

# The life of a prisoner

When your family member is in prison, you might find yourself wondering what prison is like and whether they will be alright there. This factsheet is designed to give you an idea of what is available in prison to help your family member cope, remain safe and stay well.

## Emotional and social adjustment to prison

For someone who has not been to prison before, it is difficult to imagine the impact that imprisonment has. The loss of personal freedom is of course one of the most difficult aspects of imprisonment to deal with, as is the separation from loved ones. The first few days and weeks of prison are often the hardest, as the prisoner tries to come to terms with their new situation. Many experience depression and feel anxious and afraid.

Prisons are tough places, and, while the levels of violence have decreased in recent years, bullying still does occur. Many prisoners feel that showing sadness, fear or distress may make them appear 'weak'. Some prisoners try to project an image of 'toughness' in order to avoid appearing vulnerable. Others try to stay safe by withdrawing and keeping a low profile.

Building an emotional wall around oneself may be necessary in prison, but it can impact on the prisoner's relationship with his or her family. Some prisoners have been known to cut off contact with their families outside because they feel that this contact opens them up



Photo by courtesy of Corrections Victoria

emotionally, and makes coping in prison more difficult than if they had no contact at all. However, it has been shown that prisoners with strong family ties tend to do better when they are released. If you are finding that the prisoner seems emotionally withdrawn, or is not making contact as often as you would like, it may help to understand why this may be occurring. Do not leap to the conclusion that this behaviour means that the person does not love you or care about you any more.

**If you are concerned about the emotional wellbeing of the prisoner, you can contact prison staff, so that support can be provided to the prisoner, or see our factsheet titled, *Concerns about the Safety and Well-being of People in Prison*.**



Photo by courtesy of Corrections Victoria

## Peer mentors

Prisoners are introduced to a peer educator or peer mentor/listener, available at most prison locations. Peer mentors/listeners are prisoners who are familiar with the prison system and can help other prisoners to cope. They can refer prisoners to services and/or programs in prison, inform prisoners about procedures and protocols

and provide support to vulnerable prisoners. For example, in the Melbourne Assessment Prison (MAP), if a prisoner is particularly distressed they can ask to share a cell (called a “buddy cell”) with the peer mentor in order to receive emotional support.

## Prison activities

### Programs

Corrections Victoria offers programs that prisoners can undertake, designed to enhance their mental, psychological and physiological well being. These include anger management, parenting skills, drug/alcohol treatment and adult relationships. Participation in these programs is mostly voluntary and is viewed favourably by the Adult Parole Board.

### Employment

All sentenced prisoners under 65 years of age, including those with disabilities and special security needs, are given the opportunity to work. Remand prisoners are also given the chance to work if they wish. Prisoners get paid for this work at a rate determined by Corrections Victoria. Twenty percent of the income earned each week is retained by the prison and given to the prisoner when they are released to assist them with their immediate needs.

There are several employment options in prison called industry. Industry work varies between prisons and may include metal fabrication, wooden products, agriculture, horticulture, silk screening, laundry, and kitchen positions. Prisoners with a minimum-security classification may also undertake work in the community.

### Education

All prisoners can access education programs when available, which are provided by TAFE institutes at each location. Educational programs vary between prisons and access may be dependent upon resources. Some programs that are available include computer skills, literacy/numeracy, hospitality, small business management, engineering, horticulture, and occupational health and safety. Prisoners are encouraged to participate in education programs that are consistent with their work where possible, in order to improve their chance of gaining employment upon release and to provide diversity in their day.

## Recreation

Depending on the prison location, prisoners can play various sports such as tennis, table-tennis, volleyball, cricket, football, soccer, and baseball. Prisoners can also participate in recreational activities, including: board games, martial arts, meditation, arts/crafts, pottery, reading, swimming, snooker, gym, music lessons, woodwork, leatherwork, band and choir, yoga, and art classes. Provision of activities is different at each prison.



## Religion

Prisoners can practice the religion of their choice while in prison. Chaplaincy services are provided by the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Uniting Church, Salvation Army, and representatives from the Muslim, Buddhist, and Jewish communities visit prisons regularly. Prisoners can also access a chaplain by contacting the prison’s Regional Liaison Chaplain. If you wish to speak to a chaplain, call the prison and ask what days the chaplain of your faith visits the prison and how you can get in contact with him or her.

**More information may be obtained from the Project Manager of Chaplaincy Services at Corrections Victoria on 9399 0300.**

## Food

Prisoners are provided with three meals a day. The menu varies between prisons and the food is prepared by prisoners with culinary skills acquired prior to or during their prison stay. Prisoners with special food needs, such as Muslim, Jewish, diabetic or vegetarian prisoners are catered for.

Prisoners will learn about all of these options during their orientation or they can speak with the Programs Manager at their prison.