



In brief...

Paying the Price: The financial cost to families of imprisonment and release

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Key Points

- Prison creates, sustains, and entrenches poverty for the families left behind. The costs in supporting someone falls disproportionately to women, affecting their physical and mental health.
- The families of people held in prison overwhelmingly live on very low incomes, even before taking the costs of prison into account. The impact of the additional costs on families is that they experience extreme food and fuel poverty, leaving them unable to engage in any social activities that cost money.
- Remand is an especially costly and stressful time for families. Our respondents spent an average of £300 per month spent providing support to the person in custody – around half the average monthly income.
- During the prison sentence, families spent on average £180 a month (a third of the disposable monthly family income) and a day and a half per week of their time supporting the person.
- During the pandemic, families found the lack of contact stressful. Free phone contact minutes were welcomed and should continue, but posting in clothes has been a significant cost to families and should end.
- On release from prison, the costs fall to families, with £300 per month (half of the average monthly income) spent in the first couple of months. Claims for benefits can and should be set up before the person leaves prison, but this does not happen, and families shoulder the burden.

Introduction

This briefing presents findings from research to understand the financial cost to families of supporting someone in prison and after release. Ten years on from landmark original research on the financial costs to the families left behind when someone goes to prison (Dickie 2013), and following a decade of austerity, pandemic, and cost-of-living crisis, the context in which families are living is harsher than ever. One in six UK households is now in serious financial difficulties (Evans et al. 2022), and 27% of children are living in poverty (Stone 2022). Our research heard from 49 women, one teenage girl, and one man from across Scotland. Interviews took place from January to July 2022, before the cost-of-living crisis had really begun. It is possible, even likely, that the experience of families is now even worse than what was then reported.

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Background information on interviewees and context

We spoke to 51 families across Scotland who had a family member in prison. Nearly two-thirds of women in this study (31) were supporting their son or partner. 30 women were caring for a total of 58 children, with family size ranging between one to four children. Typically, women were caring for at least two children. Three women were kinship carers. Only five earned at the level recommended as a Minimum Income Standard for individuals (more than £20,400 per annum): that is, they earned what is thought to be enough to afford more than food, clothes, and shelter, such as the opportunities and choices to participate in society and live in dignity (Davis et al. 2021). The other 46 participants were living on around £500 a month after tax and rent. All 50 adult participants were the main source of support for the person in prison, and this sense of obligation was, as one woman described, “a momentous task.”

Nearly half of participants were supporting someone serving their first sentence. Close to another half were supporting someone who had spent a significant amount of time in prison. One participant was supporting someone on remand for the first time. Two-fifths of households found their finances shifted from ‘stable’ to ‘unstable’, because of the loss of income from a partner, husband, or son who went to prison. A second group (just over half of participants) were already struggling. They did not incur financial losses in terms of household income, but the costs related to prison meant they moved from ‘struggling’ to ‘really struggling’. Nearly half of participants were supporting someone who was not in their local prison, adding more financial costs and severe time pressures. Two-thirds of participants were reliant on public transport to get to distant prisons. Three women also had to leave their homes – a significant cost – because of harassment as a result of the offence.

“Me and my kids are homeless, we have been moving into B & Bs, hostels. People will not leave us alone. We are having to move all the time because of what has happened. No matter where. We have had six different houses, temporary accommodations. Six different B & Bs, hostels. It is a nightmare.”

Costs of Remand: Time and Money

Remand was an especially uncertain and costly time for families. The average distance travelled per visit was 74 miles, took 5 hours, and cost £70 a month. £60 per month was spent on snacks at visits, £100 into the person in prison’s personal account, and £55 on other costs. The total average cost to families for remand was an average of £300 per month – also on average half of the family income. One fifth of families supporting someone on remand reported that they spent all of their disposable monthly income to afford this.

“I went every day when he was on remand. That was his first time. I had to get a friend to drive me because I was prescribed diazepam, my world collapsed.”

Cost of Sentence: Time and Money

Most families travelled twice a month to visit the person in prison and covering an average distance of 106 miles each visit taking six hours, costing £77 a month on travel and £36 on snacks. £88 was paid into the personal account and £75 on other costs. The median total spent by families on supporting the person in prison per month was £180 – around a third of average household incomes – and £2,160 per year. On average, people spent a day and a half a week on phone calls and visits.

“I have had to rely on food banks. I just buy the Slimfast shakes, so I only eat one meal a day. It is for costs. It is for the kids. I am actually gaining weight, I think it is the stress... I have had to get crisis loans, community care grants. I got that funding from Families Outside. I have credit card bills coming out of my eyes.”

Impact of the Pandemic

The main impact of the pandemic was the lack of contact, uncertainty, and stress caused. Costs dropped for around half because visits did not go ahead; the other half said costs stayed the same as they had to pay to post clothes into the prison. Many said their family members never received the parcels because of claims that traces of drugs were found, and only one woman successfully challenged this. Only a fifth had made use of video calls. Half of respondents were not able to set up these up because they did not have the 'right' technology or identification. Internet provision was increasingly being cancelled because it had become unaffordable. The 310 free phone minutes provided per month were greatly appreciated and families wanted this to continue, however, they wanted the requirement to post in clothes to end.

Cost of release

A third of respondents had supported the person when they had been released, costing between £30 to £1000 a month; the average was £300 – half of the family income. They felt that support for those released fell to them alone, even helping people to make social work appointments. The first two months after the person was out of prison were the costliest, as the person was often without any money until their benefit claims were set up. In Scotland, claims can in theory be set up before the person leaves, but this does not happen in practice.

"I had to take him to the appointments. I would say I was keeping him going... I don't sleep with the worry... I was doing without to make things happen. Not eating. Sitting with nothing because he would need gas and electricity... I do all the calls for him. Every day I take him to a chemist."

Impact on Families and Support

An estimated 27,000 children in Scotland are affected by a parent's imprisonment – more than those affected by divorce (Jardine, 2019). Our study flags up some of the financial penalties paid by children and their mothers and carers when supporting a family member in prison.

Most mothers in this study reported skipping meals to make sure their children were eating. Many respondents did not heat their homes or heated only one room, had stopped buying clothes and shoes, and did not go out. A fifth of participants were reliant on food banks. Fuel poverty was common, and the rising costs were of particular concern. All the participants had stopped socialising or engaging in activities that cost money, leading to diminished social opportunities, for many akin to lockdown. A fifth of mothers could not afford to send their children to activities, and many said the concept of 'family time' no longer existed as it had done before. Holidays were not attainable. Just over half of all respondents had lost connections to friends

and/or family. Many recognised their mental and physical health were adversely affected. Families Outside and the prison Visitors' Centres were praised for the emotional and practical support provided such as helping families access information. Other services, such as the door-to-door travel service provided by Sacro, a community justice organisation, supported families to make visits. Although peer support was mentioned by only a few people, it was greatly valued.

"I can't keep doing this. All the stress around us all the time. I have all the responsibility. It is wearing me down. My health is down to this stress... It has affected my mental and physical health. I lay in bed for seven months. It was just prior to Covid. I just lay in bed. I was suicidal. I had no motivation, I didn't wash much. I didn't eat much. I don't know, I had coped so well. I just fell apart... I feel my strength is starting to go. I am feeling the stress of all of it."

Conclusions and what families want

Our research provides a window into the harsh current reality confirming that women in Scotland bear the financial and other burdens when their family members go to prison (Jardine 2019). Families already living in poverty who are affected by imprisonment are slammed with further costs. Other families slide into struggle and poverty due to the deficits in support and practice. To say people 'coped' with costs is to underplay the reality of the hardships. The impact on individuals of these financial costs and losses was that they felt their life was on hold, diminished, and had a deep adverse effect on their mental and physical health. Families feel stigmatised, 'in the shadows', and deal with this by suffering silently. Family members of those in prison literally pay the price and are punished – financially and otherwise.

The Minimum Income Standard (MIS) highlights that having a life and dignity is about more than just food, shelter, and clothes, but also about accessing opportunities and choices, and feeling included and able to participate in society (Davis et al., 2021). There is a stark gap between the MIS and the acute financial hardship most families face when someone goes to prison.

Family members of people in prison have carried this burden and these costs silently for too long; it is time their voices are heard and that we put into action the solutions they themselves suggest that can truly help families outside to cope financially, socially, and psychologically.

Families told us that, for the future, they want better, clearer, and earlier information so families know what they can do, what they are entitled to, and how to access it. They want the stigma families feel to end. They want the costs to families to be cut, with prison toiletries, clothes, shoes, 'Email a prisoner', and payment into accounts to be free, for the canteen to be cheaper, and for people to be housed in the prison closest to where they live. Ideally, they feel that people should be kept out of prison by using community penalties or electronic tags. Interviewees want financial support to be available throughout the year, not just at Christmas. They want public transport to prisons to be improved and ideally more services like Sacro's travel service made available, and for the scheme for claiming travel costs to be reviewed and improved. A few suggest that people in prison should be paid a better wage. Families also want visits to be more family-friendly. Finally, on release, the support needed should not fall to families. Benefits claims can theoretically be set up in advance of people leaving prison; this needs to be taken forward as a matter of priority. Furthermore, to help ensure people do not return to prison and the cycle of poverty is further entrenched, the need for quality throughcare support from community organisations for people leaving prison is clear. This research indicates that this is not currently happening for those serving short sentences to the level that it should, and this needs to change.

"It is part of my life now. I am resigned to it... I think it is horrific the way families are treated... It is a terrible strain to have someone in prison and to be responsible for the little things that get them through. It is a momentous task."

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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, creating and promoting opportunities for families to uphold and defend their rights.

abrdn Financial Fairness Trust funds research, policy work and campaigning activities to tackle financial problems and improve living standards for people on low-to-middle incomes in the UK.

For information and support:

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