

**Submission
No 12**

**SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN OF IMPRISONED PARENTS IN NEW SOUTH
WALES**

Name: Mr Bernie Matthews

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Matthews: Submission to the NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young people: Inquiry into the Support of children of imprisoned parents.

The Invisible Victims of the NSW Criminal Justice System

The invisible victims of the criminal justice process are the family of prisoners, including children, irrespective of whether the parent was guilty or not for the crimes they were accused of. The relevance of being accused is a significant factor to children who suffer the trauma of having their father or mother dragged away in handcuffs for a crime they may or may not have committed.

In 1983 I was arrested for murder. The trauma my family suffered from that experience included a SWAT team smashing down the front door of my house in the early hours of the morning, my wife and children terrorized by black-clad men in masks holding an array of weapons including shotguns and yelling orders in an aggressive manner. My stepson, who was 11-years-old at the time, had a shotgun pointed at his head while he lay in bed. The bed was lifted with him still in it to see if I was hiding underneath it and then dropped back on the ground. My teenage step-daughter suffered deeply from the intrusion of strangers into the sanctity and safety of her home. Both children suffered night terror following the events of that night.

The police justification for holding guns on the children was simply: "the kids in Vietnam threw grenades at Australian troops during the war. Not taking any chances."

The children had nobody to confide their fears and anxieties to. Their mother, my wife, was seen as being complicit because she was my partner, the cause of their anguish and fear, and had somehow allowed me to create the turmoil. They needed somebody to vent their anger and frustration upon.

My wife was severely traumatized herself and felt totally helpless that she was unable to protect the children from the men in black invasion.

The fact that I was innocent of the charge and was subsequently acquitted nearly two years later was irrelevant to the events that forever traumatized the children after that night. To them, their father had had been dragged away in handcuffs to reappear behind the walls of a prison where they could only see him on allocated visit days for the next two years. The experience was mind-numbing and incomprehensible to my wife and children. But mine was not an isolated case. Other children of prisoners have suffered similar traumatizing experiences to varying degrees when they have they have collided with the criminal justice system through no fault of their own.

The wives and husbands of people accused of crimes they have been imprisoned for have a better comprehension of the experience from an adult perspective but children lack that ability to rationalize the experience. They remain the hidden victims.

In 1987 Kirsty Coburn made a groundbreaking documentary called the 'Children of Prisoners' for the Ray Martin Mid-Day Show on Channel 9. It was the first time any Australian media organization had interviewed the children of prisoners to ascertain the impact of a parent's imprisonment had upon them. The children were forthright with their observations and the most compelling argument throughout the documentary was the fact that they had not committed any crime but were judged to be equally as guilty as the parent in prison by neighbors, friends, other pupils at school and society at large. They were not allowed to be normal children anymore.

On 5 July 1987 Jacqueline Lee Lewes wrote a compelling article 'Kids Who Live in Shame' for The Sydney Sun-Herald in which she explained how the children had similar tales of schoolyard taunts about their dads being jailbirds and of friends forbidden by parents to have anything to do with them. Often they are in a no-win situation. If a teacher keeps a sympathetic eye on them, then the other kids accuse them of "sucking up". (Copy of article attached).

Another article, 'Prisoner's partners - doing time on the outside' by Jerry Fetherston for Woman's Day on 4 April 1988, explored the problems that spouses encountered while their partner was in prison. (Copy attached).

The significance of these articles displays the problems encountered by the families of prisoners over thirty years ago. Nothing has changed. The political law-and-order push for harsher sentencing practices, more prisons, and more prisoners to put in them has escalated the plight of the families outside prison walls in NSW. That plight is overwhelmed by the attitudinal view that the families are just as responsible as the prisoner hence there is no empathy from a political or sociological viewpoint to their plight. They remain the invisible victims of the criminal justice process.

For a better understanding of the plight experienced by the families of prisoners it is essential that those people, including the children, be given a voice. It is counterproductive for social engineers with university degrees to assume they can comprehend the implications and the varying impact upon families of prisoners when they have not experienced the trauma or given weight to the views of spouses and children affected by the imprisonment process. This aspect is truly relevant to any investigation of the problem.

It is my respectful submission that the Committee should avail themselves every opportunity to interview a cross-section of families affected by the imprisonment process and ascertain a comprehensive and accurate perspective of the problem.

Thank you for your time.

I remain respectfully

Bernie Matthews ex-prisoner.