

PRISONERS ABROAD

Service Evaluation 2007: a summary



Overview

For thirty years Prisoners Abroad has been supporting Britons who have been incarcerated overseas. The people we support are among the most vulnerable in society; deprived of their liberty, cut off from their friends and family by thousands of miles, often separated from their fellow inmates by language and culture, they can face extremely harsh conditions, where essentials such as food and water have to be paid for, and violence is an everyday hazard. We know from the letters we receive daily how vital the work we do can be to those who have little or no outside support. Last year we began a major piece of work to measure the impact our services have on the lives of the 1,600 prisoners we help each year. By seeking the opinion of every prisoner we are in touch with, we hope to be able to continue to improve what we do, use our limited resources to achieve the greatest possible benefit to prisoners, and to ensure that we continue to offer the best support possible to those Britons held overseas, for the next 30 years and beyond.

In spring 2007 Prisoners Abroad distributed almost 1,000 questionnaires to all of its clients detained in prison overseas. The 18-page form included 62 questions on all aspects of the services we provide: practical support in the form of grants to those held in the most desperate of conditions, books, magazines and pen-pals for those without access to English-language reading material, pen-pals and a newsletter to keep prisoners in touch with the outside world, information on prison and criminal justice systems around the world, and help and advice for those nearing the end of their sentence to help them prepare for their new life of freedom.

Four hundred people took the time to reply, giving an excellent response rate of 41%, and their answers and comments have contributed to the ongoing development of our services. This report summarises the findings from these responses, highlights areas of excellence, and there is a précis of the recommendations made as a result of this survey to improve the support we offer to prisoners.

Over 87% of respondents expressed themselves as either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with our service, and **over 90% rated our quality of service as either 'excellent' or 'very good'**. In 2001, the last time such a survey was undertaken, a similar question was asked concerning quality of service; then, 81% rated us as either 'excellent' or 'good' (the top two categories available). It is pleasing to see that perceptions of the quality of our work have increased over the last six years. **Overall, 85% of prisoners felt that we had been helpful** (either 'very much', 'a lot' or 'quite a bit'); and the longer people are in touch with us, the more useful they think we are.

"Efficient, speedy and informative, as well as always friendly and supportive."

Prisoner in USA

"Without Prisoners Abroad life would be very difficult."

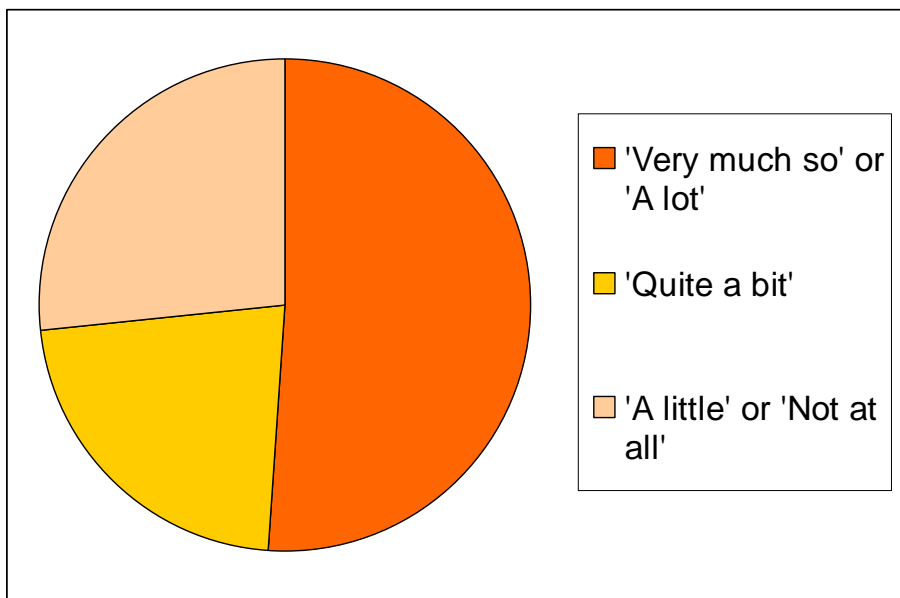
Prisoner in Brazil

Summary of findings

Our priority is always to make a positive impact on people's lives. Last year we identified seven outcomes that we seek to achieve, which drives all of the services we offer to prisoners. This survey was our first opportunity to measure our success in achieving these outcomes, and will play an important role in helping us tailor our work to maximise our impact on the lives of Britons in prison overseas.

Reduce hunger

We asked all those who receive our emergency grants whether Prisoners Abroad helped them have enough to eat. Although the results were broadly encouraging, we need to investigate the conditions in the affected countries, and to find out whether the money we provide is sufficient to survive in prison.



To what extent has Prisoners Abroad helped you have enough to eat?

"I really believe I would not make it without [Prisoners Abroad's grants]. Prison food is inadequate."

Prisoner in Argentina

"In Panama we are only provided food and nothing else. Even the food is not edible 40% of the time. No soap, toothpaste, clothes, nothing at all. We have to rely on the Prisoners Abroad grants for everything including food, medicine, clothes etc."

Prisoner in Panama

Maintain health. Gain access to treatment if required.

Our medical fund exists as a last resort for prisoners who are unable to gain access to medical assistance – when the prison authorities will not fund essential treatment. The numbers who receive this help are therefore limited, and too few responded to this survey to produce statistically significant results. However, **over the last year we have spent £5,200 on medical treatment** for prisoners. This money helped 38 prisoners gain access to medical treatment, in countries as diverse as Cambodia, Peru, France, and the Gambia. The money was spent to treat ailments such as epilepsy, gangrene, and HIV. Without this assistance the health of British prisoners would have been severely affected.

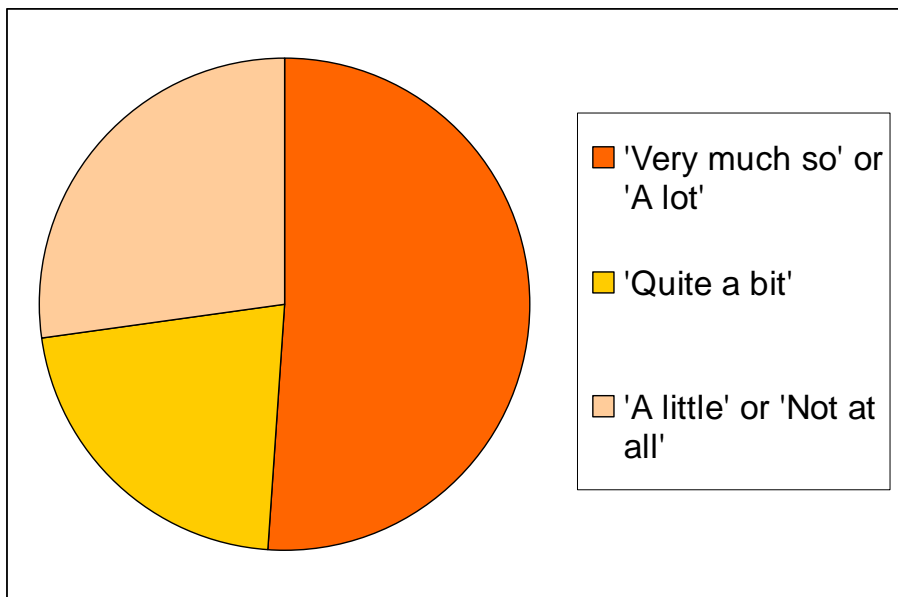
“I was seriously ill twice during my time in Brazil - the second illness was cancer of the bladder. Without Prisoners Abroad I would be dead.”

Prisoner in Brazil

Reduce isolation

Prisoners Abroad has a number of measures designed to reduce the isolation felt by Britons imprisoned overseas: isolation caused by being hundreds of miles from your family, in a country where no-one speaks your language, and without access to reading materials in English.

Sometimes even the simplest things are impossible to obtain in prison. International stamps, so that prisoners can write home, may be hard to find or be beyond the budget of people who have to pay for everything, from food to clothing, and sometimes even for a sleeping space in a cell. Prisoners Abroad sends freepost envelopes which prisoners can use to write to us, free of charge. Prisoners can also include letters for us to send on to their family, which of course we do free of charge. Books, newspapers, and magazines are sent to prisoners who want them, and everyone receives a card at Christmas and on their birthday.



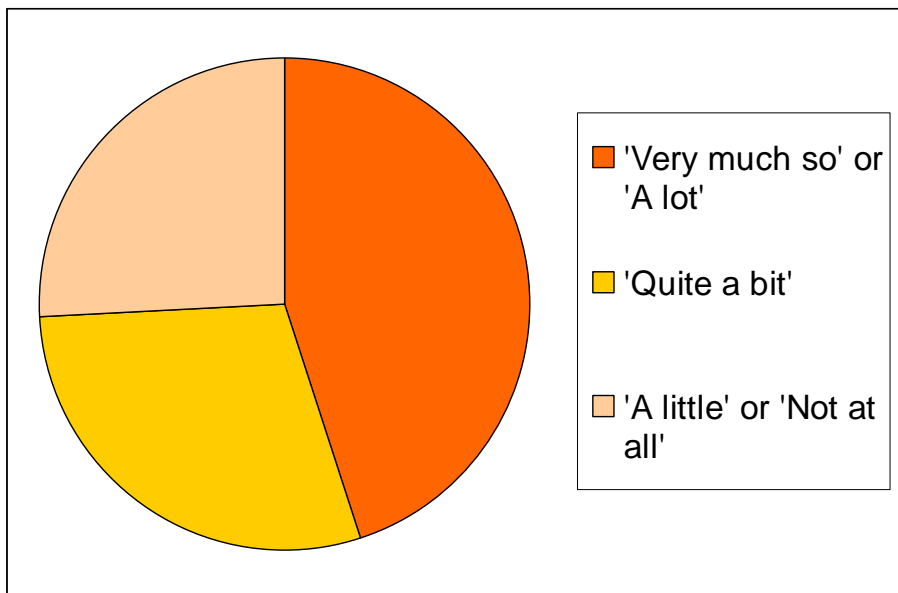
To what extent has Prisoners Abroad helped you feel less isolated / more in touch with the outside world?

"I'm not isolated [any more]. Many people around the world seem worse off than me. You are also in touch with my mum and dad, they too need a lifeline."

Prisoner in the USA

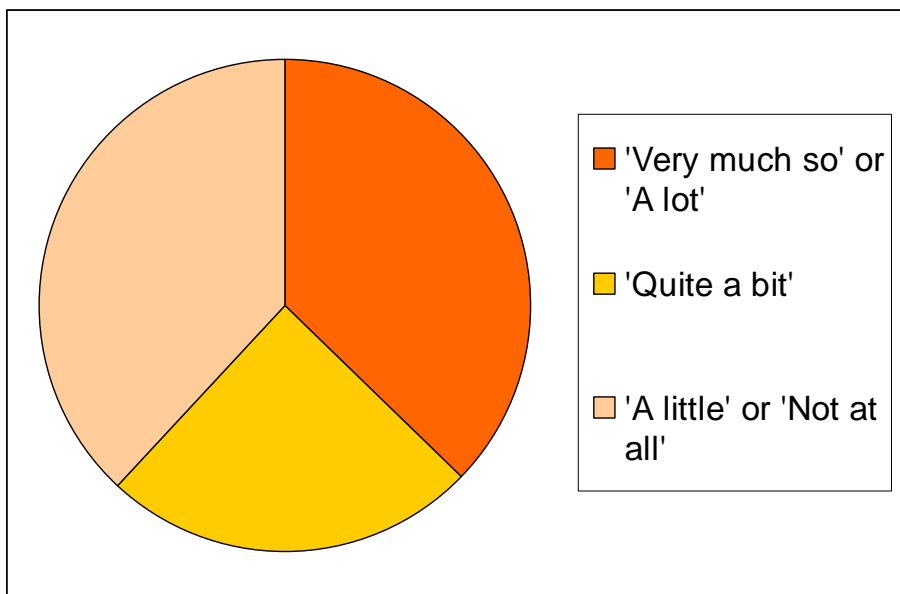
Increase understanding of prison and judicial systems

There are obvious restrictions on providing information about prison conditions; the variations within countries, the fact that prisoners will learn a great deal about the prisons just by being there and speaking to other prisoners, and the difference between rules as set down by the central authority and conditions on the ground. However, there is still a great deal of useful information we can, and do, provide particularly regarding visiting regimes and calculating release dates. However, feedback from this section suggests that we could do even better, and we will be working to improve the quality and relevance of the information we send to prisoners.



To what extent has Prisoners Abroad increased your knowledge of the prison system? (Of those receiving info)

We know from feedback we have received that many prisoners are frustrated by the legal systems they encounter. These systems are often unfamiliar and in many cases very different from the systems which operate in the UK. Prisoners also tell us that they often find that their experience does not seem to fit with their understanding of how the system should work. The law is a complicated subject, and we constantly have to balance the need for simplicity and brevity in our factsheets, with the desire to give as much information as possible. From next year we will ask prisoners for feedback on all of our factsheets, to help us understand where this balance should lie.



To what extent has Prisoners Abroad increased your knowledge of the justice system? (Of those receiving info)

I think Prisoners Abroad does not have enough info on Indian jails. Since my imprisonment in India I have never been told what rights I have. In fact the rights seem to change daily.”

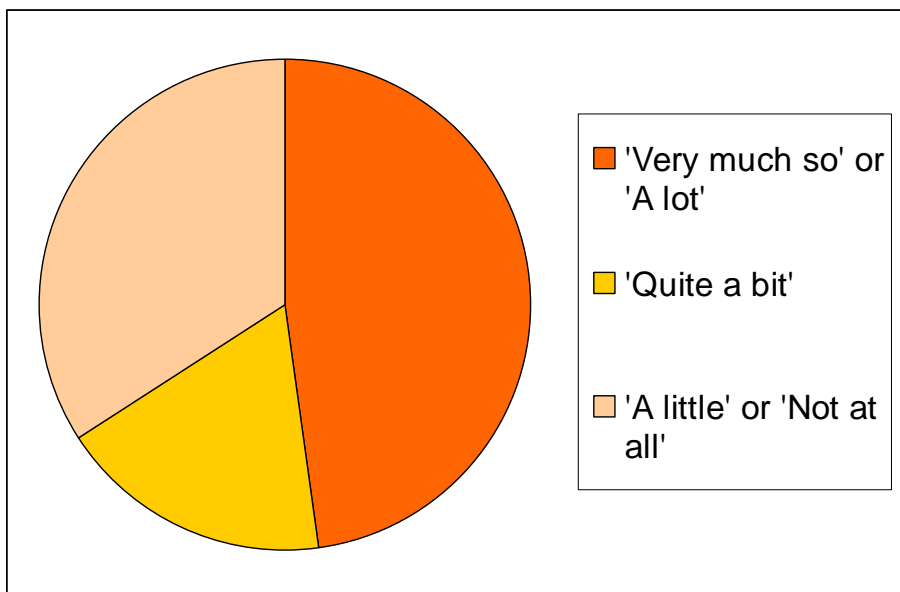
Prisoner in India

“It’s difficult to create a ‘one size fits all’ situation because of the number of legal jurisdictions in which prisoners are held. Overall the prisoners’ handbook publication is very good and where it cannot answer specifics it certainly explains where and from whom you are likely to get the answers”

Prisoner in Japan

Reduce discomfort in prison

We asked prisoners if the financial support Prisoners Abroad had provided had improved their standard of living in prison. Although a large number said we had made a major difference, a sizeable proportion said we had made little or no difference. Of this latter group, more than three quarters are in developing countries, where the mere fact of incarceration is the major discomfort, and there is little Prisoners Abroad can do about that. Where there is scope for us to help, we do, and this is recognised by those we seek to assist. We will be re-assessing the level of financial assistance we provide to prisoners in developing countries to see if it is sufficient to provide for the essentials: food, water, clothing. In addition, we provide information to help people help themselves – our newsletters contain yoga and fitness tips, and all prisoners are sent a pack when they register with advice on prison survival.



To what extent have any funds you have received from Prisoners Abroad helped improve your standard of living in prison? (Of those receiving money)

"I will be a 66 year-old woman in June 2007. I am also very small boned, so it's important for me to keep my bones strong. You sent a newsletter with exercises in to keep me moving, and the current newsletter arrived with yoga instructions, the very day a new inmate and I started yoga from cable TV. Your instructions let us do yoga at any time of the day or the night. Thank you!"

Prisoner in USA

Recommendations

Recommendations fall into three broad categories: increasing awareness of our services; improving the information and factsheets we offer; and increasing the level of grants we offer to prisoners held in the worst conditions. There was also a recommendation that we investigate ways to assist those held in Spain under their *secreto de sumario* rules.

Reading the comments prisoners made in response to each question highlighted to us that there is a lack of clarity around what Prisoners Abroad can and cannot do. As a humanitarian charity with limited resources, we have to make difficult decisions about what we can do. This survey has demonstrated to us the need to clearly and continually explain these decisions, so that all prisoners know what they can reasonably expect from us. This will empower them to tell us when they feel we have not achieved our aims, and allow them to have realistic expectations of how we can help, so they are not disappointed at a later stage. We have a high turnover of clients, with around 600 prisoners each year getting in touch with us for the first time, whilst we have been supporting some people for many years. To ensure that all prisoners have a good understanding of what they can expect from us, we will include a clear summary of our service in our regular newsletter which is sent to all prisoners three times per year. We are also looking into ways to ensure that long-term clients are routinely updated when things change, for instance if there is new legislation which may affect their situation.

Keeping our information up-to-date in an ever changing world has long been a challenge to a small charity with a limited budget such as Prisoners Abroad. This survey has shown that there is more work to do to meet this challenge, and has helped us put in place the foundations necessary to improve the information we send to prisoners. Following the feedback given to us by our clients, we will create systems to better monitor the quality of our factsheets: all will now include a feedback sheet so that we can maintain their accuracy and quality over time, which has been a problem in the past. We will also conduct a major review of all the information we hold, to create a solid base of reliable and up-to-date information to build upon for the future.

The grants we make to prisoners in desperate circumstances around the world are key to our work. This survey has clearly told us how much prisoners value these grants, and how vital they are to maintaining the health of people who have no-one else to support them. However, the survey also reminded us that in a world of rising food prices our grants have struggled to keep pace. A key recommendation of this evaluation is to look at the level of grants we make to prisoners in the poorest countries, to ensure that they are sufficient to achieve our aim of providing the absolute essentials: food, water, clothing. It is likely that we will need to increase some of these grants; this obviously has funding implications, as we seek to ensure the long-term financial security of the organisation.

Many prisoners in Spain, whilst praising our services, were very discontented with their situation, making complaints about the Spanish system, particularly with regards to the practice of holding prisoners on *secreto de sumario*. In an effort to combat terrorism, Spain has created a law allowing people to be detained on remand for up to four years. We have been aware of the issue for some time, and have spoken to our Human Rights Advisor about it. Those whose cases fall into this category cannot access information about evidence against them, and neither can their lawyers, until a few weeks before trial. Although our factsheet on the Criminal Justice System on Spain is one of our most up-to-date and detailed, it does not cover *secreto de sumario*. We plan to create a new factsheet explaining the system of *secreto de sumario* for those who are affected, and to investigate other ways we can help those held in Spain affected by this law.

Further work

This prisoner survey will be repeated every three years. The next questionnaire will be sent in spring 2010, with the report due the following year. In the interim we will conduct a similar survey to evaluate the service we offer to the family and friends of prisoners. This expanding area of our work has not been assessed for eight years. Families are also isolated by imprisonment, and often feel that they too serve a sentence. There is a growing recognition of the important role that families play in ensuring a crime-free future for ex-prisoners trying to start a new life after serving a sentence. We have also recently completed a three-year project looking into the services we offer to ex-prisoners returning to the UK. This has helped us to expand and improve the work we do in this area, and to involve families at an earlier stage in the process. The feedback we have received from these expanded services has been excellent. We will continue to monitor and evaluate this work to ensure that we strive to deliver first class quality services to all of our clients.

Thanks and acknowledgements

Many people helped at every stage of this evaluation process, but thanks must go first and foremost to all those prisoners who took the time to fill in the forms and send them back to us. Without their help this report simply wouldn't exist.

The entire Service Delivery team and Management Group at Prisoners Abroad have been involved throughout, and their collective wisdom, experience and hard work have enhanced the quality of the questionnaire and this report. In particular Theresa Gilson and Laura Bevan spent many hours reviewing an early draft of this report, and reading through the pages of prisoner quotes. Pauline Crowe and Zeta Cottrell provided support and encouragement throughout.

Thanks are also due to Tony Knivett and Diana Parkinson for reviewing the evaluation questions and offering their thoughts on how to improve them; Ghelila Masho and Amaury Jodry for the laborious work they did inputting responses into a database; Dr Valerie McCormack for her epidemiological expertise which helped to make sense of the mountain of data this evaluation produced.

All of those named here have helped improve the quality of this report; any faults which remain are my own.

Stephen Nash
Information Officer, Prisoners Abroad
August 2008

About Prisoners Abroad

Formed in 1978, Prisoners Abroad is a registered charity supporting 1,600 British prisoners every year. It also works with 800 family members and 280 returnees. It has to raise over £1 million to provide these services, which are delivered through the support of over 100 volunteers, 12 trustees and 18 staff.

For more information about this report or the work of Prisoners Abroad please contact Stephen Nash on 020 7561 6820 or stephen@prisonersabroad.org.uk.

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