

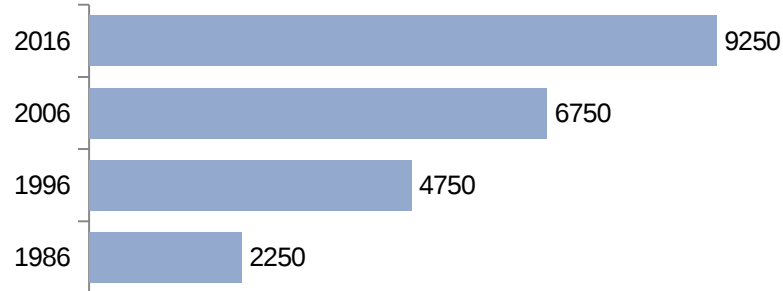
# Outcomes evaluation of the Activities Centres at Christchurch Men's and Invercargill Prisons

Stage 1. Records-based analysis

## Introduction

According to the New Zealand Treasury (2016), 16.9% of children aged 0-5, and 17% of children aged 6-14, have a parent with a sentencing history through the Department of Corrections. Not all of these parents go to prison (the exact figures are unknown at this stage), but a significant proportion do. The treasury figure, which uses NZ Government administrative (IDI) data, is higher than previous estimates, and will only increase as prison numbers grow, [as they are expected to](#). Figure 1 below graphs the growth of numbers imprisoned over the past 30 years, showing annual averages (in 2016, this is average to date).

**Figure 1. Rounded average of prisoners in NZ prisons, shown by decade over 30 years**



The growth in prison numbers is, of course, paralleled by an increase in the number of families, partners and children affected by the incarceration. Prison casts a long shadow in the community, with some authors calling the children of prisoners 'collateral convicts'. Research consistently shows that the children of prisoners suffers harm that makes it more likely for them to end up in prison in their turn. The harm may be personal (depression, anxiety, poor health, learning problems), environmental (housing, income) or social (stigma and discrimination).

Pillars will shortly be carrying out research on how many children of prisoners end up in prison themselves, using the same administrative data as the Treasury. In the interim, the only research-based figure we have on intergenerational incarceration is that arising from the Christchurch Health and Disability Study and quoted in the Pillars (Gordon, 2009) research report, 'Invisible Children'. That study showed that the children of prisoners were around 9.5 times more likely than others to end up in prison.

The idea for the Activities Centre model arose from that major research, which found that it was difficult for children to maintain strong relationships with parents in prison, and that this in turn harmed them. The aim of the AC proposal was to provide spaces where children and their prisoner parents could play together, read together and interact in a positive and welcoming environment. The most compelling evidence for such a model arose from some US studies that examined the benefits of parent-child interaction in prison. This research evidence demonstrates multiple benefits from the maintenance of family relationships in prison. Hairston (2001, p. 9) notes that:

Communication between prisoners and their families provides the most concrete and visible strategy that families and prisoners use to manage separation and maintain connections. Families visit their imprisoned relatives at the institutions where they are held, talk with them by phone, and exchange cards and letters as a means of staying connected. These contacts allow adults and parents and children to share family experiences and participate in family rituals, e.g. birthday celebrations, religious observances, etc. and help them to remain emotionally attached. They help assure incarcerated parents that their children have not forgotten them and children that their parents love and care about them. They allow prisoners to see themselves, and

to function, in socially acceptable roles rather than as prison numbers and institutionalized dependents.

Despite these benefits being widely acknowledged, at least in theory, in correctional jurisdictions in the United States, Hairston noted that practice varied significantly from the ideal of ongoing parenting in the prison environment. She concluded:

The correctional policies and practices that govern contact between prisoners and their families often impede, rather than support, the maintenance of family ties (2001 p. 9).

The concept of an Activities Centre was piloted at Christchurch Men's Prison in 2011-12, and a formative evaluation carried out. Key findings were:

- Visiting children loved the Activities Centre, scoring it 4.9 overall on a scale of 1-5;
- Prisoners enjoyed the opportunity to play with their children;
- Prison staff thought that bringing the focus on prisoners as fathers doing things with their children was beneficial to the prison culture; and
- Visiting adults were delighted that the children would be able to play during the visit, as it improved their behaviour.

The main problem identified was a lack of flexibility: that the Activities Centre was only allowed to operate in three small rooms adjacent to the main visiting area. This has since changed, with significant development taking place in the main visiting area and also in the attached courtyard.

### **The services**

Pillars Inc currently (April 2016) runs two Activities Centres in the Southern Region, at Christchurch Men's and Invercargill prisons. Other prisons have shown interest but have been unable to come up with the funding to support such developments. In the two Centres, the Department of Corrections has funded the Co-ordinator salaries, capital works and some funds towards equipment and toys, while Pillars Inc supplies and supervises the staff, promotes the service, liaises with the prisons and runs special sessions (Christmas parties, children of prisoner's week, Easter eggs).

Both services are being evaluated here from the point of their official commencement, in January 2014, although the Christchurch centre has been operating as a pilot since mid-2012. The evaluation will be in two parts. The first part provides a paper-based analysis of the records of each Activities Centre, reporting on numbers attending and issues arising through the whole period.

The second part of the evaluation will take place once funding has been received for it. It will include interviews with prison staff, other Corrections stakeholders at the regional level, prisoners and families attending Activities Centres and the Pillars staff involved, plus site observations at both prisons.

## Activities Centre at Christchurch Men's Prison

The Activities Centre runs on Saturday and Sunday at the low security visiting centre. Visiting occurs in three sessions: morning (8.30 – 10.30), middle (11-1) and afternoon (1.30 – 3.30), a total of six sessions per week. The service commenced officially on 1 January 2014 (although it was operating well before this date, back from around March 2012) and has been operating continually since that date. There are two part time staffing positions, developed with the intention that the staff rotate, and are able to fill in for one another and provide flexibility.

Records are kept of each session on each day, and supplied to Pillars for service and evaluative purposes. The records include numbers of adults and children attending, whether they are 'new' attendees, child gender and ethnicity and then notes relating to any issues for that day.

Overall records for the CMP Activities Centre show that:

1. Children visited the Centre 2740 times over the period, or around 120 times per month.
2. 1210 of the children/visits were Māori and a small number were Samoan or of other Pacific or Asian origin.
3. The children accompanied 2285 adult/visits.

While there is a session by session record of the prisoners present, there is no formal count of prisoners in most of the records, so any estimate of prisoners has been omitted.

Figure 2 (on next page) provides a summary of average daily attendance (over the three sessions) by children at the Activities Centre, but reported monthly, to give a sense of overall trends.

The average daily attendance of around 13 children has been consistent over the period. Calculating 2014 and 2015 separately, averages were identical at 13.0 per day in each year.

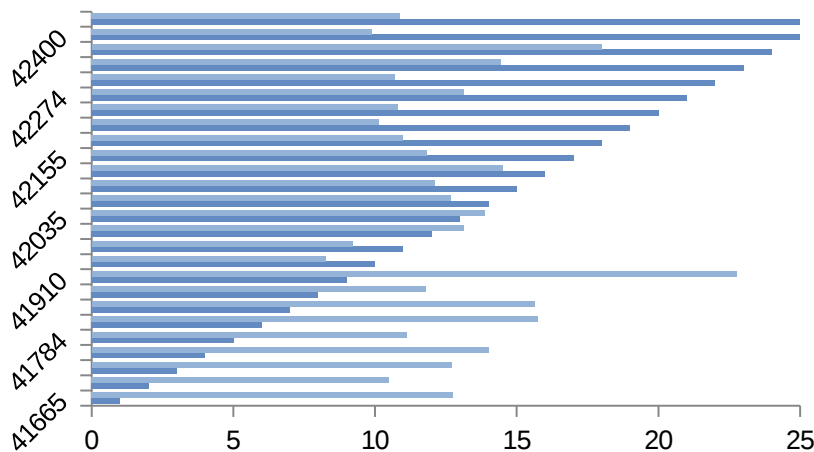
Sessional comments from the staff include incident reports, observations, requests to Pillars for support or goods or general comments. Incidents arose from time to time, and there was a focus on low-level risk management based on good relationships between prison staff and the AC staff.

Examples include discussions over two bikes at the Centre, which were ridden carelessly. The officer in charge and the AC staff agreed that the bikes should be removed, which they were, then other officers complained because the bikes were a good source of entertainment for active children. There were demands from staff and some parents to bring back the bikes for many weeks after they were removed! There were several issues of this kind, relating to managing a large number of children in a limited space, and all were resolved if not unanimously agreeably.

Another example was the Easter Egg problem one year, when a volunteer gave out chocolate only to children from the Activities Centre, not from other visiting areas. As noted below, this has now been rectified, and there are ample eggs for all.

The notes also mark progress on new murals, decorating and equipment at the Centre: "Started on the 'Anzac walls' but require pipe cleaners". There are whanau walls and other

aspects that have been added over time. The prison has been generous in supporting the development of the visiting area.



There are numerous comments in the notes about the toys and activities. It is a constant battle to replenish old, broken, dirty and used materials. Nearly every week the co-ordinator asks for more playing cards, board games, replacements for broken toys and so on. The question of how Pillars funds these requirements will be addressed in the second part of the evaluation.

**Figure 2. Average daily child attendance, by month, whole period, Christchurch**

There is evidence that special events attract children. These events are held to celebrate Easter, Christmas and the children of prisoners week (especially in 2014). For example, the single biggest day at the Centre to date was 27 September 2014, when 95 adults brought 94 children to the Centre. The staff notes from the day (where the staff member was joined by three volunteers) read in part as follows:

Standing room only in all 3 units. Nearly all prisoners got pictures, some had group photos and some had intimate ones. They chose to have novel ones with the Banana in Pajamas. Staff were excellent. They were supportive and joined in the fun. Some had pictures taken. Children and families were very excited and it became a 'gala' day with music, dance, crafts, dress-ups, face-paint, bubbles...we had everything. Children loved it and nearly all of them had face paint. The prisoners joined in and were painting kids and kids painting their dads. The photos were a full time event and it became full on with paperwork and keeping all of the records.

Some prisoners did not have food for their children so a lot was given out as there was so many of them. Had to restock and restock again for tomorrow.

Families, prisoners and staff thanked us, some hugged us, some cried after they had their photos with their families, the prisoners clapped us and cheered. I could see they were really humbled about the effort put in. We had a lot of positive comments about Pillars saying they had done a great job and they had seen some of the promotions.

While these numbers were excellent for a special occasion, they are not conducive to a quiet family visit between the prisoner and his family, so such numbers would not be manageable on a regular basis.

Christmas and Easter attendances are usually high as well, with presents available for the children donated by social services agencies and individuals, and distributed by Pillars at the gatehouse. The March 2016 Easter Bunny photo, where the Pillars President gave out Easter Eggs as families left the prison, is shown below.



Easter eggs and Christmas presents are now available to all children visiting the prison on the day, not just the children in the Activities Centre. It took a while for this policy to evolve, but by Christmas 2015 the policy (and practice) were settled. This is important because the children in the Activities Centre get many services and options not available to other child visitors, from the toys, to a range of special events. The resulting inequity is fairly evident at the prison gatehouse, with AC children coming through with their faces painted and carrying drawings and things they have made. To compound that by declining to give some children gifts (which, as the photo shows, are clearly on display) would not be acceptable to Pillars.

The parties at Christmas and Easter are enjoyed by all, and bring the Pillars and Corrections staff closer together:

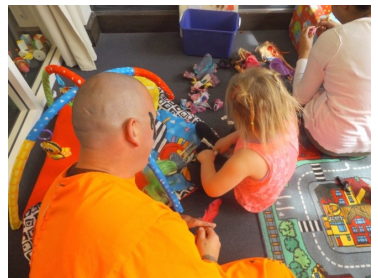
The talk for today was how great the Xmas Party was. Correction officers commented on how well it went and even some of the guards from the main jail came over to congratulate us. I was totally blown away by the positive comments. (See the wonderful email that was written by the supervisor about the day). [Supervisor] was pleased with the day and we agreed as a team, that the day was perfectly executed.

Many of the prisoners also commented and thanked us asking if we could have a party at Easter. Some of the family members also expressed gratitude stating that they were pleased with the present their child received. There were also comments that families had not gone on holiday until after the xmas party – this is extremely satisfying for Pillars as they provided that safe, fun, opportunity for family interaction. Children appeared pleased with their gift.

There is no evidence of a build-up in child numbers arising from the work of the Activities Centre in Christchurch. It appears the Centre acts neither to encourage or discourage attendance by children. For example, the busy month of September 2014 was followed by two unusually quiet months.

As the Activities Centre is located in the low security visiting area, there has been a large turnover of families in the 26 month period analysed in this report. Although only indicative (relying heavily on co-ordinator observation), it is reported that 337 'new' families visited the centre since the official starting date of 1 January 2014. Most weeks there would be one or more new families attending.

### **Photos from recent events at Christchurch Activities Centre**



## **Christmas 2014 survey**

A post-visit survey of 40 adult visitors (who brought 75 children) was conducted by the Pillars' Programmes Facilitator on 20 and 21 December 2014. Around half of the families stated they used the Centre weekly, around a quarter monthly and the rest specifying other intervals.

Around half knew about Pillars other services to families of prisoners, although only a small number used these.

A range of comments were collected, which fell into three main themes. The themes, and a small number of relevant comments, are outlined here.

### **The Activities Centre environment**

- Provides toys and activities.
- Environment friendly – great art work.
- Nice family environment to visit.
- We enjoy coming. Much better than main jail.
- Loved Children of Prisoners week.

### **Keeping the children happy**

- Best thing that happen for kids or else they wouldn't come out.
- Provides sanity. Feels like a family gathering rather than a prison.
- Makes the kids happy – happy parents.
- Very impressed. Keeps them occupied. Chance to talk.
- If we didn't have you (Pillars) we would not be here.

### **Improving relationships with prisoner**

- Given bond with family and Dad. Boy would not know who Dad was without Pillars.
- Brought us closer. Builds relationships. Do things to take back to cells.
- Increased our support network. Made us bond. Brought us closer together.
- Good support has made us stronger.
- Strengthen relationship – he talks to her during the week and looks forward to visits.

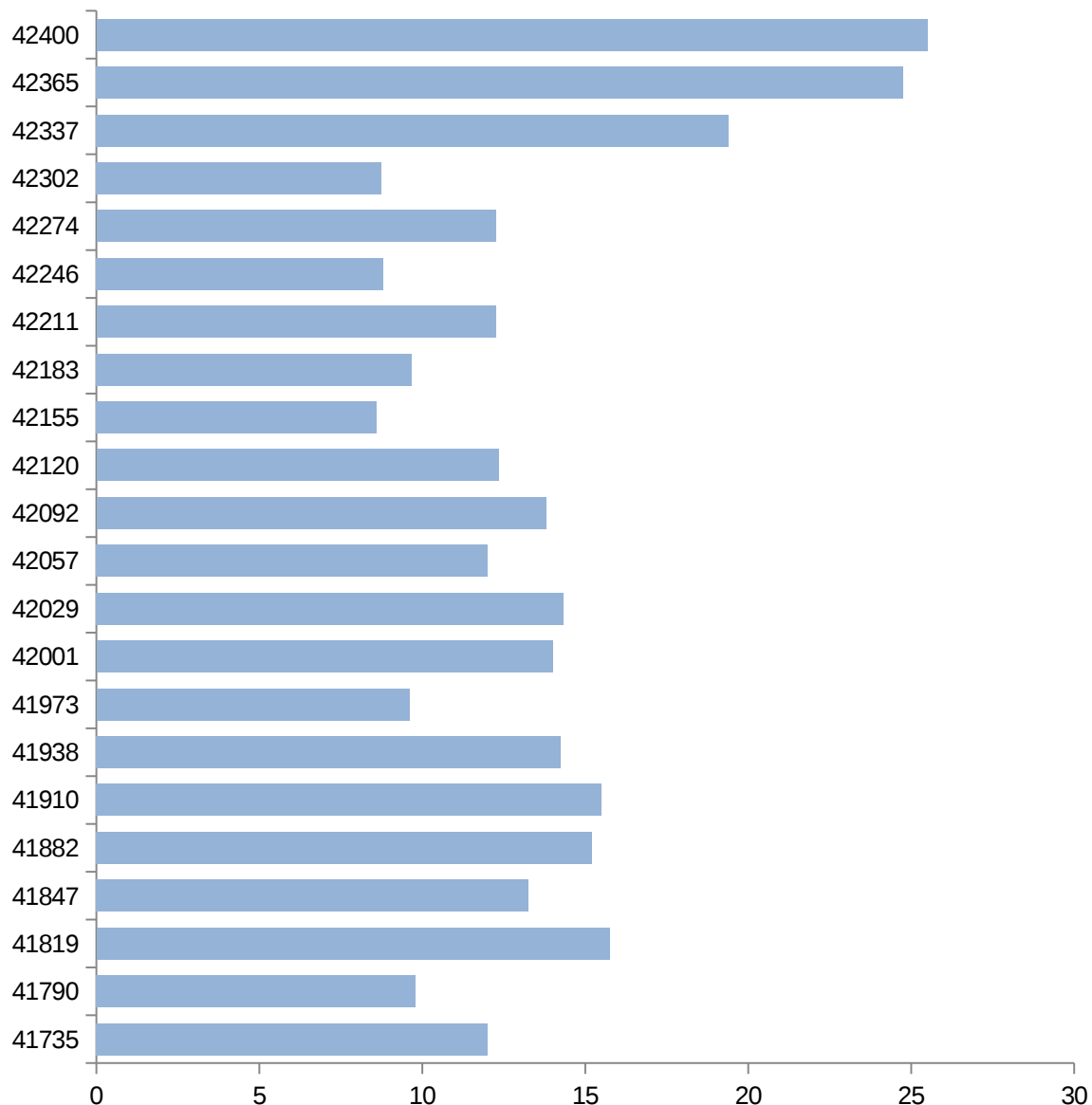
The visitors 'loved' the Activities Centre and found it 'amazing'. Many commented on the bonding and closer relationships that occur through regular visiting, and that the AC facilitates such regular visits.



## Activities Centre at Invercargill Prison

The records for Invercargill Prison commence on the first day of the service, 2 March 2014. The service runs each Sunday across three visiting periods, each covering a different part of the prison. As with the Christchurch centre, there are two staff who job-share the position. Records exist for 91 sessions (with about 5 missing) from the start date until the end of January 2016 (records for February and March are not available as yet).

In total 1309 child visits took place over the 91 days, an average of 14 children per day. 374 of the children identified as Maori. The children accompanied 1033 adults. The daily average by month is outlined in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3. Average daily child attendance, by month, whole period, Invercargill**

A small increase in child numbers (from 13.5 per day to 15.2 per day) has occurred between the first twelve months and the second year. This is mainly due to a significant increase in child numbers towards the end of 2015 and into 2016, with average attendances of 20 children per week since the beginning of November. This increase has been driven both by more families visiting, and also by some big families of three children or more.

Around 190 new families visited the Centre over the period, according to the records. It is possible that some of the increase in recent months is due to more families using the Centre because of the Activities Centre, changes in prisoner muster or other factors. The difference is quite significant: in the period November 2014 to January 2015, 21 new families attended the Activities Centre. One year later, in the same period, 42 new families attended. The second part of this study should provide further information about service development in the prison.

Issues arising from the operation of the Centre and notes by the AC staff include:

- Parents are strongly appreciative of the service;
- A number of families who had stopped bringing the children brought them back when the AC opened;
- A small number (2-3) of comments that children do not belong in a prison (public education needed about keeping families together and role of parents in prison);
- Not all prisoners or visiting adults played with their children in the area – some sent their children alone, which caused problems for the co-ordinators at times; and
- Once the play area was moved to a more central space there was better interaction between prisoners and their children.

Invercargill prison staff are very supportive of the centre, noting that visiting was much more manageable now, the centre quieter and the children less disruptive. Relationships between the AC staff and prison staff at Invercargill have been very cordial throughout the period; the AC works well in that setting.

As noted above, in recent months the numbers have increased markedly, with staff now identifying an emerging need for volunteers to assist. Issues around recruitment, training, supervision and maintenance of volunteers are currently under consideration.

Another issue that emerged, largely due to one family, was the use of activities and toys in booth visits. A prisoner with a large number of children was placed on 'booth only' visits for a period. Not all the children fit into the booth, so some stayed outside in the main areas and used the Activities Centre as they waited for their turn. As well, the children took toys and activities into the booth, which could not be seen by AC staff, and for a while were leaving a big mess behind them (this did improve over time). The situation was resolved in this case by the prisoner being allowed back into the main visiting areas, where he was "an enthusiastic user of the Activities Centre mat with his children".

For whatever reason, the numbers of children visiting Invercargill prison and using the Activities Centre has increased significantly since the end of 2015. In the second part of the evaluation, this and other matters will be explored through interviews and other engagements with stakeholders in the prison and community.