

The impact of parental imprisonment on the mental health of children and young people

A guide for professionals and organisations working with children and young people to raise awareness of the impact on child mental health of the imprisonment of a parent, carer or close family member.

Introduction

It is estimated that there are some 200,000 children in England and Wales with a parent in prison¹, with more children being affected by imprisonment than by divorce each year. There is a strong association between parental imprisonment and adverse outcomes for children but it is also widely accepted that the impact a parent's imprisonment has on their children is not fully known and that more research is needed. Compared to their peers, children of prisoners have been found to have three times the risk of mental health problems, anti-social delinquent behaviour and other adverse outcomes.² The prison population in England and Wales has nearly doubled between 1993 and 2015, which means ever more children being affected by parental imprisonment.³

Yet there is no obvious way to identify children and families affected by imprisonment as criminal justice services such as courts, probation, solicitors and prisons have no statutory obligation to tell health, education or employment services that someone has been sent to prison or received a community sentence. A teacher will not necessarily know a child has a family member in prison if the family choose not to let the school know.

Key facts

- England and Wales have the highest rate of imprisonment in western Europe
- Between 1993 and 2015 the prison population in England and Wales has nearly doubled, with an extra 41,000 people in prison
- On 25 November 2016, the prison population in England and Wales was 84,976
- 54% of the adult prison population have children under the age of 18

(Taken from Prison Reform Trust's Bromley Briefings, Autumn 2016)

It is only if another statutory provider such as a social worker or the police has reason to contact a school that they may find out. Similarly a GP will not know if someone has a family member in prison unless there is some other intervention or the family chooses to mention it. So there is no easy answer as to how to identify the families of prisoners.

Whenever a parent goes to prison the lives of those left with the responsibilities of caring for their children are profoundly affected at a time when the carer may be least able to cope themselves. Changes in the family structure can mean the father, partner or oldest sibling becomes the main carer. The child/children may move in with relatives or family friends, often this it is the grandparents who give the support or in some cases the child/children are taken into foster care or adopted.

The young person's experience

A young person's experience of the criminal justice system often starts with the shock of having their home raided and watching a family member being arrested and a sudden separation ensues.

"We got home to the house smashed up from the police raid. It was a mess. It was horrible... It was really hard. I wasn't sleeping, didn't know what was going on."

There is the confusion as they try to understand what has happened to mum or dad, the uncertainty and the lack of information, the anger that no-one explains what is going on.

"I didn't go to court because I wasn't allowed, because I was too young. I should know all about it because I was closest to mum. I felt that they thought it had nothing to do with me – I wasn't considered."

If the parent is sent to prison, a child is left to cope with a new situation, to understand the conflicting emotions they may be feeling. This can include conflicted feelings of loving someone but knowing they have done something wrong, dealing with others being critical of the imprisoned parent, and supporting the other parent who may rely on them more. A child may also find themselves having to support a younger sibling, hiding the situation from friends and family, and often teachers.

It's important to understand that for some children a parent being in prison may be a relief if it means that an aggressive person is no longer around, or a

chaotic household becomes calmer.

Keeping in touch is suddenly complex - you can't just pick up the phone, text or go on social media anymore. Prison visits may be daunting:

"It makes you feel horrible, like you have done something too. They watch you and make you feel guilty just for being there. They search you and make you take your shoes off. You sit there waiting for them to call you. And you feel ashamed."

Having a parent in prison can lead to family break up. 45% of prisoners lose contact with their families and only half of women in prison receive a visit from their children.⁴

"I feel that I'm the only one keeping the family together."

There is the stigma, the fear of bullying, of being labelled a prisoner's child - in some cases so strong that families feel forced to move away.

"I felt upset at first, and I missed him all the time. But I was ashamed and didn't want to tell people."

The toll on emotional and mental health can be immense. Low self-esteem, isolation and loneliness, children of imprisoned parents are up to three times as likely as other children to experience mental health problems.⁵

The emotional and physical reactions to the loss of a parent to prison have been likened to the grief felt when a parent dies.⁶ However, imprisonment does not always elicit the same sympathetic or supportive response of family members and the community, so children often do not have the opportunity to deal with or understand these emotions which can lead to mental health issues. Changes in behaviour can include becoming quiet and withdrawn, depression, and hyperactivity, and research suggests that such changes may be due to the fact that the prison sentence has not been discussed with children, so they are unable to discuss it with their parents or with others.⁷

At this time, when a child most needs emotional support, the remaining parent can struggle to provide it as they are dealing with many issues at this time. It is, therefore, unsurprising that children who experience a parent being imprisoned are more likely to have a mental health problem.

Why we need to recognise the impact on mental health

Research has found that almost 60% of children of offenders say they need help, “Parental imprisonment can have a massive emotional and social impact on children, often outweighing the financial implications. Among the emotional and behavioural impacts noted are feelings of helplessness, isolation, fearfulness, disappointment, withdrawal, restlessness, anger, lashing out at others, emotional instability or restriction (possibly in the form of ambivalent emotional-affective change which affects their development).”⁸

Research looking at several European countries found that children with a parent in prison can often experience conflicting emotions, for example, feeling both sad and angry about the absent parent, and may need to be helped to deal with their emotions⁹: “Children may need attention, understanding and reassurance that their anger is understandable. They may also need to have their questions answered so that they do not feel guilt around their parent’s imprisonment, and to hear that it is still okay to love their parents.”¹⁰

In some areas face to face support is available for young people affected by imprisonment, but provision varies across the country and support is most often provided when children visit their parent in prison. It is also essential to bear in mind that statutory services and schools may not even know that a child has a parent in prison as families often chose not to disclose this for fear of repercussions, stigma or bullying.

Research concludes that “parental imprisonment is a strong risk factor (and possible cause) for a range of adverse outcomes for children, including antisocial behavior, offending, mental health

problems, drug abuse, school failure, and unemployment. Parental imprisonment might cause these outcomes through several processes: the trauma of parent-child separation, children being made aware of their parent’s criminality, family poverty caused by the imprisonment, strained parenting by remaining caregivers, stigma, and stresses involved in maintaining contact with the imprisoned parent. However, there is little empirical evidence on the importance of these”.¹¹

Key issues experienced by children and young people

- Children and young people with a parent/carer in prison can often feel a sense of loss, referred to as ‘ambiguous loss’ which can lead to a sense of grief around the absence of the parent or carer, but with no clear opportunity to acknowledge the grief or be supported to process it
- Children in the UK affected by parental imprisonment are found to have lower self-esteem than children in the general population¹²
- Families are generally not expecting or prepared for a parent being imprisoned, which can greatly affect a child’s stability, leading to severe separation anxiety and a need for security¹³
- For many children, the emotional problems around parental imprisonment manifested as problems with schoolwork, concentration and motivation. Some children may abandon school entirely.¹⁴

Peer relationships and bullying

Having a parent or relative in prison often still comes with stigma from society and can result in children being bullied or rejected by their peers. They may feel they are different and withdraw from friends. Fear of being stigmatised may prevent children from telling someone, such as a teacher, that their parent is in prison and hence prevent them from receiving the support they may

need. If families are forced to move to a new area as a result of the imprisonment, they may not tell people, hoping for a fresh start. Children may also suffer because another parent won't let their child play with them or be friends, forbidding contact with a prisoner's child.

Keeping secrets

A family may choose not to tell anyone about someone being in prison, so a child may be forced to keep it a secret. This can mean that they are not able to process how they feel about this or are scared to do so, and means that they will not get the support they may need.

For some children, they may not even have been told where their absent parent is. But they may have heard things from friends or neighbours, or in some circumstances there may have been stories in the news.

Many families' lives become dominated by the effect of imprisonment. They have to live with the consequences - stigma, shame, guilt, isolation, financial, social, psychological and environmental consequences are just some of the issues faced by all involved at different stages. The very reasons for their needing help and support often prevent them from asking for it because of the stigma attached.

References

- 1 Williams K, Papadopoulou V, Booth N., Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners. Ministry of Justice, 2012.
- 2 Jones, AD. et al, Children of Prisoners, Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health, University of Huddersfield, 2013, (accessed through <http://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/COPINGFinal.pdf>)
- 3 Table A1.2, Ministry of Justice (2016) Offender management statistics prison population 2016, London: Ministry of Justice.
- 4 Jones et al, 2013
- 5 Jones et al, 2013
- 6 King, D (2002) Parents, children and prison: effects of parental imprisonment on children. Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin.
- 7 King, 2002
- 8 Jones et al, 2013
- 9 Jones et al, 2013
- 10 Jones et al, 2013
- 11 Murray, J., Farrington, D.P., (2008) The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children
- 12 Jones et al, 2013
- 13 Jones et al, 2013
- 14 Jones et al, 2013

How young people may feel when a relative is in prison

angry sad cheated
 stressed
 ashamed
guilty embarrassed
 Shocked
 loss
worried love
 helpless confused

Organisations supporting prisoners' and offenders' families and children

Barnardos - www.barnardos.org.uk/what_we_do/our_work/children_of_prisoners.htm

Families Outside - www.familiesoutside.org.uk/

National Offenders' Families Helpline - www.offendersfamilieshelpline.org/

Nepacs - www.nepacs.co.uk/

Pact - www.prisonadvice.org.uk/our-services

POPS - www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk/

Spurgeons - www.spurgeons.org/our-services/families-affected-by-imprisonment