

Families Outside Parliamentary Briefing: 'The Cost to Families of Imprisonment and Release' Members' Debate, Tuesday 7th March 2023

Key Points:

- Imprisonment creates, sustains, and deepens poverty amongst children and families. Single women on low incomes overwhelmingly bear the costs of prison with significant negative effects for their physical and mental health. The impact on families is considerable: food and fuel poverty, and an inability to socialise and engage in activities that cost money, results in living in a form of permanent lockdown and leading to isolation.
- Scotland has one of the highest remand populations in Europe, with nearly 30% of all people in prison held on remand. Remand is an especially costly and stressful time for families, with £300 per month on average spent providing support, or half their income. During sentence, families spent on average £180 a month supporting the person in prison, or a third of the family income, and a day and a half a week of their time.
- During the pandemic, families found the lack of contact stressful. Posting in clothes has been a significant cost to families and should end. The 310 free phone contact minutes were very much welcomed and should continue to support contact between people in prison and their families.
- When people are released from prison, the costs fall to families, with an average of £300 per month – or half the family income - spent in the first couple of months, before welfare benefit claims are set up. Claims can be set up before the person leaves prison, but usually this does not happen.

Background

Families Outside is the only national charity in Scotland working solely on behalf of families affected by imprisonment. Our purpose is to improve outcomes for children and families, creating and promoting opportunities for families to uphold and defend their rights. We offer a range of services including a national helpline, local 1 to 1 and group support, and training for professionals; whilst also working to raise awareness of the issues facing families affected by imprisonment, influencing policy and practice to bring about longer-term change.

We are pleased to share this briefing with Members, highlighting new research launched in November 2022 by Families Outside, funded by abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, '[Paying the Price: The Cost to Families of Imprisonment and Release](#)'. The study aimed to understand the financial cost to families of supporting someone in prison and after release.

With an average daily prison population of approximately 7,400, 96% of whom are male, Scotland has the highest imprisonment rate in Western Europe standing at 134.9 per 100,000 inhabitants compared to an average of 116.1.¹ Looking beyond the statistics, this means that thousands of families – mothers, fathers, partners, brothers, sisters, grandparents, children - are affected by imprisonment each day. Moreover, an estimated 20-27,000 children are affected by parental

¹ <http://www.scottishlegal.com/articles/scotlands-prison-population-rate-remains-above-european-average>

imprisonment each year – twice as many as experience a parent’s divorce². This number is likely to be far higher, as no systematic process is in place to identify children and families affected by imprisonment at any stage of the criminal justice process, meaning they are often unseen, unheard, and unsupported. There is a fundamental need for better identification of families affected by imprisonment to ensure support is recognised, promoted, and designed into policies and services.

There are clear links between deprivation and imprisonment: 35% of all arrivals in prison come from the 10% of Scotland’s most deprived areas, and 8.5% are registered as no fixed abode³. Considering these links against a backdrop of a decade of austerity, pandemic, and cost-of-living crises, the circumstances in which families affected by imprisonment are living are harsher than ever. Given the serious financial consequences for families associated with imprisonment, it is perhaps unsurprising, but deeply concerning, that the research unequivocally demonstrates “the role of prison in creating, sustaining and deepening poverty amongst children and families”.⁴

Importantly, the research also demonstrates that the costs of imprisonment are overwhelmingly borne by single women on low incomes. 50 of the 51 participants in the study were women, with most (31 people) supporting their son or partner, 30 were the main carers for 58 children, and 3 were kinship carers. Only 5 earned the Minimum Income Standard and had around £1200 to spend a month after paying rent. For the other 46, after tax and rent, people were living on around £500 a month. All of the women interviewed were the main source of support for the person in prison.

For families already experiencing financial hardship, to be further burdened with the costs and losses associated with imprisonment brings devastating consequences. To say many families affected by imprisonment are struggling to get by would be a gross understatement, with the research uncovering that they are in fact “being squeezed financially to the point of being crushed.”⁵

The importance of supporting and maintaining contact

The role families play in supporting desistance from offending is commonly lauded. The Social Exclusion Unit in 2002 reported that people in prison are up to six times less likely to reoffend if they maintain family contact during imprisonment,⁶ whilst Lord Farmer’s Review described families as the ‘golden thread’ that should run through the prison system, highlighting that relationships are fundamental if people are to change.⁷

Alongside the potential reduction in reoffending, meaningful connection between children and families with the person in prison, where appropriate, can support the health and wellbeing of all involved.

In recognition of both the negative impacts imprisonment can have for family life, and the importance of positive family relationships, the Scottish Prison Service has stated that “supporting and maintaining family links and promoting positive relationships generally while the family member is in prison to be one of the SPS’ key priorities going forward.”⁸

² <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2017/12/Rendering-Them-Visible-FINAL.pdf>

³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-prison-population-statistics-2020-21>

⁴ <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2022/11/Paying-the-Price-October-22022.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2022/11/Paying-the-Price-October-22022.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/poverty/downloads/keyofficialdocuments/Reducing%20Reoffending.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-review-places-family-ties-at-the-heart-of-prison-reform>

⁸ <https://www.sps.gov.uk/Families/Families.aspx>

Ultimately, the potential benefits of supporting and maintaining connections between people in prison and their families cannot be overstated. It is therefore extremely concerning that this research has found that doing so comes at a significant cost to families, and that more needs to be done to recognise and support this.

The costs of supporting and maintaining contact

The research revealed the costs to families of imprisonment at the point of remand, during sentence, and upon release to be, quite frankly, crippling to families. The costs included things like travel, staying in touch via phone and email, postage, paying money into personal accounts, and other costs associated with maintaining contact such as paying for snacks during visits.

Remand

Scotland has one of the biggest remand populations in Europe: nearly 30% of all people held in prison in Scotland are on remand,⁹ with significant numbers of those held on remand pre-trial subsequently found not guilty or given a community sentence.¹⁰ It is against this backdrop that the research found remand to be an especially uncertain, stressful, and costly time to families. With an entitlement of up to six visits per week, the costs of supporting someone on remand, both in terms of money and time, were considerable.

The research found that:

- The average total cost to families for remand was £300 per month. Several families spent all of their income to afford this, and most were spending around a half.
- 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 personal prison account, and £55 on other costs.

“He then went to Barlinnie on remand. It was a lot of money. I was spending £10 to get up there every day. I just did it because I wanted to see him... I was working two jobs at the time. I was going to a visit, going to one care job and then another. I never slept. I did that before Covid hit. I did that for a year! It was touch and go. It was 50% [of my income] that was going on the prison at that point. Remand was the most expensive time as I was up every day. I was still working, so it was tiring.”

Fiona, 30s, working, supporting partner serving his second short sentence in prison 45 miles away

Sentence

Once sentenced, whilst the costs of imprisonment were, on average, less than those incurred during remand, they nonetheless remained sustained and substantial, both in terms of money and time.

The research found that:

- Families spent an average of £77 a month on travel and £36 on snacks, £88 into the personal prison account, and £75 on other costs.

⁹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/justice-analytical-services-safer-communities-justice-statistics-monthly-data-report-august-2022-edition/pages/10/>

¹⁰ [https://www.parkheadcab.org.uk/sites/parkheadcab.org.uk/files/pdfs/Inside Information report PDF.pdf](https://www.parkheadcab.org.uk/sites/parkheadcab.org.uk/files/pdfs/Inside%20Information%20report%20PDF.pdf)

- The median total spent per month was £180 a month - around a third of the household income – amounting to £2,160 per year supporting the person in prison.
- Most families travelled at least twice a month to visit the person in prison, travelling an average distance of 106 miles each visit. On average, people spent 6 hours travelling a round-trip to visit the person in prison, therefore the total time taken was around 7 hours, including the visit.

“I am on Universal Credit. I try to put things aside and fill the car up. So some weeks I sit with nothing. 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 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.”

Lisa, 30s, four children, supporting partner serving first long sentence in prison 37 miles away

Release

Whilst release may often be seen as the ‘end goal’ for families affected by imprisonment, it brings with it its own set of stresses and costs for families. Worryingly, all interviewees felt they were very much left on their own to support the person on release, both in terms of costs and responsibility for things such as supporting the person to make social work appointments.

The research found that:

- A third (16 people) had financially supported the person when they had been released, costing between £30 to £1000 a month; the average cost was £300.
- The first two months following release were the most stressful and costly, as the person was often without any money until their benefit claims were set up.

“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.”

Alanna, 50s, working, supporting son who has had many short sentences and is currently in prison 60 miles away

Impact of the pandemic

The pandemic had significant impacts for families affected by imprisonment, primarily the lack of contact and the uncertainty and stress caused. In terms of costs, whilst the lack of visits led to reduced costs for around half of interviewees, the other half reported that the costs of posting clothes into prison meant costs had stayed the same.

The pandemic saw the introduction of video calls and the provision of mobile phones to people in prison, with 310 free minutes allocated per month. The research found that only a fifth (10) had made use of video calls, with half (25) reporting they were unable to set up these up because they did not have the ‘right’ technology or identification. Internet provision was also reported as increasingly being cancelled due to becoming unaffordable. The provision of mobile phones for

people in prison and the 310 free minutes were hugely appreciated. This was felt to have supported better and more frequent contact, and families desperately want it to continue.

‘Coping’ with the costs – the impacts for women and children

Unsurprisingly, the costs of imprisonment and release brought with them significant impacts for the women and children affected. Women were found to show huge resilience, ‘coping’ by carefully managing already tight budgets through their own self-sacrifice and silent suffering.

The research found that:

- Food and fuel poverty were common: a fifth (10) were reliant on food banks, and rising fuel costs were of particular concern.
- All interviewees had stopped socialising or engaging in activities that cost money, leading to them having a diminished lifestyle and living in a form of permanent lockdown.
- A fifth (6) 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 simply not attainable.
- Around a half (27) had lost connections to friends and/or family through supporting the person in prison.

Inevitably, these impacts had significant repercussions for the women’s physical and mental health. Nearly all the interviewees spoke of their mental health having been adversely affected, with reports of anxiety and depression. Many also spoke of the impact the stress had on their physical health, with reports of weight loss or gain, frequent headaches, insomnia, and exhaustion.

“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.”

Alison, 60s, pension, kinship carer supporting daughter in prison serving another short sentence 35 miles away

Recommendations

'Paying the Price: The Cost to Families of Imprisonment and Release' highlights clearly the role of prison in creating, sustaining, and deepening poverty amongst children and families. It recognises that women have "carried this burden and these costs silently for too long" and rightly asserts that "it is time their voices are heard".¹¹ There can be no doubt that action is urgently required.

To improve outcomes for families affected by imprisonment, Families Outside recommends action in the following areas:

1. Reduce costs to families

Examples include: remove charges for electronic payments made into prison accounts, allow families to hand in items rather than post them, maintain free access to video calls into prisons, maintain free allocation of minutes for telephone calls, provide free basic hygiene products/packs in prisons, reduced costs for food available at visits and in visitors' centres, promote the Help with Prison Visits Scheme, and support families to claim their costs.

2. Improve access to funds and financial support for families

Examples include: ensuring benefits claims and travel passes are set up to be available immediately upon release from prison, and setting up an independent Scottish system to support travel costs for prison visits.

3. Provide more accessible information to families

Information should be aimed at: maximising the financial support available to families as early in the criminal justice process as possible, allowing families to plan their finances when supporting someone in prison, and ensuring families are fully informed about prison regimes and processes.

4. Wider systemic changes

Changes include: reducing the rates of imprisonment, including specifically sustained efforts to reduce the number of people held in prison on remand; monitoring of and compliance with the Prison Rules requiring people to be placed in prisons close to their homes; and introducing a requirement for an assessment of the potential impact on family contact before a person is transferred to another prison for administrative reasons.

5. Reduce the stigma families affected by imprisonment face in society

Actions include: remove the use of HMP prison stamps on post received from establishments, and implement efforts to promote education and equalities (e.g. training on the impact of imprisonment; reference to the impact of imprisonment as part of PSE classes in school).

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¹¹ <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2022/11/Paying-the-Price-October-22022.pdf>