



## What do we know about the impact of parental imprisonment on families?

Despite increased participation in policy and practice, children who are affected by parental imprisonment remain a 'hidden group' in society (McGillivray, 2016). This means that few accurate or reliable statistics on children of prisoners exist. Challenges of parental imprisonment for children and young people include: housing and care arrangements, schooling, victimisation, substance misuse, and risk of future offending (Loureiro, 2010). Even with such challenges, some children and young people may benefit from a parent's imprisonment. For example, some may feel a sense of hope or relief if they are no longer subjected to domestic violence or parental substance misuse. Others may have a chance to build upon their strengths and resilience through their parent's time in prison. In general though, research tends to focus on the negative effects of parental imprisonment.

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## How can we promote resilience in children and young people?

Regular contact with an imprisoned parent, where appropriate, is a crucial element for maintaining children and young people's emotional wellbeing and their capacity for resilience, as evidenced in the European COPING Project. Jones et al. (2013) recognise that when children are able to open up about their experiences, it reduces their anxiety and lessens feelings of isolation associated with parental imprisonment. Building resilience can only be achieved if children and young people have opportunities to discuss their experiences openly (*ibid.* 2013).

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## What challenges do children and young people face?

Two of the most significant challenges for children of prisoners are stigma and secrecy. Jones et al. (2013) found that, for many children and young people, the loss of their parent is sudden, stigmatised, and unrecognised. Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) (2013) suggests that stigma can make a child or young person feel like they have to hide the fact that their mother or father is in prison. Families often keep secrets to hide their loved one's imprisonment from the local community including friends, neighbours, and particularly from social services (Jones et al, 2013). Loureiro (2010) suggests that children and young people have different levels of understanding and have been told different reasons for their parent's imprisonment. However, if a child or young person discovers they have been lied to, it may lead to a loss of confidence or mistrust. Families of prisoners have been known to 'clench on' to secrets: "parents from children; parents from the world; children from the world" (SCCYP, 2011: 8). This culture of secrecy between families can prevent the child or young person from receiving the support they need.

## Methods

For this study, one-to-one interviews were conducted with six children and young people who voluntarily agreed to take part in the research. The five female and one male participants were aged between 13 and 26 years old and lived in Central Scotland. All had a biological father who was currently, or had in the past, served a prison sentence, and one young person's mother had also served time in prison. Parents' sentences ranged from one year, to life imprisonment. Open-ended questions were asked to allow the participant to respond in their own words. Participants were given time to think about what they wanted to say to ensure they felt at ease. Participants were recruited through two existing support services, which were carefully selected to ensure that the children and young people had access to appropriate support. Participants highlighted that building a trust-based relationship with them was one of the most significant aspects in the recruitment process.

## Findings

In line with previous research (Loureiro, 2010), this study uncovered a number of challenges children and young people who experience parental imprisonment face.

One of the most common challenges participants cited was having to grow up too fast. Four out of six said that they felt like maturity was 'forced upon them'. They reported that they had to take responsibility for younger siblings and their caregivers at a very young age. All six participants lived with their parent before their imprisonment; however, two were subjected to violence in their households. These two participants described how they often put other people's emotions and needs before themselves. One stated: **"He attacked people in front of us all the time... he broke in to my house with a lot of weapons on him. It was survival mode, at 8 years old I was doing the shopping, cooking and cleaning. I had no choice."** (Male, age 26)

Growing up in a violent household made these participants more protective of younger siblings, as they had to manage high pressure situations at a very young age.

Participants felt that feelings of stigma and having to keep secrets were amongst the most difficult challenges. They expressed feeling uncomfortable when sharing their story with their friends and said it was 'normal' to tell lies to cover up the truth about their family. All six participants said that they felt they had to keep their parent's imprisonment a secret. One of the main reasons, according to participants, was the stigma surrounding imprisonment. As one put it:

**"When you have this situation at home, you don't really want to let everyone else know about it ... you just naturally learn not to tell people. You just get used to telling lies, like 'white lies' you could call them, and hide the fact that your dad is away in prison..."** (Female, age 18)

The young people expressed that coping with secrecy and stigma on a long-term basis ultimately had a negative effect on their emotional and social wellbeing. Children and young people express being judged as one of the most difficult aspects of stigma (McGillivray, 2016). Some feared being judged so much that they did not tell friends or classmates in school about their parent's imprisonment to avoid the risk of being bullied or singled out. One participant felt that she experienced a lack of trust and found it hard to disclose any information to people other than her family. This is particularly prevalent when a parent is convicted of a sexual offence.

One participant, who believed her father was wrongly convicted of sexually assaulting a child under the age of 13, said:

**"It was just a total shock. I didn't believe it. They shout names like 'paedo' and that at me. I felt more like the victim."** (Female Participant, age 15)

Participants said they were told by teachers, social workers, police and other family members that they would 'turn out like them'.

Participants clearly felt a real sense of isolation due to their perceived lack of support mechanisms that could have allowed them to express their emotions freely. Loucks (2012) suggests that children and young people can react to grief by isolating themselves, as they have a fear of being judged. When asked if anyone asked how they felt at the time of their parent's imprisonment, one participant responded by saying:

**"No social worker did. No birth family did. My foster family certainly didn't. My brothers didn't. No, no one asked."** (Male, age 26)

Five out of six participants identified that they felt they had no one to talk about their feelings or answer any questions they may have had. They expressed wanting one consistent person in their life with whom they could build up a trust-based relationship.

Loss and grief were identified as aspects of children and young people's lives that they had to endure whilst their parent was imprisoned. Participants said that the sudden sense of loss was what impacted their lives the most. Participants said that, although they lost their parent, they also lost friends, family members, financial income and a sense of belonging and identity. One said: **"My life completely changed just through one phone call... it's just like your dad is being ripped away from your home, but he's still there... I have always been a daddy's girl, always will be... I didn't have a sibling to confide in and didn't know anyone in my situation."** (Female, age 21)

Participants emphasised that the parent who is imprisoned being physically present in a child or young person's life was of high importance. One said that she felt like the loss of physical presence was the most significant change for her, and that when her father was released, she did not know how to introduce him back in to her life, because he had not physically been there for ten years.

# Conclusion

This small piece of empirical research illustrates various challenges for children and young people. The most mentioned challenge was the lack of support from society as a whole and from people within their lives, leading to feelings of isolation and judgement. The culture of 'them' and 'us' is damaging for the child or young person, who must be reassured that services and professionals are there to work together to help them develop and grow through such a difficult time in their lives.

There must be more attention in policy and practice to address children's feelings of isolation and stigma. The findings from the interviews highlighted the importance of maintaining relationships and trust with one person in the child's or young person's life who can provide them consistent care, understanding, and empathy.

Implications for policy and practice include the need to have more robust support services to address the needs of children and young people affected by parental imprisonment. This research suggests that every person in Scotland must give children and young people a chance to build resilience through their experience of parental imprisonment. This can only be done by working together to listen and respond actively to the needs of children.

## Example of good practice

One way of promoting resilience is by developing support groups to provide opportunities for children and young people to share their experiences, meet up, and gain encouragement and inspiration from others in a similar situation. In Scotland, a good practice example of this is KIN.

KIN is an arts collective for 16-25 year olds who have lived experience of the imprisonment of a parent or a sibling, facilitated by Vox Liminis in partnership with Families Outside, that has engaged young people effectively. Young people at KIN have expressed their feelings about imprisonment: "it's something that's part of me, but it's not what defines me". Having someone a child or young person feels comfortable to talk to throughout their parent's imprisonment is crucial to alleviate distress, anxiety, and feelings of guilt, and to promote resilience (Jones et al, 2013). KIN has provided that support effectively for young people in Scotland. (<http://www.voxliminis.co.uk/kin/>)

## Messages for policy, practice and research

- An estimated 20,000-27,000 voices of children and young people in Scotland affected by parental imprisonment have a story to tell, with different experiences.
- Policy makers, practitioners, family, and friends need to start listening to show children and young people they are not alone through their experience of parental imprisonment.
- Practitioners should strive to build children and young people's resilience and empower each individual to be proud of who they are and where they come from.
- Children and young people will only believe in their own abilities to achieve if they have an adult who instils confidence and encourages them every step of the way.
- Researchers, the public, and professionals in the caring sector have the responsibility to work together to educate others to promote awareness of the needs of children and young people affected by parental imprisonment, especially in relation to isolation and stigma.

## References

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- Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (2011) *Not Seen. Not Heard. Not Guilty. The Rights and Status of the Children of Prisoners in Scotland: Review 2011*. Edinburgh: SCCYP.

## For additional references and the full version of this report, contact Families Outside.

Families Outside is the only national charity that works solely to support the families of people affected by imprisonment in Scotland. Our purpose is to improve outcomes for children and families affected by imprisonment so they can live healthy, active lives free from stigma and impediment.

### For information and support:

Call our Helpline 0800 254 0088

Email [support@familiesoutside.org.uk](mailto:support@familiesoutside.org.uk)

Text FAMOUT followed by your message to 60777

Visit [www.familiesoutside.org.uk](http://www.familiesoutside.org.uk)



voicing the needs  
of families affected  
by imprisonment

