



The Needs of Families of People Held in Local Jails

Megan Lee Comfort, RTI International

Public awareness is rising about how families suffer when members are sent to prison. However, when it comes to confinement in *jails* – local facilities where people are held from few days to several months – observers may be tempted to underestimate the family impact.

My colleagues and I conducted a study that opened our eyes to the effects jails can have on families. Our study provided intensive case management for impoverished people living with HIV who needed to be connected to treatment and other services to stabilize their health. When the study's social worker first met them, all of the participants were unstably housed or homeless, had mental health issues, and had recently used illegal drugs. Study participants were extremely socially and physically vulnerable – a portrait that resembles that of a typical U.S. jail inmate. Indeed, the majority of the participants spent time in jail during the study. As part of the case management, the study social worker reached out to family members, giving us an opportunity to document how having a loved one in jail can be hard on families in ways that are different from the challenges faced by families of prisoners.

Each Arrest Means Starting from Scratch

One family unit we got to know was Linda, Sherry, and their 51-year old brother, Cadillac. Cadillac was frequently sent to jail, and each time he was released, his sisters welcomed him into their homes. Trying to keep him safe and sober, they would buy him new clothes, lend him money, cook meals for him, and let him sleep on the couch. But as much as Linda and Sherry tried to help, Cadillac needed professional treatment for his mental health and substance use issues. Without a way to get that treatment, he repeatedly cycled from his sisters' apartments to living in a park to being jailed for misdemeanors like shoplifting.

Linda and Sherry helped us understand how disruptive it can be to deal with a family member jailed for a few days or weeks. When Cadillac was in jail for a short period, he would lose his bed at the shelter, his identification card, bus pass, medication, and any clothing or belongings not in his possession at arrest; and he fell behind on appointments and paperwork his social worker was using to try to get him needed services. Each time, he left jail in a state of extremely high need, with nothing but the clothes on his back. For Linda and Sherry, dealing with their brother felt like incessant crisis management, a Sisyphean effort repeatedly undone by a few more nights in jail.

A Twenty-Hour-a-Day Job

In our study we also got to know Antoine and Diane. As Antoine told us, he was “raised by the state of California,” having spent his first 26 years in foster care, the juvenile justice system, and the adult prison system. In the first year we knew him, he had severe psychiatric issues and also suffered a gunshot wound and a life-threatening illness. During this time, he became romantically involved with Diane, a transgender woman, who routinely participated in every aspect of Antoine's care. She knew all of his medications, reminded him when to take them and asked doctors about side effects and researched these online; she arranged his appointments with therapists and healthcare providers and she filled out forms he found stressful to handle. In an interview, Diane characterized her caretaking for Antoine as “a twenty-hour-a-day job.” And yet, when Antoine went to jail her job was not over, because then she had “to fix all of the issues that he caused right before he went to jail... [I]n that two weeks he skipped every appointment that he ever had and burnt all his bridges. But in the last month [while he was in jail], I've been making sure that all of those things have been taken care of. Keeping in touch with his doctors and his therapists and all of his case workers and making sure that they don't drop him.”

Importantly, it was Diane's sense of urgency that Antoine would have a network of service providers to return to after his release that drove her efforts to reach out to these professionals and secure Antoine's place in their caseloads. As with Linda and Sherry, her experience showed that the jailing of loved ones does not stabilize a situation or provide a reprieve. It can generate "more work" because of a need to hurriedly regroup and prepare for a relatively swift return.

The Need for Specialized Services

Overall, our study indicates that supposedly "low-level" encounters with criminal justice – such as repeated arrests, jail stays, and community supervision episodes – can be very stressful for family members. Constant churning between jail and the streets undermines efforts to stabilize a troubled individual, because appointments are missed, paperwork and belongings are lost, medications are skipped, housing is jeopardized.

Further research is needed, but our preliminary findings suggest directions for policy and program development. Our study showed that family members of troubled and occasionally jailed people want, appreciate, and thrive upon interactions with a case manager who is focused on their loved one's care. While case management programs for people returning from prison terms already exist, such services should be further developed and refined to address the needs of those intermittently jailed as well as those serving long-term prison sentences. These services and supports also should take into account the needs of family caregivers and social networks surrounding and trying to stabilize those leaving confinement, including those jailed for short stints.

The need for integrated services – especially housing assistance for people involved in the criminal justice system – emerged clearly from our study. Lessons can be taken from public health experts who have a strong track record of forging partnerships across institutions and supporting the wellbeing of people who move through settings ranging from correctional facilities to single-occupancy room hotels to back alleyways to public hospitals. Clients who spend time in jail should not be shunted into separate categories or excluded from broader services, because they often have needs similar to those of other marginalized people.

Equally important, our study shows the need for creative thinking about ways to support family members. Caregivers need resources not only to help their vulnerable kin during and after jail stints, but also to provide such help without jeopardizing their own wellbeing.

Read more in Megan Lee Comfort, "'A Twenty-Hour-a-Day Job': The Impact of Frequent Low-Level Criminal Justice Involvement on Family Life." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 665, no. 1 (2016): 63-79.