

The forgotten victims



Thousands of children and family members are affected each year in New Zealand when a family member is imprisoned.

They are often a hidden and isolated group and their suffering is compounded by the stigma attached to having a family member in prison.

The imprisonment of a caregiver can be particularly traumatic for children.

The loss can affect them in a variety of ways, and they may feel confused, let down, ashamed, or feel they are to blame somehow.

Visiting a family member in prison is important for children as it helps them to maintain a relationship with their family member and helps them understand the situation better.

There are about 9250 people incarcerated in New Zealand. The number of children affected each year by having an immediate family member imprisoned is estimated to be around 20,000.

PARS (Prisoners Aid and Rehabilitation) Waikato is a not-for-profit community organisation that works for a safer society by providing support and reintegration services for offenders and their family.

Made up of a combination of paid staff and volunteers, this support starts with connecting with families and offenders at the Courts and providing emotional support and information.

PARS provides assistance with transport from Hamilton to Waikeria Prison which, given its isolated location, makes visiting both inconvenient and expensive.

This is compounded by prisoner numbers in New Zealand being the highest



Prisoners Aid and Rehabilitation and the forgotten victims of incarceration.

they have ever been, and the transferring of prisoners to other prisons around the country to cope with the large numbers — at times to Wellington and the South Island.

This has an impact on families and their ability to be able to visit their family members. Ten years ago in New Zealand, there were 119 people imprisoned per 100,000 people. This is now at 203 people per 100,000 people.

New Zealand has one of the highest imprisonment rates in Oceania. Recidivism rates are around 50 per cent of people back in prison between 4-5 years. Maori are over represented in prison statistics, with more than 50 per cent of our prison population of Maori ethnicity, while being only 15 per cent of the total New Zealand population.

PARS Waikato believes that if you maintain family links it goes a long way towards reintegration when the offender is

released from prison.

PARS can provide practical support such as helping set up bank accounts and getting onto a benefit or into work. It can also provide emotional support and information, and referring to other support services where necessary.

Finding accommodation can be tough for someone out of prison especially if they have not maintained family links while in prison. Parolees are not allowed to stay in a Housing NZ house. PARS Waikato provides support to help find accommodation.

PARS Waikato coordinator John Booth said they do not want to know what the offender has done to end up in prison.

"We work to reintegrate. If we can make sure that when people come out of prison they have support, this can reduce the risk of reoffending for the betterment of society," John said.