a report by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2016: 57) as 'radical and innovative and probably the best we have seen in any prison'. It helped the prison achieve the 'Investors in Families' accredited charter mark – the only prison in the European Union to have received the award.
- The IWW model also featured prominently in the report of the UK Parliamentary Review on the importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties, led by Lord Farmer (published 2017), which is likely to have an impact on prisons policy in England and Wales.
- In Wales, IWW and Barnardo's Cymru are now part of a Welsh Assembly Cross Party Group, established to examine the issues affecting children with a parent in prison.
- New measures to make prison Governors accountable for family support, and to move the visiting agenda away from the security department, have been outlined in the Prison and Courts Bills 2017.
- HMIP's *Expectations* (July, 2017) contains a whole new section on children and families, in which Parc's Family Interventions Unit is cited as a best practice exemplar.