

The Council for Research and Development

SEPARATED FAMILIES
Reviewing the needs of Families of Irish Prisoners Overseas

The Council for Research and Development
A Commission of the Irish Bishops Conference
The Columba Centre
Maynooth
Co. Kildare

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas (ICPO) is currently the only organisation working on behalf of Irish prisoners overseas and their families. It was established by *the Irish Bishops' Conference* in 1985 and operates as a subsection of the Bishops' Commission for Emigrants. The ICPO has two offices; one located in Maynooth, Co. Kildare and the other in London. The London office deals solely with Irish born prisoners held in the UK, while the Maynooth office assists Irish prisoners held all over the world. This survey was commissioned by the ICPO in Ireland and its scope is therefore limited to examining the needs of prisoners' families in relation to the ICPO service in Maynooth

The ICPO recognises that Irish prisoners abroad are 'among the most deprived of Irish emigrants' and aims to provide a confidential and non-judgemental support and information service to both prisoners and their families. At present they help approximately 506 Irish prisoners held in over 22 countries. The majority of Irish prisoners overseas are incarcerated in the UK, where Irish born people continue to be over represented in the prison system. However the ICPO has also assisted Irish prisoners scattered over all five continents and in countries as far away as Thailand, the Arabian Gulf and Peru.

An integral part of the ICPO service is to provide information, support and advice to the families of prisoners overseas. It recognises the pain and suffering endured by families caused as a direct result of a relatives' imprisonment. Research conducted in the UK found that the problems faced by families with a relative imprisoned abroad can be exacerbated by the cost of foreign travel, language and communication difficulties and dealing with unfamiliar prison bureaucracies and legal systems (Prisoners Abroad, 1999:9).

This report presents the results from a survey sent to prisoners' families, in order to identify their needs and some of the difficulties that they have encountered. It is hoped that the findings will assist the ICPO in developing and improving their family support service in the future.

Research Aim and Objectives

The survey was commissioned by *the Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas* (ICPO) and was carried out by *the Council for Research and Development*, IBC. The study was conducted between November 2004 and May 2005. The overall aim of the research was "to evaluate the needs of families of Irish prisoners overseas, in relation to the service provided by the ICPO and support services in general".

Four main issues are addressed in each chapter and include the following:

- Profile of respondents
- Satisfaction and usefulness of current service
- Difficulties experienced by families
- Supporting families in the future

Methodology

As part of an on-going effort to mark *the 10th Anniversary of the Year of the Family*, the ICPO commissioned the Council for Research and Development, a Commission of the Irish Bishops Conference, to undertake a small evaluation of their family support service. Prisoners were invited to forward their family contact details to the ICPO and a questionnaire was included in the autumn edition of the ICPO newsletter. In total, 100 families were sent the questionnaire and 44 were returned. This represents a 44% response rate, which is a very positive result for this type of survey.

The questionnaire itself was designed in consultation with the staff of the ICPO and examines the needs of prisoners' families and some of the difficulties that they have had to encounter. In order to obtain the maximum response rate as possible, the questionnaire was kept brief and included only the most important questions to examine the research aims identified. The use of Basic English and closed-questions were maximised, as problems with literacy is higher among this population.

After consulting with the ICPO it was decided to keep personal questions to a minimum, such as the respondents' income and the nature of the crime committed by their relative. The findings in this report would suggest the need to re-examine these issues in future research studies.

1 PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS AND PRISONERS OVERSEAS

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the profile of respondents and their family members imprisoned abroad. Respondents were asked about their relationship to the person in prison overseas, how long their family member had been imprisoned, what country they were incarcerated in and finally where they themselves lived.

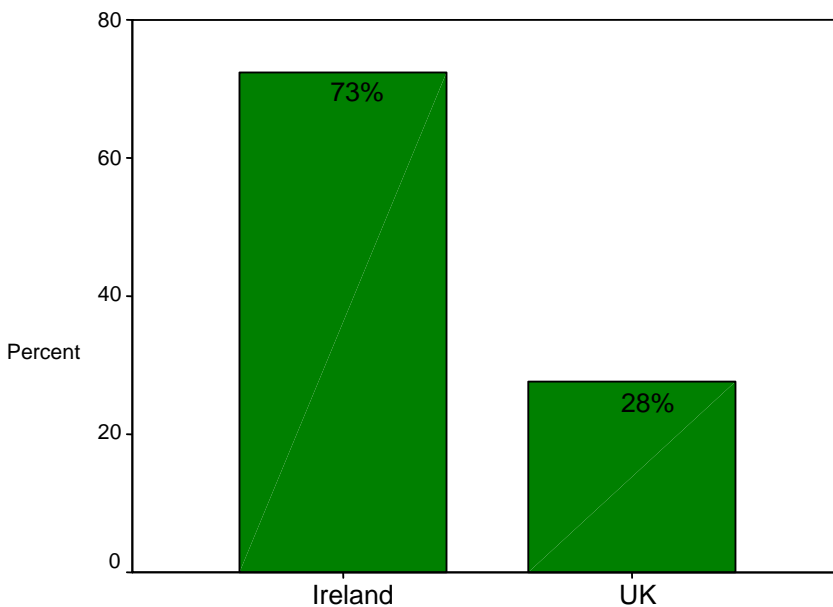
1.2 Respondents Relationship to the Prisoner Overseas

Over a third of respondents (39%) reported that they were the parents of prisoners overseas, while a further 27% said that it was their spouse or partner in prison abroad. Of the other respondents, 17% were siblings of prisoners overseas, 15% were a son or daughter and 2% were placed in the 'other' category.

1.3 Place of Residence of Respondent

Of the family members who replied to the questionnaire, nearly three quarters (N = 29) said that they lived in Ireland, while the remaining (N = 11) respondents reported that they lived in the UK.

Chart 2 What country are you from?



1.4 Length of Time that Family Member has been in Prison Abroad

Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the length of time that the respondents' family member has been in prison overseas. It can be seen that 15% have been in prison for 1 year or less, 61% for 13 months to 5 years, 19 % for between 5 to 10 years and 2 respondents (5%) had a family member in prison overseas for over 10 years.

Table 1 Length of time family member has been in prison

Time in Prison	Number	Percentage (N=41)
1 year of less	6	15
1 to 5 years	25	61
5 to 10 years	8	19
Over 10 years	2	5
Total	41	100%

1.5 Country where family member is imprisoned

Over half (56%) of relatives of respondents were held in prisons around the UK. The rest were held elsewhere in Europe (15%), North America (15%), South America (3%), Australia (8%) and the West Indies (3%). Responses from families of prisoners held in the UK are under-representative. At present, approximately 89% of the ICPO caseload is taken up by UK cases.

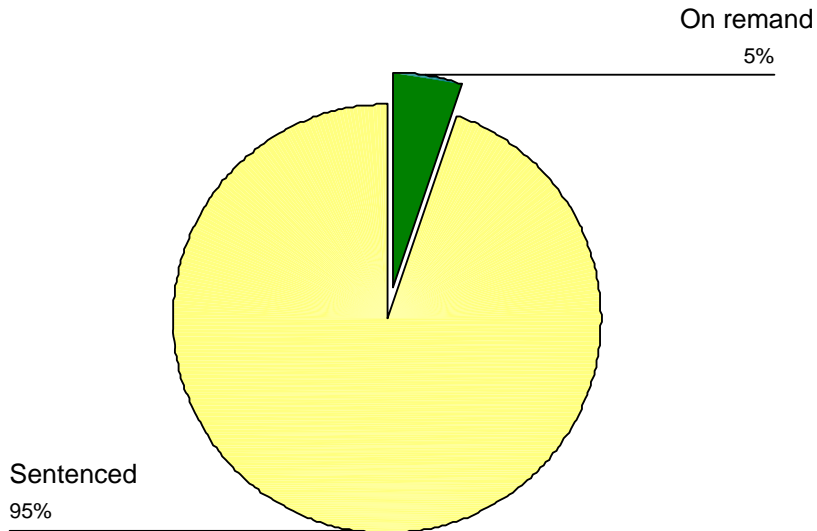
Table 2 Country of Incarceration

Country	Number	Percentage (N=39)
UK	22	56
Elsewhere in Europe	6	15
North America	6	15
South America	1	3
Australia	3	8
West Indies	1	3
Total	39	100%

1.6 Prison Status of Relative in Prison Overseas

The majority of respondents who replied to this questionnaire stated that their relative had been sentenced and was serving their sentence abroad, while only 5% were on remand. This corresponds to the percentage of clients sentenced and on remand who are currently on the *ICPO* database.

Chart 3 Status of Prisoner Abroad



2 EVALUATING THE ICPO SERVICE

2.1 Introduction

The central purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the respondents' satisfaction with the service provided by the ICPO. Respondents are asked whether they have ever contacted the ICPO and, if so, who referred the service to them. Another issue discussed here is the examination of the different agencies, other than the ICPO, which families members approached for assistance. Following this, respondents provide details about the regularity in which they contact the ICPO for help, and their overall satisfaction with the service. Finally, the families are given space to highlight one example of how the ICPO has supported them in the past.

2.2 Contact with the ICPO Service

Respondents were asked whether they have ever contacted the ICPO in either London or Maynooth.

Table 3 below outlines the number of respondents who have contacted the ICPO London for assistance. Thirty two percent of respondents said that they had been in touch with the London office for help however this figure increases to 41% for respondents with family members in prison in the UK. As can be expected a greater proportion (46%) of those who actually live in the UK also contacted the London office for information and advice.

Table 3 Contact with the ICPO in London

Contact	Number	Percentage (N=41)
Yes	13	32
No	28	68
Total	41	100%

Table 4 overleaf shows that while 60% of respondents had sought assistance from the ICPO in Ireland, over a third had never contacted the office for support or advice. Some respondents had never heard of the ICPO prior to receiving the questionnaire for this survey. For instance, when asked for an example of how the ICPO had helped support them, one respondent said:

“First, by knowing that the organisation now exists”

Another respondent reported that they ‘had never heard of the ICPO before receiving the questionnaire.

Table 4 Contact with the ICPO in Maynooth, Ireland

Contact	Number	Percentage (N=42)
Yes	26	62
No	16	38
Total	42	100%

2.3 Organisations where respondents sought support

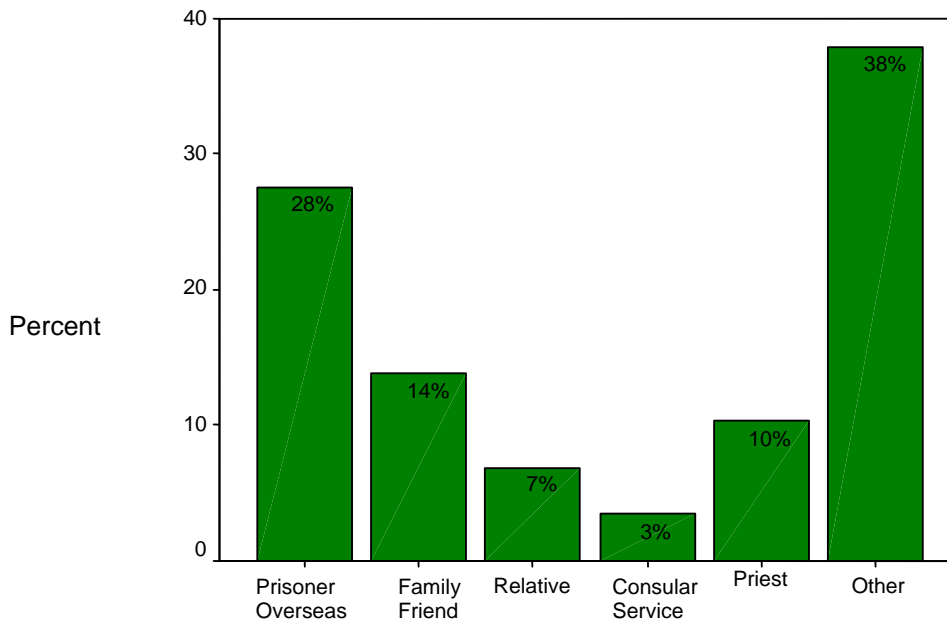
In order to examine which organisations families turned to for support, respondents were asked to indicate who they had contacted for help. Table 5 shows that nearly a third of replies said they contacted the ICPO, 25% contacted the Department of Foreign Affairs, 13% said no-one, 7% sought assistance from the Citizens Information Centre and 3% were in touch with the Irish Embassy. Another 18% indicated they had received help from a different source not mentioned in the list.

Table 5 Who did you contact for help

Organisations	Number	Percentage of Responses (N=61)
Department of Foreign Affairs	15	25
The ICPO	21	34
Citizens Information Centre	4	7
No-One	8	13
The Irish Embassy	2	3
Other	11	18
Total	61	100%

2.4 Referrals to Service

Respondents were asked where they first heard about the ICPO service. Just over a quarter of those surveyed said that their relative in prison overseas made them aware of the ICPO. Other respondents were informed about the service from a family friend (14%), a priest (10%), other relative (7%) and the consular service (3%). Over a third of family members first heard about the ICPO from another source. These included a local counsellor, the ICPO London, a Bishop and a drug worker. In one case, the ICPO had made contact with the family.

Chart 4 Where did you first hear about ICPO Ireland?

2.5 Regularity of Contact with the ICPO

Respondents were asked how regularly they contact the ICPO for assistance. It is worth noting that almost half (46%) of families who contact the service do so regularly. A further 35% (N=9) reported that they 'sometimes' had to contact the ICPO for help, while 19% (N=5) were rarely in touch.

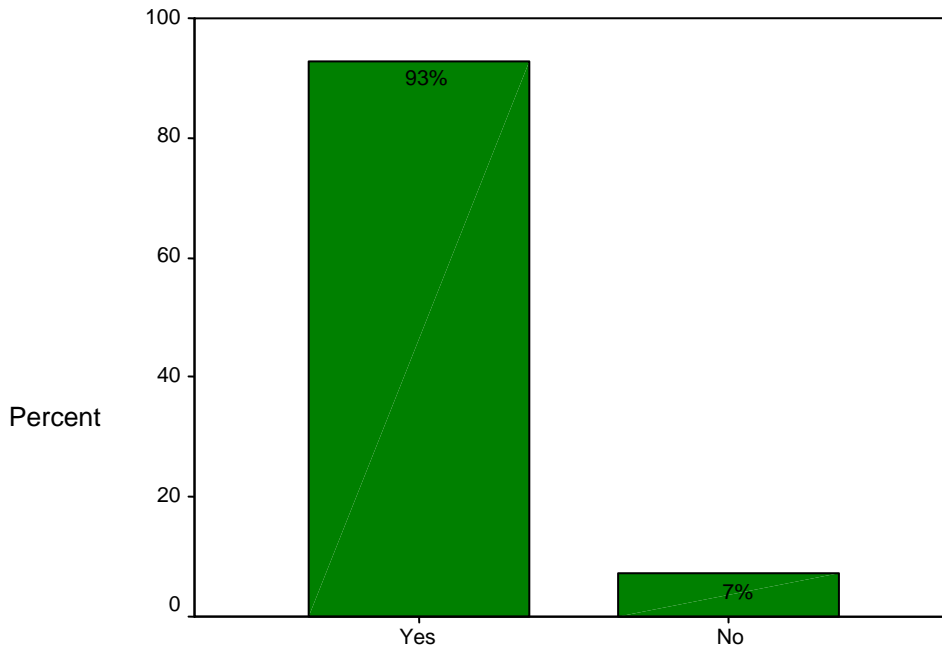
Table 6 Regularity of Contact with the ICPO Maynooth

Contact	Number	Percentage (N=26)
Often	12	46
Sometimes	9	35
Never	5	19
Total	26	100%

2.6 Respondents Satisfaction with the ICPO Service

There was a high level of satisfaction among respondents who had contacted the ICPO Ireland for help and support. Nine out of ten respondents said that they were satisfied with the service to-date.

Chart 5 Satisfaction with the ICPO Service



2.7 Examples of how the ICPO has Helped Families of Irish Prisoners Overseas

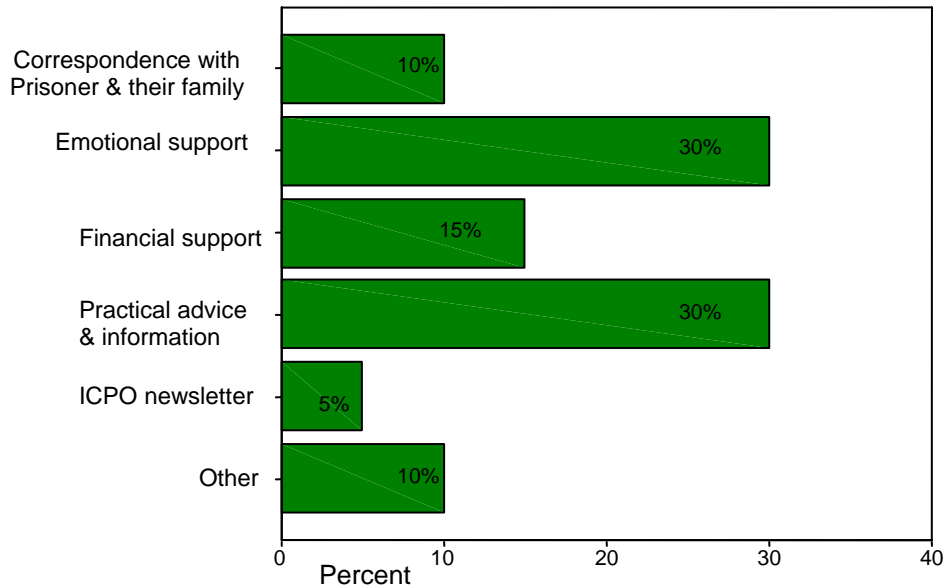
Families of prisoners overseas can feel a great sense of shock, depression and loneliness as a direct consequence of the imprisonment overseas of a loved one. This painful experience may be exacerbated by the stigma of having a relative imprisoned, and the increasing risk of poverty and hardship.

As part of their principal aims, the ICPO is committed to “*identifying and responding to the particular needs of Irish prisoners overseas and their families throughout Ireland, regardless of religion or offence*” In order to examine how the ICPO is responding to the needs of the families of prisoners overseas, respondents were asked to give one example of how the *ICPO* had helped them in the past.

Chart 6 overleaf shows examples of how the ICPO has helped respondents. The greatest proportion of respondents made reference to how the ICPO had provided emotional support (30%) and practical advice and information (30%). A further 15% of families noted the financial assistance made available by the service, either through the hardship fund or referrals and advice on how to seek financial help from other sources. Ten percent of replies highlighted assistance with maintaining contact between the families and their relatives in prison abroad, and a further 5% mentioned that they found the ICPO newsletter

helpful. The remaining examples were categorised under ‘other’. These examples of family support are examined in further detail below.

Chart 6 Examples of how the ICPO has helped



2.7.1 The Provision of Emotional Support to Families

Prisoners’ families are often the forgotten victims of a relative’s imprisonment (ICPO, 2004). The findings of this survey show that the ICPO provide a vital role in supporting prisoners’ families cope with the distress and emotional trauma caused as a direct consequence of their relatives’ imprisonment.

It was a relief for respondents to be able to talk to someone about their worries and concerns. Their non-judgemental service provided a strong sense of re-assurance to families in need of emotional support.

“There have been times when I’ve needed some counselling, be it over the phone or face-to-face, some reassurance that things would be fine, some emotional support and I am pleased to say that the ICPO have been there for me”

“I know there is a person willing to talk to me about my concerns and worries. They have been very sympathetic to the plight of myself and my family. I know they are there to help me”

The telephone and listening service was flagged as an important source of support to families who wanted to talk to someone. It should also be noted that families were positive when the ICPO were proactive in contacting the family, as well as when the families telephoned the ICPO directly for assistance.

“They are always on the other end of the phone”

“So far the ICPO have been very helpful.....I can talk to them freely and don’t feel under pressure; they contact me if I don’t contact them”

“I have had a phone call with the ICPO which I found helpful. Time was not an issue and the person I spoke to seemed genuine”

“Great advice and someone to talk to”

2.7.2 Practical Advice and Information

An important element of the ICPO service is to provide information and advice to prisoners and their families. They maintain detailed files and information systems on a wide range of issues such as visiting procedures, sending money and clothes, prison regulations, legal systems, social welfare, accommodation, deportation and repatriation (ICPO, 2004:6). It was clear from the responses received that families valued the information service provided by the ICPO. The provision of information and support seemed to go hand in hand.

“They have often been able to get information for me when I have been unable to and when the Department of Foreign Affairs have also failed”

“They have let me and my family know a lot about the judicial system in England and have gone above and beyond to help in every way”

“They have been extremely supportive and informative”

Just knowing that there was a service available to provide advice, information and support was a great re-assurance to one respondent:

“We found it helped our ‘morale’ to know that advice and help would be available”

2.7.3 Financial Support

Lack of financial support was a persistent problem highlighted by respondents throughout this study. Families were grateful for the assistance that the ICPO provided them to access funding to visit their relative overseas. For instance, the ICPO informed families in receipt of welfare payments, of their right to apply for financial assistance from their Community Welfare Officer and wrote letters on their behalf.

“They wrote the my Community Welfare Officer (CWO) who in turn helped with the fare to visit my son – otherwise we couldn’t have afforded the fare”

“The ICPO has given a letter for us to give to the CWO in order to apply for travel expenses to visit my partner in an English prison. I wouldn’t be able to otherwise”

Families also acknowledged the financial support provided by the ICPO for practical items such as clothing and telephone cards.

“It’s nice to know there is someone out there, who will talk to you and get help if I desperately needed it. The ICPO also sent my husband money for a phone call when he hadn’t a dime”

2.7.4 Maintaining Contact and Communications

Ten percent of respondents stated that the ICPO had helped them maintain contact with their relative in prison overseas. Positive links between prisoners and their families is a vital element of successful reintegration of the prisoner following release. Irish prisoners abroad are at greater risk of losing contact with family and friends due to distance and the financial implications of travelling to visit them. By assisting prisoners to keep in touch with their family, the ICPO facilitates continued communication and contact.

“My brother is in prison in Australia and communications can be limited. The ICPO has assisted greatly in this matter. They have been extremely supportive and informative”

2.7.5 ICPO Newsletter

The ICPO newsletter acts as an important vehicle of communication for prisoners and their families. One respondent noted the comfort they felt in receiving the newsletter and realising that they were not alone.

“The newsletter let me see I was not on my own”

2.7.6 Other

Other examples of how the ICPO assisted families included the possibility of providing post-release support, providing pen-pals to prisoners and by simply knowing that the organisation exists.

3 DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY FAMILIES OF PRISONERS OVERSEAS

3.1 Introduction

Imprisonment of a loved one causes a great deal of stress, suffering and pain for families of prisoners. Families suffer the pain of separation, but they also suffer in other ways, such as a loss of income, loss of home, anti-social behaviour by distressed children, and shame (Loucks, 2005). The purpose of this chapter is to assess the difficulties faced by families of prisoners overseas when a relative is in prison abroad. We are especially interested in examining whether families of prisoners overseas face additional difficulties to the problems encountered by families with a relative in prison in Ireland. We asked families whether they had experienced a number of given difficulties. Following this, respondents were given the chance to provide further details of problems they themselves had encountered.

3.2 Problems Experienced by Families of Prisoners Overseas

Our findings suggest that families face multiple difficulties in coping with the imprisonment of a relative abroad. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had experienced any of the problems mentioned in Table 5 overleaf. It is clear, that the majority of families who participated in this study had numerous problems in dealing with the prison and legal system, and keeping in contact with their loved one. Families also suffered in terms of their own well-being and in their concern for the prisoners' health.

It is striking that over two thirds of respondents had experienced all except one of the problems mentioned in Table 7 overleaf. Forty percent of respondents said that had difficulties in finding out their social welfare entitlements, representing a third of families. Three quarters of families found financial difficulties and the feelings of isolation a particular burden and 73% of respondents also agreed that they were concerned for the health of their relative in prison overseas.

Seventy per cent of all cases agreed that the imprisonment had a negative impact on their family. The same number also reported that they had difficulty in visiting their relative abroad and had experienced problems in getting information about the foreign prison system. Families seemed to struggle with communication in general (60%) and in grappling with the legal system (65%).

It is possible that these families were experiencing a particularly low point in their life and were therefore inclined to tick all the problems mentioned in this question. This would challenge the reliability of these figures. At the same time, when respondents were given space to voice their concerns and opinions, these issues re-occurred throughout the survey. This can be seen when families were asked to suggest other problems that they had experienced.

Table 7 Problems Experienced by Prisoner

Problems	Number Experiencing Problem	% Experiencing Problem
Lack of information on the legal system	26	65%
Lack of information on the prison system	28	70%
Difficulty around communication	24	60%
Concerns for his/her health	29	73%
Travel to a different country	28	70%
Lack of information on social welfare entitlements	16	40%
Financial difficulties	30	75%
Feeling isolated	30	75%
Impact on family at home	28	70%

3.3 Additional Problems Encountered by Families

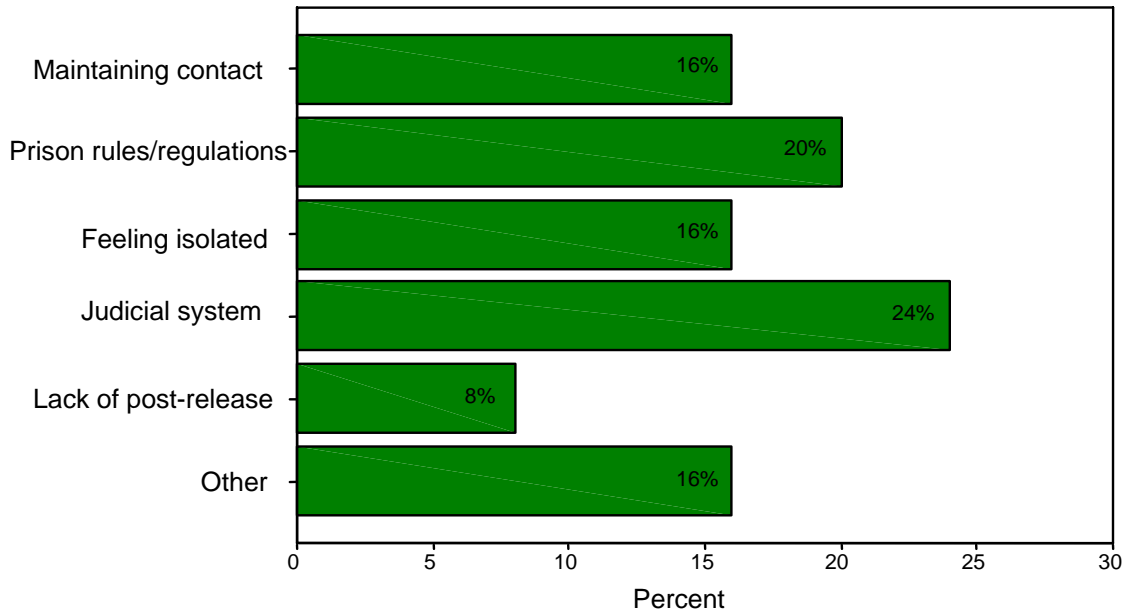
Respondents were asked whether they had experienced additional problems to those already mentioned in the survey. Just over half (53%) of respondents said that they had encountered other difficulties when dealing with the imprisonment.

Table 8 Any Additional Problems

Additional problems not mentioned in the list	Number	Percentage of responses (N=38)
Yes	20	53%
No	18	47%
Total	38	100%

The type of problems that respondents had to deal with can be seen in Chart 7 overleaf. These issues will be discussed in greater detail, highlighting comments made by respondents where appropriate.

Chart 7 Other Problems Experienced by Families



N = 25

3.3.1 Problems with the Judicial System

Of greatest concern to respondents were difficulties that they had experienced with the judicial system. Twenty four percent said that they had difficulty with the legal system in the foreign country. Respondents were frustrated by the poor correspondence between the legal team and family. Not knowing what was going to happen to their relative left families feeling anxious and worried.

Lack of communication seemed to prevent families from obtaining practical information concerning their relative imprisoned abroad such as their date of release, or details of repatriation back to Ireland. One respondent described how their son was left with no legal help whatsoever.

A further 12% of respondents within this category noted their dissatisfaction in dealing with the authorities. Families did not feel supported from the relevant authorities such as the Irish Consular Service Abroad, the Embassies or government departments such as the Home Office. One respondent notes:

“I found probation unhelpful and unprofessional. Also prejudicial to my husbands’ offence”

Another respondent expressed their disappointment with the lack of priority given to Irish prisoners abroad by the Embassies.

“Foreign prisoners are not given the same rights as native citizens and here is where the embassies could be more on the ball. I don’t think the embassy has much interest in prisoners abroad”

3.3.2 Prison Rules and Regulations

Twenty percent of respondents described having problems with prison rules and regulations. These issues tended to be related to a lack of practical information on individual prisons such as the visiting times and rules governing items which can be sent to the prisoner. These difficulties were multiplied for families whose relative moved prisons.

“My son has been moved to four different prisons since his arrest. All have different visiting times and regulations. Some allow things to be handed-in, some do not. It’s all very confusing”

3.3.3 Maintaining Contact

It is widely recognised that maintaining contact between prisoners and their families reduces the risk of recidivism on release from prison. Despite this, families of prisoners abroad face a number of barriers preventing them from keeping in touch with their loved ones in prison. These problems are multiplied by prison bureaucracy and in certain cases, language difficulties.

A key issue to emerge from this study was the absence of financial support to help families and their relatives stay in contact for the term of imprisonment. The cost and distance of travel were inter-related and made it difficult for families to visit their relative. Families of prisoners overseas are not automatically entitled to funding to help them meet the cost of travelling to a prison abroad. While it is possible for families in receipt of social welfare to apply for a discretionary needs payment under supplementary welfare, this is only available twice a year and is left to the discretion of the individual community welfare officer. Families not in receipt of any welfare allowances are not entitled to any state support to help them visit a family member imprisoned overseas.

Prisons are often located on the outskirts of cities and towns, making them difficult to access by direct flight or train. This pushes up the cost of travelling, as visiting will usually involve additional taxi rides and bus journeys. Poor literacy was noted in some responses throughout the questionnaire. Although we can’t be sure, it is possible that certain families with poor literacy would be less able to book cheap flights over the internet. The lack of cheaper alternatives when travelling may impact on ones decision to visit a relative in prison abroad.

“My son is coming to the end of his sentence... I would love to be at the prison the day my son is released but due to financial difficulties it would be too expensive for me”

“My son has seen no-one for the last three or four years. He was in Manchester and he was moved to London which I can’t get to”

For families who could not afford to visit their relative in prison overseas, the only alternative available was to keep in contact through letters or the telephone. Unfortunately for some families, even the price of a stamp was too expensive. One respondent explained how she was sending her children’s allowance to her husband in prison overseas, so he could afford basic toiletries in prison and to make the odd phone call.

“Prisoners do not earn enough in wages to provide for their basic toiletries let alone for phone calls. As a family we have had to use my sons’ children’s allowance to send a monthly sum of €100 to my partner in prison for the past three years. Things have been difficult”

While prisoners in Ireland may struggle to pay for telephone calls to keep in touch with their families, the cost of making a long-distanced phone call makes this an even greater problem faced by Irish prisoners overseas. This experience was summed up by two respondents:

“Because I live in Ireland, my son rarely rang me because of the limited amount he was getting on his phone card. I was worried when I did not hear from him. It’s so expensive to ring Ireland, even for me to go and visit him. I did feel isolated and worried a great deal”

“I would love to speak to my son on the phone. It is hard on my older son as he loves his brother. If there was some way that there could be more done for them to communicate more as at the moment it is only letters”

One respondent simply requested help in keeping in contact with their relative in general

“Our biggest difficulty was trying to establish and maintain contact with X while he was in prison. Some way of facilitating this would be helpful”

3.3.4 Feeling Isolated

Sixteen percent of respondents described their feelings of isolation, loneliness and anxiety associated with the imprisonment of a loved one overseas. Poor communication between the prisoners, families and authorities, as well as a general lack of family support seemed to contribute to the emotional difficulties facing families. One respondent noted that they felt “total helplessness and fear” as a result of the imprisonment.

3.3.5 Lack of Post-Release Support

The National Economic and Social Forum Report on *Re-Integration of Prisoners* (2002) found that release from prison ‘can be a very traumatic experience, particularly to those prisoners who have been in prison for a long period of time and are effectively institutionalised’. Issues such as unresolved family disputes, drug dependence and a lack of accommodation or employment on release can seriously compromise a prisoners’ ability

to settle back into the community and family life (NESF, 2002:83). Post-release support services are crucial in promoting successful re-integration to society.

While families of Irish prisoners overseas were not asked directly about their concerns around the release of their relative, this issue arose voluntarily for 8% of respondents. One respondent noted that lack of financial support on release from prison was problematic. This difficulty is shared by offenders who are released from Irish prisons with little or no money to pay for some food or a hostel. The failure of the State to provide adequate support to prisoners on their release can trigger re-offending behaviour and contribute to the cycle of poverty and crime.

Another respondent highlighted the problem of finding and paying for cheap accommodation in a foreign country while out on bail and awaiting a court appearance. Irish prisoners overseas are more at risk at experiencing this difficulty given that restrictions will probably be put in place to prevent them from leaving the country until after their case is heard in court. Persons awaiting trial are also less likely to have strong support networks in a foreign country than if they were in trouble at home.

Fears and worries were expressed regarding the impact that release from prison would have on the family, particularly the children. These feelings are evident in the response below:

“My son is in prison in the UK. He is the father of four children who have not seen him for three years. How will he cope with them on release? They feel angry with him and hurt”

3.3.6 Other

A number of other problems were highlighted by respondents in this question. For instance, 12% stated that they were worried about their own health or the health of their relative imprisoned in a foreign country. Other problems mentioned by respondents included concerns regarding the media, dissatisfaction about the way the prison overseas had been treated, and feeling that their relative had not committed the crime.

4 SUPPORTING THE FAMILIES OF IRISH PRISONERS OVERSEAS

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this Chapter is to examine how the ICPO can improve its service to provide greater support to families of Irish prisoners overseas. The first section examines how respondents felt about a number of suggestions to help families of prisoners overseas. This is followed by an analysis of respondents suggestions to improve the ICPO service and to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of families in the future. Finally, we discuss any ‘other comments’ made by respondents at the end of the questionnaire.

4.2 Taking the Pressure off Families of Irish Prisoners Overseas

Respondents were asked whether they would find a number of suggestions helpful in taking the pressure off them and their family. Overall, the families who responded to the questionnaire were positive about the suggestion the ICPO made to assist families in the future.

Table 9 below shows whether respondents agreed that the suggestions mentioned would be helpful to them. Over 90% of families who replied to this question said that a telephone helpline, family newsletter and on-going contact with the ICPO would help take the pressure off them and their family. A further 83% of respondents agreed that a visitation allowance would be helpful and just over three quarters (76%) reacted positively to the suggestion of a support group and prisoner allowance. The mixed feelings toward the idea of a support group and prisoners allowance should be noted, with 21% and 18% indicating ‘don’t know’ respectively.

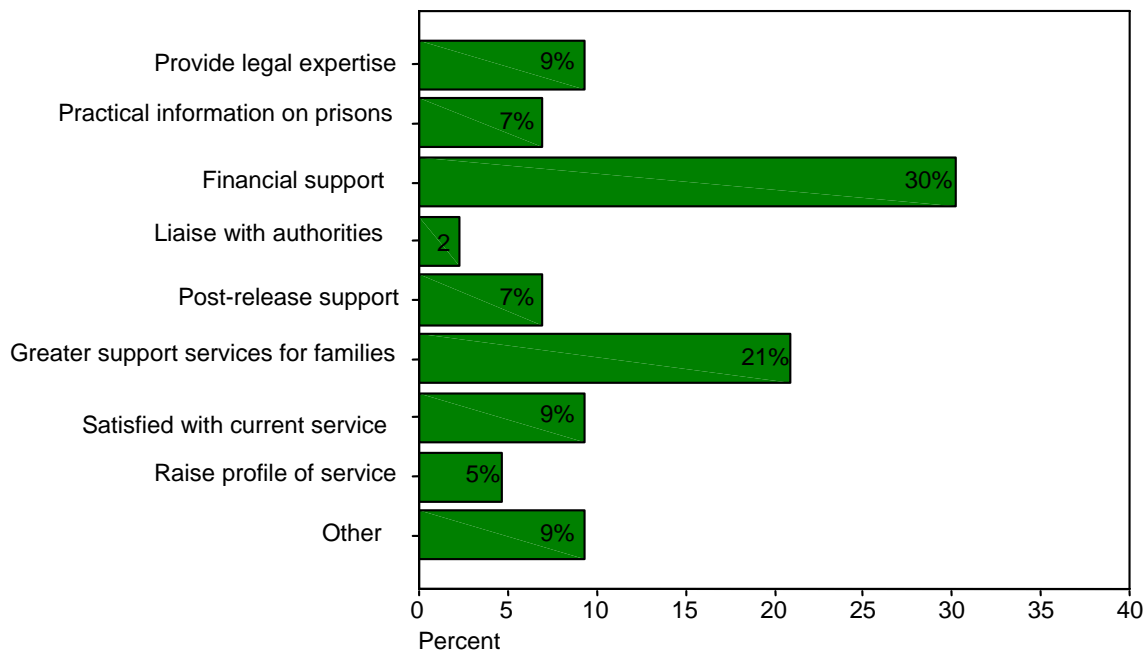
Table 9 Suggestions to help Families of Irish Prisoners Overseas

Suggestions	Helpful	Not Helpful	Don’t Know	Total
Travel allowance to visit relative in prison	83%	6%	11%	100%
Telephone Helpline	92%	3%	5%	100%
Newsletter for families of prisoners overseas	96%	2%	2%	100%
On-going contact with the ICPO Ireland	97%	3%	0%	100%
Support group for families of prisoners overseas	76%	3%	21%	100%
Allowance for relative in prison overseas	76%	6%	18%	100%

4.3 Respondents Suggestions to Improve the ICPO Service

Respondents were asked how the ICPO could improve its' service to help families of prisoners overseas in the future. Of those who received a questionnaire, 30 made one or more suggestions to improve the ICPO service to families. Chart 8 below shows the different suggestions made by respondents.

Chart 8 Suggestions to Improve Service



N=30

4.3.1 Financial Support

Thirty percent of respondents made reference for the need for greater financial support. Of these, 21% felt that the ICPO should provide travel assistance to help families visit their relative in prison overseas.

“Many families cannot afford to travel overseas to visit partners in prison. A travel allowance for visiting relatives in prison would be helpful”

“I think that the best help of all would be a travel allowance”

“The only difficulty that families have is getting to visit their kin. Social welfare are not very supportive in providing help”

One respondent encouraged the ICPO to seek funding from the government to assist families of Irish prisoners overseas with travel expenses.

“Travelling to foreign countries is very expensive and most families cannot afford to travel very often. Maybe the government could give the ICPO a grant to help out these families”

A further 9% of respondents suggested that the ICPO should assist in providing an allowance to their relative in prison. Prison facilities around the globe vary in their policies to provide prisoners with basic necessities such as food, toiletries and clothing. Practical problems, such as not liking the local food, can push up the cost of prison life as prisoners are forced to pay extra for additional items (such as different food, cigarettes etc).

In some cases, a prisoner is expected to pay for all living expenses and without any government assistance the family is left to foot the bill. This can cause enormous financial and emotional strain to families already struggling to make ends meet.

“I wish there was more financial help as X needs clothes for winter and I am on a single disability allowance”

“An allowance for relatives in prison overseas would be very helpful – they should be able to buy their own toiletries each week and be able to phone home once or twice a week. Even being provided with phone cards especially at Christmas would make a big difference to both the prisoner and their families”

One respondent encouraged the ICPO to arrange funding for families to maintain contact with prisoners overseas, by financing phone calls, stamps, stationary and postcards.

It was also suggested by one family member, that the ICPO should provide some sort of financial assistance to provide families of prisoners overseas with a break of some sort.

“Some help to provide a holiday or short break for families, especially for children. Something to look forward to”

4.3.2 Greater Support Services for Families

Twenty one percent of respondents suggested that the ICPO could improve its service by providing greater support to families in general. These responses tended to stress the value of remaining in contact with families, to provide emotional assistance and support. Two respondents suggested that the ICPO should provide useful information on support groups that they could access for help.

Another respondent makes reference to the positive experience they had in dealing with the ICPO staff over the phone and felt that a telephone support line would be of great benefit to other families.

“I feel a telephone would be very beneficial from experience. There have been times when I have felt so confused, emotional and even lost. It was the friendly non-judgemental voice at ICPO that helped me gain a positive perspective”

4.3.3 Legal Assistance

A number of respondents (9%) felt that the ICPO should provide better legal assistance to families. One idea was that the ICPO should employ a lawyer or legal expert to answer questions about international legal systems and who could liaise with appointed lawyers. Another family member reinforced the need for legal expertise that would provide cheap, but reliable information. The response below highlights the desperation and hopelessness felt by a family member, faced with the difficulty in dealing with a criminal justice system in a foreign country.

“If there was a lawyer in Ireland who practiced international law and who could be approached by you with queries from prisoners’ families. These lawyers are very expensive and charge fees that are out of the reach of prisoners families”

“...If there was someone who could be used to research questions from prisoners families on points of law. There are many times when we feel that great injustices are being done but there is no-one we can approach. There also comes a time when families just have no fight left and just have to sit back and let things go. One feels so helpless”

Another suggestion was to keep a list of solicitors or criminal offence attorneys from overseas countries, along with feedback from former prisoners overseas and their families who employed them. There was also a call for basic information on the legal system in different countries, in Plain English¹ and without the legal jargon.

4.3.4 Practical Information

Seven percent of respondents suggested that the ICPO could improve their service to families by holding on file practical information on the rules, regulations and procedures of foreign prisons and making it available to families when necessary.

“Because of the problems I encountered trying to find out about visits etc, it might be helpful if you hold some information on file concerning some of the prisons”

4.3.5 Satisfaction with Current Service

It is worth noting that 9% of respondents felt satisfied with the current service provided by the ICPO and did not make any other suggestions for improvements.

“I think you are doing a great job as it is”

“I have found the service very satisfactory and don’t see how they can be more helpful”

4.3.6

¹ 'Plain English' is language that the intended audience can understand and act upon from a single reading. The use of plain English in documents and all written material is endorsed by NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency) www.nala.ie

Other Suggestions to Improve Service

The need for post-release support was raised by 3 respondents, who were concerned about their ability to cope with their relatives release from prison.

“Follow-up support should be available to both ex-prisoners and their family upon release, such as counselling and a support group”

One respondent suggested that the ICPO should liaise more with the relevant authorities, such as the Department of Foreign Affairs, on behalf of families of prisoners overseas. This point was also made with regard to contacting solicitors and lawyers representing prisoners overseas.

Other suggestions included the need to raise the profile of the ICPO, to provide a visitor to go and see their family members imprisoned abroad and to send Irish newspapers to prisoners.

4.4 Other Comments Made by Respondents

Respondents were given the opportunity to make additional comments in relation to the ICPO service. Table 10 overleaf outlines the issues and concerns that respondents wanted to highlight.

Almost half of the respondents used this opportunity to express their thanks and gratitude to the ICPO for the help and support they received. Some respondents made special reference to members of staff who had been of particular assistance to them, however most wrote generally to praise the caring, informative and non-judgmental nature of the ICPO.

“Thank you seems so little when I think of the comfort and support I have received from your organisation over the years. In particular Sr. Maria has always been there for me”

“I really appreciate the honesty and empathy with which the staff carry out their duties. It gives a real feeling that someone cares. Thank you”

“Thanks for being non-judgemental. It’s great to know that I can pick up a phone and talk to someone, get information, seek advice or just have a shoulder to cry on”

Some respondents felt let down by the authorities. While one family member praised the ICPO for their support, they used the opportunity to show their despair in trying to deal with government departments and agencies.

“The ICPO do fantastic work. It’s great to speak to someone who genuinely cares what happens to you and your family and to know they will do their very best for you. Unfortunately, with any government departments, including the Consular Section in the Department of Foreign Affairs, this is far from true”

Three respondents mentioned the need for greater legal support. For instance, one family member noted their frustration with the foreign legal system and solicitors, who they felt

had failed to keep them up-dated on their relatives’ case. Another respondent pointed out that her son had no legal assistance and required help on this matter.

Two family members who responded to the questionnaire requested information and assistance with the repatriation of their relative back to Ireland. The families mentioned that they wanted their relative to be closer to home, where they could visit them more often.

The need for financial support was noted again in this question. Respondents made special reference to the possibility of a visitation allowance to facilitate families to travel to see their relative in prison overseas. The hardship and financial strain suffered by families trying to make ends meet and travel to visit their loved one is obvious in the following response:

“I have 5 children with my partner, 2 of whom he hasn’t seen. I can’t even afford to visit X for Christmas. It is really so upsetting on my 4 eldest children”

Other issues which were mentioned by respondents, was the need for post-release services, family support group and to increase the profile of the ICPO.

Table 10 Other Comments made by Respondents

Other Comments	Number	Percentage (N=29)
Express gratitude to the ICPO service and staff	14	48%
Need for post-release support	1	3%
Information on repatriation	2	7%
Greater legal support	3	10%
Financial support for prisoner	3	10%
Support Services General	4	17%
Other	2	7%
Total	29	100%

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this report has been “to evaluate the needs of families of Irish prisoners overseas, in relation to the service provided by the ICPO and support services in general”. In this section, we examine the main research results and make recommendations based on these findings.

Profile of Respondents and their Relatives in Prison Overseas

Chapter One examines the profile of respondents and their family members imprisoned in a foreign country. It found that families in need of support are not a homogenous group and include parents, partners, spouses, siblings and children of prisoners overseas. All have suffered as a result of their relatives’ imprisonment, even though they themselves have committed no crime. Over half of prisoners were in a UK prison and 61% were sentenced to between 1 and 5 years.

Evaluating the ICPO Service

This chapter evaluated the respondents’ satisfaction with the service provided by the ICPO to families of prisoners’ overseas. Just over 60% of respondents said that they had been in contact with the ICPO Maynooth and, of these, 93% said that they were satisfied with the service they received. This is a very positive finding and reflects the high level of support for the service.

Respondents were asked to give examples of how the ICPO has supported them in the past. The findings showed that emotional support, the provision of practical advice and information, as well as financial assistance was the greatest source of assistance to families using the service. In particular, respondents emphasised the importance of the non-judgemental, caring and listening nature of the service.

The survey found that some respondents had no-one to turn to (13%) and were unaware of the existence of the ICPO. It highlights the necessity to raise the profile of the ICPO and to ensure that families are notified, through prisoners themselves, the Department of Foreign Affairs or the Consular services, that they are there to offer support.

Difficulties Experienced by Families of Prisoners Overseas

Findings from this chapter suggest that families face multiple difficulties in coping with the imprisonment of a relative abroad. When asked to provide details about some of the problems that they had encountered, respondents made reference to the prison and legal system and the lack of support to keep in contact with their relative. Feeling isolated and worries about the lack of post-release support services were also mentioned.

Supporting the Families of Prisoners Overseas

This chapter examined how the ICPO could improve their service to provide greater support to families of Irish prisoners overseas. Financial support emerged as one of the greatest perceived needs among the families. Families required support to visit their relative and to provide them with basic supplies such as toiletries, clothing, food, stamps and phone cards. Respondents suggested that the ICPO itself meet these costs, or approach the government on their behalf to obtain funding.

Other suggestions included the need to recruit a legal assistant to help answer legal queries and correspondent with foreign lawyers and assistants. Families also requested country specific information regarding the prison and legal systems. When given the opportunity to make additional comments, over half of respondents wanted to express their gratitude and support to the ICPO.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following provides the recommendations made from the findings in this report. The recommendations are categorised under the main themes which have emerged from this study.

Raising awareness of the ICPO among prisoners and their families

1. At first contact with an Irish prisoner overseas, the ICPO should make the client aware of the existence of family support services and offer to contact their family
2. Increase the profile of the ICPO and the family support services it offers by continuing the awareness campaign in the ICPO newsletter sent to prisoners
3. The Department of Foreign Affairs, along with the Irish Consular Services, should inform Irish prisoners overseas and their families of the existence of the ICPO as soon as they make contact with new cases

Financial support to prisoners and their families

4. The Department of Foreign Affairs should provide an allowance to Irish citizens in prison overseas. Families are currently meeting the cost of imprisonment. An allowance to pay for basic toiletries and clothes, where they are not provided, would ease the financial burden of the imprisonment on families.
5. Contact with family members during a prison sentence reduces the risk of recidivism on release from prison and is essential for successful re-integration. Prisoners should receive a stamp and phone card allowance, to help them maintain contact with their family.
6. A major barrier to visiting a relative in prison was the cost of travel. To assist families and prisoners to keep in contact, the government should provide a visitation allowance to all families of prisoners overseas. This should not be a discretionary payment left to individual Community Welfare Officers.

7. Family concerns regarding the lack of post-release support service available to their relative, was an emerging issue from this study. The Government should implement recommendation from *The Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants* (Ireland, 2002:49) to make emergency welfare funds available through voluntary agencies in Britain to support Irish citizens released from prison, with little or no funds to sustain themselves.

Emotional support to families and children of prisoners overseas

8. The establishment of a family support group would facilitate families to make contact with one another and share their experiences
9. A “family day” should be organised to take place on one day each year in order to take some of the pressure off families and children of prisoners overseas. Activities could include kids games and a barbeque
10. Respondents have indicated the value of the counselling and emotional support that they received over the phone. A telephone helpline should be set up to ensure that all families are supported through their relatives imprisonment

Developing the information and legal support services

11. Produce a series of leaflets directed at families of prisoners overseas. Leaflets should include information on
 - The ICPO – who they are, their aims, contact details etc
 - The main issues affecting families and how they may be feeling
 - Support services available to families and links to other agencies
 - Financial support and assistance available
 - Visiting a prisoner overseas – what to expect?
 - Returning home – how to cope? (resettlement and post-release support available)
12. Prepare Factsheets or Information Bulletins on the prison and legal system in different countries (such as prison rules and procedures, visiting times, accommodation options while visiting, deportation, repatriation, post-release support services)
13. Findings in this study show that there is a clear need for accurate and up-to-date information on matters relating to the legal system and repatriation. The ICPO should liaise with FLAC (Free Legal Advice Centres) to answer queries on legal issues.
14. The employment of a full-time legal expert at the ICPO is crucial to responding to legal issues in the long-term. Recruiting someone with legal knowledge would also assist the ICPO in meeting one of their four aims, “to seek human rights for prisoners, refugees and emigrants at an international level”.

15. Consider the possibility of maintaining a database of the names and contact numbers of solicitors or lawyers from various countries and who have dealt with Irish prisoners overseas in the past

Future Research

16. The Government should fulfil its obligation under *the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF)* to undertake research to identify the number of Irish prisoners abroad and their needs for services in prison (Ireland, 2000).
17. The Government should implement the recommendation of *The Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants* (Ireland, 2002:13) that more research is needed to establish the specific circumstances and requirements of vulnerable Irish abroad, and includes prisoners within this category.
18. The government should also note the Task Force recommendation that its commitment under the PPF, to carry out a research study identifying the needs of Irish emigrants abroad, should be undertaken at the earliest opportunity before the expiry of the PPF (Ireland, 2002:18).
19. Evidence in this report suggested that families suffer financial hardship and an increasing risk of poverty as a consequence of a relatives' imprisonment overseas. The ICPO should seek funding to support further study to examine this issue and any policy implications in greater detail

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