

On the Outside: identifying and supporting children with a parent in prison



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Barnardo's knows that children whose childhoods are disrupted for any reason face worse outcomes than children with more stable backgrounds. This is why we work directly with more than 200,000 vulnerable and disadvantaged children every year in 900 services across the UK.

Children affected by parental imprisonment are some of the most vulnerable; their voices go unheard and their needs are frequently unmet. Barnardo's works with these children in 13 services in England and Wales, as well as in many of our other services such as family support and Children's Centres.

The vulnerability of children with a parent in prison

Nearly three times more children experience separation and family disruption through parental imprisonment than are placed in care each year.¹ The sudden change in their family circumstances is known to have an adverse effect on these children's life chances and although it is estimated that more than 200,000² children are affected at any time, we cannot tell who they are or what services they need to improve their outcomes because no official records are made of their existence.

Many children experience the arrest of their parent with grief which they cannot share because of shame and stigma. They are socially isolated and disadvantaged, but most do not get the support they need in the community, and some are at risk of unsuitable care arrangements, because they are not being identified by the authorities when their parents are sentenced to prison.

Barnardo's is asking for children to be identified when a parent is sentenced to prison so that they can receive the practical and emotional support they need as soon as possible.³ We are calling on the Ministry of Justice to appoint a Minister to look after the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment and to deliver a National Action Plan to make sure that this large and vulnerable group of children are recognised.

¹ 73,853 children were in care in England and Wales at March 2013
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/244872/SFR36_2013.pdf

² Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction Survey. MoJ 2012, available at
<http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/research-and-analysis/moj/results-from-the-surveying-prisoner-crime-reduction-spcr-survey>.

³ Barnardo's is part of the Families Left Behind campaign which is calling for better identification
<http://www.familiesleftbehind.info/>

Barnardo's call to action

Responsibility - The Secretary of State for Justice to appoint a lead Minister to have responsibility for children of prisoners. The lead minister would have the following key tasks:

- 1) **Identification** – Ensure that children of prisoners are identified in England and Wales. There should be a statutory duty on courts to ask whether individuals remanded or sentenced to prison in England and Wales have children and, if so, whether the immediate care arrangements that have been put in place for those children are satisfactory.
- 2) **Action** – Develop a National Action Plan for England for cross-departmental implementation by the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education. There is an urgent need to support children of prisoners by raising awareness and establishing training so that statutory services know who these children are and can provide appropriate care and assistance. Action is needed at a local level so that children of prisoners are supported in their communities through a multi-agency approach.

The Problem

Hidden and isolated

A major challenge to providing support to children with a parent in prison is that they are an unrecognised, hidden group. We can estimate that there are 200,000 children in England and Wales with a parent in prison⁴—nearly three times the number currently in local authority care⁵—but it is harder to say *who* they are because no official record is made of their existence when a parent is arrested, remanded or sentenced to prison. These events can take place abruptly meaning that parents sometimes have no time to prepare their children for separation or

⁴ Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction Survey. MoJ 2012, available at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/research-and-analysis/moj/results-from-the-surveying-prisoner-crime-reduction-spcr-survey>.

⁵ 73,853 children were in care in England and Wales at March 2013
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arrange alternative childcare. Some children are left at immediate risk of inappropriate care arrangements.⁶

Contrast the rights and regulations surrounding children taken into care, for even a short time, with the experience of children who lose a parent to prison. Taking children into care involves serious consideration by qualified professionals, legal protections, extra support at school and listening to the child's wishes and feelings, followed up with regular review. But imprisonment can abruptly separate children from a parent in a way which is hard for the whole family to come to terms with⁷.

'The police just turned up and dad disappeared and that was that'⁸

Children with a parent in prison risk their distressing experiences going unnoticed by their school, or health and children's social care. Behaviour and health can deteriorate in a way that authorities struggle to explain. This is through a combination of a lack of official information about who these children are, uncertainty about how to help them, and a fear of stigma and bullying for the family on the outside.

Stigma means that children experience a parent's arrest and imprisonment with a mix of grief and shame. They miss their parents, but feel unable to talk about them or share their fears and worries with friends, family or professionals. One child told Barnardo's researchers,

'No, [I didn't tell the teacher] because if I tell that my dad's in prison then I'll get told off by my mum,'

A mother explained, *'I haven't told my parents. I just don't want to tell them at the minute. They think he's working away. I've just been keeping myself to myself...My friend knows but the neighbours know nothing'⁹*

Just as we support and listen to children who are separated from their parents *'for their own good'*¹⁰ Barnardo's believes that we should make sure that the needs of children with a parent in prison are clearly understood and met without stigma.

⁶Families Left Behind Campaign, December 2013, memorandum of evidence on legal reform for children and adults affected by the imprisonment of a parent/carer

⁷ Parke and Stewart (2001) describe the traumatic impact of witnessing their parent's arrest on young children

⁸ Gill, O and Jacobson Deegan M (2013) Ibid

⁹ Glover, J (2009) *Every Night you Cry* Barnardo's Ilford

¹⁰ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (1989) Article 9, New York, NY

'Collateral damage': the unmet need for support

Children with a parent in prison are the unacknowledged and innocent victims of crime and have been described as the 'collateral damage' of imprisonment.¹¹ The damage is caused because children affected by parental imprisonment may experience a severe disturbance to family life including prolonged and stigmatising separation from a parent, with intermittent, traumatic contact through prison visits. International research going back to the 1960s¹² attributes numerous adverse effects and poor outcomes to parental imprisonment and yet we still don't know exactly who all these children are and are therefore unable to provide them with timely support.

The sudden loss of a parent upsets the attachment relationships between children and both their parents, increasing the levels of stress, anxiety or depression that they experience, leading to increased levels of behavioural and conduct disorders. These effects are more pronounced if the parent in question is the primary caregiver, so it is troubling to note that occasionally parents can receive a custodial sentence unexpectedly, leaving them with no time to make provision for the care of their children. According to the leading authority on women's imprisonment, up to 18,000 children each year are affected by the imprisonment of their mother.¹³

Emotional and behavioural problems may continue into adolescence and young adulthood, and adults who had a parent in prison during childhood are more likely to experience worse outcomes, including poor accommodation, relationship problems, poor employment, heavy alcohol use, drug use, anxiety or depression, and offending behaviour than children with stable parental support.¹⁴



¹¹ Hagan, J and Dinovitzer, R (1999) *Collateral Consequences of Imprisonment for Children, Communities, and Prisoners* University of Chicago

¹² Morris, P (1965) *Prisoners and their Families*, Allen and Unwin, London

¹³ <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf>

¹⁴ SCIE (2008) *Guide 22: Children of prisoners – maintaining family ties*. Social Care Institute for Excellence, London.

The effects of parental imprisonment on children-the statistics

Thirty six per cent of boys separated from their parents because of parental imprisonment during childhood have high levels of anxiety or depression at age 48, compared to 15 per cent of boys with no history of parental imprisonment or separation.¹⁵ Sixty five per cent of boys with a convicted father will go on to offend themselves.¹⁶

Children with a parent in prison are:

- Twice as likely as other children to experience conduct and mental health problems
- Less likely to do well at school
- More likely to be excluded
- More likely to be arrested and imprisoned as young adults¹⁷
- Three times more likely to be involved in offending activity them selves¹⁸

The effects of parental imprisonment on children-the emotions

A mother of a six-year-old boy described the initial period of his father's imprisonment in the following way:

*'My son, who's incredibly close to his father, was literally for the first two weeks – I mean I think he was in shock. He was having night terrors, nightmares. I would wake up at three o'clock in the morning and he would be in the loo, just rocking and saying 'I want my daddy, I want my daddy, I want my daddy' ... I had to make decisions very, very quickly under a huge amount of pressure.'*¹⁹

¹⁵ SCIE (2008) *Guide 22: Children of prisoners – maintaining family ties*. Social Care Institute for Excellence, London.

¹⁶ Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners*. Cabinet Office, London.

¹⁷ Murray, J (2003) *Fathers in Prison*, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge

¹⁸ Ministry of Justice, Department for Children Schools and Families (2007) *Children of Offenders Review*. MoJ, DCSF, London.

¹⁹ From Gill, O and Jacobson, Deegan, M (2013)

The effects of parental imprisonment on children—the identification barrier

We know through our work in specialist services that children with a parent in prison benefit from timely support from services to maintain family relationships and contact with the imprisoned parent and advise on practical and emotional issues at school and in the community. Support that is delivered promptly, preferably at the point of imprisonment, is most effective²⁰ One parent said

*'I would like a system whereby the minute somebody is arrested and they go off to prison then in the next couple of days you receive a visitor....Is anybody doing that?'*²¹

The fact is nobody can do that unless there is systematic identification of prisoners' children at the point of remand or sentencing to prison.



²⁰ Gill, O and Jacobson Deegan, M (2013) *Working with children with a parent in prison*, Barnardo's

²¹ Ibid

The solutions

Identifying the children affected by parental imprisonment

Unknown and unsupported

- An estimated 200,000²² children in England and Wales have a parent in prison.
- Around 18,000²³ children in England and Wales have a mother in prison, but there is no requirement to inform social care authorities when a parent is sentenced or remanded to prison.
- 12 per cent of children with a mother in prison go into care.²⁴
- It is troubling that *‘Even less is known about the cumulative number of children who experience parental imprisonment any time during childhood’*.²⁵
- **The numbers are larger than any other single group of children officially defined as vulnerable each year, including: children in care, children leaving care, or children starting a child protection plan²⁶**
- **And yet these children appear on no official records.**

We know that there are many more children with a parent in prison than there are in care and that their outcomes and life chances are often worse, but we often cannot know who they are, or where they are, or what help they need, because no official data is collected about them.

Although crime rates and violent crime rates in particular, have declined²⁷, the prison population has steadily increased over decades reaching a record high of 88,179 in December 2011—a sudden peak explained by the effect of imprisonment of people involved in the August

²² Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction Survey. MoJ 2012, available at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/research-and-analysis/moj/results-from-the-surveying-prisoner-crime-reduction-spcr-survey>.

²³ Corston, J (2007) *The Corston Report*, Home Office, London

²⁴ Ministry of Justice (2009) *Short Study on women Offenders* Cabinet Office Social Inclusion Task Force, London

²⁵ Murray, J et al (2009) *Effects of parental imprisonment on child anti-social behaviour: a systematic review*, Campbell collaboration

²⁶ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254084/SFR45-2013_Text.pdf

²⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/260303/criminal-justice-stats-june-2013.pdf

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/apr/23/alcohol-prices-violence-study-binge-drinking>

2011 riots²⁸. The figure at the time of writing is 85,254, of whom 3,951 prisoners are women^{29 30}. The numbers of children affected by parental imprisonment must also have steadily increased over the decades.

It is troubling that parents can be sentenced or remanded to prison without any information being passed to social care, meaning that sometimes children are left with unsuitable carers while their parent is imprisoned. This is a particular risk on remand or refusal of bail.³¹

During their time at school, about seven per cent of children will experience the absence of their father through imprisonment.³² It is estimated that 66 per cent of women prisoners and 59 per cent of men have dependent children under the age of 18. Government research has found that women prisoners are more likely to have children than the general population and that 51 per cent have children under five.³³

Due to the dearth of data collected, these figures are just conservative estimations. Researchers have been calling since the mid-1990s³⁴ for better data on the numbers of children affected by parental imprisonment. To date this call has not been heeded. Without a sensitive understanding of the numbers of children involved, it is impossible to assess the extent of services that they need to address the issues they face and deliver the prompt support that we know makes a difference to each child.

Raising awareness

Given the large numbers of children estimated to be adversely affected by parental imprisonment, most schools, children's centres, family support services, health centres, GPs and social care departments will be working with several of these children at any time without realising their needs. Many families feel ashamed of the stigma associated with imprisonment and so feel unable to ask for the help they need to improve their children's life chances.

²⁸ Berman, G and Dar, A *Prison Population Statistics*, 29 July 2013, SN/SG/4334 House of Commons Library.

²⁹ <http://www.howardleague.org/weekly-prison-watch/>

³⁰ Corston (2007) *ibid*

³¹ Families left behind, Memorandum of evidence on legal reform for children and vulnerable adults affected by the imprisonment of a parent /carer.

³²

http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/uploadedFiles/2010_Publications_And_Resources/Facts_and_figures_about_prisoners_families_June2013.pdf

(Department for Education - Every Child Matters (2003) -

www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/CM5860)

³³

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110314171826/http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/hors208.pdf>

³⁴ Lloyd, E (1995) *Prisoners' Children :research, policy and practice* SCF London

Awareness raising needs to be handled with the utmost sensitivity. Families on the outside can be reluctant to make their circumstances known to health, education and social care professionals. We know that children with a parent in prison may be wary of authority figures such as a teacher knowing about their circumstances³⁵ and that other children may name-call and bully.

It can help to make frontline workers like teachers and health care professionals aware that they are likely to be working with children with a parent in prison so they can offer the right support, sensitively and without judgement. Barnardo's works in the community in a number of ways to raise awareness and offer training for the professionals likely to come into contact with children of prisoners.

Barnardo's also knows from its work in prisons that one good place to meet and start to support children with a parent in prison is at the prison itself. This is why it is important that criminal justice workers are trained to understand the issues for prisoners' children and signpost them to the appropriate support services.

What Barnardo's wants for children with a parent in prison

Barnardo's knows through its work with children with a parent in prison that sensitive, timely support is crucial to improving outcomes and life chances and helping to break the cycle of intergenerational crime. Teachers, health workers and social workers are valuable allies in providing this support, but if children with a parent in prison remain a hidden group due to a lack of official information and stigma, any support provided risks being too little, too late to be most effective in meeting the child's needs.

This is why we are calling for a statutory requirement to find out about an individual's children at the time of remand or imprisonment so that we can give more and better support as soon as possible, improving the lives and future outcomes of many more children on the outside. To ensure this is carried out we ask the Ministry of Justice to appoint a Minister to take responsibility for children with a parent in prison to identify children in England and Wales and work closely with the Minister for Children in the Department for Education, and with other Government departments to develop an action plan for England.

³⁵ Gill, O and Jacobson Deegan, M (2013) Ibid

Barnardo's support work with children affected by parental imprisonment

Our concern for children affected by parental imprisonment is based on more than 20 years of UK-wide involvement in direct work with this vulnerable group. We work with the child and family in the community and with the parent in prison as it is through this integrated approach that prisoners can be most effectively re-integrated into their families on release. This is key to breaking the inter-generational cycle of offending. In that time we have produced research and resources to aid professionals and policy-makers

Barnardo's conducted its own extensive research into the needs of these children, starting in 2009 with [*Every Night you Cry*](#). Practice-based research was released in 2013³⁶ as well as handbooks to inform schools³⁷ and Children's Centres.³⁸ In addition we run i-HOP, in partnership with POPS a knowledge sharing hub funded by the Department for Education for people working with children affected by parental imprisonment.⁴⁰

Running three ground-breaking, community-based services in Bristol, Wales and the Isle of Wight, part-funded by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) over the past two years, has added to Barnardo's understanding of the issues faced by children with a parent in prison. The evaluation of this innovative model will be available in summer 2014 and Barnardo's will be extending this model across the UK over the next two years.

Support in prison

Visiting family members in prison often involves a long and costly journey, body searches and an unwelcoming environment for children.

We help to improve children's life chances by strengthening family relationships through improving the quality of visits by running visitors' centres and halls which are family focused and child focused with play facilities. We also run family visiting days so that children can have the

³⁶ Gill, O and Jacobson Deegan, M (2013) <http://www.barnardos.org.uk/working-with-children-with-a-parent-in-prison.pdf>

³⁷ http://www.barnardos.org.uk/resources/research_and_publications/children-of-prisoners-handbook/publication-view.jsp?pid=PUB-2040

³⁸ http://www.barnardos.org.uk/web_eng_14856_childrenfamilies_affected_by_imprisonment_handbook.pdf

Barnardo's Cymru, (2014) Children affected by the imprisonment of a family member: A handbook for schools developing good practice, (available on request)

³⁹ http://www.barnardos.org.uk/resources/research_and_publications/under-fives-and-their-families-affected-by-imprisonment-a-handbook-for-sure-start-childrens-centres/publication-view.jsp?pid=PUB-2120

⁴⁰ <https://www.i-hop.org.uk/>

opportunity to engage in family activities such as cooking or reading with their parent or grand-parent.

Barnardo's services work with prisons takes a multi-agency approach by working with local authorities and family support services, especially in our through the gate services such as our 'Invisible Walls' services in Wales and Birmingham. We deliver advocacy, accredited parenting and volunteer programmes inside the prisons. We also run the Acorn Family Support Centre at Askham Grange women's prison designed especially to support mothers with family and childcare issues, including a centre for extended and overnight visits with children.

Support in the community

Families and children with a parent in prison face stigma, a reduced income and isolation in the community.

Barnardo's runs three community teams in Bristol, South East Wales and on the Isle of Wight to engage with families to plan and deliver coordinated family interventions. Working with the 'whole child' they aim to develop multi-agency links to reduce re-offending and intergenerational offending. Workers raise awareness amongst external support services and run training for professionals about children affected by parental imprisonment. Barnardo's runs participatory young people's groups with the children we support. For example, a young people's group in Bristol has developed a charter for children of prisoners, which has been adopted by the City Council.



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