

Reintegration

– the problems and the issues

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*In memory of the late Billy Giles
who contributed so much to this publication*

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I would also like to express my thanks to all my colleagues (friends) at EPIC Central Services, without whose guidance the publication would still be in its early stages. To Michael Hall for editing and structuring the report with the passion and commitment required to give it justice.

On a personal note I want to thank those who have encouraged me to take a constructive role within the Loyalist community. To my family and friends who gave me confidence to continue with educational achievements and to all my comrades, prisoners/ex-prisoners and their families from the Shore Road/Tigers Bay area for their friendship and support over many years.

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Jim Crothers

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Just prior to the publication of this document, Ulster Volunteer Force and Red Hand Commando released prisoners jointly issued the following statement:

At this time of the Agreement's implementation, which includes the release of serving political prisoners from organisations who subscribe to peaceful transition, we would remind concerned organisations and individuals of our commitment to non-violent means of addressing the political conflict in Northern Ireland.

This was demonstrated by our support for the declaration of ceasefire in 1994 and our becoming proactive in our support for our political representatives in the negotiated process.

Ulster Volunteer Force and Red Hand Commando prisoners have supported the peace process, the negotiated Agreement, and democratic developments which continue to emerge.

We acknowledge the overwhelming desire for peace, given by way of referendum on the Good Friday Agreement by the people of N. Ireland.

Let it be known that it is our desire that, should opportunity and circumstance present itself to contribute to the unselfish work being done by many ex-combatants, ongoing in the political and social settlements, we will again offer our support.

We remain forever conscious of the casualties of the conflict and in respect for all surviving families we return to our communities with dignity, embraced with sensitivity, and an ongoing commitment to the democratic process.

Preface

As Northern Ireland emerges into a new era of democratic government after 30 years of violent conflict, thoughts are focusing on the future arrangements and relationships within Northern Ireland, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and on a new East-West concept embracing the United Kingdom and Ireland. Transition takes time, energy, commitment and an ability to see a brighter, inclusive future while reflecting on past experience.

It has not gone unnoticed that former enemies in that violent conflict are now addressing their differences and representing their communities in a non-violent theatre of debate – the new Northern Ireland Assembly. Our differences, political and otherwise, have now a new arena within which they can be explored and creatively accommodated.

While we as a community-based self-help organisation welcome and will continue to give our support to these latest developments at the political level, we are also conscious of the impact and legacy of violent conflict at community level.

It is our belief that many sections of our community have an increasing role to play in addressing the casualties of our violent conflict, in acknowledging and endeavouring to resolve injustices, and in striving to heal the wounds (as best as one can) so as to enable all our people to invest in a new future.

EPIC has taken responsibility to assist in the reintegration and transformation of ex-prisoners who engaged in the violent conflict. As an integral part of this work EPIC has undertaken intensive research into prison-related issues – whether describing the background to the prison experience itself, or cataloguing the many predicaments, problems and concerns which politically-motivated ex-prisoners encounter upon release.

The first results of this research are now being published, aimed not only at our ‘client’ group of ex-prisoners, but also with a view to increasing awareness among the general public about a significant section of our community whose experiences of long-term imprisonment have impacted right across Northern Ireland, and in some cases beyond.

This publication has been compiled from research conducted primarily by Jim Crothers, a member of staff of EPIC Central Services, and, though Jim, a number of other volunteers. To all those people involved in the research and publication I offer the thanks of EPIC’s client base for putting into print a voice not often heard – indeed, in the past hardly articulated – but a message which should be listened to, and, for those in positions of influence, acted upon. It is complemented by another EPIC research document, published simultaneously, which presents an historical overview of the prison experience from a Loyalist perspective.

We in Northern Ireland know only too well that to ignore our communities’ ills only guarantees festering sores and fermentation of future conflict. EPIC feels that its practical work on the needs of ex-prisoners, as well as its ongoing research, will assist in creating the awareness and understanding which is the necessary foundation for purposeful dialogue, without which we can never hope to move forward and reconcile individuals, neighbourhoods, communities and our society in general.

Martin Snoddon

Programme Co-ordinator
EPIC

Introduction

This publication is the culmination of extensive research undertaken by EPIC, using two main methods of information gathering – qualitative and quantitative.

The *qualitative* research involved in-depth interviews with Loyalist ex-prisoners, focusing primarily on the numerous problems and concerns encountered by the ex-prisoner population, especially in the course of their reintegration into society. The interviews also encouraged the ex-prisoners to express their hopes and fears, regrets and aspirations, freely and at length.

The *quantitative* research took the form of a questionnaire designed specifically for the ex-prisoner population. Volunteers from each of EPIC's regional committees delivered and collected these questionnaires from their respective ex-prisoner populations. Approximately 500 questionnaires were circulated, of which 328 were returned. All of the respondents were politically-motivated ex-prisoners from an Ulster Volunteer Force or Red Hand Commando background, and all them had returned from imprisonment and are reintegrating back into communities right across Northern Ireland.

The aims of the research were:

- to establish the needs of Loyalist politically-motivated prisoners in terms of their reintegration into the community, with particular reference to employment, training and future education;
- to identify the level and quality of current assistance and support;
- to assess the level of resourcing required;
- to create public awareness on issues relating to prisoners, ex-prisoners and ex-combatants.

The publication comprises the following sections:

- pages 5–27* A comprehensive overview of the many issues and concerns raised by the ex-prisoners during the interviews, allowing the ex-prisoners to speak largely for themselves.
- pages 28–33* A breakdown of the statistical data collected from the questionnaires, revealing the extent of the major areas of concern.
- page 34* An outline, prepared by a member of EPIC's Welfare Rights Branch, of the main problems that department endeavours to assist with.
- pages 35–36* A report prepared by American psychologist Helen Seline on the psychological repercussions of violent conflict and captivity.
- pages 37–38* The text of a submission by EPIC to the Northern Ireland Office on the theme: 'Reintegration of ex-combatants; towards peace and reconciliation'.
- pages 39–40* A general overview of EPIC and its various services.

EPIC feels that this publication should do much to help raise awareness within Northern Ireland, and outside, of prisoner-related issues. EPIC also feels that its content could contribute significantly to the healing process our long-suffering society is now hopefully embarking upon.

Jim Crothers
Research Officer
EPIC

The Personal Impact

All ex-prisoners, particularly 'lifers', invariably spend a lot of time reflecting on the huge segment of their lives which has been taken from them.

I find it very hard to relax and the constant search to find who you are is ongoing. Quite often you find yourself going through bouts of depression. There would be times when I would be very low and depressed because I become so weary and tired of trying to work out on the emotional side all that has happened to me.

When you come out even the language has changed – the 'in' words and the 'out' words – and it's as if you have lost those years of your life. You have to adapt to all that, and some people never adapt.

For a few the amount of introspection they indulged in could seem never-ending.

Even at the present – and I'm released 16 years – there is times I still sit back and think what would it have been like if I hadn't done this or that or the Troubles hadn't been there. I accepted the punishment for what I had done, but in different ways it gets you down.

Some felt it was important to remind themselves of why they ended up being incarcerated in the first place.

Well, we're going back to the 70s, and the attitudes then were entirely different. This was new to everybody, you were then, in my opinion, a true soldier of Ulster. You were proud to go in. I remember thinking to myself – I was caught in this wee operation – that I was ashamed of myself because I wasn't in doing life.

It sounds silly. It's not that I wanted to do life – it's contradictory – but I felt sort of worthless.

Others readily admitted the existence of self-doubt.

My *raison d'être* at the time would have been [that] that old man on crutches couldn't go out and pick up a gun, that old woman with arthritis in the wheelchair can't lift a gun . . . I'm young and able, I'll do it for them. A lot of the people have actually expressed the same sort of emotions to me when I was released – you were fighting for me, I'm not able to. But, having said that, there was the other attitude too from others – no-one asked you to go and fight for me. So I was confused at times.

Some reported that the same feelings which led to their involvement with paramilitarism still remained with them and had to be constantly confronted.

I think sometimes you struggle with yourself, especially even within the environment we currently live in and the hostilities that still go on. There're times that the aggression could come out, but you have to control it. There's times when I have thought of actually doing something that I could end up back in prison for, but I was able to rationalise and put that in perspective, whereas before I wouldn't have.

A few, however, could be quite blunt in their self-appraisal.

You get headcases in every area. Maybe that's what we were, or maybe that's what I was. Maybe I just wasn't the brainiest.

I believe that seeing as I done the crime I had to do the time. Some prisoners can't accept that – they feel they are innocent and blame someone else. I didn't blame anyone else. I done the crime – nobody twisted my arm up my back. If you believe in what you were doing then you'll be able to face it. There is fellas who can't accept it – why should I be in prison, I don't deserve to be in prison.

Others recalled their initial sense of disillusionment.

It was hard. The key thing for me was the shock of having fought for the British and then having been punished by them – that was difficult to come to terms with. So when I began to serve

my sentence it was a learning process, which was encouraged by Gusty within the compound system. So the way I eventually established my sentence was by setting my day up as if I was going to do a day's work. I was always trying to prepare myself for

eventually being released. So I established a pattern. I would get up and do some training – a five or ten mile jog – then head into the study hut until lunchtime, do some physical exercise at lunchtime, then head back to the study hut – as though I was doing a day's work.

It was this aspect – how each individual coped with being inside – which seemed to be one of the most significant aspects of the whole prison experience.

At the start I fought the system, but after six or seven years I said to myself – this is my life now and I'm going to make the best of it. So I started taking up handicrafts and education – just keeping myself busy.

You have to accept it. There is fellas that just can't accept it, but I knew when I was arrested

that I was getting a life sentence, so I was physically and mentally ready for that sentence.

Some, on reflection, considered their incarceration not to have been without its positive side.

I know prison is hard but prison can also be good for you, in learning to cope and adapt under stressful situations. I trained a lot in prison and it has stood by me. I swim now three times a week which releases a lot of tension . . . gets me out, and keeps me physically fit.

I coped with it okay and found it an experience. I dare say if I hadn't have gone to prison I may not have ended up the person I am today. I have to say, being honest about it, the only effects were good effects – when I was away I used the time to better myself.

Some believed the prison experience actually left them more confident and self-assertive.

There was always conflict between the prisoners and the regimes. Everyone was affecting your brain and your body, always attempting to institutionalise you. So we always fought against that every day. Big things and wee things – there was always a battle with the authorities, trying to prove that you're different and not just a criminal. That still continues today.

In not just the compound but in the whole prison experience you couldn't question or challenge [directly] the establishment or the people in authority who were telling you how things were to be done. The methods we used were petitions and 'board papers' . . . a long drawn-out process. But you began to learn how to challenge those in establishment, so that when you come out you bring that experience with you, and I think that a lot of people were amazed that you could challenge people. You could go to your GP, who people look up to and wouldn't challenge, and say "I don't accept the diagnosis you have given me."

I became a lot wiser in jail because I was doing things I never thought about before, and I began to think more about things instead of just diving into them.

Many prisoners utilised whatever facilities prison offered in order to help them keep on top of things, both mentally and physically.

We were lucky [in the Compounds] because we had the facilities and things to do whatever we wanted. Some went into education, some went into handicrafts. There was plenty of opportunity to train and things, especially in the latter years.

Others readily admitted that the physical regime adhered to inside had not been as easy to follow on the outside.

I looked after my health in prison, physically and mentally. Since my release I haven't been as focused, and as a result of this my physical condition has gone down a lot.

On my release I was a fit man. [When inside] I did training practically every day and back in society I found myself in the same mould. For the next three years I trained every day and ran every morning. After three years I began to miss a day here and there and eventually stopped. I was fitter when I was inside.

Many others were not able to cope to the same extent.

I got it really hard sometimes. And with my parents and all dying when I was in jail at that time it was heavy wack.

Some felt that the psychological burden of imprisonment was not something which could be easily alleviated by visits to the prison gym.

I would say that in later years it does affect you, because a lot of the ones in prison with me have [since] died from heart attacks and other illnesses which I would say were maybe related to the pressure you were under in prison, but didn't realise – it's only

in later years that it starts to affect you.

For those who found it hard to cope with, however, there were others prepared to offer a helping hand.

I can get across to people in some way. I have seen boys trying to commit suicide in prison and boys cutting their wrists and you can more or less talk to them and say it's not as hard as you think it is. Every man's sentence is the way he wants to do it: you can do it the easy way or do it the hard way. The easy way is the best. I found that out.

That 'helping hand', and the supportive environment of a prison community, however, was not available to the handful of female Loyalist prisoners, who were greatly outnumbered by their Republican counterparts. For them it was a constant and wary battle of wits.

The men in jail had strength in numbers but in Armagh you had to stand and fight on your own. Where I was there were 37 Provos over to the right and I was over to the left. I always had to be on my guard. They did try to burn me one day, and on another occasion they all lined up around the ironing board when I was ironing and it was in my head that if any of them touched me I would hit them with the iron as it was hot.

Release from prison, rather than being the panacea many

had hoped for, was often beset with problems. For a start, it was as if the prisoner had entered a different time zone.

When I first got out I still thought I was 21 and should be running around with slits in my jeans – which had been all the style at the time. It's only in the last couple of years that I've come around to my own age. There's a lot of that in it, a time warp, because your memories are all to do with when you got lifted, and when you come out you think it's going to be the same.

Some found the world outside an almost threatening place.

I find I have this thing about crowds, even when I am going to sign the 'dole'. You may find that strange, but if I go into a place that is packed I get this sweat just coming on my head. Once I get that initial period over me I seem alright.

Or a place where the lack of a daily routine was difficult to adapt to.

Sometimes it will all get on top of you. You are dying to get out yet when you do it's just the same thing back and forth – boredom. You need something to do, like a hobby. In jail you are institutionalised and there's things that keep you occupied, like football in the afternoon, or using the gym. Or people coming down and going for a walk, saying come on and we'll do this or that. When they put the multi-gyms in a squad of you got together and used it at a certain time. You are doing something all the time. But now [that I'm out] it's hard to do things on your own.

For many, there was a fear of finding oneself 'imprisoned' on the outside.

I need to be out of the house. I spent enough time cooped up behind four walls.

I like solitude. I fish on my own. I like my own company. My wife understands that I like to fish, though she wouldn't take part in that. I would probably go away for hours and hours. I've seen me going away most of the day to fish, weekends to fish. It's relaxing.

Prison not only took away one's liberty, but removed any concern with the numerous necessities of everyday life.

In prison you don't have the responsibility of your food or rent or electric or clothes so when you come out of prison, and are living in a house, housekeeping becomes a big problem.

And facing life on the outside once again proved to be a daunting experience for many.

Stress? Certainly! I think everyone experiences a great deal of stress. The stress of everyday life when you come out. The stress of not having a job, or trying to get a job and not getting one. The stress of not having money. The stress of maybe seeing yourself not doing as well as you thought you would've. You know, you've grand ideas before you are released from prison, and if they aren't fulfilled . . .

I get downers just like everyone else. I would talk to my mates and that, but that's about it. Fellas I was in jail with. They're the only ones that know what I'm talking about.

And it was in interpersonal and family relationship that the most difficult problems were encountered.

Maintaining fitness and discipline while in prison.

The Impact on Family Life

Very often the arrest and imprisonment of someone was the first inkling a family had that their loved one had been involved in the 'Troubles', and the impact could be devastating.

My family were shocked. I think my mother accepted it a lot quicker than my father did. For the first year and a half my father rejected rather than accepted. I felt hurt; I wanted to speak to him and try to explain to him what was going on. He had been trying to push me on and do the best for his son, and I suppose I let him down. My mother died when I was in prison, and he began to accept it then. I think he thought that my mother was not there any more so he had to come up to see me. It was all very emotional for me. The hardest bit was when my mother was dying. She was dying of cancer and I was promised a release to visit her in hospital. Then at the last minute I was let down – they told me duty transport problems. It was hard for me to accept but even harder for my mother – she thought, you know, it might have been my last visit.

The family of one female prisoner was certainly quite unprepared for her imprisonment.

My mother and them, all my family, are the sort of people who didn't get involved in politics, they didn't get involved in things, so it was a big slap in the mouth to them when I got arrested. It came as a big shock to my mother.

For some families the damage was almost irreparable.

My family were sort of against me for what I had done, like. Make no mistake about it, I was in for armed robbery and hijacking. To be honest, it was for the organisation, but [my family] didn't think I was involved in anything like this, and because of the way they heard about it in the media and the news they sort of turned their backs on me. My mother came down to visit me only once when I was in because she didn't like to go into prison. I can understand that, with her age and her ill-health, you know. I found that very hard and at the same time you have to accept it. There is a lot of things you don't want to accept but you have to accept them.

Other families proved to be supportive right from the beginning.

It was good to know they were fully behind me. I thought maybe at the beginning my mother and father . . . they are totally against things like that, you know, they have their beliefs . . . but they

stood behind me all the time I was in, it was great.

Yet even though many families gave their total and unselfish support, this loyalty often took its toll.

After I got arrested my family told me they weren't ashamed of what I had done. They all said they were proud. "Hold your head up high when you go into court", and I done that and I don't feel ashamed of what I done. But my family paid – my mother took an overdose worrying about me when I went in, and ended up in hospital.

However, once the period of incarceration was over, there was no guarantee that re-entry into the family would be easy. Some prisoners had already realised this possibility.

When I got pre-release paroles I felt like a child going to a birthday. But you didn't know what to expect when you got out. Alright, you got people coming back but all they ever spoke about was the good times they'd had. They never forewarned you of what else to expect, the loneliness of it all, or what to expect within your own community or within your own family.

Most prisoners sensed that adjustment was always going to be difficult.

When you come back to your family you're set in your ways with your own routines, so there can be problems.

They never forewarned you of what else to expect, the loneliness of it all, or what to expect within your own community or within your own family.

On release it was hard to adjust. I think you need someone to lean on. I was fortunate enough to have J____. A lot of people coming out would have nobody, so I can understand why – if you don't have a safety-net there, either from your family or a loved one or an organisation – it can become quite easy to get involved again.

For many families, there was confusion as to how to relate to the released prisoner – as they were then, or as they are now?

When I came out there was no real bond with my family. I didn't believe they understood I'd grown – I served 12 years – and they still treated me, especially my father, as a young boy. I couldn't relate to my father. I was 17 when I was sentenced and having to grow up virtually on my own inside, without nobody guiding me and then having to come out and have this parental guidance pushed on me which I didn't want. I wanted my independence.

Prior to my release both my parents had died so I

went to live with my elder sister when I was released. She was married with three teenage children. She was sort of treating me as if I'd just went in. To her I was still a 17-year-old who had no experience of outside life and she was sort of trying to mother me that way as well. I wanted to be treated like an adult. This led to a certain amount of friction in the household and although I was eternally grateful to her for taking me to live with her it did cause a lot of problems, mostly from my side. They had their own lives to be getting on with and I was just an obstacle there. I know I was in the road a lot of the time. They couldn't get doing their own thing, the way they'd done for years before I arrived.

To others, the return of the absent family member seemed more like the arrival of a stranger in their midst.

Just being away people go their own ways. I went in when I was 18 and when I came out my brothers and sisters were married and had kids. So I came out and the house was overcrowded: my mother, father and sister was in the house and she gave me grief, I was the extra one.

My father died ten years ago, my mother is not well, and the rest of the family . . . well, you got the feeling you weren't accepted in the family, you also got the feeling they were talking about you in some way. If you walked into the house they just shut up and they changed the subject. I just broke away from home and don't go down that much now. The only reason I would go down to Coleraine is to see my mother. If she wasn't here I wouldn't go next to near it.

Many families found it difficult to cope with the fact that their loved one had changed so much.

I had a loving relationship with my parents, but I needed so much time on my own. I couldn't even sit up in the house with them. I had me own wee sitting room with my TV and all in it and I spent most of my time there, to the extent that my mother would have started worrying about me spending too much time on my own. I just felt there was a part of me was missing and that I had nothing sort of in common with other people to talk about. They were able to talk about everyday sort of things and to me that was all mundane stuff that I couldn't relate to, and I had the feeling that I wanted to be somewhere else. But when I got to where I was going I would have wanted to be somewhere else again. So I could never really stay in the one place for too long – ten to fifteen minutes – and I would have wanted to go somewhere else. They didn't understand and again that was my fault for not sitting down and trying to explain to them. But I think especially my mum wanted to sort of say

everything would be okay, because she was so worried about me, so she thought if she sort of changed the subject it would go away by itself, which I knew it wouldn't. Because at that time I didn't know what was wrong with me either. I mean, I had come back out and all I knew is that I wanted to be back in.

Sometimes the renewed self-assertiveness of the returning prisoner, rather than being viewed positively, could often seem threatening.

The problem for me was that my family was used to looking after me and they had major difficulties in coming to terms with me setting up my own independence, making decisions for myself. What made it worse was that my brother always thought he knew better than me, and yet in a short period of time since my release I succeeded more that he had from working since he left school. Even after working for fifteen years he didn't have a car and nothing to show for it, while in a very short period of time I had went through three cars, and he hated to see what I had achieved.

The desire of the ex-prisoner to establish some degree of independence could often be the cause of misunderstanding and friction.

I had to get out of the house because it was causing arguments and all. So I got a job and a flat and then got into difficulties with the rent – that was a big problem for me. So you're actually trying to build a new life on your own 'cause your family don't understand the way you were in prison. Silence was one of the things in prison, and when you're in the house with a mother and father and sister and her wee child you can't get the same privacy you had in prison.

So life is completely different, you need to get into a house or flat of your own to do your own thing.

While I was in jail I had started writing to a girl just as a pen-pal, but as it went on we developed a relationship and as soon as I got out we started seeing each other and then decided to move in together. Anyway, it didn't work out. I think we genuinely felt for each other but she had really only seen me for half an hour once a fortnight and usually when you are in jail you are a different person while you are on a visit. She didn't really know any of the habits that I had developed during those four years and then when I got out a couple of other things happened that I know didn't help matters any. For a start my family had been really supportive during my time inside and when I came out some of them saw her as an outsider. It wasn't so much my mother because I think she was just glad that I

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was trying to settle down anyway – it was more my sisters. I had three older sisters who probably thought of me as their wee kid brother and to be honest I think they were raging because they didn't have a say in who I picked to go out with. There was a hell of a lot of friction between her and my sisters. It got to the stage that none of them spoke to her and one of them still doesn't speak to me.

Often a 'tug of war' ensued between the released prisoner's needs and those of his family.

I come from a very close family. A very big family. When I was in jail my family visited me faithfully for all the years I was in. So I owed them, and felt bad about betraying their commitment by going off and spending my time with someone else as soon as I got out. I ended up feeling really guilty about the situation. It made me ill. I was a big lad and yet it was like I was still tied to my family's apron-strings. I wanted to be with my girlfriend but at the same time I felt I owed all my time to my family. I finally moved in with my girlfriend. It was hard for the first while. It was like I was really only sleeping there, spending my days with my family and my nights with her. For the first few months she was okay about it, she could understand my predicament. After that she started going on about me just using her house to sleep in. I guess it was understandable. I don't know how it happened, how it came about, but in the end I was able to balance my time in a way that kept everyone happy.

Those prisoners who were married prior to their imprisonment often had the hardest adjustments of all to make.

When I went into prison my kids were infants. When I came out I was dealing with people in their mid-teens who hadn't grown up with me, and I had to get to know them as individuals. Especially in the case of the girl – there was clashes between us. I think she resented me infringing on her relationship with her mother. She was a baby whenever I went in, and then this stranger suddenly comes into the house and takes over. It was basically down to jealousy, I would imagine. She had her mother's undivided attention for 13 years and all of a sudden her mother was devoting much of her attention to me, like. A couple of years later she eventually acknowledged the way she was behaving. She just said to me all of a sudden one night: "Daddy, like when you came out I could have seen you far enough".

It was very strange. It was like I wasn't there. My son and her arguing. . . I'm actually sitting in the room, but I was completely left out of it, as if I wasn't there.

Before I was arrested you were the man of the house and you would have made all the decisions.

When you go inside the woman takes over that role and when you come back out again it's pretty difficult to try and take over that role. She has got her routine, her independent sort of way of running things. It took a while for us to get back to normal. It's hard to explain. Even to get to know one another again.

Some were lucky to be able to sit down and work through any difficulties.

I was married before I went into prison and my wife stuck by me all through it. I'm still married to the same girl. There were problems though. My daughter was two when I went in and whenever I came out she had grown up without knowing me really as a father. She was always used with her mother and whenever I would ask her to do something or tell her to stop something she tended to look to her [mother] for reference, and this annoyed me. Plus the fact that my wife had always been used with looking after the monetary affairs and all the rest, making decisions on her own for her and the child while I was in. It took a lot of tolerance and nights awake sitting talking about stuff and going over everything, just basically renewing the whole relationship with her and the child. Problems still crop up but we've learned to sit down and go over the situation and dig for the roots of the situation rather than just blundering on hoping things will work out.

Many ex-prisoners experienced a high degree of guilt.

After being in prison you think you've failed to a certain extent, failed your family and failed ones about you, so you tend to go harder for your goals. I mean, at the minute there's ones would say I'm a workaholic, because that's just the way I am. I just work for the family, and for things that I'm after, to get the money for them. I'm self-employed.

My marriage was very solid like, really. I wouldn't like to say it was a great strain but I realise now I have a big sort of guilt complex thing about it, and I feel really guilty because there are certain things I can't provide for my kids. I would like to be more supportive of them, particularly financially. And sometimes I would blow into a temper to mask that type of thing, you know. I can never see myself being in complete control of my life. I would say that the single biggest problem in my life is the vulnerability of being an ex-prisoner. I think it's bad enough for the ordinary man in the street, but particularly so for an ex-prisoner who is going to be discriminated against.

Not all things go rosy when you get out. You start arguing, then you feel guilty about it. Here I am giving her a hard time, and I put her through all this sort of thing. And the guilt would kill you – it's very common. Same with the kids. Who are you to come in and tell them off when

you weren't there for them when they were growing up? You say to yourself afterwards what are they thinking.

Some relationships just could not survive.

[Our relationship continued] for a while. But then it got to the stage where it was obvious that it was stupid to carry it on. I think she wanted to go her own way but was afraid to say so, and I wanted to hang on just for the sake of it – just being selfish, I suppose. It just petered out and it ended up more like a friendship thing.

I eventually left my wife and since then she has told our daughter that her father was a murdering bastard . . . that's how bad she is. It ended up everybody thought she was a good girl; I always thought she was a good girl. But if I went out for a drink there was nothing but rows. Even sitting in the house watching a football match and having a few beers I was called all the drunken 'B's of the day.

Some relationships had not even survived the separation caused by imprisonment.

My girl was actually having an affair when I was in jail. You can understand how I felt as a prisoner. This old saying 'forgive and forget' but it was eating inside me. There was nothing I could do about it, my hands were tied. To be honest with you, a few relationships before that I had the same problem and you always keep saying: this will never happen again. And even when you do think you have the right girl in your life, there you are, it's happening again.

But for many ex-prisoners there was a growing appreciation

of just who did the most suffering during the period of their imprisonment.

I only began to realise when I was released and started talking to them about the difficulties they had – their support and the visits and the money that they had spent. Sometimes maybe when they had only £7 or £8 left to do them a week after they had visited and given me a parcel and left money in. And for me it was very painful and disturbing to think that they had went through that for me and I hadn't considered that while I was in prison. I had sort of thought: well, if there was money there, it was for me. When I came out and started talking to my mother and she started telling me how they had coped and what it meant for them, I began to realise that she had kept a lot of things hidden from me because she felt that I had enough to cope with inside. So I wasn't really fully aware of the pain and the sacrifice that they had actually made.

They have had to put up with a terrible lot more than us. They were the ones who had to carry all the shopping and do all the running. Even if they hadn't two pennies they always got it somewhere; they are the ones who put up with it.

When I went away my youngest was four and the eldest 12, and my wife had a struggle – and I mean *struggle* – to rear those kids, and it is a real credit to her. I'm not saying that prisoners didn't worry, but the prisoners had no real concept of events outside – the emotional problems and maybe wee lads going astray and all those things. The women all deserve Victoria Crosses, Loyalist and Republican.

*Families protest
in support of the
prisoners
(August 1973)*

Social Relationships

Some prisoner had an inkling that they would face problems relating to people even before they were released.

Even in visits I was getting bored. It is just too long to talk. They [the visitors] are telling you everything and all you can say is a yarn of what happened on the wings, a bit of a joke or something. I remember my Da telling a joke about some bus ticket machine, and they all started laughing. Then they all looked at me because I wasn't laughing, but I couldn't understand the joke. I didn't know what they were talking about, I didn't know what [the machine] looked like.

And once release day arrived, those feelings were often reinforced.

I felt shock that I was actually going out; it was hard to believe I was going out the following Monday. When I did get out I wanted back in! I actually remember walking round Portadown with my sister and I was near in tears. And after two days I wanted back in. I couldn't relate to people, and I couldn't relate to my own family, and I didn't seem to have friends – all my friends were inside.

Sometimes I thought maybe people were looking at me a wee bit. That was a bit strange, but maybe it was me getting used to the community – I was a bit paranoid. After a couple of months I didn't have that.

Some wanted to escape their former haunts.

I met a girl and married her when I was in prison and moved here [Ballymoney]. I wanted to settle down. I didn't want to go back to the Shankill. I thought if I went back to Belfast I would maybe get into trouble again. If I was sitting drunk and someone gave me a gun I would have been away. I get on with most people [around here]. Some of them found me strange. I heard rumours that some of them thought: who wants a murderer living beside you. But the people have since come around and know I am not a bad fella and spoke to me.

Some were only too happy with their homecoming – at least at first.

I came home as the 'returning hero' – know that sort of attitude? For a week or two you thought you were the only one done time. But it's not long to the penny drops – everyone has their own lives to get on with. But you're young and impressionable and you sort of think you're the

only one. Everybody wants to buy you a drink, everybody loves you, you're their hero. The truth is that nobody gives a shit. Thankfully it didn't last long.

This uncertainly as to the genuineness of people's reactions could create barriers to the building of trust.

I had difficulty in trying to understand female thinking, in the sense that I found it hard at times to read if a girl was being genuinely friendly with you or whether part of the fascination for them was the fact that they were going with an ex-prisoner. I felt uncomfortable around females and didn't really know how to react properly.

Some pondered long over what it was they were trying to relate to.

You missed most of your life at the end of the day; you missed everything in general, like your teenage years. The only real friends you had was the ones you were in jail with. Those you classed as friends before you went in are still there, but you hadn't got that bond. There is a bond in jail completely different to outside.

Indeed, the bond with those who shared their time in jail loomed even stronger when looked at from the 'outside'.

There have been times that I have reflected back. Even now you've lost contact with people you still miss that contact. And from time to time something would come on TV, or things would happen, and you would just get reminded of something that took place inside, and you just think back. It's a big part of your life.

When you're in prison you feel like you've got a family – your comrades. You meet people from different areas that you would never have met. When you come out you're an individual, you're a loner . . . not a loner as such, but you *are* on your own. You still have a family when you come out, but you want to meet up with other ex-prisoners. You still have that closeness. Other people would never have that feeling because they have never come through that. I sometimes feel sorry for people because they don't have that closeness.

Against such a comradeship, outside relationships could seem somewhat lacking.

Take having an ordinary conversation – you have a bigger conversation inside than you would with somebody outside because of the time that you spend with each other when you're in prison.

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The only thing I have difficulty with is in conversation: when people tell you about things they've done but because you were in jail all you can talk about related back to the time you were lifted – and that's going back twenty years – so sitting with people your own age you feel a bit out of it.

I think that as a result of being locked up and arguing your case for so long, and you're so used to it, that people just can't hold an argument with you – even practised people in that arena.

And when the ex-prisoner would endeavour to seek out new friendships, the lost time and the whole prison

experience would often work against a successful outcome.

When I came out all my [former] friends were all married, settled down with their own families and ways. You were isolated, and when you wanted to go out and make new friends the only way was in bars and clubs. So you went to pubs and clubs and then you end up drinking too much, and I found I was drinking too much.

The speed of life in prison . . . there is a set speed to things. Outside, people rush around and, apart from prisoners' families, no-one really cares. It is difficult to adapt. The longer you are inside the harder it is.

Elusive Employment

Attempting to find employment after release is one of the most time-consuming yet unproductive tasks the ex-prisoner engages in.

When you go to employers you still have to account for the time you were away, and I believe it does have an effect; I believe there was jobs I went for that I was discriminated against because of my record.

When I go for an interview and they ask me where I was from 1977 to 1988 it's like hitting a brick wall when you turn around and tell them. A couple of times I've said 'overseas working', but they seem to know. I went for an interview for Shorts and I done the test an' all, passed the test no problem. But I think it stopped me getting into Shorts.

One man actually said to me . . . during the interview I could see in his face that he had the man for the job, but as soon as I explained the 'gap' in my CV, I could see his chin literally drop. He said they [the firm] would have difficulty with this, as they installed these systems in the NIO and you needed security clearance, which I wouldn't have had.

Many prisoners genuinely wanted to be 'up front' about their past.

I was told in prison you should do that, I was tutored to do that. The employment agency came up to the pre-release scheme and they told us: "If you're asked this question on the form put it down." But I found it's been a hindrance, and if at the same time you don't put it down and they find out later you're an ex-prisoner, then

you've told them lies and they'll strip you of the job right away.

When I was filling in the application forms I would write that I had served a prison sentence if it asked that. I thought I was doing the right thing telling the truth, but obviously not. This was soul-destroying because I knew I could do the jobs and yet I wasn't being given a chance to prove it. And what got me more than anything was that at that particular time there was all the crying about Catholics being discriminated against in jobs and there was the introduction of the Fair Employment thing, and yet here was a section of the community who were actively being discriminated against and there wasn't a word said about it.

Some prisoners felt they were left with no choice but to be dishonest.

When I applied for jobs I conveniently 'forgot' to tell them [about my imprisonment]. I just felt it was a necessary evil, it was one of those things. Nobody's going to start you: if you had the choice of 'X' number of men and one guy's got a record, why take that chance? If you're an employer why take that chance, why not take some of the other guys who have a clean record. So I thought I might as well give myself an even chance here.

And those who showed that they could make an effort did not necessarily find that assistance was at hand.

My first business venture when I got out was a garage. I went to the Bank of Ireland and asked for the lend of money along with a fella who was my partner. Once I mentioned that I was an ex-

prisoner they didn't want to know, the shutter came down. He talked and chatted on for half an hour but you knew he didn't want to know. So I went to another bank with my partner and never mentioned that I was an ex-prisoner and I got a lend of the money. I had to tell lies, they had to be deceived.

Even those who ended up creating their own work did not necessarily find themselves credited with perseverance.

Even though I'm successful now [self-employed], the fingers are pointing at me now. That such and such an organisation give me that business, that's why I got the business, that's why I drive a decent car, have a decent house, etcetera . . . 'cause the organisation gave me those things. And it's not true.

Lack of work, and especially the lack of willingness on behalf of employers to even consider an ex-prisoner for it, could prove extremely detrimental to a person's morale.

It can affect your confidence and self-esteem. You get to the stage where you find that nobody cares or that nobody wants to give you a chance in life. If people would only give you a chance then you'd find that most people who get out of prison are as capable, if not better capable, than most who are in jobs at the present time.

Some ex-prisoners did encounter a willingness on the behalf of individual employers to provide such a chance.

There's a woman asked me to do her gardens

regularly, that's another part-time job I have. I told her up front. She seen me on a Sunday and said "I hear you are a gardener; come down tomorrow". I went down and I told her that I had been in prison and she says "I already know you were in prison". I said "do you know what I was in prison for? It's not that I don't want to do the job, I just want to tell you the truth". And I always do tell people the truth and I wouldn't hide it, you know. She said "that's alright, your work is okay; we'll not give you the sack because you were in prison and after a week the job is yours."

For some, the failed search left them very defeatist.

I got to the point I said to myself why the hell should I bother when you get told the same thing every time. Anyway, it's got to the stage now since we have been separated, that it wouldn't really pay me to get a job now. I would like to work, but if I get a job I would have to pay maintenance for my own two kids, and the woman I am living with at the minute she has two kids – how am I going to feed them as well? If I stay on the dole they can't get into me. I do a wee job here and there, that's all I can do.

A few, having finally struggled to secure a precious job, had it subsequently snatched away again.

Somebody phoned up and said I done life in prison; next I was in the office and away. Two jobs that happened with.

EPIC (North Belfast), in co-operation with a building contractor, arranged employment in the Shore Road area for nine ex-prisoners. A further four went on a training programme.

Education

Education was valued by many ex-prisoners. Some felt it was important for personal development and not just as a means to employment.

Even when you're in company you need to be educated to sit and talk to people and know what they're talking about. If you have a broad grasp of education you can usually fit in anywhere.

Education is sold as a way to get a job and it shouldn't be. It should be sold as something that will make us a better society. And it's not just about being able to get a job, it's about being able to represent yourself confidently.

I would study for the purpose of gaining employment and knowledge, not just to get employment. I would like to study for personal reasons and not ambitious reasons.

Many prisoners attended education classes while in prison, and many of them sat and passed a wide variety of examinations. Some undoubtedly did so to alleviate the boredom of prison life, but others saw it as an opportunity to be grasped. Those who were able to complete their courses and obtain their degrees while in prison were the lucky ones; those who wished to continue after release often found themselves thwarted by lack of support.

When I was in prison I did a couple of university credits; the problem was that when I came out of prison there was no help for education – I needed to get something like £200 for exams within a month, plus I had to pay so much for books and lectures and all. If I had been given help on my release I would have been able to continue towards my degree and maybe been able to do full-time employment somewhere. But because of the system then you were put out the gate with one week's 'buroo' and with no help whatsoever. That was the worst thing.

Others found that their qualifications were of little value when it came to utilising them where it had seemed most

useful – in seeking employment.

When I was in prison I did a couple of A-levels and got a First Class Honours degree, so I came out reasonably educated. I must have applied for 40 jobs within that first year. I got a few interviews but I think it was only curiosity value

that got me the interviews – to see what a perceived killer looked like, you know. But you knew you weren't going to get it and after that year was up I finished up doing the 'double', shovelling cement for a year. Like maybe in my naivety I thought that with my Honours degree I wouldn't have expected to be treated any

better but expected it to level the playing field a wee bit, if you like. But people just didn't want to know.

However, many held a deep distrust of the education system dating back to their school days.

Before I left school the Careers Officer came and his role was to point me in the right direction. He pointed me to be a 'tenter' and I was successful in my application. I served my five years and then I went to prison, and while I was in prison the mills and all closed down. So when I came out of prison I found it very difficult to find a job as a tenter, because all tenting jobs had become practically obsolete. And I keep thinking back to that day when that Careers Adviser directed me, and what he was directing me to was a few years' employment. Being the educated man he was he should have had the wit to realise that the mills were going to close.

Others were blunt about their lack of enthusiasm.

Well, the way I look at it now is that I am 47 years old and I can't see that something at this stage would do me much good. Where am I going to get a decent job at my age?

Honestly, I'm thick as champ, I hated school. You will never get me to go back to school.

Like maybe in my naivety I thought that with my Honours degree I wouldn't have expected to be treated any better but expected it to level the playing field a wee bit, if you like. But people just didn't want to know.

Return to the Community

Most people in working-class areas accept that their 'community' has seen massive change, and not all of it positive.

From when I was a kid it has changed a lot – with the housing and that. Everybody doesn't run in and out of anybody's houses like they would have done in my day. You left your door open but now you couldn't do that or you would get baseball-batted or something.

Some ex-prisoners even detected changes having occurred during the period of their confinement.

Before I went into prison there was a real [sense of] community – everyone shared. But now you don't know your next-door neighbour, everyone keeps to themselves.

This lack of 'community' was all the more noticeable to ex-prisoners, especially as a sense of togetherness was so all-important for survival in jail.

In jail you are part of a big community, and when you get out you see that people just want to get on with their own lives and not anyone else's.

And often when a prisoner obtained their release 'community work' had an undeniable attraction. Some even tried to maintain links with the prison community they left behind.

For about ten years after I got out of prison I was involved with youth and cross-community work and was involved with a group called Prison Fellowship and was involved with the Church of England doing different talks and speaking to different people in England. I got invites to Catholic churches. At the same time too I met guys that I'd been in prison with, Republican prisoners. I brought them to my home and vice versa, but all that has fallen through. It's just slipped away. I think what happened was the guys that met together then, once they started getting back into their own community and their own way of life and had to earn for themselves, they got tied up in their own affairs. I'm the same, I got tied up on my own affairs, looking after my own family and stuff like that.

I think it is imperative to support your own community, the community you claim to have fought for. What was the point in fighting for them if you don't feel part of that community? I personally feel the community means everything; without the community you have nothing, you've no culture, you've no nothing. You have to be active in your own community.

But how did the community feel about the ex-prisoner now back in their midst? Some ex-prisoners found that perceptions were mixed.

You got people who would have said "I didn't think you'd have done a thing like that" – they still wanted to see the wee child running around the street. They couldn't maybe accept what I had done, although they never fully turned their backs on me.

I definitely feel I was a political prisoner, but you get different attitudes from the Protestant people. They're not like Republicans who stick together and they consider their prisoners. In Belfast there might be no problem, but in this area [Londonderry] the majority of Protestants would probably think you're not a political prisoner. It might be the term *you* want, but it's not the term *they* want.

Where I lived, whenever I was first sentenced I think I was more or less took as one of the bad black sheep. You know, like he would never amount to any good anyway, that kind of talk. But then, when I got out of jail and people realised that I wasn't running about mad, I was settling down and all the rest of it, I think they maybe changed their opinion of me.

The estate I'm in is more Belfast-orientated and certainly not strangers to that particular sort of thing. I'm not saying they welcome you home and pat you on the back, but certainly the majority of them wouldn't hold it against you, and if anything they would maybe be a wee bit more open to you and help you a wee bit more. In turn they would come and rap my door if they felt I could do anything for them and I'm only too happy to do that. I've always been one of the ones if there's a problem in the estate they come and rap your door.

Some ex-prisoners returned home fully expecting that 'pat on the back', much to the annoyance of their comrades.

I know people who came out and wanted to be treated like heroes, for want of a better word. I don't think people should be treated like heroes, I think they should be treated for what they are and not treated any differently. I have known ones who expected a brass band to be playing for them on the Shankill. There's ones come out looking help and if they genuinely need help then there should be something [for them]. There's some looking sympathy rather than help,

and other ones come out expecting to be looked after hand and foot.

In some cases it was the ex-prisoner who retained a distance from the community, at least from the more politicised elements within it.

My oldest boy – he’s now 15 coming 16 – I’ve steered him away from what I see to be the political influence within the Mid-Ulster area. I don’t discourage my children from associating with Catholics and I try to steer them away from anything to do with Unionist or Loyalist groupings, through bands or through rallies or whatever.

Most ex-prisoners, particular those who become involved in community activities, felt that the trust of the community could not be taken for granted and had to be earned.

It’s like everyone – you’re labelled by your past. If you extort money, you’ll be an extortionist the rest of your life – you know what I mean? I’ll always be a paramilitary in people’s eyes, unfortunately. We have to work hard to change that ourselves. We have to let them see that we are real people; they think we are demons with two heads. We have to get the public perception of us changed, because we are not all thugs with guns under the table. There is nobody wants to see a peaceful society more than ourselves, which I always thought was strange.

With the experience of prison and working with the community you do get a lot of respect, especially if you are working to help your community, but it is something you have to earn. If you come out with the same intentions or are going to wreck the community then they wouldn’t [respect you] – they will maybe fear you but not respect you.

In some working-class areas, however, such respect was readily granted and, in return, many ex-prisoners found themselves playing the role of ‘informal counsellor’.

For somebody that comes from a working-class area that has served time for what the working-class population perceive as a political offence, people would look up to that. In our community there isn’t the stigma attached to being in prison that there would be from somebody on the outside of our community. People would look up to the likes of myself and people in the area, in the community, would come to me with problems. You know, maybe a son or a husband in prison for a similar offence, looking for what would be the best way to get help. In my opinion in North Down there is no help, there is nothing. Short of me putting my own hand in my pocket and

helping people with bus fares to the prison, there’s nothing.

Well, the likes of P__’s daughters – I call them my wee girls. Any problems they’ll come to me. My mother and father would ring me about things. They listen to me. I don’t stumble into things. I sit back and think about things now.

Some of the younger ones have this hero-worship thing [towards me]. That’s not what I want. I try to forewarn them that it’s not all rosy on that side of the fence. Relationships break down, families break up, and when you come out it’s hard to get a job. They wouldn’t be thinking of those things, only about what is going on and the situation the way it is. And people who have a wee problem would maybe come ask me to help them out. If they maybe thought their son or daughter was going down that road they would ask me to have a wee talk with them to try and enlighten them.

Certain people in the area, knowing I had been in jail, would listen to you a wee bit quicker. I would say to them to wise up or that is where they are going to end up too.

Many ex-prisoners genuinely wanted to feel they had a role to play in moving this society onto a more positive path.

I suppose we all overestimate our own importance, but yes, I would like to think I could help them. I would persuade them to take the right track and steer clear of the road I went down. This is 99.9% of ex-prisoners’ wishes – to have no-one else go in after them. This is a big perception which the general public don’t have. They think there is a big factory somewhere that produces these guys who go out and do these things; they don’t realise that they are somebody’s sons and daughters. I’m not trying to excuse anything; hopefully the way things are going at the moment, those things will change forever, and it’ll never go back to any sort of civil strife.

Some expressed caution, however, acknowledging that community perceptions could sometimes create misleading impressions.

I think people [in community work] are using me like a witness – what they will turn around and say is that there is someone who has went through the system. Some times it represents you fully, other times it misrepresents you, because the implication is that if you go to jail this is what comes out.

Personal Security

On top of the problems released prisoners had of relating to their families again, or trying to rebuild old friendships and establish new ones, not to mention their often frustrating attempts to find work, came real concerns over personal safety. They had not been incarcerated for 'normal' crimes in a 'normal' society. They had engaged in a brutal inter-communal war within a society which had become more and more 'abnormal', a war in which they had been involved in the taking of other people's lives – not just from within the 'enemy' community, but even from within their own. And the ex-prisoners knew, irrespective of whether they themselves felt they had now 'paid their dues to society', that they were still perceived by many – whether their political opponents or the friends and family of their victims – as 'targets' in this war.

It's always at the back of your head. Even in pre-release we all got the same bus and the bus used to stop at the bottom of Kennedy Way. You were always sitting waiting – what's going to happen here? The likes of the INLA, you know: here's a bus of Lifers coming down the road, wait until one of them gets off and then attack. I would say with them all that it's there somewhere in the back of their head, and it's always the one who says it won't happen to me that it happens to.

What I did find on returning to society was that I was nervous at times, especially in the winter nights, when a car would come by. You were always looking over your shoulder and things like that.

A lot of the things I was doing subconsciously. Like checking the doors, looking out the windows if there was a noise. I just done them without really knowing I was, but other people noticed me doing them.

You get a bit paranoid about this, that and the other. And especially with my own case, with police harassment – I was being followed and stupid things like that. I wasn't sure at times – were they police or were they enemy? I check the car every morning, I check underneath it and all. I feel very vulnerable where I am. Six weeks ago there was a threat on me, there was four guys spotted and they're known players like. I had to look after my own security.

Not only was this a personal burden but one carried by the ex-prisoners' families, with many wives constantly fearful, not only for the safety of their husbands but for the lives of their children.

I secured my front door and the bottom of my stairs. My wife was more frightened than what I was and it was more to put her mind at ease.

The discrimination faced by ex-prisoners when they sought work was compounded by the fact that, even if they did manage to secure employment, the areas in which they could work were often severely limited.

You're always security conscious, particularly in the first few years of getting released. And it's very unlikely for an ex-long-term Loyalist prisoner to go into Nationalist or dodgy areas, if you want to put it that way.

You see a stranger maybe standing in the street, someone you don't know . . . maybe it's being paranoid. I would notice that a lot with me, because of where I'm working. If somebody looks in my cab they may be just walking past, but you say – is he looking at me, who is he? You start to become paranoid. You are a target from the day you are released – you understand that?

The need for support

Until fairly recently, there was no real support network for released prisoners.

You were lifted off the streets, you were put in to do time and you were put back onto the streets without any sort of guidance as to what you were going out to. If you came out and you didn't get a job and there was nothing for you it would have been very, very easy to slip back into some sort of criminal activity or something. If you weren't getting any money what were you supposed to do? Same with going for jobs, there was no guidance as to what you should do or what you should say.

When you think about it now there should have been more of a system for people coming out, because it is too easy for people to get back involved, if not with paramilitaries then with robberies, just to get themselves a few bob, because living on the dole is no good. But you weren't given a lifeline at all.

The worst thing was that during the whole period – until EPIC was set up – there was nothing for prisoners. Welfare organisations in the paramilitaries tried to help with finance, but there was no real back-up support for people coming

out. Certainly the statutory organisations couldn't help, because the prisoners wouldn't trust them.

For some released prisoners, even just to know that there was someone who could help them come to terms with their innermost feelings would have been welcome.

I've been out 16 years and this is the first major opportunity I've had to talk to someone. To me it is very, very necessary, it's the whole point. It makes prisoners feel wanted again too.

Many prisoners acknowledged that the Loyalist community had been lagging far behind the Republican community when it came to dealing with ex-prisoners' needs.

I do feel that there is a big need for that type of work, because the way I see it is that the Republicans and Nationalists have been doing it for years and they are miles ahead of us. It's about time our own side started doing that kind of work too, particularly with the ex-prisoner population, the youth, the elderly and on the welfare rights because although the other side has been clued up on the system for years we are only starting to find out about it now.

I think [organisations like EPIC] are a bit late, but better late than never, and even if you can help one prisoner at least it's something and gives them a chance. Whereas before they had nothing. You were released and ended up in the Loyalist Club and in no time at all you were relying on handouts instead of yourself. That's how a hell of a lot of them went back in, back into jail for doing robberies and break-ins and daft things like that.

It should be easier for those getting out now, because there are opportunities for a bit of 'path-finding' by prisoners' groups – to look at the problems and make them aware of the problems they are going to face. Because by and large when you are getting out the only thing you see is the gate, you don't see beyond it – it's only natural – but when you get out it is a big world and you don't realise the problems until you are in them. The problems can be anything between paying bills and your family.

Help was also required with regard to the ex-prisoner's attempt to seek employment.

I was lucky enough to get a job, but when you come straight out of jail the last thing you want to do is go on the dole, because your confidence is low anyway and when you are on the dole you seem stuck in that rut. If there was something there for an ex-prisoner to come out to – such as an EPIC-run training programme – it might give you a bit of pride back.

Even those who went self-employed found the going difficult at times.

I actually said to somebody a while ago that you really feel you could go back in for a couple of

weeks to get away from everybody for a while. You have no worries in jail, no money problems.

Admittedly, there had been bodies in existence, statutory and others, to which ex-prisoners would have been expected to turn, but many prisoners had found them decidedly lacking.

I had no time for them at all. My experiences of them were very negative and I had no trust in them. To me they were more interested at that particular time in their own careers and their own image, and not on the prisoner and what he was going through. I don't think they had much understanding anyway of what actually a prisoner had experienced psychologically.

Many prisoners had little positive to say about government attempts at 'reintegration'.

My only contact with the professional bodies was while I was on the 'working out' scheme, and the attitude of the people that they had at that time working for them was that this is an ex-prisoner, he will behave himself, he will do anything you tell him. To the extent where those that were doing the supervision would have almost tried to talk down to you and sort of used that as a threat against you. You do as I say or I will report you. Treating you like a child. So their understanding of how to deal with a grown person, an ex-prisoner, an intelligent person, was non-existent. They treated people like children and used their position and your vulnerability of being out on licence against you, to the extent where they actually told lies on me in order to protect themselves. I just totally disengaged from them and to this day, although there has been great changes in their thinking, I still find it hard to have anything to do with them.

I think the 'working out' thing was a disaster; I think it does absolutely nothing to help the prisoner reintegrate. A man is in his cell, he gets out in the morning and goes to his work. He gets back from his work and he is in the working-out unit again until the next morning, and he is left really to his own devices when he gets out. There is no input from the prison service or anyone else as to how they are doing. It is just simply a cosmetic, a political exercise. It does nothing for the prisoner reintegrating into society.

Furthermore, there existed a fair degree of scepticism regarding the recent upsurge of support offered by some professional organisations.

Because of the 'peace process' they are all trying to jump on the bandwagon – we'll do this and that for you, we can help you. But they don't really want to help you, they see there is big money for prisoners so they jump on the bandwagon. I personally wouldn't have them anywhere near me. I don't need them, I believe counselling should be given by our own people – the likes of EPIC. I believe the Northern

Ireland Office should allow the likes of EPIC to have a welfare role. If I go to some professional body, they don't care about me; it should be done by our own people who I know have been in the position I am in.

Most prisoners made it abundantly clear that the help they really wanted was from their 'own people'.

As long as the ones I was talking to knew what they were talking about. As long as they were ex-prisoners like me. There's not much point in me talking to someone who's got all the answers to problems that they couldn't even relate to, wouldn't have a clue about.

If I had known of a network or even a group of ex-prisoners who got together, even in people's homes, to talk about their experiences, I would have jumped at it. It just didn't exist and any prisoners – most of the prisoners that I knew in the area – would have been short-time prisoners, and with me coming out of a life sentence most of their families wouldn't have wanted me hanging around them because they would have been afraid maybe of me trying to get them back involved.

From the day you come out of prison you face financial hardship. You have to fight and argue to get anywhere. You are dependent on someone who has been there before you to point you in the right direction, to tell you what forms to get, how to fill them in . . . That is what the ex-prisoners are, they are leaders, pathfinders, showing people what to do, and other prisoners are benefiting as a result. There is only one type of person who can really empathise with an ex-prisoner, and that is an ex-prisoner – nobody else.

Prisoner's concerns were not just related to the present, but to the future.

When people [who have been in prison] reach retirement age they will miss out on benefits because of all the [National Insurance] stamps they lost out on while in prison. So they are being punished twice.

As far as I know I will have problems with the pension. It's a concern. It's difficult to take out a private pension. I can't even get house insurance. When I was in with my local bank there was an offer on in reduced house insurance if you had an account with them. I enquired about it and filled in the form. The bank person was very friendly and she done all she could to push it through, but word came back that I wasn't able to take out house insurance because I had been in prison and the risk was too great.

But whatever support network was created for ex-prisoners, the ex-prisoners themselves had to acknowledge that they were in need of such support.

There is definitely a reluctance of the part of some prisoners to accept, or own up to, the fact that they have got problems. Quite often they would see that as some sort of weakness, that they are not coping or that by admitting to psychological problems related to prison or to what went on in the conflict then in some way they're not a man. Very often it can take a long period of befriending and talking before someone actually feels able in a small way to start talking about some of their problems. Some of these problems are very deep-seated in relation to the suffering that has went on and the role they played in the conflict – it's quite distressing for a lot of men.

Often the initial request would come from the ex-prisoner's immediate family.

My experience is that women are more often ready to talk about their feelings and their suffering. And not only their own feelings, but on top of that they have the children to look after and they would be worried about their children and they have a lot to cope with.

Sometimes prison life can make you selfish – you are so wrapped up in your own feelings you don't give enough time to your partner or your children and their feelings. There is also the problem of coming back out of prison and maybe your children were only two or three [when you went in] and now you're coming into a home where teenagers live, with all the relationship problems that brings. Also, coming out of prison a different person than you went in, both politically and in relation to your own personality and how you now feel about the use of violence. Also your wife is a different person too and has learnt how to cope and learnt new skills that have helped her to get through, so you're like two strangers and your children are strangers also. So there is a lot of work there that needs to be done to help people get all through this.

Whatever the reintegration difficulties, EPIC is dedicated to addressing them, as well as informing the wider community in the process.

One of the important things people need to take into consideration is that prisoners and their families are normal people who come from local areas in which ordinary people live, and this notion that in some way prisoners are not normal people who don't have normal feelings and emotions, or that their families don't have normal feelings of loss or pain is just not true.

The Questioning

As some interviewees have already indicated, the prison experience, rather than being a ‘training ground for terrorism’, as was once claimed by the media, actually provided many prisoners with time in which to reflect upon what had happened to them and to their society. Some related the events and the emotions which contributed to their own involvement and imprisonment.

Around the start of 1972 Vanguard came on the scene. Now this was fronted by the likes of Bill Craig and other politicians so we felt we weren’t doing anything illegal. I went to all the marches – Lisburn, Derry, Coleraine and Bangor. We thought it was brilliant because Craig had just made his ‘shoot to kill’ speech and there he was inspecting us as we were lined up in Castle Part in Bangor! About July of 1972 I was thinking of joining an organisation because of all the things that were happening. Towards the end of that month was Bloody Friday when all the bombs went off in the centre of the town and there was 11 people killed. I knew one of the fellas killed in the Oxford Street bus station and went to his funeral – it really got to me because I had went to school with him. It was more or less this that made my mind up to join one of the organisations. So a load of us who were knocking about together at the time all joined the UVF.

With the benefit of hindsight, however, many prisoners now perceived themselves as being ‘victims’ of circumstance.

I was 17 years old and responding to what people in the community were saying at that time. I ran about with a friend whose father was killed, and in the mid-70s at the height of the Troubles the influence was upon young people. I believe that I responded in the way that I thought was the only way that I could respond and I lost all my youth, from 17 to 29. The psychological problems that come out of that still continue today . . . Quite often people demonise those who are in prison, those who have been involved in the conflict. They don’t want to accept that these men have come from their own communities. They were normal people from normal families and quite a lot of them were engaged in the conflict reluctantly. I believe that I am a victim of the conflict in Northern Ireland, I believe that my family is a victim of the conflict in Northern Ireland. I believe that the prisoners and their families are victims of that conflict. I am mindful of the people who have lost members of their

families. But many prisoners are in prison because they responded to a member of their own family being killed. So I don’t see victims in a narrow sense.

There was one thing I could never understand when I was growing up. We used to hear all the time about how ‘badly done by’ the Catholics were, yet I came from exactly the same size of house, our family had all the same problems such as unemployment, overcrowding, poor facilities, less privileges that those who were better off. What people don’t realise about the ghettos or the inner city areas in those days is that right across the board we were all victims of the old Stormont government and not just them.

But, above all, the political leadership whose strident, alarmist calls to ‘defend Ulster’, inevitably came in for the deepest questioning. And the answers which emerged were troubling for many individuals.

The biggest problem I had was [over] my own identity. The change that I went through in prison and re-examining and re-evaluating the things that I believed in and had been taught to

I came from exactly the same size of house, our family had all the same problems such as unemployment, overcrowding, poor facilities, less privileges that those who were better off. What people don’t realise about the ghettos or the inner city areas in those days is that right across the board we were all victims of the old Stormont government and not just them.

believe in as far as Unionist leaders were concerned – I have been re-examining all that. I am sick of listening to the same old talk that I heard in 1975 about people ‘fighting to the last drop of their blood’, and stuff like that. It did annoy me because I wanted to strike out; I wanted to say what I

really thought but I felt isolated. The only thing I was concerned about was trying to find out who I was and what had happened to me and how I was going to get through this, and I had no-one really to turn to. I can remember walking the streets in my estate at 2.00 o’clock in the morning, wondering what was happening to me.

In that intense self-analysis, the reality of sectarianism was not avoided.

It has been my experience that the people who are most vocal in their sectarianism and the most discriminatory in their attitudes are in fact middle-class Unionists, and that working-class Loyalists would have more liberal views. And yet although they [middle-class Unionists] would have been more politically extreme than I would be, they still wouldn’t want to rub shoulders with a killer, like. Next to the people who have been killed, maimed or whatever, the prisoners

and paramilitaries are the people who have suffered the most in the conflict. So they have a vested interest in trying to solve the conflict, but these people – the middle-class golf club bigots – nothing has ever infringed on their cosy lives, like, so they don't know what it's about – blood and guts in the streets. Because they haven't seen it they have no interest in solving it. They will perpetuate this struggle for ever, as long as they are not fighting it. Now don't get me wrong, not all Loyalist paramilitaries are not sectarian, because you certainly have that element. But in the parties that represent the paramilitaries – the likes of the PUP – their policies are things that I can identify with.

When you do undergo a change and your perception of things while in prison changes, sometimes your life becomes very confusing. But there is things I can accept now about my own community I don't necessarily like accepting – for instance, I see the Unionist people as being more sectarian than Nationalists and Republicans. Maybe I could be wrong in saying that, perhaps the Republicans are just more subtle in their sectarianism.

But what angered ex-prisoners the most was that the very leaders whose calls to defend Ulster they had heeded so loyalty repaid that loyalty with avoidance and condemnation.

I was very angry with my own people, with people who lived around me. Not so much people who were just trying to get through life, but with those who had been doing the most shouting about the Ulster cause and the Protestant cause, and the years I had listened to them turning their backs on us and calling Loyalist prisoners scum – the very same politicians and people like that who called for us to do the fighting. I had all that anger and bitterness inside me and every time I would have heard certain names like Paisley and other ones mentioned – because where I come from [local people] would all have been very strong supporters – I just wanted to scream. But I knew that they wouldn't understand where I was coming from, because they hadn't experienced or didn't want to even listen to what people who went through what I had went through had to say. They would have looked at you as some sort of traitor that you would even dared to speak out against Paisley. But yet they just wouldn't listen to the truth and the facts of the matter.

The anger of a female prisoner was no different in this respect from that of her male counterparts.

Ken Maginnis came to our door looking for votes. When he asked if he could rely on me for a vote I told him 'no'. When he asked why, I said that sure he had no time for people like me. He said he didn't know what I meant, so I

reminded him about the article in the *Tyrone Courier* the previous week in which he had said he had no time for terrorists in his community. I did end up voting for him to keep Sinn Féin out but when I met him at the polling station I told him I voted for Sinn Féin.

The pretence and hypocrisy that prisoners often encounter was hard for them to stomach at times.

Usually people who were doing the talking weren't doing the fighting. In my home town I found that people were saying things to me about, you know, the 'fine line' and how close they came and if it hadn't been for the Grace of God they would have been beside me doing time too. And I felt they were just talking in a way that [they thought] would impress me, and I didn't want to hear that old stuff, I had just no time for them and could relate to none of that old talk.

At the end of the day Paisley is a hypocrite. He has conned people for that long he's got used to it. Everybody knows the way he operates; at the

end of the day he'll jump off the horse when he is coming down and whoever is behind him will fall. Nowadays Loyalists have wised up to him, but years ago you can understand why he was able to lead them up the hill. I would see the middle and upper class as clapping their hands when the job is done, but would not get their hands dirty doing it.

Many former Loyalist prisoners felt that a total re-evaluation was required, especially over the use of violence.

My values and my beliefs about being British are still intact, but I don't believe that violence is the way to protect them. I believe that somewhere we need to find an accommodation. But that is the question that most of the people that I would know from my area have not addressed, that they can't have it both ways. I mean, if they don't want to find an accommodation then the alternative to that is fighting. Yet these same people don't want to fight either because it is 'against their conscience' – they want somebody else to do it all for them. For twenty years the DUP has been telling us that we were being sold out, now they are focusing on the present Peace Process and telling us that this is a sell-out too. I mean, if I really believed what the DUP were saying today I would still be out there fighting, ceasefire or no ceasefire. I ask myself if they really believe what they are saying, for if we are being sold out why are *they* not at war? They have failed the people of Northern Ireland and want the people to forget about their inadequacies and their failure of leadership.

We're not going to get a result through the bomb and bullet and shooting people; we're not going

to get anything that way. All it'll bring is hardship to both sides of the community. Nobody wants to see any other young lads going to jail or nobody else's kids get murdered.

Some had taken their anger at the politicians directly into the public arena.

At that rally [organised by the DUP and the UK Unionists] they were talking about how we were in the same situation as Carson had found himself. And I knew that when Carson was in that situation he armed the Loyalists. So I asked if *they* would do that. And I was booed and jeered and shouted down but eventually I got an answer, and that answer was 'no'. They were not prepared to smuggle arms in. Why tell people that they are facing the same situation as Carson but yet you are not prepared to do what Carson done? War mongering – that is exactly it. This is what young people had been hearing for decades, but when they ended up in prison the politicians then turned their backs on them.

As has been evident over recent years, it was often ex-prisoners who had taken the initiative and attempted to move this society forward. And they were doing so from a basis of knowledge: not only of the failed political leadership, but of the reality of the hurt and suffering.

I think we can try to make this society better. The people who live outside the interface areas of Belfast don't know this world, or if they do it is from some sort of managerial position. They 'manage' this place from 9 to 5 then go back out again. You, me and the wee woman across the road are the experts in poverty and deprivation. That wee woman doesn't need someone with a sociology degree or who is a criminal psychologist to come in and tell her what conditions she lives in. *She* tells *him* because she lives in it. The experts, or the so-called experts, will learn from the actual physical expert. That is what some prisoners are doing now, they are advocates for the plight of the working class and the deprived.

Many felt that the hurt within this society encompassed far more people than was normally alluded to in the media.

The term 'victim' usually refers to someone who has lost their life, or to a member of their family. I can understand that anyone who has lost a family member might never want to think about those they would see as 'perpetrators' as being victims too. But in my experience the term 'victims' covers any individual who has been physically or mentally damaged by the conflict in Northern Ireland. That ranges from those who have lost their lives, their relatives, prisoners, prisoners' families, prisoners' children... People tend to feel that those who have been involved in the conflict are not victims. They totally disregard their families and their children, who suffer as much as anyone else. Also, a lot of the men in prison have themselves lost members of their family and loved ones, and have seen their

community blown to pieces – and in a lot of cases that is what has led them to get involved actively in the first place.

The role that some ex-prisoners now play at community level had only served to reinforce such perceptions.

No-one has a monopoly of suffering in Northern Ireland. Working with EPIC has allowed me to understand the suffering of the children and the families of prisoners. Prisoners' families have been very much neglected. People have tended to think that if you are the family or the children of a prisoner then you deserve to be suffering. And those people out there who want recognition for their own suffering and loss and pain often forget that the children and the families of prisoners are suffering to. And if they want society to acknowledge their existence and what they have lost they must be prepared to see that extended to the families of prisoners, many of whom knew nothing of their partner's involvement in the conflict. Working with EPIC has also brought the realisation that men who have been involved in the conflict have their own suffering. Myself and others went through years of soul searching in prison about the conflict and about the use of violence and about the suffering it brings on families. Many men are still going through all that, and there are things that have happened in this conflict that they will have to live with for the rest of their lives, and they are facing up to that, painful as it is. I myself have taken part in workshops with people who have lost loved ones, and it is painful and it is difficult, and sometimes people are angry with you and they want to tell you how they feel and that is part of the consequences and we have to accept that as part of it. And to say that those involved in the conflict are the only people to blame for what has gone on is completely untrue.

For some ex-prisoners this soul-searching was unending.

That was, and is, a constant struggle. Trying to find a reason why things happened, why things were allowed to happen. I was often aware of regret and an overwhelming sadness at having taken a life. That would have been, and continues to be, constantly on my mind.

I often think about the actual shooting. I could be reading a book, watching a film, listening to a song and I am immediately reminded of it. It's something that has been with me constantly through the years of soul-searching, of reflecting upon your role in the conflict. It's devastating.

I have great trouble in finding any inner peace, not only in relation to the person that I killed but in relation to people I have known that have been killed. The sense of loss, the sense of sadness, the sense of guilt. What type of person would they have been, what would they be doing with their lives? Believe me, inner peace is very elusive. I can't say that I've ever known it.

As the families see it

While most families have been unselfishly supportive of their loved ones in prison, the reality is that this support was often maintained through the most trying of circumstances. This final section, prepared by Marion Green, highlights some of the numerous problems with which families have had to contend.

Visiting

Nowadays a visit can last anything from one to two and a half hours but will take up the best part of a day for the visitor.

Nearly your whole day is taken up waiting: for the bus, for the journey there, waiting to get in, waiting to get searched, waiting to get to the block, waiting for him to be brought out, and then you have to wait to get out again and for everyone to come back from their visit and get back on the bus.

A visit inside a prison is a very daunting experience even for an adult never mind a child. Before relatives can gain access to the prison they are subject to rigorous searches. These search procedures can be quite humiliating and embarrassing.

I realise they have to search you but some of them do everything but put their hands inside your bra or your pants.

Even the children are subject to the searches and in many ways it is even more traumatic as they don't realise what is going on.

I took my one-year-old with me and I had an apple for him to eat during the visit as he hadn't ate any breakfast. They wouldn't let me bring the apple through and I lost my temper with them. I have been coming up here for the past eight years and I have never tried to smuggle anything in. As if I would dream of trying to sneak something in inside an apple!

The visits take place in a cubicle with two fixed benches separated by a fixed table. It is very difficult to keep a child amused in that type of environment, especially after the stress of the travelling and waiting to get into the prison. The stress of the visit for the partner is balanced against the importance of the visit for the prisoner. The visits are often their only point of contact with home life and the majority of prisoners look forward to the visit all week.

You always try to hide the bad aspects of life from them. Even if I had a really bad day beforehand or the kids were playing me up, I would go up on the Friday morning and put on a brave face for his sake.

Coping alone

Some Loyalist prisoners may have had good jobs before going into prison and their families may have been accustomed to a fairly high standard of living, therefore imprisonment can lead to drastic changes of lifestyle for the family with the loss of the breadwinner.

My husband had a good, well-paid job before he went inside. We were buying our own house and had a good car. When he went in I had to sell the house and the car in order to survive.

The daily grind of coping with everyday life and the extra burden of looking after the prisoner can take its toll on both the lone parent and her children. The often sudden arrest and subsequent imprisonment forces upon these women and children the status of one-parent families. In addition to being subject to all the stresses suffered by 'normal' lone-parent families, they are exposed to many additional problems and none of the advantages. The women, in being robbed of a partner, suffer the isolation, deprivation and the trauma of that but still retain the responsibility of caring for the prisoner.

The only thing I ever smuggled in for him was vitamin pills because he wasn't eating the food in there.

I always try to leave money in for him when it is coming near the kids' birthdays or whatever so that he could buy them something in the tuck shop or give them money on the visit. They thought it was great, getting something from him and it made him feel good too.

There is no recognition in the benefit allowances that these women are now effectively single parents.

You can't claim one-parent family when your husband is in prison. You have to be legally separated.

The responsibility for caring for the prisoner despite their separation adds to the already high financial burden.

People think that because your husband is in jail, especially if he is in the Maze, then you must be well looked after, but the organisation only give you about £10 a week which is supposed to go towards the parcels.

As these prisoners do not do any prison work they don't receive any allowances. Neither do they wear prison uniform so the burden to supply their clothes falls on the partner or family, and for some men only top quality and designer label clothes are accepted. A lot of wives or partners do without themselves in order to provide food

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and clothing for the prisoner.

Because they are allowed to wear their own clothes now, it puts more pressure on us, because fellas will not take just any old cheap clothes. It's the best of everything they want. I know girls who spend a fortune getting their husbands' clothes and jewellery.

Before he went inside, a pair of jeans from Dunnes would have done him, but now only Levis will do and I have to go to Marks and Spencers for his underwear.

As well as the cost of everyday living outside, the women also need cash for the transport to and from the prison and any other expenses, such as lunch for the children and themselves on the day of the visit. They are also expected to supply the weekly parcel and the special parcels at Christmas, Halloween, Easter and the holidays. The weekly parcel would contain fruit, newspapers, magazines, toiletries and cigarette papers. The 'special' parcel would in addition contain clothes, cigarettes and many extras.

On remand you get three visits a week and you are allowed in up to 60 cigarettes each visit. When he first went in you were allowed to put in cheese, apples, oranges, chicken and cake. I would say you are talking about £50 a week at least.

The prisoners' partners are likewise expected to supply whatever finances are required for the tuckshop, craft materials, and often computer discs and books for the prisoners' studies.

I used to leave him £10-15 at the shop for him so he could buy the stuff he needed within the jail. You pay more for everything in the jail.

With the introduction of telephones at the Maze, there is now the advantage of prisoners being able to maintain more normal contact with their children, but it is an added expense for the relatives to supply money for phone cards.

Some prisoners can lose sight of reality and become very self-centred, with no appreciation of the difficulties for the family outside. Many women sacrifice their own needs and do without in order to supply the prisoner's needs.

One Xmas I was going up for a visit in the minibus and one of the wives was wearing a pair of shoes which were all busted at the sides and her feet were soaking. Yet she was bringing her husband up a pair of designer training shoes which cost her £60 – a whole week's money. She could have bought herself and her three kids a pair of shoes each for that.

Prisoners' partners and wives are faced with many difficulties in trying to get employment, as they need to be flexible in order to keep up the weekly visits, thus many families end up dependent on state benefits.

The bus from the road only goes up to the Maze in the morning, so it is hard to fit in with the visits. Even if I could get a job what would I do with the kids?

For those partners or wives who live in rural areas, visiting is even more difficult. Inner Belfast areas have organised buses to take relatives to and from the prison but those in rural areas have to make their own way to the prison and if there are children then it is even more difficult. Visiting takes up a whole day and the day prior to the visit is spent arranging it.

He was very lucky that I had a car. I couldn't have done without it, not out here where we live. Having the car made it that wee bit easier to get up and down to the jail, especially when I was bringing the baby with me.

Relationships

It is difficult enough to maintain a relationship through a period of imprisonment with only visits or letters to express feelings but often a lot of feelings are left unspoken.

I have never actually said to him: "you weren't here when I needed you or when the children needed you." I wanted to say it but held back. I think deep down he knew it anyway.

I have never actually said to him: "you weren't here when I needed you or when the children needed you." I wanted to say it but held back. I think deep down he knew it anyway.

I feel resentment towards him. I have never had the nerve to say it to him because it would devastate him, but I think he knows the way I feel. I still want to be with him and I still love him, but I feel resentful towards him because he doesn't seem to know what we are going through.

There is always the fear that children, especially boys, will mimic the behaviour of their fathers and subsequently join a paramilitary organisation.

Both of my boys are at the age where they could get brought in. I have said: "If I ever hear of you joining the UVF or UDA, I will put a knife in your own heart rather than me having to see you rot in jail."

Coping alone would appear slightly easier if the prisoner had a definite release date.

I hate Old Year's Night. I used to say: here we go, another year.

One stress which uniquely affects the families of Loyalist prisoners stems from the realisation that the State to which they profess loyalty has not only merely imprisoned their loved ones but seems intent on punishing them and their children. Also, there is no tradition of political involvement and subsequent imprisonment within the Loyalist community as exists within the Republican community.

I was shocked when I realised what he was in. It was never brought into my home life, it was never talked about. He was never out all night or anything . . .

I found it very difficult to deal with because none of my family had ever been in prison before. When my husband was lifted it was all alien to me.

Children's experience

Many children will demonstrate a variety of behaviour problems, from temper tantrums and bed-wetting to withdrawal and nightmares.

He just sort of withdrew into himself after his daddy was lifted.

He just doesn't cope. Everything gets to him. If he is out playing in the street he is arguing all the time.

I brought my five-year-old up to visit her daddy shortly after he was lifted. At the end of the visit the child started crying and asking her daddy to come home with us because she didn't understand that he couldn't. She ran up to the prison officers and was crying and begging them to let him come home. It was terrible for all of us. I dreaded bringing her back up with me.

Christmas can be a very difficult time for families and children as it is a time for families being together.

I always try and make an effort for the sake of the children, but he was the one who always put the tree up and the decorations. Christmas is very hard.

Some families often feel pressurised by their communities and the prisoner's relatives 'not to let the side down', to bring the parcels, provide money as needed and not to divulge problems to anyone.

A lot of people looked upon my father as a hero and as long as he was looked after it was to hell with the rest of the family.

There was pressure from people he knew: "are you not going up to see him this week?"

There is some support from those who have either currently or previously had relatives in prison. They understand the difficulties more than anybody else does.

When my brother was lifted I felt I had no-one to turn to. Nobody realised the pain or hurt that I was going through. Then one day a girl came to see me whose brother was in prison and she talked to me about what could happen, practical things as well as emotional things. It helped having someone to talk to who understood exactly how you felt.

The girls on the bus were really good because we went up at the same time every week and we got to know each other really well. They

understood more than some of your own family. I would have confided more to the girls on the bus than to anyone else.

Release

The anticipated release is the one factor that keeps the prisoner and his family going. It is the light at the end of the tunnel. There are great expectations that for everyone this will be the end of the suffering and misery. The reality, however, is often very different.

You think that when they get out of jail you can put it all behind you and forget about it, but it's not like that. I thought it would have been easier.

I am even more nervous since he came out. I am smoking far more now than I was when he was inside.

The prisoner's wife or partner has had to become more independent and often when the prisoner returns that role and status is challenged.

I was always dependent on him before he went into jail but when he was in jail and I started working part-time, I found I could cope all right on my own.

When they are away, you got that feeling that you were the boss of the house and then you have this man coming back in, trying to tell you and the children what to do.

Changing attitudes

For the prisoner there is a major readjustment on release. Over the period of imprisonment they have lived in a closed environment where all their physical needs were met, where they were valued and supported by their fellow prisoners, and where they could be alone if they wished.

Whenever he first got out he had no patience, he wanted everything done then and there. He used to walk up and down in the kitchen. He also wanted single beds, as he couldn't get used to sleeping in a double bed with someone again. He used to go for long walks by himself. At first I thought it was really odd but then I realised it was his way of coping.

A large number of prisoners have had time to reflect on their situation and therefore have tended to change, both personally and politically, whereas sometimes it is the case that their communities have not moved on, especially politically, and this can present a problem. Some family members and friends may also find the changes difficult to deal with as they assume that the prisoner is still the same person that he was before imprisonment.

He has become a terrible hoarder. I have never seen a man with as many clothes in my life!

There is always the fear that the ex-prisoner may want to

make up for lost time and that he may not be able to settle down.

I know lots of wives who stood by their husbands the whole time they were in prison, but as soon as the husband got out he started going out with his mates, trying to make up for lost time. I am terrified in case that happens to me.

I think that most women believe that when their husbands get released everything is going to be perfect. You have waited for it for so long and yet it doesn't work out like you expect. There are so many problems and things to work through that everything isn't perfect. At least if you are warned then you will realise that you are not the only one. There are so many couples that split up after the release; the women had gone on for

all those years and then when their men get out, they just couldn't live with them.

A lot of prisoners miss the comradeship that they had in prison and the families find this difficult to understand.

I know that he missed his friends from the prison; sometimes I felt that he would rather be back with them.

Grown-up Children

For many life-sentenced prisoners, their children will have grown up and will either be adults or teenagers by the time they are released. A lot of readjustment is necessary in order to avoid tensions and conflict within the family.

It was very difficult for my daughter when he was released. She was only a baby when he went in so she found it hard to get used to him in the house. She was just used to having me in at home and when he first got out she asked him where he was going to sleep. When she found out he was sleeping with me she was shocked. Although she was used to visiting him in the prison, it was different for her when he got out and was at home living with us.

Children may resent their father as they have been used to having their mother all to themselves and suddenly they have to share her attention.

A widespread impact

It is abundantly clear, therefore, that imprisonment on such a large scale has not only had widespread communal repercussions, but it has created circumstances of hardship and stress for countless families. Furthermore, and irrespective of the current releases taking place, many of the problems which families have had to endure will undoubtedly continue to impact upon their lives for years to come.

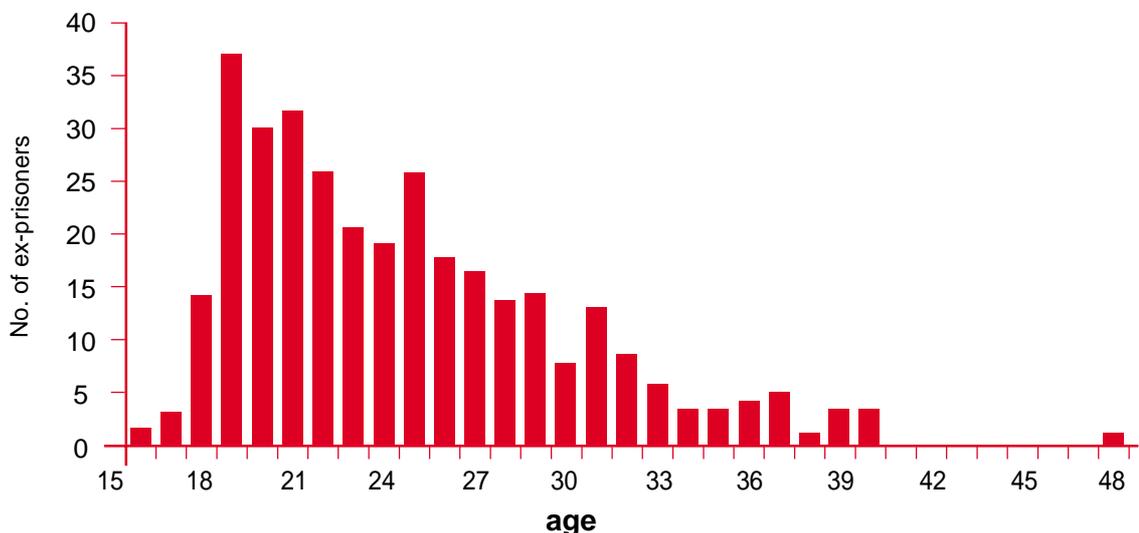
Families give their support; Crumlin Road December 1981

THE QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

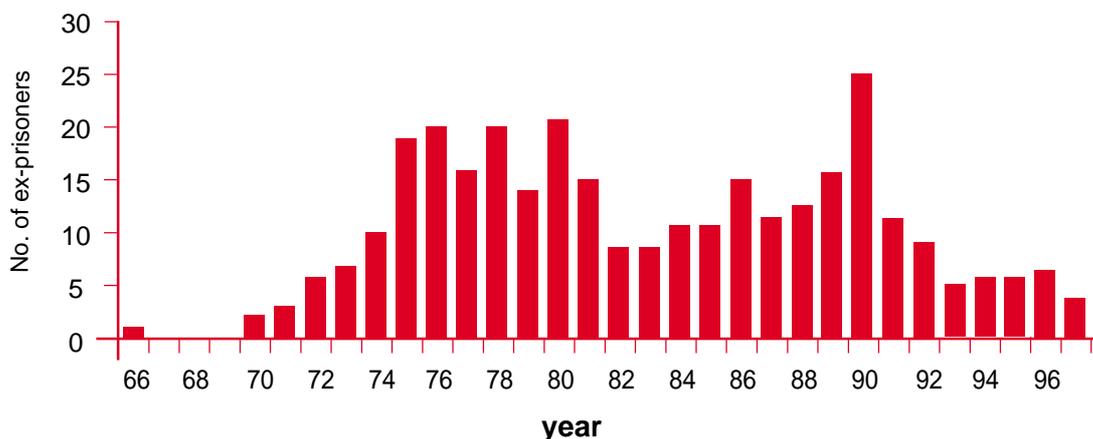
Approximately 500 questionnaires were circulated within the ex-prisoner population. Volunteers from each of EPIC's regional committees were involved in delivering and collecting these. A total of 328 were completed and returned. The data drawn from them is of vital importance to EPIC as it helps in identifying the main problem areas faced by ex-prisoners, and the extent and severity of these problems. The statistical analysis should also prove invaluable when approaching statutory, voluntary and community agencies and organisations with a view to searching for remedies to such problems. The data given below represents only part of the statistical information which was gathered through the questionnaires.

1 Age at time of arrest

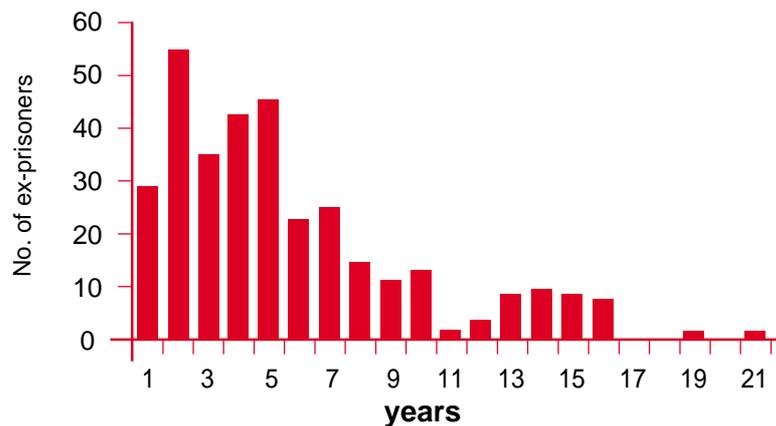
This graph indicates clearly that the majority of those incarcerated throughout the conflict were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five at time of their arrest.



2 Year of sentence

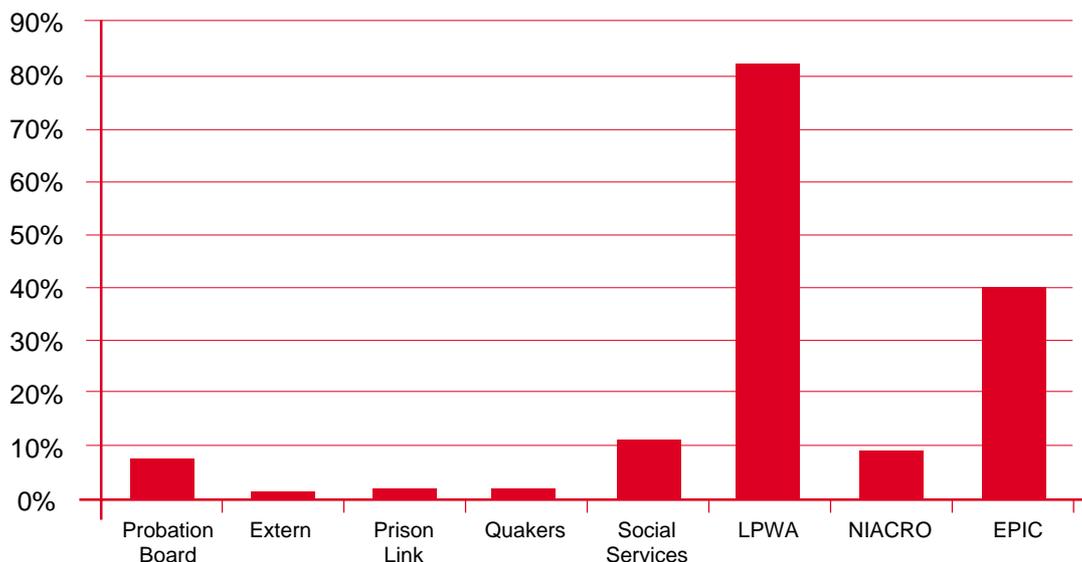


3 Time served



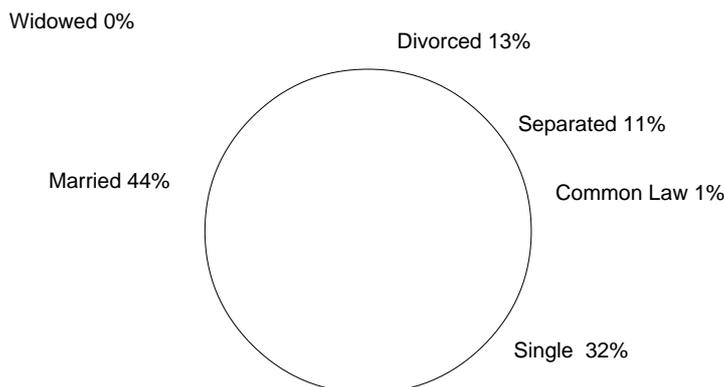
4 Contact with support services

The questionnaire responses indicate that ex-prisoners, when seeking help with the problems of reintegration, have a preference for their community's self-help groups, such as the Loyalist Prisoners Welfare Association (LPWA) and the most recently developed Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre (EPIC).



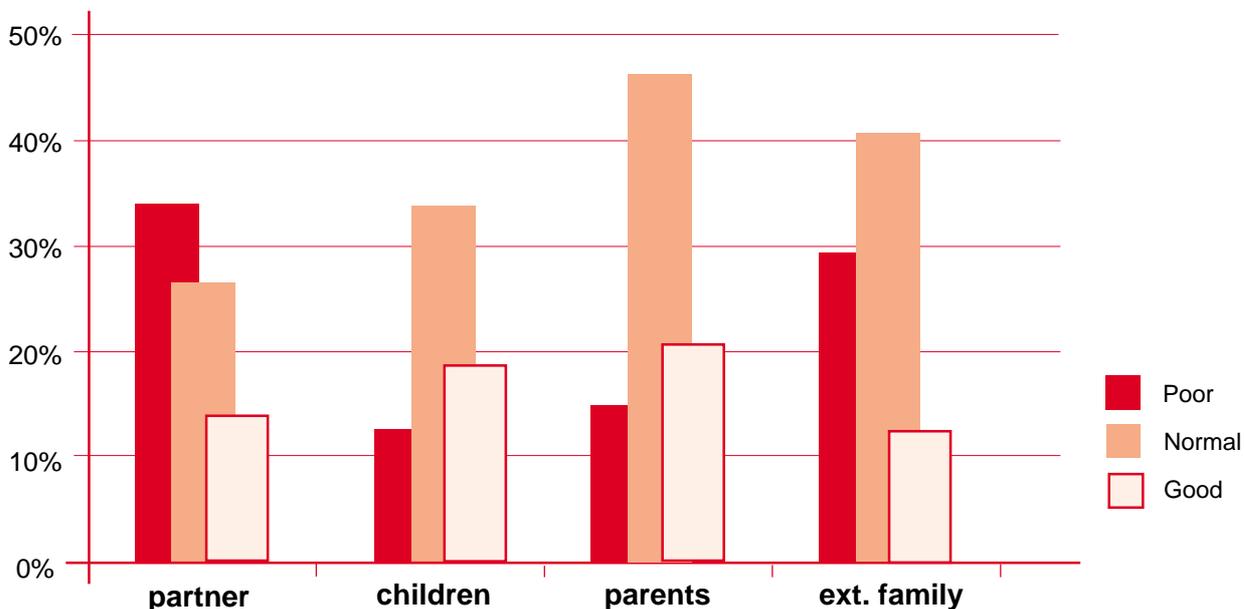
5 Present marital status

The following graph demonstrates that 24% of the ex-prisoners surveyed have, since release, been unable to maintain their marriages, while 32% have had difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships.



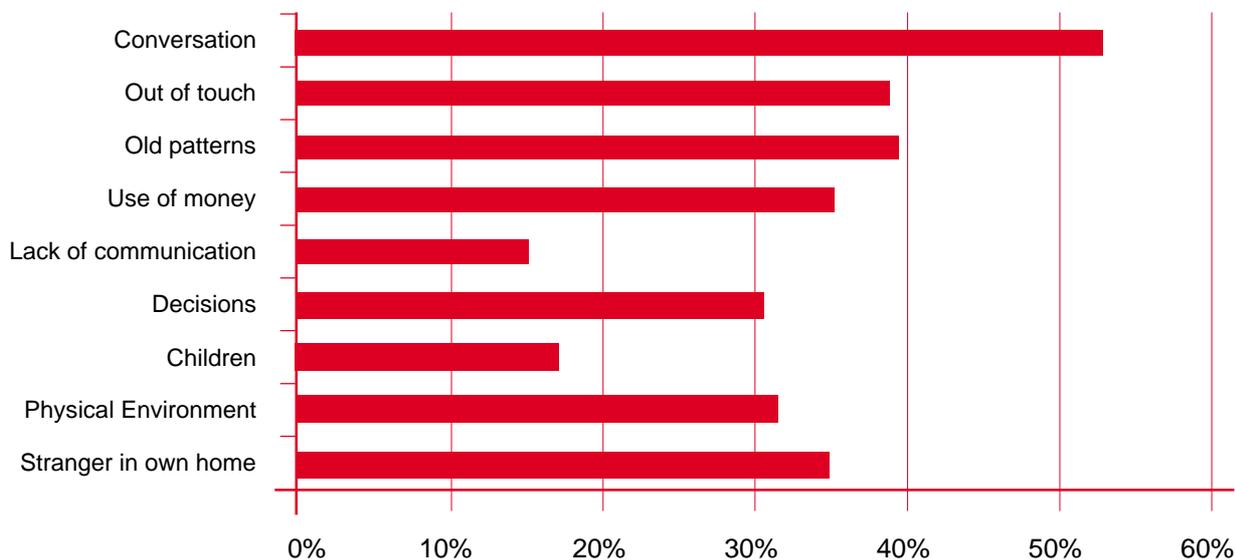
6 Quality of relationships

International conflict trauma consultants from South Africa and the US support the statistics given in No 5 as being normal for ex-combatants. Furthermore, they concur with the findings in the chart below with regard to the quality of relationships experienced by ex-combatants from other conflict zones.



7 Home / family life problems

Marital status and relationship quality were indicators of the following domestic difficulties experienced on release by ex-combatants, even in some instances for those still striving to maintain their relationship.



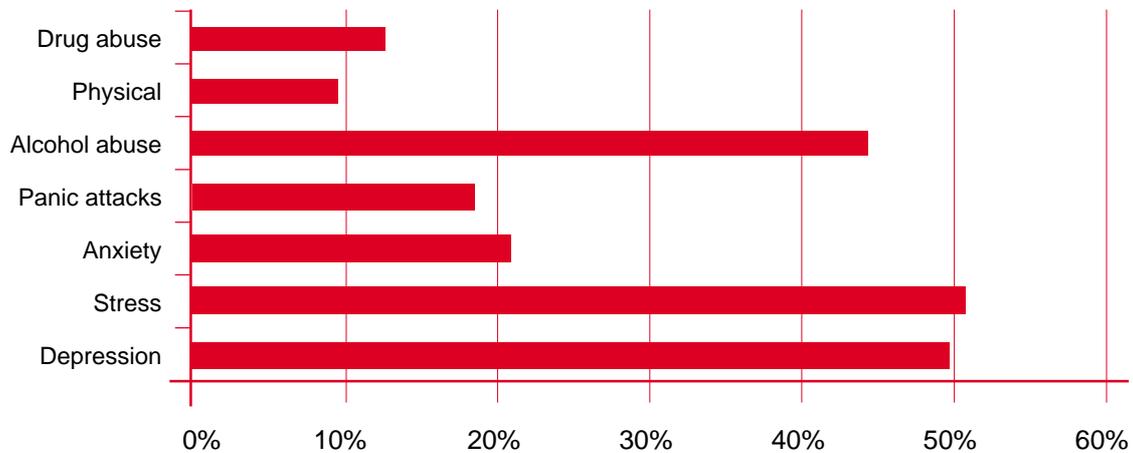
8 Desired EPIC assistance

When the ex-prisoners were asked whether they would use EPIC if it offered assistance with any of the above problems, the response was overwhelming affirmative.

Yes: 97%
No: 3%

9 Illnesses

Of internationally recognised post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms suffered as a result of periods of captivity, our survey identified the following symptoms experienced by the ex-prisoners incarcerated as a result of the political conflict in Northern Ireland. This concurs with data from ex-prisoners in the South African conflict.



10 Sustaining employment

This pie-chart highlights the difficulties experienced by ex-prisoners in sustaining regular employment.

11 Current employment

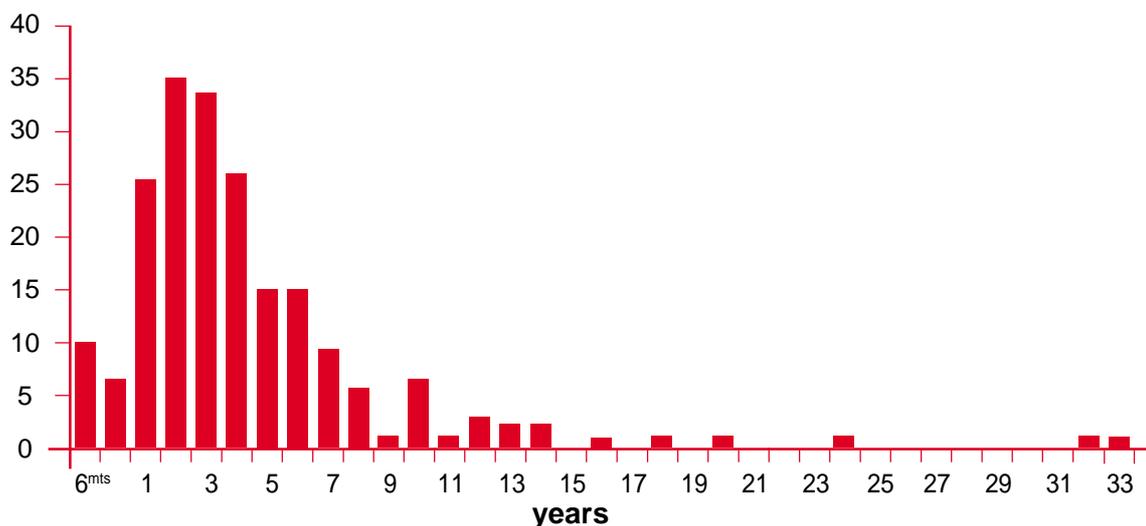
This pie-chart reveals that the majority of ex-prisoners are currently unemployed.

Able to sustain: 21% Unable to sustain: 79%

Unemployed 65% Employed 35%

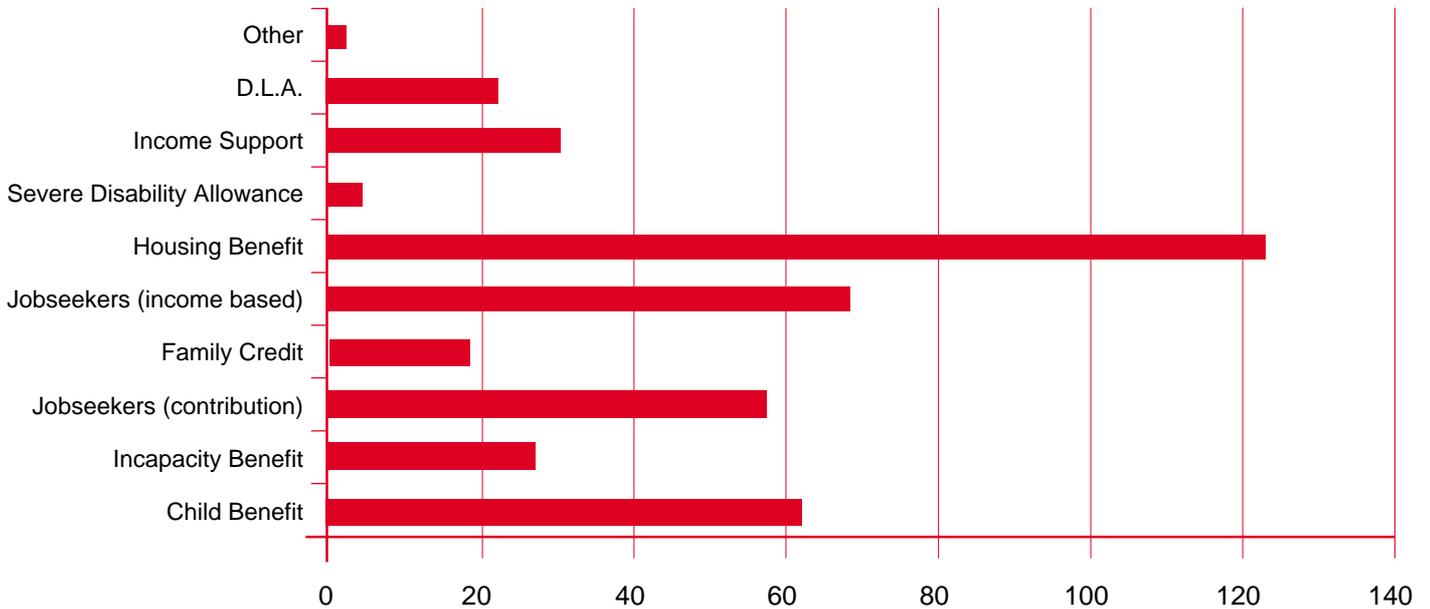
12 Length of unemployment

This graph shows clearly that long-term unemployment is prevalent in the ex-prisoner population, with the vast majority of our sample being unemployed for between one and five years.



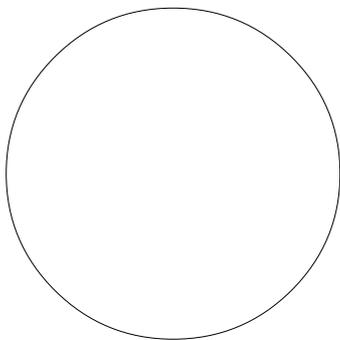
13 Benefit dependency

Considerable numbers of ex-prisoners are dependant on welfare benefits, and those who are employed tend to fall into the low income bracket.



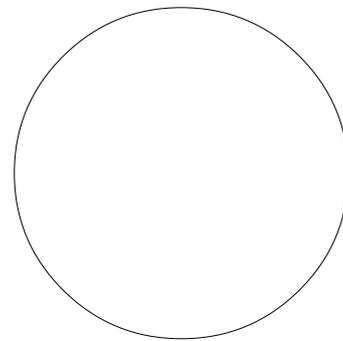
14 EPIC and welfare rights

When the ex-prisoners were asked whether they would use EPIC if offered assistance with welfare rights issues, the response was 88% affirmative.



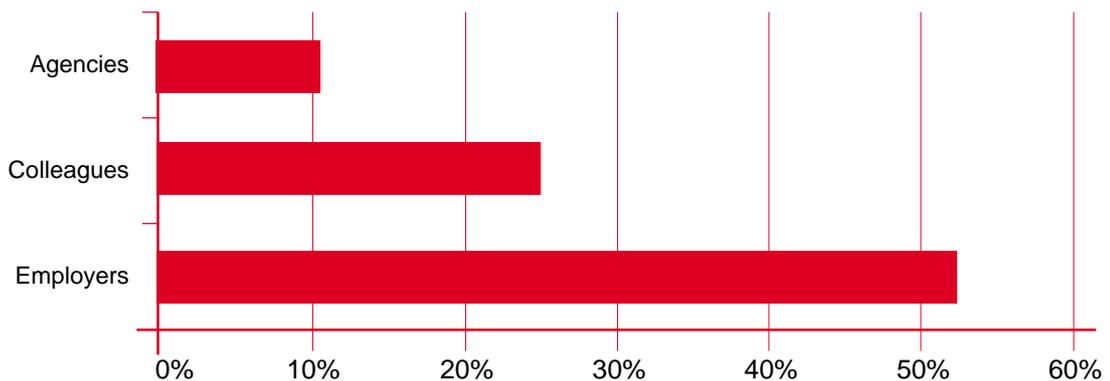
15 Striving to find work

The questionnaires reveal that 84% of ex-prisoners are keen to gain employment and despite many obstacles, continue to strive to find work.



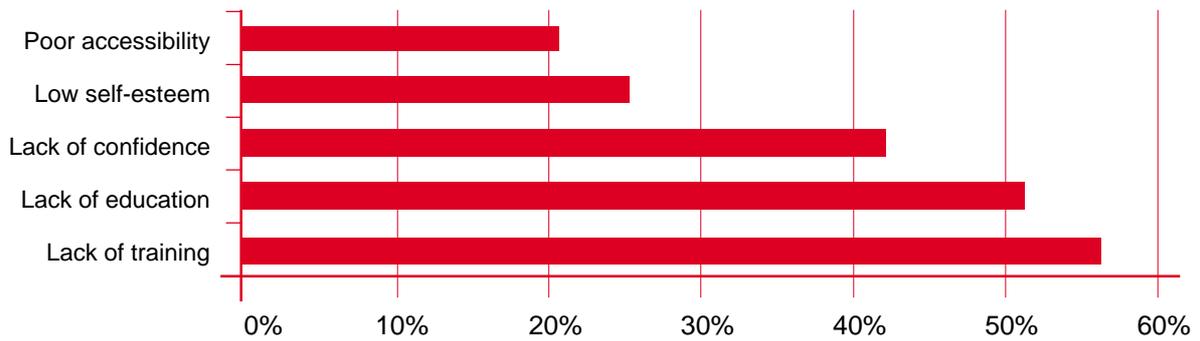
16 Encountering discrimination

Discrimination was reported as an issue, particularly from employers.



17 Factors affecting the search for employment

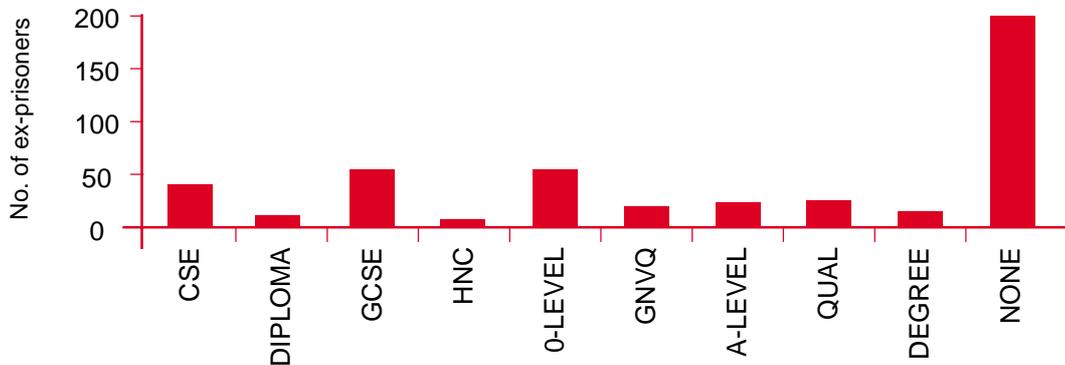
Aside from the discrimination faced, there were other reasons given which militated against achieving employment.



18 Community perception

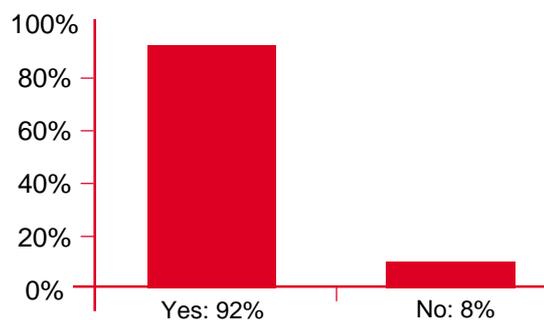
The prisoners were asked whether they felt their community saw them as 'political' or 'non-political' prisoners, and 86% reported that this was the case, revealing a general acceptance in the community that persons imprisoned as a result of the conflict were political prisoners.

19 Educational qualifications



20 EPIC as a training provider

Asked whether they would use EPIC training or education courses, 92% of the ex-prisoners responded affirmatively.



EPIC's Welfare Rights Branch

Since the beginning of the conflict there have been two types of 'serving prisoner' – not only in our prisons but within the community in which we live. The first category are those men (and the small number of women) incarcerated by the legal courts, while the second category includes the families of those men, who, while not 'imprisoned' by the courts, still experience their own form of 'sentence' in being left to cope, mostly unaided, with the multitude of problems which result from the incarceration of the men.

EPIC has been established to help such people – in the form of our Welfare Rights Branch. This branch seeks to assist families with regard to their day-to-day needs: advice, benefits, housing, legal matters, contact with other agencies, tribunal representation, employment rights, debt counselling, family problems, education matters and many other problem areas.

In the short time that EPIC has been up and running we have been contacted from all corners of Northern Ireland for help with the above issues. This has resulted in an overwhelming demand for our assistance, a demand which comes not only from ex-prisoners and their families, but from serving prisoners, their families and indeed a wide range of people within the community.

The following is a rough breakdown of the main problem areas assisted by EPIC's Welfare Rights Branch.

Benefits (Income Support, Family Credit, Disability benefits, etc)

When a husband is imprisoned the responsibility falls on the partner to claim benefits for herself and any children. Invariably, when contact is made with the DHSS, a pile of forms are put down in front of the claimant and very little assistance, if any, is offered with regard to filling them in, or advice given as to what additional benefits the claimant might also be entitled to. Once contact is made with EPIC we take the claimant through the different forms step by step, not only to help the claimant understand exactly what is being asked of them, but to help them determine just what they can and cannot claim for.

Housing (Housing Benefit, rent arrears, housing repairs, tenant's rights, etc)

For the family of prisoners, numerous housing-related problems can arise. For example, in getting the NIHE or private landlord to carry out needed maintenance work. Or, for those who have got into arrears with their rents, assistance with budgeting whatever income they receive. And it is not only families which have housing problems, often the single prisoner on release also needs to find accommodation. EPIC will act on their behalf too, making contact with the NIHE or private landlords, filling in housing forms, and advising the client of his rights (e.g. that they don't have to accept the first accommodation offered, for many are under the impression that unless they do so they will be removed from the housing list).

Legal matters (advice on personal claims, legal representation, Legal Aid, etc.)

Many people are unaware not only of their legal rights, but that Legal Aid is widely available. Furthermore, many people, *including* the families of ex-prisoners who have had some dealings with the court system, feel very intimidated by solicitors and the legal process. EPIC tries to assist in whatever way needs arise, whether that entails making initial contact with solicitors or helping clients feel more confident and at ease with legal processes.

Tribunal representation (benefits, housing, health, education, etc)

This is an important aspect of our intervention. When a person is disallowed something, because of the decision made by the DHSS or doctors or schools, they often accept these decisions and fail to exercise their right of appeal. EPIC tries to help people not feel intimidated by the amount of paperwork necessitated by most appeals. EPIC's aim is to help people understand their rights and to help them to exercise those rights. For example, in the case of Incapacity Benefit a claimant is judged on points and also examined by a department doctor, and as a result they often find themselves disallowed. However, such decisions can be challenged, because the decision is given by an Adjudicating Officer who is not qualified in medicine and by a doctor who makes his/her decision on seeing the claimant for a brief interview. These decisions can often be overturned and EPIC provides claimants with support to undertake the necessary appeals.

Debt (rent arrears, social fund, NIE, etc)

Many prisoners were the 'bread winners' within their family before incarceration and the family may have been used to a certain lifestyle. With the loss of his income the new circumstances can be extremely hard for some families to cope with. Arrears of rent or loans can result, and people often find themselves failing to pay one creditor to enable them to pay another, thereby compounding the problem. Often pride prevents people from facing up to the facts of their new disadvantaged circumstances, or from contacting agencies which could help them. At EPIC we find that people often come to us and present initially with one small problem, as if to 'sound us out', but once confidence has been built up they open up with all their other problems, and among these debt looms large. We help them budget their income and, when appropriate, intervene on their behalf with the creditors.

EPIC believes that its Welfare Rights service should not be restricted to helping people fill in DHSS forms, but should provide a supportive environment where people can come when in trouble, a place where they can receive not only advice but training in their rights, with the aim of building up their self-confidence and 'know how' to help them deal adequately with future problems.

Psychological repercussions of violent conflict and captivity

(a report prepared by Helen Seline)

For several years I have had the privilege of working in Belfast among and with ex-prisoners. It has been a vital and enriching experience for me, one from which I have learned. It has taught me much about the psychological repercussions of violent conflict and imprisonment, areas unfortunately all too prevalent in our current world. Violent conflict, particularly when it is of an inter-communal nature, leaves the lives of countless individuals and families changed irrevocably. While I am mindful of the trauma suffered by *all* the victims of violence – many of whom became victims as a direct result of the actions of those who were subsequently imprisoned – for the purposes of this publication I intend to focus solely on the prisoner population and the reintegration difficulties which can arise as a product of the experience of imprisonment.

[Both Republican and Loyalist prisoners in Northern Ireland perceive themselves as being ‘politically-motivated’ prisoners, and give many compelling arguments to support such a perception, hence I shall adhere to that terminology here.]

The world of the Northern Irish politically-motivated prisoner is in some way a unique one. For a start, family loyalty is unusually strong and prisoners are often visited weekly by their families throughout the long years of imprisonment. In prisons in the United States, on the other hand, family visiting is minimal and usually ceases completely by the end of the first two years. This is not to say that all families in Northern Ireland stand by their prisoners, but most do, and although there are divorces and deaths many families remain intact. Additionally, the paramilitary organisations generally support their prisoners in different ways.

Despite the British Government’s denial of many years, the main prison (the Maze) is divided into wings with paramilitary groups housed separately, organised in military fashion just like prisoners of war. Northern Irish prisons are not as brutal as, say, South America prisons but brutality, both psychological and physical, occurs frequently. Long-term captivity is captivity with all the consequences thereof.

One way to think about the differences that long-term prisoners face when leaving prison is to imagine it in terms of moving from one world to another, or having to adjust to a totally different culture, but one with which you expect and are expected to be familiar. If you are in prison for 10 to 15 years the world you knew as a civilian no longer exists. That world has gone on without you. Not only that but you have changed, as has everyone you know. Your children have grown up without you and you do not know them, nor they you. Your wife or partner has had to manage without you and is now quite able to manage the family on her own. She has changed and you find you are relating to quite a different person. Then again, you may have lost your wife or partner through

divorce or death and have no family to which to return. Or, if not married, your nuclear family may be diminished through death. You have to find your place in a new and totally changed and alien world.

Think of the difference between a regimented, structured prison experience with its own flow and pace (no matter how difficult) and civilian life with its complex and multi-faceted demands and noise. Prison is essentially a world of its own, without automobiles or traffic, without the hubbub of people on busy streets, without women with whom to relate, without the privilege of creating opportunities for yourself. Prison routine is boringly simple without much variation, with the structure imposed on the prisoner. Civilian life is very much the opposite. Coming from long-term imprisonment the increased amount of external stimuli in civilian life can become overwhelming and make adjustment that much harder. To say nothing of having to develop your own structure for daily living.

Whenever one moves from living in one culture to living in another there is some mourning at the loss of the old, even if it is a desired loss. You have lost the familiar and are now in the unknown, and the unknown is almost always scary. You no longer see the men you have lived with daily, you no longer have a familiar structure, you now have to do things for yourself, relate to women, find a job, relate to your own grown-up children, etc. You do not know how this new world works and it certainly does not work the way prison life did. You have some depression at the loss of the familiar and you are bombarded by an increase of external stimuli. You and everyone else expects you to be very glad to be out. But it is bewildering, demanding and anxiety-provoking, to say nothing of feeling very much on your own and without support, and certainly without the support you developed in prison. Does anyone understand the difficulties of readjustment, including yourself? Is something terribly wrong with you that you feel depressed or anxious?

So you are bewildered, depressed, anxious, wondering what is wrong with you. To top all this off you are not the same person who entered prison. You have changed, years have passed and your life experience has been very different from those who remained civilians. They can seem very like strangers, and yet they shouldn’t be, as they are family or old friends. They do not know how to relate to you, or they relate to their own idea of who you are, not to you as you are now. They do not know you, and you do not know them. This can increase your confusion and sense of estrangement, which then adds to whatever anxiety, depression and self-doubt you may have.

Then there are the psychological results of trauma, sometimes referred to as ‘post traumatic stress syndrome’. Many politically-motivated prisoners are involved in violent actions prior to their imprisonment and this violence

inevitably involves trauma. Many participants are often overwhelmed by the brutality and the extraordinary events which they have become caught up in, for whatever reasons.

These psychological results of trauma include hyperarousal (constant alertness as if danger could come at any moment), intrusion (flashbacks and nightmares), constriction (a frozen quality, psychological numbing, restriction in living and in relating, with a decrease in intimacy), depression, and self-medication with alcohol or drugs. In my experience many ex-prisoners in Northern Ireland suffer from one or more of these symptoms.

However, the ethos of everyday cultural attitudes within Northern Ireland (on both sides of the communal divide) militates against the recognition of these normal responses to trauma. Although the psychological results of trauma are a normal reaction to extraordinary and overwhelming events, they are viewed as abnormal and 'crazy' within a Northern Ireland cultural context, by both the ex-prisoner population and the communities to which they belong. In Northern Ireland you are supposed to 'pull yourself together and get on with it'. Feelings are to be stifled and denied.

This places the ex-prisoner in a 'double bind'. He is suffering and yet that kind of suffering is not allowed, and, besides, is 'weak' and 'crazy'. To seek help, therefore, is to admit to being both crazy and/or weak. Compounding these cultural aspects is the fact that traumatic events and the accompanying feelings are so painful that no-one really wishes to revisit them. Unfortunately, many of the symptoms will persist until they can be revisited in a supportive environment. Adding to all of this is the sense that to admit the possibility of psychological wounding is to say that you have lost and they have won (whether 'they' are the 'other community', or the guards and regime that imprisons you). Thus the politically-motivated ex-prisoner not only faces the trials of entry into a different and challenging new world but may also be plagued by the psychological results of severe trauma. All this may have to be denied or pushed aside in order not to feel that the other side has won, or to feel weak or 'crazy'.

For those politically-motivated prisoners from the Loyalist side of the divide there is another difficulty. They went to war to safeguard a particular belief system, and yet when they did so they were repudiated by the very people whose dire warnings that this belief system was under threat had been a major motivating factor behind the initial decision to take up arms. And yet, many sections within the Protestant community disowned them and they were imprisoned by those for whom they thought they were fighting. Even some people in their own community

look upon them as murderers and criminals, not as political prisoners. In this they resemble America's Vietnam veterans who were spat upon when they returned from that war. The ambivalence of the community to which you return makes re-entry exceptionally hard. As can the sense of betrayal resulting from this.

Fortunately ex-prisoners from both sides of the divide have begun to develop self-help groups, such as the Loyalist group EPIC. These are supplying support and resources on which the ex-prisoner can draw. This is particularly important as there is little trust among ex-combatants of those who have been civilians and not participants. Traditionally among those who have been directly involved in violent conflict there is the belief that those who have not been directly involved cannot, and often do not want to, understand what it is like. In Northern Ireland there is also mistrust of those not part of your own camp. Consequently self-help groups can be an ideal way to offer support and help.

Since part of the core of psychological trauma is disempowerment and disconnection from others, self-help groups are ideally suited to deal with both these issues. They are composed of, and run by, those who have shared your experiences and those from your own camp. They are struggling with the same issues, you can connect with them, and, most importantly, they are not the establishment coming in and telling you what to do, thus disempowering you.

It is, of course, important for self-help groups to acquire training and expertise in the arena of trauma and adjustment to civilian life. A number of programmes within EPIC are currently being developed for this purpose. EPIC draws upon the experience of similar groups in other parts of the world, taking those experiences and adapting them to the Northern Ireland setting.

The world in general tends to want to sweep the results of war and conflict under the carpet and forget all about it. This usually includes forgetting about those who have been part of those events. I believe we do this at our peril. It is far too easy to say 'this has nothing to do with me – they are the "bad" ones', when in reality violent conflict and war are symptoms of the society in which they occur and therefore all sections within that society are party to it. To repudiate those who participated in the conflict allows them to carry our shadow and for the rest of us to pretend to ourselves that we are the 'good' and they are the 'bad'. It is important for society to integrate, in a productive way, those who return from conflict and imprisonment. Self-help groups for ex-prisoners are a large step in that direction.

Reintegration of ex-combatants – towards peace and reconciliation

(a proposal submitted to the NIO by EPIC)

The release of the existing politically-motivated prisoner population can underpin the settlement, if this is achieved in a positive manner. Past release precedents have been set even in the days of the old Stormont regime, and international legislation, the Geneva Conventions Protocol II Article 6 (5) states: “At the end of hostilities, the authorities in power shall endeavour to grant the broadest possible amnesty to persons who have participated in the armed conflict or those deprived of their liberty for reasons related to the armed conflict.”

What should be highlighted is the fact that ex-combatants positively engaged have been, and can continue to be, a dedicated and committed community resource.

With the transformation of our conflict into a desired non-violent expression and respect of diversity within the political arena, we ask our courageous political leaders to focus again on the sensitive and difficult issue of ex-combatants, and their political, social and economic integration.

The history of our country has forewarned us of the dangers of unsatisfactorily addressing integration, whether that has been in the wider community in Northern Ireland or indeed within the ex-combatant and associate population.

As we enter a new and uncertain phase of partnership and consultancy created within the negotiated settlement, EPIC would like to take this opportunity of highlighting an expression of interest towards contributing to peace and stability in our country.

It has been estimated that during the course of this conflict upwards of 25,000 people have been incarcerated in our prisons. We in Northern Ireland know how close our families are and when one adds into the equation the families, nuclear and extended, affected by incarceration, the figure propagates to the region of between 200,000 and 300,000 – a very significant population directly affected by imprisonment.

What must be added to this figure is the number of ex-combatants, and their families, who escaped conviction; RUC files would substantiate that not all suspects were convicted.

All of the above must be considered, in reality, ‘casualties’ of our violent conflict. For us as a people to move forward we must address the needs of our casualties, and that encompasses everyone in our community.

We must heal the wounds of the past, acknowledge the injustices and address the trauma of conflict for everyone in our society. Otherwise we are subscribing to the inter-generational trauma which plays a significant role in breeding violent conflict.

Ex-combatants in many countries around the world, e.g. South Africa, Mozambique, Nicaragua, USA, the

United Kingdom, etc., have demonstrated a commitment towards peace which has only recently been acknowledged by the international community.

Through our comparative study of conflict zones we ex-combatants in Northern Ireland are fully aware of the leadership given by ex-combatants in other transformed conflicts, and are very familiar with the role played by ex-combatants in what were once called the ‘fringe’ parties, during the ceasefire declaration and the high-profiled negotiating process.

It should also be acknowledged the dedicated efforts made by loyalist ex-combatants towards a social settlement.

This paper is a proposal to offer a strategy towards the implementation of an acceptable service designed to reintegrate former combatants, and empower them towards contributing to political, social, and economic development.

Historically, government sponsored agencies, eg. NI Probation Service and NIACRO have been unacceptable to the ex-combatants because of the stigma of criminalisation and these agencies’ lack of understanding of fundamental community difficulties in respect to their relationship with external agencies, and indeed the external agencies’ hidden agenda –professional and private – dictates that new arrangements need to be explored to provide an adequate service to this specific clientele.

Institutions of reintegration can be instigated by government(s) to give a veneer to addressing the problem; however, if government(s) are serious about addressing the very real issue of reintegration then they must not only consult but also empower the acceptable agencies of the beneficiaries.

EPIC is an acceptable agency for the UVF/RHC ex-combatant population. They have been in the field for over two years, conducting research and implementing results.

EPIC has identified the need for practical assistance, welfare rights, employment and housing accommodation, on immediate release; indeed, pre-release.

EPIC has also undertaken an exploration into the trauma in relation to our conflict, with consultation with our respected international contacts in the trauma counselling field –people who have counselled Vietnam veterans, South African casualties of conflict, Nicaraguan beneficiaries, and a Mennonite working in former Yugoslavia.

What has emerged has been a very clear identification of the tragedy, bitterness and suffering in our province. Trauma which has affected a large percentage of our people, trauma which has contributed to our violent conflict. Trauma must be addressed to help our people move forward in peace.

Now is the time to move beyond the pale, the time to use our experience of our recent history to enable a better and more equitable society to emerge. A society which is inclusive, respectful and committed to preventing a repeat of our inter-generational conflict.

We are conscious of the need to create a public awareness on issues relating to prisoners, ex-prisoners and ex-combatants. This applies both at home and internationally and in the case of Loyalists is an area that has been long neglected. To address this, staff at EPIC have made numerous presentations, both collectively and individually, to groups from both home and abroad. An extension of this work is in the study of other areas of conflict around the world and in particular we are working on exchange programmes with South Africa and Nicaragua.

An EPIC mediation service exists to work on disputes both within and between the communities.

A Loyalist ex-prisoner working on behalf of EPIC has conducted extensive research into the possibility of finding an alternative to punishment beatings. The research is at an advanced stage and it is anticipated that a pilot scheme may soon be in operation. This pilot scheme has now an inclusive Management Committee with representation from the community, voluntary and statutory sectors. At this time lack of funding prevents it operating.

It has been recognised that there is a need to provide a pre- and post-conflict counselling service for our client group and the wider community. To this end EPIC have staff currently training and working towards recognised counselling qualifications. Until this expertise is acquired in-house we can only scratch the surface of trauma.

One of the by-products of long-term imprisonment is the tendency to raise the 'street credibility' of the ex-prisoner amongst his modern-day youth contemporaries. Ex-prisoners, through EPIC, have used this to advantage with groups of young people susceptible to taking a violent approach to our conflict. A fully resourced service could influence large numbers of our youth towards positively channelling their energy in a more positive direction.

EPIC as a community resource could impact dramatically on a healing route forward. To facilitate this we need additional financial and professional support. Of the governments in power we ask you to demonstrate practical support to our service.

With the successful conclusion to the present talks process in Northern Ireland and with a view to consolidating peace a number of key issues in relation to politically-motivated prisoners and ex-prisoners require to be urgently addressed. These include:

- The release of all politically-motivated prisoners whose organisation is demonstrating commitment to the peace process.
- An initiative taken to facilitate the transition from incarceration to liberation and employment during the pre-release phase.
- The scrapping of the requirement that life sentence prisoners remain on licence for the remainder of their natural lives. This should also be extended to include determinate sentenced prisoners who are also on licence

for the duration of the remitted portion of their sentence.

- Released prisoners should immediately have the rights afforded to all citizens restored; e.g. the right to stand in all forms of election and if elected be entitled to take up their positions in government bodies or otherwise.
- Ex-prisoners who are affiliated to those organisations taking a non-violent stance in relation to the outcome of the process should have their 'criminal' records expunged and intelligence records in relation to themselves and their families destroyed.
- The requirement that previous convictions be declared in relation to applications for employment should be abolished and the rights of politically-motivated ex-prisoners enshrined in Fair Employment legislation that guaranteed their equality of opportunity in relation to employment.
- Ex-prisoners should be afforded their normal old-age pension entitlement, which was restricted by their inability to continue their National Insurance contributions.
- The practice of the Northern Ireland Office in reclaiming from prisoners any compensation paid on their behalf in relation to politically-motivated offences should be ceased. This has been particularly evident in cases where ex-prisoners have received damages in respect of claims.
- Impediments in relation to ex-prisoners setting up their own businesses should be removed, i.e. access to loans from banks and government agencies, insurance requirements, etc.
- Both the British and Irish Governments should, in consultation with relevant countries, abolish restrictions on visa applications discriminating against politically-motivated ex-prisoners. They should be afforded the same travel entitlements as any other citizen.

EPIC has undoubtedly empowered the loyalist politically-motivated ex-prisoner; it has strengthened our capacity for self-determination.

Through our increasing consciousness we are more open, more receptive and more responsive, with a clearer vision and a unifying voice.

We ask of our administration to move us from relative weakness to positive strength. To aid our regional development strategy and by so doing to increase our capacity to contribute to peace and reconciliation.

Now is the time for the administration to take the risks they asked, indeed demanded, from our political representatives. Now is the time for the administration to collaborate with our agency, EPIC, and transform a significant proportion of our society towards harmony in our newly envisaged arrangements and relationships.

EPIC are available, willing and committed to address the needs which have arisen from our conflict. We only ask for resources and a demonstration of inclusion in this new era.

EPIC

The Concept

The recent phase of the conflict in Northern Ireland has lasted for more than a quarter of a century. From the mid-1980s large numbers of politically-motivated prisoners began to be released. These were men and women who had been incarcerated at the height of the conflict in the early to mid-1970s. It soon became apparent that no acceptable support mechanisms existed to provide help and advice on the difficulties associated with reintegration. The existing statutory and voluntary agencies were either ill-equipped or unacceptable to meet the needs of the prisoners. The unacceptability originated from the fact that these agencies historically catered for the criminal element of society and association with them was inappropriate for people who regarded themselves as political prisoners. It would also have lent credence to the British Government's policy of criminalisation.

In 1991 a group of political ex-prisoners met with a number of Quakers who shared a common concern in relation to the reintegration and social inclusion of life sentence and long-term prisoners and their families. From these discussions the concept of EPIC materialised. EPIC stands for 'Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre' and our client base is primarily former Ulster Volunteer Force and Red Hand Commando prisoners. The centre's staff primarily comprises ex-prisoners and prisoners' family members who we feel are the persons best equipped to understand the problems associated with reintegration.

Mission Statement

EPIC will provide a province-wide service to alleviate the problems associated with the reintegration of Loyalist prisoners into the community. Through continuing research EPIC will endeavour to match the needs of ex-prisoners and their families with appropriate resources.

Objectives

The principle objectives of EPIC are:

- To identify the needs of prisoners and prisoners' families during the post-release period.
- Provide resources and facilities that will help ex-prisoners and their families in the process of reintegration into the family and community.
- Provide reference points for prisoners during the pre-release period and after release.

- Link ex-prisoners and their families with other existing agencies, where appropriate, and support them in making use of their services.
- Provide opportunities, both formal and informal, to share experiences and encourage the development of mutual support services.

Regional Development

For the purpose of our regional development we have identified seven geographical areas:

West Belfast

This area includes the Shankill Road which is where our Central Services Office is located. The Greater Shankill area has the highest concentration of Loyalist politically-motivated ex-prisoners, hence the reasons for locating our Central Services in this area.

North Belfast

This area stretches from inner city North Belfast to Larne, including Newtownabbey Borough Council area and the principal towns of Carrickfergus and Ballyclare.

East Belfast

Comprises inner city East Belfast out to Dundonald and Ballybeen.

South Belfast

This includes inner city South Belfast areas such as Sandy Row, the Village and Donegal Pass and outwards to include Lisburn.

North Down

Comprising the major towns of Bangor and Newtownards and to include Comber and the Ards peninsula.

North-West

Comprising the major centres of Londonderry, Coleraine, Ballymena, Ballymoney and Antrim.

Mid-Ulster

Includes the towns of Portadown, Lurgan, Banbridge, Armagh, Dungannon and Cookstown and the area within. It is also intended for this office to cover the west of the province out to Enniskillen and Omagh where the concentration of Loyalist ex-prisoners is not high.

EPIC has conducted extensive research in each of the seven regions to ascertain the needs of the Loyalist ex-prisoner population. On the basis of this research we will be attempting to obtain funding to provide a service to address the problems that exist.

Record to date

EPIC has been in existence just over two years but has already established credibility with the ex-prisoner population and has made considerable progress towards meeting the above principal objectives.

Drop-in Centre / Welfare Rights

The Drop-in Centre serves both as a pick-up point for serving prisoners' friends and families visiting the Maze Prison and incorporates an office for our Welfare Rights Department.

Prison Transport

EPIC has acquired two 14-seater minibuses for use in providing transport to and from the prisons. When not in use for prison visits they are utilised as a community transport service and are availed of by a wide range of groups, from youth to pensioners.

Research

EPIC has currently undertaken research into the following prison-related issues:

- The reasons why people became involved in the conflict which ultimately led to their imprisonment.
- The social history of the prisons from a Loyalist perspective.
- The problems long term prisoners experience on release and subsequent reintegration into the family and wider community.

Awareness

We are conscious of the need to create public awareness on issues relating to prisoners, ex-prisoners and ex-combatants. This applies both at home and internationally and in the case of Loyalists is an area that has been long neglected. To address this, staff at EPIC have made numerous presentations, both collectively and individually, to groups from both home and abroad. An extension of this work is in the study of other areas of conflict throughout the world and in particular we are working on exchange programmes with South Africa and Nicaragua.

Employment

With the high rate of unemployment among Loyalist ex-

prisoners EPIC has established a Community Enterprise to address this issue. **EPIC Enterprises Limited** has its own board of directors and is a company limited by guarantee. Several projects have been identified for development, three of which are already in operation. Through liaison with various employers Epic Enterprises has now developed a Manpower Service Agency and has been successful in securing full-time employment for numerous ex-prisoners.

Mediation

An EPIC mediation service exists to work on disputes both within and between the communities.

Punishment Beatings

A Loyalist ex-prisoner working on behalf of EPIC has conducted extensive research into the possibility of finding an alternative to punishment beatings. On the basis of this research funding has been obtained to begin a pilot scheme in the Greater Shankill area. The project is Greater Shankill Alternatives and is based on the principle of restorative justice. If the project proves successful it can then be replicated in other appropriate areas.

Counselling

It has been recognised that there is a need to provide a pre- and post-conflict counselling service both for our client group and the wider community. To this end EPIC has staff currently training and working towards recognised counselling qualifications. Until this expertise is acquired in-house we are directing our clientele to persons acceptable to both EPIC and themselves.

Youth Intervention

One of the by-products of long-term imprisonment is the tendency to raise the 'street credibility' of the ex-prisoner amongst today's youth. Ex-prisoners, through EPIC, have used this to advantage with groups of young people susceptible to taking a violent approach to our conflict. Through their influence large numbers of our youth are now channelling their energies in a more positive direction.

Community Consultancy

EPIC staff have acted in an advisory role to a number of community groups and assisted them in the preparation of funding applications.

Though every person is a unique individual we have found that prison experiences, as well as experiences on release, can have common threads for both prisoners and their families, and these problems, and their solutions, can prove of real benefit to others when shared. If you would be willing to share either your problems or your solutions – or, indeed, to pass on to us any suggestions you might have as to how we can make our services better and more effective – then we at EPIC would be glad to hear from you.

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