

Parents in the Criminal Justice System

Literature Review

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Executive Summary

The Government reported that, as of June 2023, there was a prison population of approximately 95,526 people. This is comprised of 85,851 in England and Wales, 7,775 in Scotland, and 1,900 in Northern Ireland¹. The prison population was steadily rising until 2015, with a drop during Covid-19, and is now growing again. In England and Wales, the prison population has almost doubled since 1990. Within West Yorkshire, there are an estimated 2,735 male adult prisoners, 368 adult women, and 143 children under 18 in prison.

Research has suggested that 54% of male prisoners have a child under the age of 18 at the time they enter prison, which is likely to be a huge underestimation, due to failures in recording parental status. The number of children impacted by parental imprisonment have been estimated to be between 100,083 and 312,000 children.

Parental imprisonment has wide-reaching and long-lasting impacts on the mothers and fathers imprisoned, their children, and their extended families. The impact on parents can begin prior to their imprisonment from their first contact with the Criminal Justice System, for example at their arrest. When in prison, parents find their parental identity challenged by the prison environment and the restrictions they face to contact with their children. The impacts on parents on being in prison extends beyond their prison sentence and can be influential in how successful their resettlement is.

Prisoners' children and families have been described as '*forgotten victims*', an '*invisible group*', and '*the unseen victims of the prison boom*'. Children who experience a parent going to prison are more likely than their peers to experience challenging life experiences in the future. These children have an increased likelihood of criminal offending, mental health problems, drug and alcohol addiction, passing away before the age of 65, and stopping education at a younger age. There is evidence of an inter-generational transfer of criminality especially for boys, who have been found to externalise their feelings as a result of parental imprisonment. Continued contact between children and their parents whilst in prison has been identified as a key protective factor mitigating the impact of imprisonment.

Other family members are also impacted by parental imprisonment, in particular grandparents. Often when a mother is imprisoned, grandparents become caregivers which can result in a loss of identity and also complicate their previous relationship with their grandchildren who they are now responsible for.

A number of other stakeholders can play a role in lessening or amplifying the effects of parental imprisonment. The Criminal Justice System as a whole can improve the way they manage parents and children from the point of arrest onwards. Schools also play a key role through the support they can offer to children impacted by parental imprisonment, which can act as a protective factor against future negative influences or criminality.

Background

The Government reported that, as of June 2023, there was a prison population of approximately 95,526 people. This is comprised of 85,851 in England and Wales, 7,775 in Scotland, and 1,900 in Northern Ireland¹. The prison population was steadily rising until 2015, with a drop during Covid-19, and is now growing again. In England and Wales, the prison population has almost doubled since 1990. The number of children impacted by parental imprisonment have been estimated to be between 100,083 and 312,000 children.

Within the United Kingdom (UK), imprisonment has a disproportionate impact on the economically disadvantaged, as prisoners are more likely to have experienced poverty, be from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and face other aspects of deprivation², and imprisonment both introduces new and entrenches existing deprivations.

The effects of imprisonment on families and children have been conceptualised in a number of ways. Most commonly as '*collateral consequences*' which intends to capture the myriad of ways imprisonment impacts upon wider families, including '*family disruption, emotional difficulties, financial difficulties, the burden of childcare, the breakdown of social networks, and disrupted home and working environments*'³. However, it has been argued that this term does not capture in full the effects of imprisonment on families in particular as the *consequences* discussed tend to refer to the prisoner, and secondly, collateral means both secondary and parallel, neither of which accurately describe the way harms are experienced by prisoners' families. It has been suggested that the term '*symbiotic harms*' better conceptualises the effects of imprisonment on families. Symbiotic harms captures how the negative effects brought about by imprisonment flow in both directions in the relationships between prisoners and their families. This terminology includes negative effects external, but relevant to, the prisoners' relationships with their family, for example mental illness, drug addiction, or interaction with services.

Children with parents in the Criminal Justice System (CJS) are not a homogenous group and numerous factors can influence the impact parental imprisonment can have, including their development stage, family environment and wider social factors⁴. Moreover, involvement with the CJS tends not to be an individual, distinct event but a complex process taking place over a period of time with numerous experiences. Each engagement with the CJS can impact upon children's resilience and future life trajectories.

Involvement with the CJS is intertwined with the influential factors for violence and criminal behaviour. Parental substance dependence, domestic violence, and extreme poverty have been found to be extremely common in households where a parent has

¹ [UK Prison Population Statistics \(2023\)](#)

² [Conceptualising the Effects of Imprisonment on Families: Collateral Consequences, Secondary Punishment, or Symbiotic Harms?](#)

³ Turanovic, JJ, Rodriguez, N, Pratt, TC (2012) The collateral consequences of incarceration revisited: a qualitative analysis of the effects on caregivers of children of incarcerated parents *Criminology* 50(4), 913

⁴ [Constructive Connections: building resilience of families affected by the criminal justice system](#)

been arrested, sentenced to probation, and that unemployment was a significant factor in those who had been in prison⁵. Parental imprisonment has been found to impact on children's behaviour, wellbeing, and involvement in crime.

This literature review explores the impact on parents, both fathers and mothers, of imprisonment, the impact on children, the impact on other family members, the importance of maintaining contact between parents and children during a prison sentence, and the role of other stakeholders in supporting the parent-child relationship.

⁵ Phillips S, Detlaff A (2009) More than parents in prison: the broader overlap between the criminal justice and child welfare systems. *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 3(1) 3-22.

Parental imprisonment overview

United Kingdom

The prison population of England and Wales has been increasing for a number of years, quadrupling in size between 1900 and 2018. This means that as of 2021/22 there were 159 prisoners per 100,000 of the population for England and Wales, 162 per 100,000 for Scotland and 97 per 100,000 for Northern Ireland⁶. As of November 2022, the prison population in England and Wales was 82,905. 95.7% (79,334) were male adults, 4% (3,245) were female adults, and 0.4% (326) were children under the age of 18⁷. The prison population is projected to increase to an estimate of 106,300 by 2027. Currently, the UK imprisons more people than any other country in the Western world, other than the United States of America.

Prisoners' children and families have been described as '*forgotten victims*', an '*invisible group*', and '*the unseen victims of the prison boom*'⁸. There are significant challenges to verifying the number of parents in the CJS and particularly within the prison system. Therefore, it is difficult to know the true number of children in the UK affected by parental imprisonment. The parental status of prisoners' is not recorded upon their arrival to prison and so is therefore not included in data on prisoner demographics. As a result of this, the identification of parents in prison tends to be self-reported and non-disclosure of this information is likely as prisoners may fear a negative outcome for their child if this information is shared. Furthermore, it is even more challenging to identify the number of individuals and children involved in wider criminal justice system. The lack of a system to identify the children of prisoners means they become hidden, and thus unable to easily access the help they may need.

Research from 2012⁹ suggested that 54% of male prisoners have a child under the age of 18 at the time they enter prison¹⁰. Based on the prison population (as of November 2022) in England and Wales, this would equate to nearly 43,000 children, which is likely a gross underestimation. A number of studies have attempted to ascertain how many children experience parental imprisonment. Analysis by the Prison Advice and Care Trust in 2023, estimated that 100,083 children have a parent in prison right now based on the Ministry of Justice's estimation that each male prisoner has an average of 1.14 children¹¹. Crest Advisory's 2019 report estimated that the number of children who are/will be affected by paternal and maternal imprisonment in the next 7 years (until 2025) will be 312,000¹². 295,000 of these will be affected by paternal imprisonment and 17,000 by maternal imprisonment. The 17,000 affected by maternal imprisonment accounts for around 66% of women in prison, however the definitions and data tend not to include grandmothers and mothers of older children which would increase this number¹³. For context this estimation is

⁶ [UK Prison Population Statistics \(2023\)](#)

⁷ [Prison Population Projections 2022 to 2027, England and Wales](#)

⁸ [Risk and protective factors in the resettlement of imprisoned fathers with their families](#)

⁹ [Prisoners' childhood and family \(2012\)](#)

¹⁰ This is based on a sample of newly sentenced prisoners between 2004 and 2006

¹¹ [Number of children with a parent in prison right now tops 100,000 \(Pact\)](#)

¹² [Children of Prisoners - Fixing a broken system](#)

¹³ Minson, S., Nadin, R. and Earle, J. (2015) Sentencing of Mothers: Improving the Sentencing Process and

more than the number of children in care and considerably more than the number of children on the child protection register¹⁴.

In recent years there has been a demographic transition within the prison population, with the number of 'older' prisoners (aged 60 and above) rising by 243% between June 2002 and March 2020, from 1,511 to 5,176 individuals¹⁵. In 2020, those over 60 made up 6% of the prison population in the UK. There has been a suggestion that this demographic change may mean the numbers of younger children and infants impacted by parental imprisonment is decreasing¹⁶. However, given the challenges noted earlier in recording the parental status of those in prison it is difficult to verify this assumption.

West Yorkshire

There are an estimated 2,735 male adult prisoners, 368 adult women, and 143 children under 18 imprisoned in West Yorkshire. This would mean, based on suggestion that 54% of male prisoners have a child under 18 when entering prison, that an estimated 1,500 children will be impacted by parents imprisoned in West Yorkshire. However, this does not include the children in West Yorkshire whose parents are imprisoned outside of the region, which, as will be explored later, is frequently the case for women imprisoned. Ultimately, this number will be a huge under-estimation.

The importance of maintaining contact between prisoners and their children is explored later, and although the Government notes that a prisoner is '*usually allowed at least two 1-hour visits every 4 weeks*', each prison has their own rules for visiting¹⁷. The prisons in West Yorkshire all have a 'Family Strategy', which outlines how the prison will deliver effective services for families to ensure a positive impact on the prisoners. These strategies aim to benefit prisoners, their families, and the wider community by reducing reoffending and the negative impact imprisonment can have.

HMP Leeds¹⁸

HMP Leeds is a Category B men's prison located in Armley, Leeds. The prison holds just under 1,106 adult prisoners.

HMP Leeds's Family Strategy aims to:

1. Help reduce the likelihood of men reoffending and returning to prison
2. Reduce the potential negative impact of imprisonment on the wider family and significant others, particularly children

Outcomes for Women with Dependent Children, Discussion Paper Prison Reform Trust

¹⁴ [Every night you cry - The realities of having a parent in prison](#)

¹⁵ [Ageing prison population \(2019-21\)](#)

¹⁶ [A father in prison is still a father: paternal imprisonment and infant mental health](#)

¹⁷ [Staying in touch with someone in prison: Visiting someone in prison - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁸ [Our Family and Significant Others Services Strategy - HMP Leeds](#)

3. Provide support, information guidance, and opportunity to families, children, and significant others of men in custody

These aims will be achieved through the following priorities:

1. Delivering good and effective family and significant other services
2. Supporting those who do not receive visits
3. Connecting with our community
4. Consultation, engagement and learning

HMP Leeds allows 'social visits' mornings and afternoons 6 days a week. In addition, to these HMP Leeds holds regular family visit days, which are extended visits. Through the Jigsaw Family Support Service, HMP Leeds offers:

- 15 extended family days – these are themed and available to parents with children and can include activities in the gym for active play
- Adult family day visits are also held so partners without children or whose children are older can invite up to two adult relatives to visit
- Building relationships through play – individual weekday play specialist support for fun family activities
- Story Book dads – where fathers record a story for their children aimed at reducing separation
- Homework clubs for children and fathers
- Parent and toddler group takes place fortnightly for pre-school children to bond with their fathers through play, allowing their dad to take a lead parenting role

HMP New Hall¹⁹

HMP New Hall is a closed-category prison for female adults and young people who have offended, located near Wakefield. The prison holds 368 women.

HMP New Hall's Family Strategy acknowledges that families can play a huge part in helping those in prison through their time there and contribute positively to supporting them not to reoffend. The strategy details the different methods families can use to stay in touch with those in prison, including letters, telephone calls, emails, and visits.

Visits are available Tuesday-Thursday afternoons as well as Saturday and Sunday afternoons. To help children who are visiting, the New Hall Kidz Charity has produced an explanatory DVD aimed at children visiting prison for the first time to support them through the daunting experience visiting prison can be.

Within the prison, HMP New Hall offers support to residents and families through a Family Support Worker who works with families to try and maintain good communication links and help in cases where relationships have broken down. This includes the offering of an After Adoption course for residents who have lost children through adoption and a Parenting Course, a ten-week programme designed to be delivered in a prison environment.

¹⁹ [HMP New Hall Family & Significant Others Strategy](#)

HMP New Hall also holds family days where residents who are mothers, grandmothers, or siblings are able to have an extended visit. These visits are focused on activities where residents and visitors can play and interact.

HMP Wakefield²⁰

HMP Wakefield is a Category A men's prison holding 745 prisoners.

HMP Wakefield's Family Strategy states that '*maintaining supportive family relationships is paramount in achieving a reduction in re-offending*'. The strategy focuses on children and families because the support from family whilst imprisoned can play a vital role in helping individuals move away from crime as well as be a protective factor against suicide and self-harm in prisoners.

The prison operates a visitors' centre which is open 4 days a week and is the primary place for visitors prior to meeting their family member. There are also Family Day visits offered by the prison, these aim to:

- Enable families to have more accessible and better contact with prisoners in custody
- Provide interventions and support for prisoners and their families to enable them to maintain strong and supportive relationships
- Provide support and training for prisoners in custody who are parents/carers/grandparents

HMP Wakefield also has an education, training and employment stream which offers prisoners the opportunity to achieve qualifications and gain employment skills. Families are encouraged to support prisoners in these activities and attend celebration events. As part of this the prison library runs a Storybook dad course which allows prisoners to make a recording of a story to be shared with their child.

HMP Wealstun²¹

HMP Wealstun is a Category C men's prison, which holds 884 prisoners.

The prison's Family Strategy outlines how they work with partners such as Jigsaw, St. Giles, and NOVUS to deliver effective family services for prisoners. HMP Wealstun aim to '*offer prisoners the chance to strengthen supportive family relationships and promote family ties as a protective factor against reoffending*'.

There are a number of opportunities available for families of prisoners in HMP Wealstun. Jigsaw Family Support offer one to one family support work as well as enrichment and support during Dads and Kids days. They also offer parenting courses and extended individual family visits including budgeting, food planning and cooking. Dads and Kids Days are run regularly and allow prisoners to spend quality time with their children through enrichment activities such as structured play, PE games, and planting seeds.

²⁰ [HMP Wakefield The Families and Significant Others Strategy](#)

²¹ [HMP Wealstun Our Family Strategy](#)

The prison also offers a family learning initiative called Storysacks in partnership with Leeds City Council. This is a parenting course to encourage the support of numeracy and literacy learning for children. Prisoners create a story sack including a favourite book with a selection of games and activities. The course is designed to improve fathers' understanding of their role in their child's reading process, help them to identify and use all the learning opportunities in the book, and support their children's early learning even without seeing them daily. As Leeds, Wakefield and Wetherby do, HMP Wealstun also have a Story Books Dads project.

HMP Wetherby²²

HMP Wetherby is a Young Offenders Institution (YOI) holding 143 children, with a capacity of 266.

The prison's Family and Significant Others Strategy supports the prisons commitment to *'support the children in our care to develop meaningful and constructive relationships with their families and carers or significant person identified as their next of kin'*. Within HMP Wetherby sentenced children are entitled to three visits per month (more than the amount outlined by the Government). Due to the nature of HMP Wetherby as a YOI the strategy mainly focuses on families visiting their child who is imprisoned. However, Child Centred Visits can be arranged for prisoners who have children themselves. The aim of these is to maintain positive relationships whilst in custody and the Strategy explains how a child can be prepared for a visit to prison. At these visits, soft play activities are encouraged to support the early physical development of children and strengthens the bond between fathers and their children. HMP Wetherby have an in-prison park run which takes place every Saturday morning and at the time of writing the strategy were planning for family members to be allowed to take part with their child.

As with other prisons across West Yorkshire, Wetherby offers family days and celebration of achievement days where prisoners can spend time with family members in a less formal setting than traditional visits allowing for more intimate and caring interactions.

²² [HMYOI Wetherby Family and Significant Others Strategy](#)

Impact on parents

The impact and trauma of involvement with the CJS can occur for the individual and their families from the first moment of contact. Turmoil usually begins for families before an individual is sentenced or enters prison. Parents can be arrested within the home which can be especially traumatising, and lead to mistrust of the CJS.

Examining the whole prison population, it has been evidenced repeatedly that many prisoners (men and women) have a history of social exclusion and are more likely than the general population to grow up in poverty or have a family member who has been convicted of a criminal offence²³. A longitudinal cohort study which explored the past and present family sentences of newly sentenced prisoners in England and Wales found that difficult family backgrounds played a role in prisoners' offending²⁴. 24% had been in care at some point during their childhood. Those who had been in care were younger at the time of their first arrest and more likely to be reconvicted than those who had never been in care (13 years old compared to 16 years old). 29% of prisoners had experienced abuse or observed violence within their family home (41%). There was also evidence of inter-generational offending, with 37% of prisoners having someone in their family who had been found guilty of a criminal offence, and the transmission of criminality was found to be stronger when parents were imprisoned, as opposed to just convicted. This finding is critical as it could suggest that this transfer of offending would be repeatedly 'passed down' through families rather than encouraging desistance.

Imprisonment is often accompanied by the loss of a wage, a change to benefit entitlements, and additional costs such as childcare and travel to prison visits²⁵. This means prisoners families are particularly susceptible to financial instability, poverty, debt, and housing disruption (which is explored later). It was estimated in 2009 that the average personal cost to the family and relatives of a prisoner is £175 per month (and considering inflation this has risen to approximately £270). Even families who were financially stable prior to a parent's imprisonment suffered due to loss of assets, with neither household structure nor pre-imprisonment employment insulating against the costs imposed by imprisonment²⁶. In cases of paternal imprisonment, childcare tends to fall solely on women who weigh employment decisions carefully against the needs of the child, prioritising the latter amplifying financial disadvantage.

Even at the point of resettlement, challenges with reintegration can amplify the negative effects of imprisonment due to barriers finding employment combined with inadequate housing. These challenges extend their dependency on family members, impacting family dynamics and relationships²⁷. Research has found that commitment to family roles upon release can help parents in prison develop pro-social identities

²³ [Compendium of reoffending statistics and analysis - MoJ](#)

²⁴ [Prisoners' childhood and family background \(2012\)](#)

²⁵ [Every night you cry - The realities of having a parent in prison](#)

²⁶ [Poverty and disadvantage among prisoners' families](#)

²⁷ La Vigne, N.G., Naser, R.L., Brooks, L.E., and Castro, J.L. (2005). Examining the Effect of Incarceration and In-Prison Family Contact on Prisoners' Family Relationships. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 21(4): 1-22.

and emotional attachments which subsequently impact the decisions they make upon release from prison, for example whether to reoffend²⁸.

Paternal imprisonment

Paternal imprisonment can be viewed as a public health risk factor, both for the father and their children, increasing the likelihood of deprivation, social isolation, inter-generational offending, and unemployment²⁹. As with most influential factors, there is a continuum which includes protective effects, for example personal assets including resilience and support from familial networks can facilitate coping.

Prison by its very nature means fathers imprisoned are less involved in the caregiving and physical acts of nurturing. Whilst traditional roles assumed by fathers were ones of financial provision, protection, and authority, there has been a shift away from these with fathers *'assuming a more egalitarian partnership, combining nurturing with economic support'*³⁰. Fathers considered leisure and play to be a defining factor of their 'fathering' behaviour as important as provision and discipline. This suggests that when a father enters prison, he is faced with losing the key elements of his identity as a father.

The prison environment can influence a person's identity through a process termed 'prisonisation' where individuals become assimilated to the subcultures, norms, and values of the institution. The experience of losing their identity as a father can bring about feelings of guilt, grief, and helplessness, with fathers in prison struggling to feel like a 'good father'³¹. The longer-term impact of these feelings can be a decision, conscious or subconscious, to discontinue contact or involvement with their family and children whilst in prison. Research found that prisoners who found it difficult to maintain a relationship with their child whilst in prison cited the brevity of visits, conditions in visiting areas, and loss of authority as contributory factors³². Prisonisation can also influence prisoners experience of resettlement, as adoption of prison norms make adjusting back to patterns of 'normal' family life challenging³³.

A potential positive impact of imprisonment on fathers is that it can offer *'a chance for self-reflection, creating a positive opportunity to re-evaluate and re-appraise their criminal lifestyle and family relationships, becoming a catalyst for creating new, positive, father interventions'*³⁴.

Maintaining a relationship with their child through communication is a key factor in keeping men attached to their identity as a father beyond the constraints of the prison environment³⁵. A study examining what imprisonment meant for men in terms of their identities as a father found that they felt prison prevented them from achieving their vision of an ideal father, creating a disconnect between what they wanted to do and

²⁸ [Families of Prisoners: A Review of the Evidence](#)

²⁹ [Risk and protective factors in the resettlement of imprisoned fathers with their families](#)

³⁰ [Understanding fathering: masculinity, diversity, and change](#)

³¹ ["It's been hard to be a father": A qualitative exploration of incarcerated fatherhood](#)

³² King, D. (2002). Parents, Children and Prison: The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children. Dublin Institute of Technology: Centre for Social and Educational Research.

³³ Carceral, K.C. (2003). Behind a Convict's Eyes: Doing Time in a Modern Prison. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

³⁴ [A father in prison is still a father: paternal imprisonment and infant mental health](#)

³⁵ [The experience of fatherhood post-imprisonment](#)

their inability to action this³⁶. Fathers felt that being able to evidence to their children (as well as their partners and wider family) that prison had changed their behaviour in a positive way was an important aspect of their paternal identity. This highlights the importance of contact and connection during a period of imprisonment to be able to show this change to children.

Fathers experience of stigma during and following their imprisonment can have a considerable impact. When trying to reintegrate into society, fathers faced significant stigma when looking for employment and this has implications for their paternal identity as a 'provider'³⁷. Employment is an important factor in desistance, and when this is inhibited because of stigma this can make a return to offending, particularly for financial gain, increasingly appealing.

Paternal imprisonment also perpetuates gendered inequalities in that the family members supporting men in prison are typically female and this invokes a burden of care, which is often taken for granted³⁸. In some cases, these women become solely responsible for raising children, whilst also caring for their male partner in new ways due to their status as a prisoner, for example visiting them and liaising with legal authorities³⁹. In some instances, the expectations and attitudes of children towards their fathers upon release are primarily shaped by the attitudes of their mothers⁴⁰, and often these are unrealistic. Mothers may expect the father to contribute financially and have stable employment upon release, to which there are extensive barriers⁴¹.

Maternal imprisonment

It will be more common for a child to experience paternal imprisonment than maternal imprisonment, due to the huge difference in the numbers of men and women imprisoned each year. However, maternal imprisonment has different and unique impacts on mothers and children and there is a significant inter-generational impact of trauma as women are usually the '*main caregiver and focal point of the family*'⁴². In light of this, the imprisonment of a mother has been suggested to be far more disruptive than that of a father⁴³. It is estimated by the Ministry of Justice that between 13-19% of all women receiving immediate custody have dependent children⁴⁴. The Prison Reform Trust argues that *"the imprisonment of a mother has a potentially devastating impact on children, regardless of the age of the child and the length of sentence the mother receives"*⁴⁵.

³⁶ [The experience of fatherhood post-imprisonment](#)

³⁷ Bahr, S. J., Armstrong, A. H., Gibbs, B. G., Harris, P. E. and Fisher, J. K. (2005) 'The Re-entry Process: How Parolees Adjust to Release from Prison', *Fathering*, 3(3), pp. 243–265

³⁸ [Conceptualising the Effects of Imprisonment on Families: Collateral Consequences, Secondary Punishment, or Symbiotic Harms?](#)

³⁹ Condry, R. (2007) *Families Shamed: The consequences of crime for relatives of serious offenders*. Devon: Willan

⁴⁰ Yocum, A. and Nath, S. (2011) 'Anticipating Father Reentry: A Qualitative Study of Children's and Mothers' Experiences', *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 50 (5), pp. 286–304

⁴¹ [The experience of fatherhood post-imprisonment](#)

⁴² [The intergenerational traumatic impact of maternal imprisonment](#)

⁴³ Jones A, Gallagher B, Manby M, et al. (2013) *Children of Prisoners: Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health*. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield.

⁴⁴ Niven and Stewart. (2005). *Resettlement outcomes on release from prison*. Home Office Findings 248. London: Home Office. Referenced in in MOJ (2014). *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds*

⁴⁵ [What about me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system](#)

As not all women in prison are mothers, it is important to explore the picture of women in prison to provide context. Women make up less than 5% of the prison population, and the majority are serving sentences for non-violent, less serious offences, with 70% receiving sentences of less than 12 months⁴⁶. For many women entering the CJS, their offending is rooted in previous experiences of trauma with women in prison typically having extensive histories of poverty, substance dependence, mental health difficulties, and experiences of abuse. For women serving long sentences, their *'life histories read as catalogues of suffering and abuse'*⁴⁷. For example, in a study of women serving life sentences, 60% reported histories of sexual abuse, 80% had experienced physical abuse, and 54% had been victims of both⁴⁸. Furthermore, it is relevant to examine inter-generational impacts, not just for the children of prisoners, but for the women imprisoned as well. Research has highlighted a common theme of *mothers not mothered*, with women in prisons describing their own experience of being mothered poorly and making connections between this and their future experiences of trauma and ultimately criminality⁴⁹. Deprivation has been shown to be a driving factor in some women's offending behaviour. Mothers who had been in prison described feeling as though they were failing as a parent even prior to their imprisonment by being unable to meet their children's basic needs but also provide them with the latest consumer items. These feelings of failures interacted with financial challenges, histories of trauma, and abusive relationships creating *'a perfect storm'*⁵⁰ for offending.

The impact of trauma leads to an overlap between 'victim' and 'perpetrator' for many women in prison which can intensify the prison experience and a particularly distressing element of imprisonment, for mothers serving sentences of any lengths, is losing contact with their children⁵¹. Even sentences of a few weeks is enough time for mothers and children to be harmed. Evidence has shown that even this length of sentence can result in mothers losing their homes and jobs, having their children taken into care, and losing their support networks⁵².

As with fathers in prison, mothers suffered a huge loss of identity due to being separated from their children. Having to 'mother from a distance' made many women feel like they were failing in their roles. Even if their maternal identity was maintained through visits, mothers still felt anxious and guilty when they felt their children *'needed them most'*⁵³ and they were not able to be there for special life events or occasions. However, within prisons women tried to maintain their maternal identity by connecting with other mothers in the prison. Women held in open prisons discussed how their

⁴⁶ [Invisible Women: Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment](#)

⁴⁷ Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017). 'The Gendered Pains of Life Imprisonment.' *British Journal of Criminology*, 57, 1359 – 1378 (page 1363). Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017). 'The Gendered Pains of Life Imprisonment.' *British Journal of Criminology*, 57, 1359 – 1378 (page 1363).

⁴⁸ Leigey, M., & Reed, K. (2014). 'A Woman's Life Before Serving Life: Examining the Negative Pre-Incarceration Life Events of Female Life-Sentenced Inmates.' *Women and Criminal Justice*, 20, 302–322.

⁴⁹ [Motherhood Challenged: A matricentric feminist study exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

⁵⁰ [Motherhood Challenged: Exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

⁵¹ Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017). 'The Gendered Pains of Life Imprisonment.' *British Journal of Criminology*, 57, 1359 – 1378.

⁵² [Short but not sweet: A study of the impact of short custodial sentences on mothers and their children](#)

⁵³ [Motherhood Challenged: A matricentric feminist study exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

motherhood acted as a bond between prisoners. In contrast, those in closed prisons employed emotional control and restraint around their maternal identity, avoiding talking about their children, in order to prevent themselves becoming upset or upsetting others. The latter approach has also been observed in relation to male prisoners, however for men as well as being a coping mechanism, this was in order to maintain a sense of masculinity⁵⁴. Women held in closed conditions spend the majority of their days in their cells, meaning this becomes a place where women were frequently surrounded by their children in the form of photographs. Whilst the 'presence' of their children offered hope, it also meant their cell became a place women would try to manage their maternal emotions, and when this was not possible some mothers have been found to self-harm or attempt suicide⁵⁵.

Motherhood extends beyond those who already have children. There are also women who enter prison whilst pregnant and become mothers whilst imprisoned. Approximately 600 pregnant women are held in prisons each year and 100 babies are born to women in prison⁵⁶. How a person experiences pregnancy is an important aspect of their maternal identity and bond with their child. For women who were pregnant in prison, this environment and the reasons for being there meant it was challenging for them to form a positive maternal identity⁵⁷. Research highlighted that these women struggled to feel safe in prison whilst pregnant, fearing being injured, miscarrying or giving birth alone in their cell⁵⁸. These feelings repeatedly reminded women that they were pregnant under abnormal circumstances and were unable to 'become' a mother in the way most women do, for example by preparing a nursery, attending antenatal classes, or buying baby clothes. These many factors combined can have a lifelong impact on a mother's maternal identity and bond to their child⁵⁹. Mother and baby units can act as a supportive environment where healthy attachments can be formed, but the number of women receiving places at mother and baby units has declined and this must be addressed to lessen the long-term impacts for both mothers and their children⁶⁰.

An aspect of motherhood much less considered when looking at women in prison is that for those who do not have children when sentenced, a prison sentence, especially a lengthy one, *'may force them to re-evaluate their aspirations for becoming mothers'*. This is a particularly gendered consequence of imprisonment with women describing feeling as though they have been *'stripped of the mother role'*⁶¹.

In the United Kingdom, it has been argued that there is an overuse of custodial sentences for women. The outcomes for women who receive custodial sentences are significantly worse than for those given community orders. 55.8% of women released

⁵⁴ Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2017). The Gendered Pains of Life Imprisonment. *British Journal of Criminology*, 57(6), pp.1359-1378.

⁵⁵ Baldwin, L. and Quinlan, C. (2018) Within these Walls: Reflections of Women in and After Prison - An insight into the Experience of Women Imprisoned in Britain and Ireland. *Prison Service Journal*, 240.

⁵⁶ [An unfair sentence - All Babies Count](#)

⁵⁷ [Motherhood Challenged: Exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

⁵⁸ Abbott, L. (2018) The incarcerated pregnancy: an ethnographic study of perinatal women in English prisons. Doctoral thesis, University of Herts.

⁵⁹ Abbott, L., Scott, T., Thomas, H. and Weston, K. (2020) Pregnancy and Childbirth in English Prisons: institutional Ignominy and the Pains of Imprisonment. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 42(3), pp.660-675.

⁶⁰ [What about me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system](#)

⁶¹ [Family Ties During Imprisonment: Important to Whom and For What?](#)

from prison reoffended within a year, compared to 26% of those with a community order⁶². Research showed that many women, prior to their sentencing had been advised that they would not receive a prison sentence, and therefore had not made arrangements for their child's care, increasing the stress and trauma of initial imprisonment⁶³.

Those with short sentences or who were imprisoned for non-serious offences felt their resettlement and future desistance would have been better supported through a community sentence which would have also had less damaging impact on their children. Women who had committed violent offences did not consider their imprisonment to be unjust for themselves but did still question how this impacted on their motherhood and their children⁶⁴.

Communication and contact has been shown to be the key strategy for maintaining parental relationships and affirming women's maternal identity whilst in prison. As was evident for the father-children relationship, visits allow women to 'actively' mother whilst physically apart. The perceived quality and success of a visit was impacted by several factors, with longer, more flexible visits (i.e. where parents were able to hug their child) being viewed more positively. In Baldwin's research mothers expressed frustration at visits where movement was limited as this prevented them from even '*doing the basics*' for their children during visits⁶⁵. Telephone calls also help women to continue their 'active mothering' by offering them the opportunity to talk to children in a more natural way, for example helping them with homework, talking about their school day, and even disciplining them.

The psychological and emotional pain mothers experience due to losing contact with their children, can actually be worsened through visits which can be emotionally distressing for both. Visits have been described as '*not child-friendly*' and '*traumatic*', as in some instances mothers were not allowed out of their seat or were unable to have their child on their knee⁶⁶. Despite the fact that visits can feel distressing, not being able to see their children also has devastating consequences for mothers. For some this had brought on suicidal feelings and resulted in self-harming behaviours.

Furthermore, maintaining contact through visits is made more challenging by the fact that women are often held far away from their homes (due to the limited number of female-only prisons). The average distance between home and prison for women is 63 miles, with a significant number being held more than 100 miles from home, compared to 50 miles for men⁶⁷. This further inhibits mothers' ability to have regular face-to-face contact with their children if they feel emotionally able to. In addition, ten

⁶² Hedderman, C. & Jolliffe, D. (2015) 'The impact of prison for women on the edge: paying the price for wrong decisions', Victims and Offenders: An international journal of evidence-based research, policy and practice DOI

⁶³ [Maternal imprisonment - research on the impact of intergenerational trauma](#)

⁶⁴ [Motherhood Challenged: Exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

⁶⁵ [Motherhood Challenged: Exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

⁶⁶ [Maternal imprisonment - Evidence review](#)

⁶⁷ Lord Farmer (2019) The importance of strengthening female offenders' family and other relationships to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime, London: MoJ Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/809467/farmer-review-women.PDF (accessed 27 August 2021)

of the twelve women's prisons in the UK are closed prisons⁶⁸. These are for prisoners who do not require the highest security conditions but are too high a risk for open conditions. As women are placed based on the requirements of the prison estate, they can be moved at any time, which for mothers can be especially traumatic as they may have imminent visits booked and are often not afforded the opportunity to inform their children or relatives of the move. This evidences how the arrangement of the prison estate can place physical barriers additional to the act of imprisonment between parents and their children. Research has investigated how the relationship between the prison space and maternal emotion⁶⁹. The prison environment is not one of emotional safety, engendering feelings of powerless, sadness, and disconnection⁷⁰. There are intersections between gender, space, and feeling⁷¹, and mothers described feeling immediately challenged in their maternal identity from the moment they entered the prison space⁷². Moran⁷³ reiterated how the way in which a prison is organised and managed is related to the emotions and experiences of prisoners and their visitors. It is argued that visitors are influenced by the rules and regimes of the prison when visiting, feeling not completely imprisoned but not completely free. This 'in-between' space acts as a reminder of their previous life outside, highlighting the restrictive nature of the prison visiting space⁷⁴.

Women's role as caregivers is not enabled by the prison environment, resulting in stress and guilt amongst mothers in prison, and this had implications upon their release. Baldwin found that the maternal identity of many was impacted for up to decades post their release from prison and for some this resulted in a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder due to the severity of the ongoing trauma they had experienced being imprisoned⁷⁵. After their release mothers were required to 'renegotiate' their maternal identity and find their new role within their family and for some this was challenging as they had lost confidence in their maternal self-esteem. The guilt, shame, and stigma many felt had irreversibly impacted their self-esteem as mothers, describing themselves as '*forever spoiled*' or '*tainted*' as mothers due to their imprisonment causing an overwhelming fear of '*failing again*'⁷⁶. These feelings left them susceptible to mental health difficulties, addiction, and reoffending, this is evidence of how the presence of influential factors for violence, imprisonment, and a lack of support during the resettlement period can lead to a cycle of offending. During the resettlement period, mothers wanted to reassert their maternal role but frequently felt unsupported. This is critical as research showed that reassuming the maternal role upon release from prison can have '*a transformative effect on mothers' desistance, with many seeking to demonstrate desistance through the pursuit of idealised motherhood*'⁷⁷. This links to the role of other stakeholders, as when their motherhood

⁶⁸ [Categorisation - women's prisons | Prison Reform Trust](#)

⁶⁹ [Motherhood disrupted: Reflections of post-prison mothers](#)

⁷⁰ [The Incarceration of Women - Punishing Bodies, Breaking Spirits](#)

⁷¹ ["Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones": A Personal Geography of Harassment](#)

⁷² [Motherhood disrupted: Reflections of post-prison mothers](#)

⁷³ ["doing time" in carceral space: timespace and carceral geography](#)

⁷⁴ ["doing time" in carceral space: timespace and carceral geography](#)

⁷⁵ [Motherhood Challenged: A matricentric feminist study exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

⁷⁶ [Motherhood Challenged: A matricentric feminist study exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

⁷⁷ [Motherhood Challenged: Exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

was acknowledged and valued this made a positive difference to their ability to cope upon release and to their outcomes⁷⁸.

The strength and resilience of mothers who have been imprisoned has been repeatedly evidenced, but this does not absolve systems or services of the need to support mothers leaving prison. The role of other stakeholders engaging with parents in the CJS is explored later but Baldwin identified that for mothers in particular there were multiple missed opportunities for interventions across the life course of these women, not just at the point of offending and arrest⁷⁹. Frequently, mothers felt the services available for support did not suitably recognise the importance of their maternal identity, and rather than being empowered they felt '*stigmatised, judged, and left floundering*'⁸⁰.

Mothers in prison, especially those who committed serious offences, often described having more limited family support networks than men did⁸¹. This is related to the histories of trauma previously described, as the lack of supportive relationships is often due to coming from a disjointed or complex family unit⁸². It was common that family members became responsible for children whilst their mother was in prison, and the mother's own family dynamics and relationships with her children's new caregiver complicated their ability to continue to 'mother'. Mothers in prison were reliant on caregivers to facilitate contact, and this was made particularly difficult if children were cared for by ex-partners who may have played a role in the mother's imprisonment through violent behaviour⁸³. In addition, being responsible for facilitating contact between children and their mother puts a financial and emotional burden on caregivers which can lead to feelings of tension, frustration, and judgement. This is linked to a mother's loss of identity whilst in prison as previously she may have held most, if not all, of the 'parenting power' and this is reduced, or even eradicated once imprisoned, leading to feelings of replacement and loss.

⁷⁸ [Motherhood Challenged: Exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

⁷⁹ [Motherhood Challenged: A matricentric feminist study exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

⁸⁰ [Maternal imprisonment - Evidence review](#)

⁸¹ Crewe, B., Hulley, S., & Wright, S. (2017). 'The Gendered Pains of Life Imprisonment.' British Journal of Criminology, 57, 1359 – 1378

⁸² [Invisible Women: Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment](#)

⁸³ [Motherhood Challenged: Exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

Impact on children

The extent to which a child will be negatively impacted by parental imprisonment depends on a number of factors, including their age at the time their parent goes to prison, the gender of the imprisoned parent, their relationship prior to imprisonment to the parent in prison and their remaining caregiver, the quality of care received during imprisonment, the nature and frequency of contact, the length of separation, the nature of the parent's offence, and attributions or perceptions of stigma⁸⁴.

Research has shown that children who experience a parent going to prison are more likely than their peers to experience challenging life experiences in the future. These children have an increased likelihood of criminal offending, mental health problems, drug and alcohol addiction, passing away before the age of 65, and stopping education at a younger age⁸⁵. There is also evidence that children with parents in prison are disproportionately represented amongst children accessing mental health services⁸⁶.

The emotional and behavioural impacts of parental imprisonment on children, include disruption to their school experience⁸⁷. In terms of schooling, 59% of prisoners stated they regularly truanted from school; 63% had been suspended or temporarily excluded; and 42% stated they had been permanently excluded or expelled⁸⁸.

Whilst children with parents serving long-term prison sentences may experience the most harmful impacts from their imprisonment due to the extended period of physical separation, children with parents in lower security prisons, serving shorter sentences, or who have repeated experiences with the CJS are also affected. These events and periods of separation are far less evidenced. As discussed earlier, the impact of parental imprisonment often begins at their first interaction with the CJS, usually their parents' arrest. It is not uncommon for children to witness their parent being arrested, and it has been estimated that as many as 80,000 children experience a raid by police at their home each year⁸⁹. Experiencing this can lead to feelings of uncertainty in the following weeks where it is unknown when, or if, a parent will return home. Seeing a parent being arrested can '*leave emotional scars*' and taint their future relationship with the criminal justice system⁹⁰. Similarly, at sentencing, parents can be sentenced to immediate custody meaning there is no opportunity for parents and children to say goodbye to each other, which can be incredibly distressing and further cement any hostility and distrust towards the CJS. Humans show biological responses to experiences of trauma where there is a choice to fight, flee, or freeze. Frequently, children 'freeze' meaning they delay the processing of the incident and do not assimilate the traumatic event, this can lead to long-term memory loss and difficulty in

⁸⁴ [Families of Prisoners: A Review of the Evidence](#)

⁸⁵ [The right to family life: children whose mothers are in prison \(2019\)](#)

⁸⁶ Phillips SD, Burns BJ, Wagner HR, et al. (2002) Parental incarceration among adolescents receiving mental health services. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 11(4): 385–399

⁸⁷ [Risk and protective factors in the resettlement of imprisoned fathers with their families](#)

⁸⁸ Williams, K., Papadopoulou, V., & Booth, N. (2012). Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners. London: Ministry of Justice.

⁸⁹ Tilley-Riley, J. Collateral damage: The impact of witnessing a home raid by the police, on the children and the siblings of offenders in England, 2016. Page 3

⁹⁰ [Perspectives of children and young people with a parent in prison](#)

assessing the meaning of the experience⁹¹, leading to long-term consequences for a child's response to stress. This experience of 'freezing' is particularly relevant in the case of children seeing their parents be arrested and/or sentenced.

Parental imprisonment is considered to be one of the ten adverse childhood experiences which have a significant impact on the long-term health and wellbeing of children. Children who experienced parental imprisonment were five times more likely to have experienced other adverse childhood experiences than children whose parents had not been imprisoned⁹². Higher exposure to adverse childhood experiences results in an increased likelihood of developing harmful health-related and antisocial behaviour, including binge drinking, smoking, and drug use⁹³. These harmful behaviours can lead to a more rapid development of health conditions including diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease and mental illness⁹⁴. Furthermore, there is evidence that children from a Black ethnic background had experienced the highest number of adverse childhood experiences. It is possible that there is a relationship between this and the disproportionate over-representation of Black, Asian, and Ethnic Minority individuals in the CJS.

The inter-generational impact of parent's criminality and imprisonment has been found on child's risk of involvement with the CJS increasing as a result, highlighting the importance of helping children of prisoners as a tool to prevent future crime. Some studies have shown that over two thirds of sons whose fathers had been in prison also offend⁹⁵. For some children, parental imprisonment could be the reason for their criminal behaviour as a means of copying and identifying with their father⁹⁶. Furthermore, for children who have experienced parental imprisonment who then go on to offend, their criminal behaviour starts earlier. With Simmons finding that 45% of boys arrested between the ages of 9 and 12 had parents who had been in prison⁹⁷. Children with a parent in prison are also stigmatised within wider society and it has been suggested that *'the anger and hate caused by the stigma of being a child with a parent in jail can increase the probability of criminal behaviour in the future'*⁹⁸.

It has been argued that criminal parents appear to be the strongest family factor predicting offending⁹⁹. Six explanations have been proposed for the inter-generational transmission of criminal behaviour, 1) inter-generational exposure to multiple risk factors, 2) mediation through environmental risk factors, 3) teaching and co-offending, 4) genetic mechanisms, 5) assertive mating, and 6) official (police and justice) bias. The likelihood is these explanations are intertwined, and transmitted through social learning which posits that when parents are more frequent offenders, children have

⁹¹ [Perspectives of Children and Young People with a Parent in Prison](#)

⁹² Turney, K. (2018). Adverse childhood experiences among children of incarcerated parents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 89, 218-225

⁹³ Health Scotland. Tackling the attainment gap by preventing and responding to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). 2017.

⁹⁴ [The health impact on children affected by parental imprisonment](#)

⁹⁵ Farrington, D. P., Barnes, G. C., & Lambert, S. (1996). The concentration of offending in families. *Legal and criminological psychology*, 1(1), 47-63

⁹⁶ [Perspectives of Children and Young People with a Parent in Prison](#)

⁹⁷ Simmons, C. W. (2003) *California law and the children of prisoners*. Sacramento, CA: California Research Bureau, California State Library.

⁹⁸ Ziebert, R. (2006) No easy answers: The effects of parental incarceration on children. Department of Research & Evaluation Services Alliance for Children and Families. Available at:

<http://www.alliance1.org/Research/articlearchive/Re-entryPresentation12-8-06.pdf>

⁹⁹ [Intergenerational transmission of criminal behaviour: Conviction trajectories of fathers and their children](#)

more opportunities to observe and imitate these behaviours leading to criminal behaviour¹⁰⁰. In addition, offending parents themselves will have been influenced by their own upbringing and if they had observed criminal behaviour this will have affected their own transition into adulthood, parenting styles, and effectiveness of their parenting, which in turn impacts on their children. An empirical research study investigated the relevance of the timing and volume of criminal behaviour in parents on their offsprings offending behaviour¹⁰¹. The findings showed that children of offenders (both sporadic and chronic) had a higher offending and conviction rate than children of non-offenders. The study demonstrate that having a convicted father increases the chance and number of offspring convictions, but trajectories do not follow each other with the intensity of the father's offending not predicting the intensity of the child's offending.

It has been found that the attachment style between a father and their children prior to them entering prison (or being separated following an arrest) can determine the impact on the child, including on their emotions and resilience¹⁰². Therefore, it is not a definite that having a parent in the CJS will have a negative impact on the children, as having strong relationships before prison can endure throughout a prison sentence, but in contrast fragile family relationships and conflicts can persist after release¹⁰³. In addition, this highlights the importance of family-centred policies within the prison system to sustain and strengthen family connections whilst a parent is in prison¹⁰⁴. An interactional model of relationships argues that relationships involve a series of interactions over time, thus the parent/child relationship is a product of and context for parent/child interactions. Meaning that the interactions between a child and parent prior to prison will be of relevance to understanding their interactions during the prison sentence and following¹⁰⁵.

Parental imprisonment can impact a child's development resulting in maladaptive behaviours, this is typically seen through externalising behaviours in boys and internalising behaviours in girls¹⁰⁶. Boys have been found to express their feelings about their parent's imprisonment through anger, fighting, and anti-social behaviour, whereas girls typically cope through withdrawing or isolating themselves and the development of psychosomatic symptoms. It has been suggested that boys struggle to manage the absence of a male role model, whereas girls who live with their mothers whilst their fathers are in prison benefit from their female role models being consistent and available¹⁰⁷. The age a child is at the time of their parents' imprisonment can also result in differences between girls and boys, with evidence showing that girls are more resilient in childhood but more vulnerable in adolescence¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰⁰ [Intergenerational transmission of criminal behaviour: Conviction trajectories of fathers and their children](#)

¹⁰¹ [Intergenerational transmission of criminal behaviour: Conviction trajectories of fathers and their children](#)

¹⁰² [Parental imprisonment: Long-lasting effects on boys' internalizing problems through the life course](#)

¹⁰³ [Risk and protective factors in the resettlement of imprisoned fathers with their families](#)

¹⁰⁴ ['It was just like we were a family again': play as a means to maintain family ties for children visiting an imprisoned parents](#)

¹⁰⁵ Hinde, R. A. (1976) On describing relationships Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines 17: 1 -19

¹⁰⁶ [Children of Prisoners - Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health](#)

¹⁰⁷ [Exploring the Emotional Impact of Parental Imprisonment on Children through Children's, Parents' and Carers' Accounts](#)

¹⁰⁸ Masten AS, Best KM, Garmezy N (1990) Resilience and development: contributions from the study of children who overcome adversity. Development and Psychopathology 2(4) 425-444

Research has found that children affected by maternal imprisonment may show reduced empathy, which is an influential factor for future criminal behaviour, and the impact of this is greater for girls with a mother in prison than for boys¹⁰⁹.

Children have been found to suffer feelings of grief, stigmatisation, and isolation following parental imprisonment¹¹⁰. The vicarious shame and stigma experienced by children can stem from the perceived failure of their mother to meet societal expectation of her role¹¹¹. The effects of having a family member in prison parallel children's experiences of bereavement, including a deterioration in physical and mental health, and in social and financial circumstances¹¹². Experiences of parental imprisonment have also been likened to divorce. Similarities include the sudden and often unexpected departure of a parent, loss of contact, reductions in family income, and emotional impacts on caregivers¹¹³. The trauma incurred by parental imprisonment can manifest as a type of grief with particular characteristics originating from 'secondary prisonisation and 'secondary stigmatisation'¹¹⁴. Prisonisation, as mentioned earlier, is *'the process by which a prisoner become socialised into the culture and life of prison'*. Secondary prisonisation refers to the pain experienced by those visiting a family member in prison. Children with parents in prison experience secondary prisonisation through the changes to their daily routines, this includes physical changes to their home, caregiver and education and changes to the parent/child relationship which becomes constrained by the regime of the prison estate. Secondary stigmatisation is where the consequences of a parent's offence and imprisonment becomes attached to the children, resulting in them being 'othered' within society. Because of this, children of prisoners can be labelled as 'problems', 'a potential criminal', or 'a chip off the old block' and experience different treatment to their peers because of this¹¹⁵. As a result, children begin to see themselves on the margin of society, as their parent in prison is, and this can lead to feelings of grief.

The security of a child's attachment to their parents can be impacted by imprisonment due to the enforced separation, restricted contact, and unstable care giving arrangements, and this disruption can have irreversible effects¹¹⁶. The development of an insecure attachment style due to the separation of children from their parent can lead to deficits in social and moral functioning in adulthood¹¹⁷. Three possible explanations for the association between anti-social behaviour and parental imprisonment have been proffered. The first suggests an interaction between a pre-existing propensity for antisocial behaviour and the stressful experiences caused by parental imprisonment. For example, if children observe their parents responding with anti-social behaviour to stressful life events, they may be socialised into responding with antisocial behaviour to disruptive events such as parental imprisonment. A

¹⁰⁹ [What about me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system](#)

¹¹⁰ [Invisible Women: Understanding women's experiences of long-term imprisonment](#)

¹¹¹ [The Visibility of Children Whose Mothers are Being Sentenced for Criminal Offences in the Courts of England and Wales](#)

¹¹² [Perspectives of Children and Young People With a Parent in Prison](#)

¹¹³ Richards, M. (1992). The separation of children and parents: Some issues and problems. In R. Shaw (Ed.), Prisoners' children: What are the issues? (pp. 3–12). London, England: Routledge.

¹¹⁴ [Direct Harms and Social Consequences: An Analysis of the Impact of Maternal Imprisonment on Dependent Children in England and Wales](#)

¹¹⁵ Codd H (2008) In the Shadow of Prison: Families, Imprisonment and Criminal Justice. Devon: Willan

¹¹⁶ [Mothers in prison: The sentencing of mothers and the rights of the child](#)

¹¹⁷ Bretherton, I., & Munholland, K. A. (2008). Internal working models in attachment relationships: Elaborating a central construct in attachment theory. In J. Cassidy, and P. Shaver (Eds.), Handbook of attachment: Theory, research and clinical applications (2nd Edition) (pp.102- 127). New York: Guildford.

second explanation is that the stigma of having a parent in prison can result in anti-social behaviour, this stigma can result in the labelling of children with parents in prison causing them to internalise these social biases and respond as is expected of them. A final explanation is that confounding variables affect anti-social behaviour in response to parental imprisonment, for example genetic and social influences causing a predisposition¹¹⁸.

A study which conducted interviews with children, prior to and following, their father's release from prison found that many children experienced a sense of loss as a result of their father's absence and found this to be profound and challenging. A key impact of paternal imprisonment in particular on children was that, whilst mothers tended to be the main caregiver (as noted earlier), fathers tended to be the main figure of authority in the home. During a father's imprisonment, many mothers took up this role and children struggled to adapt and acknowledge boundaries mothers put in place. This links to the increase in anti-social behaviour seen amongst children whose fathers are in prison. A study of men from London and their parents found that 71% of boys who experienced parental imprisonment during childhood displayed antisocial behaviours at the age of 32, compared to only 19% of boys whose parents had not been to prison¹¹⁹. Other studies have argued that parental imprisonment has been found to treble the risk of anti-social behaviour in children, which has implications for wider society as imprisoning mothers for non-violent offence for example is estimated to cost more than £17 million over ten years. This is mostly due to the increased likelihood that children with mothers in prison are not in education, employment, or training¹²⁰.

The lives of all children impacted by parental imprisonment are altered, but those experiencing maternal imprisonment experience additional adjustments to their normal life. Only 5% of children impacted by maternal imprisonment remain in their own homes; 9% are looked after by their fathers, 14% are taken into Local Authority care, and the remaining 81% face a variety of different care options¹²¹. This disruption in the placement of children is in part due to a third of mothers in prison being lone parents prior to their imprisonment¹²². Housing can also be disrupted by paternal imprisonment, especially if the father was the key contributor to household income¹²³. Secure and stable housing is an evidenced factor that can influence a person's involvement in crime and violence. Often for children whose mothers enter prison they are moved with little or no warning and in some cases, overcrowding was an issue for children and their caregivers as they were joining new family groupings¹²⁴. Upon release many mothers do not have homes to return to, which in turn impacts whether they can regain custody of their children¹²⁵. This can lead to a 'catch-22' situation

¹¹⁸ [Children's antisocial behaviour, mental health, drug use, and educational performance after parental incarceration: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#)

¹¹⁹ [Parental imprisonment: effects on boys' antisocial behaviour and delinquency through the life-course](#)

¹²⁰ [Unlocking Value: How we all benefit from investing in alternatives to prison for women offenders](#)

¹²¹ [Motherhood Challenged: Exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role](#)

¹²² [Mothers in prison: The sentencing of mothers and the rights of the child](#)

¹²³ Murray, J. & Farrington, D.P., (2008). The effects of parental imprisonment on children. In Tonry, M., (Ed.), Crime and Justice: A Review of Research 37, 133-206. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹²⁴ [Direct Harms and Social Consequences: An Analysis of the Impact of Maternal Imprisonment on Dependent Children in England and Wales](#)

¹²⁵ [Home truths: housing for women in the criminal justice system](#)

whereby women need custody of their children to apply for suitable housing but require suitable housing to be allowed care of their children.

Children with parents in prison have been conceptualised as a '*hidden population of young carers*'¹²⁶. Under the established criteria of being a 'young carer', children with a parent in prison are rarely eligible, i.e. they do not have a parent with a disability, mental illness, or drugs/alcohol problem. In reality though children who have a parent in prison are heavily relied upon by their caregiver, especially through providing significant emotional support and experiencing a distortion in their previous caregiver/child relationship. A qualitative research project investigating the caring experiences of children with a parent in prison found that children were increasingly anxious about their caregiver's wellbeing and mental health. This had an emotional toll on the children themselves who were further isolated from support mechanisms due to the stigma of parental imprisonment causing them to create cover stories as to the location of their parent and distance themselves from friends. Often the remaining parent is experiencing significant challenges themselves, and this can manifest in drug and alcohol use, the onset of mental illnesses or physical manifestations of stress. Children also experienced a shift in roles, being relied upon to support their younger siblings and act as parents themselves¹²⁷. When a father is arrested, the older brother frequently assumes the position of the father, which can bring about confusion for other siblings who do not understand the changing dynamic within their family¹²⁸. Sometimes the remaining caregiver does not want younger children to know about their parents' imprisonment, which can create further pressure and shame for older children. Whilst one research project found that children expressed a sense of pride in their new roles, they also exhibited a sense of frustration of their lost childhood¹²⁹.

Societal perceptions of children are either as '*strong, resourceful and able to work with adults*' or as '*deprived and damaged or ignorant and needing services and education*'¹³⁰. In reality, children often show resilience, adapting and learning from difficult experiences. For example, it has been shown that older children with parents in prison who are supporting younger siblings demonstrated less anxiety than other children¹³¹. Protective factors linked to this idea include the capacity and confidence of children to direct their own lives, continuing to build positive relationships with their parental figures¹³².

The changing roles and responsibilities experienced within a family home whilst a parent is in prison changed the relationships between a child and their parent, in particular their father, when they returned home from prison. When children had assumed a more parental role within the family, there was a perceived lack of legitimacy in the parent returning from prison when they tried to resume their parental

¹²⁶ [Children with a parent in prison England and Wales: A hidden population of young carers](#)

¹²⁷ [Children with a parent in prison England and Wales: A hidden population of young carers](#)

¹²⁸ [Perspectives of Children and Young People with a Parent in Prison](#)

¹²⁹ [Constructive Connections: building resilience of families affected by the criminal justice system](#)

¹³⁰ Alderson P (2005) Designing ethical research with children. In Farrell A (Ed) Ethical research with children. Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press 27-37

¹³¹ Lösel F, Pugh G, Markson L, Souza KA, Lanskey C (2011) Risk and protective factors as predictors of fathers' resettlement and families' adjustment. University of Cambridge Conference; 'Dads inside and Out'

¹³² Masten AS, Obradovic J (2006) Competence and resilience in development. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences 1094: 13-27.

role¹³³. Research has found that children question the returning parents' right to authority and decision-making due to their absence¹³⁴.

¹³³ [Families of Prisoners: A Review of the Evidence](#)

¹³⁴ King, D. (2002). Parents, Children and Prison: The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children. Dublin Institute of Technology: Centre for Social and Educational Research.

Impact on other family members

The imprisonment of a parent has a ripple effect on their wider family, bringing about feelings of sadness and anger, but also altering family structures with many family members suddenly becoming responsible for caring for children.

Phillips and Gates¹³⁵ identified a number of burdens that caregivers of children with a parent in prison experience, including the stigma and shame associated, the increased financial strain, and physical and emotional stress. The 'guilt by association' of having a family member in prison can be worse for caregivers than the stigma prisoners experience as these views manifest in isolation from communities they were previously considered part of¹³⁶.

Caregivers also become responsible, in part, for maintaining the relationship between the child and their parent in prison. Research found in a sample of 100 caregivers, parental imprisonment had a negative effect for 58% of caregivers, no effect for 22%, and an improved effect for 20% of caregivers¹³⁷. The relationship between the caregiver (whether this be the other parent or a family member) and the parent in prison can affect the child's experience of their parents' imprisonment and when this is strained caregivers are reluctant to facilitate contact and visits. These strained relationships have been described as an '*emotional tug of war*' continuing beyond a parents release from prison¹³⁸.

Frequently, children with mothers in prison were cared for by their grandparents, primarily grandmothers. Whilst remaining in some form of their own family structure was appreciated by children, research has shown that there are challenges to having grandparents as caregivers such as their age and health¹³⁹. Moreover, caring for children whose parents are in prison can cause grandparents to feel isolated as there is limited emotional or financial support available for them. Just as children experience a shift in their familial role, when grandparents become caregivers their role changes from '*one which was playful to carrying the responsibilities of main carer*,' which can be a difficult transition for both children and grandparents. Grandparents also become responsible for supporting children through the trauma they are experiencing, which, as explored previously, may result in challenging and anti-social behaviour¹⁴⁰.

¹³⁵ Phillips, S. and Gates, T. (2010) A conceptual framework for understanding the stigmatization of children of incarcerated parents. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 20(3): 286-294

¹³⁶ Turanovic, J., Rodriguez, N. and Pratt, T. (2012) The Collateral Consequences of Incarceration Revisited: A Qualitative Analysis of the Effects on Caregivers of Children of Incarcerated Parents. *Criminology* 50(4): 913-959

¹³⁷ Turanovic, J.J., Rodriguez, N., and Pratt, T.C (2012). The Collateral Consequences of Incarceration Revisited: A Qualitative Analysis of the Effects on Caregivers of Children of Incarcerated Parents. *Criminology* 50(4): 913-59

¹³⁸ Baldwin, L. (forthcoming 2021) Grandmothering in the Context of Criminal Justice: Grandmothers in Prison and Grandmothers as Carers When a Parent is Imprisoned. In: Mantas K. ed. *Grandmothers and Grandmothering: Creative and Critical Contemplations in Honour of our Women Elders*. Ontario: Demeter Press.

¹³⁹ [What about me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system](#)

¹⁴⁰ ["What upsets me is that I can't be Grandma": The Experiences of Grandparent Carers of Children with a Parent in Prison](#)

A recent study¹⁴¹ into the impacts on grandparents acting as primary caregivers for children with a parent in prison found the key themes that defined their experiences were loss of agency, starting over, strain on romantic relationships, shrinking present, shrinking future, isolation and lack of peer support, challenging behaviours, and mortality. Grandparents described feeling as though they had no choice but to care for their grandchildren, especially when the alternative was them entering the care system. Loss characterised the experiences of grandparents, including the loss of time for themselves, their romantic relationships, and their peer groups due to their new 'parental' responsibilities. In addition, grandparents discussed being acutely aware of the disadvantages of parenting at their age, making them increasingly anxious about the future as they continued to grow older.

¹⁴¹ ["What upsets me is that I can't be Grandma": The Experiences of Grandparent Carers of Children with a Parent in Prison](#)

The importance of contact

The most important protective factor for children of prisoners has been identified as the continuation of relationships with their parent, and children having enough information to understand the situation¹⁴². Family networks are highly valued by prisoners and have been associated with reducing re-offending and aiding resettlement¹⁴³. Contact during custody has been found to be crucial to the maintenance of family ties, facilitating prisoner wellbeing, reducing prison infractions, encouraging adjustment to prison life, and supporting successful resettlement¹⁴⁴. Generally, the reduction of social isolation, which is a defining factor of life in prison, can promote prisoner mental wellbeing and has been linked to reduced depression during resettlement¹⁴⁵. In 2013, it was estimated that more than half a million visits were made to prisons in England and Wales. The Criminal Justice Joint Inspections concluded that *'overwhelmingly an offender's family are their most effective resettlement agency'*. There are benefits observed for children as well with continued contact with their parents whilst in prison being considered a protective factor against longer term impacts and is associated with better emotional adjustment and more effective coping skills¹⁴⁶.

Unfortunately, contact between prisoners and their children is controlled and can be dictated by the prison system. For example, it has been found that in male prisons additional family visits can be an incentive offered in return for 'good behaviour' under the Incentives and Earned Privileges schemes and male prisoners are placed on a hierarchical system with some entitled to more visits than others. In comparison, in women's prisons family visits are exempt from this scheme as the guidelines state that children *'should not be penalised from visiting or contacting their mother because of the mother's behaviour'*¹⁴⁷. This inadvertently creates a hierarchy that places a child's relationship with their mother above their relationship with their father.

For parents, visits enabled them to remain emotionally and psychologically present in their child's life. Keeping in touch through letters and phone calls mean they were up to date with their child's daily lives and could share daily experiences in the way they would if they occupied the same space¹⁴⁸. Phone calls and visits have been shown to play different yet significant roles in maintaining the parent/child relationship during a prison sentence. Phone calls act as a conversational form of communication for daily updates and touchpoints, whilst visits (when delivered effectively) support bonding and recreate a sense of family¹⁴⁹. However, it should also be noted that phone calls

¹⁴² [Constructive Connections: building resilience of families affected by the criminal justice system](#)

¹⁴³ [Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners](#)

¹⁴⁴ [A double-edged sword: Children's experiences of visiting a parent in prison in Scotland](#)

¹⁴⁵ Woodall J and Kinsella K (2017) Playwork in prison as a mechanism to support family health and well-being. *Health Education Journal* 76(7): 842–852.

¹⁴⁶ Murray J (2005) The effects of imprisonment on families of prisoners. In: Liebling AM and Maruna S (eds) *The Effects of Imprisonment*. Devon: Willan, pp. 442–462

¹⁴⁷ [Women's Policy Framework](#)

¹⁴⁸ [Children's contact with imprisoned fathers and the father child relationship after release: an interactional perspective](#)

¹⁴⁹ [Children's contact with imprisoned fathers and the father child relationship after release: an interactional perspective](#)

are of limited value for very young children or non-verbal children unable to communicate in this way¹⁵⁰.

However, visits to prison can be intimidating, with children being subjected to sniffer dogs and drugs checks. It has been argued that *'the prison environment is harmful to children's emotional wellbeing and not conducive to quality parent-child interaction'*¹⁵¹. Exploratory research based in Scotland, found that visiting a parent in prison is a *'double-edged sword'*¹⁵² which brought about competing and contrasting emotions. Children were happy to see their parents, but the process of the visits was distressing due to the hostility of prison staff and the lack of privacy and intimacy offered. In addition, the prison environment does not equate to 'normal' family interactions, with many children feeling bored and restless, rather than engaged. Recent research¹⁵³ by Children of Prisoners Europe explored how prison spaces can be made more child-friendly for those visiting a parent in prison. The most important aspects of prison visits for children were *prison waiting and visiting rooms must be child-friendly spaces, security checks for children must be respectful and child-friendly, and imprisoned parents should be able to wear their own clothes when their children visit them*. Children wanted prison visiting rooms to be more welcoming with vibrant colours and materials for activities. They also wanted prison staff to clearly explain to the children what was happening using clear and age-appropriate explanations.

Whilst some research has highlighted positive outcomes for children after contact with their parent in prison including reduced anxiety, especially over their parent's absence, and fewer behaviour problems, other studies have found increased behavioural problems following visits¹⁵⁴. This suggests that it is important to consider what a visit looks and feels like for both the imprisoned parent and the child to ensure that it is valuable and positively contributes to the maintenance of their relationship. Research has shown that when extended visits are allowed between children and parents in prison with structured activities, the parent-child bond is better supported. The evaluation of a play visits scheme based at HMP Leeds investigated the role of play in maintaining family ties¹⁵⁵. The play visits scheme employed a qualified play worker in a designated play area to facilitate supervised play between the prisoner and their child. Positive outcomes were evident for the children as they actively enjoyed the visits, and the boredom and restlessness experienced during standard visits was removed. The findings also showed that, in comparison to standard visits, the play visits improved family connections and bonding between father and child, this was partly because play visits allowed for physical contact which increased feelings of closeness. A key theme that emerged from the evaluation was that play visits were a time where they could *'be a family again'*. The play visits replicated in a small way the home environment, resulting in a more relaxed atmosphere and natural interactions. The damage of entering prison to a father's identity has been discussed previously,

¹⁵⁰ [The impact of COVID-19 prison lockdowns on children with a parent in prison](#)

¹⁵¹ Sharratt K (2014) Children's experiences of contact with imprisoned parents: a comparison between four European countries. *European Journal of Criminology* 11(6): 760–775.

¹⁵² [A double-edged sword: Children's experiences of visiting a parent in prison in Scotland](#)

¹⁵³ [How can we make prison spaces more child-friendly for children visiting a parent? - Children of Prisoners Europe](#)

¹⁵⁴¹⁵⁴ [Children's contact with imprisoned fathers and the father child relationship after release: an interactional perspective](#)

¹⁵⁵ ['It was just like we were a family again': play as a means to maintain family ties for children visiting an imprisoned parent](#)

and this research found that play visits allowed them to re-establish their role as a father, alleviating the social distance they had previously felt from their children¹⁵⁶.

Unsurprisingly, contact between parents in prison and their children was considerably disrupted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Face-to-face contact stopped entirely for a period but restrictions to regimes due to concerns over transmission of Covid-19 also limited prisoners access to phones to be able to speak to their children¹⁵⁷. The immediate cessation of face-to-face visits was found to cause confusion and complex emotions in children, with some reporting that they thought their parent didn't want to see them anymore or perhaps no longer loved them¹⁵⁸ and many blamed themselves for this. Without the re-enforcement of face-to-face visits to support phone calls, young children were unable to recognise or know their parent's voice whilst on the phone. A further impact on children was increased anxiety about the wellbeing of their parent in prison, research found that children, during the pandemic, were asking questions such as *'Will my Dad die?, Do they have enough food? When will we see each other?'*¹⁵⁹. In response to the Covid-19 restrictions, many prisons started to allow prisoners access to video calls. According to the Ministry of Justice¹⁶⁰, 90,000 calls were made between March 2020 and January 2021, however this only equates to one call per person over this period. Whilst the idea was that video calls would support prisoners in maintaining contact with their family, there were difficulties with the system. A key barrier to video calls was that many families with a parent in prison are from lower income families and therefore were not equipped with the digital equipment needed or the digital literacy to be able to effectively use it.

It is clear that maintaining contact between prisoners and their children can be key to supporting the wellbeing of both and encouraging positive behaviours in children. However, it is essential that these visits are well managed, and the impact of the prison environment does not negatively influence the visits.

¹⁵⁶ ['It was just like we were a family again': play as a means to maintain family ties for children visiting an imprisoned parent](#)

¹⁵⁷ [The impact of COVID-19 prison lockdowns on children with a parent in prison](#)

¹⁵⁸ [The impact of COVID-19 prison lockdowns on children with a parent in prison](#)

¹⁵⁹ [The impact of COVID-19 prison lockdowns on children with a parent in prison](#)

¹⁶⁰ [Secure video calls help all prisoners maintain essential family ties during pandemic - GOV.UK](#)

Role of other stakeholders

The role of other stakeholders in supporting parents in the criminal justice system and the children and family members impacted by imprisonment cannot be understated.

There are opportunities at each point of contact with the CJS for parents, and mothers especially, to be supported rather than penalised. It has been repeatedly echoed that where possible alternatives to custody should be the preferable option for pregnant women and those with dependent children (as in most cases women are the primary caregiver)¹⁶¹. However, in 2021 the Ministry of Justice announced the expansion of the female prison estate, building up to 500 new prison places¹⁶². It was argued that this expansion would improve conditions, provide greater opportunities for employment and education, and allow overnight visits with their children. It is not clear whether this has been successful so far and whilst the idea is that this expansion is an improvement for women in prison, it undermines the female offender strategy which aims to reduce the female prison population. In the case of sentencing mothers, a contextualise lens must be applied that understands the *'long trajectories of vulnerability, stretching back before imprisonment – indeed, often as far as the imprisoned mother's own childhood – and forward into the future adult lives of her children'*¹⁶³. However, it has also been argued that a person's role as a mother should be taken into account at the point of punishment, rather than sentencing¹⁶⁴.

Throughout the CJS there is a need for increased visibility of children across the judicial process. It has been argued that children need to be recognised in the sentencing process, with the judge being aware they exist, that their mother is the primary carer, and that imprisonment would bring an end to existing family arrangements. With this understanding, a judge should be able to exercise the discretion and not be constrained by minimum sentences, instead recognising the vulnerabilities of the mother and future impacts on the children¹⁶⁵.

Prisons, and the prison system more widely, are one of the most important stakeholders as they can hold control over how and when those in prison contact or see their family members. A number of barriers within the prison estate need to be addressed to support children visiting their parent. For example, families face challenges such as last-minute transfers of prisoners, insufficient seating in visitors' centres, increased demand for family visits, and prisoners' families being unable to get through the helplines to book visits¹⁶⁶.

Previous research reports have made a number of recommendations to the prison estate, including¹⁶⁷:

¹⁶¹ [The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime](#)

¹⁶² [Extra funding for organisations that steer women away from crime - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁶³ [The Visibility of Children Whose Mothers are Being Sentenced for Criminal Offences in the Courts of England and Wales](#)

¹⁶⁴ Susan Easton 'Dangerous Waters: Taking Account of Impact in Sentencing' (2008) Criminal Law Review 105-120

¹⁶⁵ [The Visibility of Children Whose Mothers are Being Sentenced for Criminal Offences in the Courts of England and Wales](#)

¹⁶⁶ [Children of Prisoners - Fixing a broken system](#)

¹⁶⁷ These recommendations were made by Barnardo's in 2015, so it is possible that some of them have been enacted by individual HMP estates

- All prisons should view visits as a family intervention, under the remit of reducing reoffending, rather than a security risk
- Searches of children and babies should be made more child-friendly and proportionate to the security risks
- Children's visit to male prisons should be separate to the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme, as they are for women's prisons
- The National Offender Management Service should simplify the form and process for applying to the Assisted Prison Visits scheme
- Play facilities and visitor services within prisons should reach a consistent national standard, and the National Offender Management Service should issue guidance for governors, informed by advice from Ofsted
- Children should be permitted bring homework and school reading books into and out of prisons

Fathers for whom financial provision is a key aspect of their paternal identity should be supported to participate in employment whilst imprisoned as this can facilitate men's involvement with their families and maintain their paternal role¹⁶⁸.

Schools are a key stakeholder in supporting children impacted by parental imprisonment. An estimated 7% of children in the UK will experience their father's imprisonment during the school year and almost every school will have at least one child present who has a parent in prison¹⁶⁹. As discussed earlier, children whose parents are in prison are less likely to regularly attend school, achieve higher grades, pursue higher education, and find work after leaving school¹⁷⁰. Children's school experience can be further disrupted by prison visits, many of which take place during school hours, the time commitment of which is exacerbated if a parent is imprisoned a considerable distance from home. Taking children out of school to visit a parent can lead to the child accruing numerous unapproved absences and lead to a breakdown in relationship between the caregiver and the school¹⁷¹.

It is also known that many children are either unaware that their parent is in prison or feel ashamed to disclose this leaving schools unaware of their circumstances. The lack of formal mechanisms to make schools aware of a parent's imprisonment causes the children of prisoners to become hidden. Introducing a system to make schools aware of the children whose parents are imprisoned will assist schools in putting individualised support in place. This is crucial as evidence has shown that positive relationships with teachers can act as a protective factor for children with parents in prison¹⁷². There is already an information safeguarding partnership in place between the police and education in the form of Operation Encompass. Operation Encompass ensures that school's Designated Safeguarding Lead is notified, prior to the start of the next school day, if police have attended a domestic abuse incident where the child

¹⁶⁸ Arditti, J. A., Smock, S. A. & Parkman, T. S. (2005) "It's Been Hard to Be a Father": A Qualitative Exploration of Incarcerated Fatherhood', *Fathering*, 3(3), pp. 267–288.

¹⁶⁹ [School Experiences of Children of Prisoners: Strengthening Support in Schools in England and Wales](#)

¹⁷⁰ [Children of Prisoners - Fixing a Broken System](#)

¹⁷¹ [School Experiences of Children of Prisoners: Strengthening Support in Schools in England and Wales](#)

¹⁷² Losel F. Pugh G. Makson L. Souza K. and Lanskey C. (2012). Risk and protective factors in the resettlement of imprisoned fathers with their families. Final report. University of Cambridge and Ormiston

is related to either of the adults involved¹⁷³. This process could be replicated to inform schools of children whose parents have entered prison. Recommendations for schools highlight the need for them to be connected with statutory services including the local authority. Support from statutory services tends to focus on children who present as ‘at risk’ rather than those who may be ‘*just getting on with it*,’ ensuring a joint approach between schools and these services will help reach children who may be suffering in silence¹⁷⁴.

The charity Children Heard + Seen deliver school assemblies in some regions of the UK to raise awareness of parental imprisonment, amplify the voice of the child, and encourage a more empathetic and understanding approach towards children who have a parent in prison¹⁷⁵. Children Heard + Seen are also in partnership with Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit to deliver ‘Operation Paramount’¹⁷⁶, which uses the Prisons Service Database to identify children whose parents are sent to prison. Operation Paramount was piloted in 4 areas of Thames Valley, with the view to rolling it out across the region this year. From May 2022 to January 2024, 731 children across the Thames Valley were identified as being affected by parental imprisonment, with 79 of them receiving direct support from Children Heard + Seen. The Operation involves a data-sharing platform called *Thames Valley Together*, which allows the VRU to identify families with a parent in prison who may need support but does not rely solely on a self-declaration of parental status. Once identified, the family is contacted by an ‘Operation Paramount Champion’ (an officer or member of police staff) who makes contact with the family. Whilst this Operation does not involve directly informing a school that a child has a parent in prison, this could be incorporated using the Operation Encompass model. To support schools the charity has also created a ‘Model School Policy’¹⁷⁷ for children impacted by parental imprisonment, created in consultation with children and parents they have supported.

As well as providing individualised support and trusted adults in which to confide, school can also be a place where children can escape the challenges in of their ‘new’ family environment and responsibilities and feel able to achieve and be hopeful for their future¹⁷⁸.

It has been reported that unless a child of a prisoner is known to children’s services previously or presents as a ‘child in need’ they are not prioritised for support. There is a need for systematic collection of data on the children of prisoners to ensure they are identified and supported as early as possible¹⁷⁹. It is also necessary to involve children in discussions about the support they want from schools and what would be helpful for them as an individual¹⁸⁰. It has also been suggested that providing a mentor for children to speak to before and after visiting their parent in prison would allow them to explore their feelings, this could also be achieved using art or other creative mediums¹⁸¹.

¹⁷³ [Home : Operation Encompass](#)

¹⁷⁴ [School Experiences of Children of Prisoners: Strengthening Support in Schools in England and Wales](#)

¹⁷⁵ [Support for Organisations - Children Heard and Seen](#)

¹⁷⁶ [Operation Paramount: Recognising and supporting children with a parent in prison - Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit \(tvvpp.co.uk\)](#)

¹⁷⁷ [Children Heard and Seen publish Model School Policy: Parental Imprisonment - Children Heard and Seen](#)

¹⁷⁸ [Constructive Connections: building resilience of families affected by the criminal justice system](#)

¹⁷⁹ [Every night you cry - The realities of having a parent in prison](#)

¹⁸⁰ [School Experiences of Children of Prisoners: Strengthening Support in Schools in England and Wales](#)

¹⁸¹ [School Experiences of Children of Prisoners: Strengthening Support in Schools in England and Wales](#)

Recommendations

Data & Research

- Systematic collection of data on the children of prisoners at the earliest possible point to ensure they are effectively supported
- Data, if collected, on the number of parents in prison in West Yorkshire should be shared with the Violence Reduction Partnership
- Data, if collected, on the number of children visiting their parents in prison in West Yorkshire should be shared with the Violence Reduction Partnership

Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP)

- The VRP should support schools in West Yorkshire to implement a policy to support children impacted by parental imprisonment
- The VRP should investigate 'what works' within prisons in West Yorkshire to support parents' identity, facilitate contact with children, and prepare them for successful resettlement

Criminal Justice System

- Courts should ensure that all reasonable steps have been taken to identify where a convicted person has dependent children
- Where possible alternatives to custody should be offered for pregnant women and those with dependent children

HM Prison Service

- Regular reviews of the family strategy in place in response to feedback from prisoners and their families
- Introduction of more frequent play visits, where possible, to facilitate more natural interactions between parents and their children
- Family days and child-parent visits should cease to be privileges for those in prison
- Prisons should be providing activities within their estates that support prisoners' parental identity beyond facilitating visits
- Consideration should be given to how parents in prison with children who are too young or unable to engage with phone calls can be supported to connect with their children outside of visits
- Parents, especially mothers, should not be placed a considerable distance from their children and efforts should be taken to avoid the last-minute transfer of parents
- Mother and baby units must be effectively funded and equipped to support mothers giving birth in prison to bond with their child

Other stakeholders

- Establishment of a process to notify the relevant local authority and school when a parent is sentenced to custody
- Multi-agency working between local authorities, prisons, probation services, health services and schools to address the needs of prisoners' children and families
- Support offered prior to and at resettlement must be holistic, including housing, employment, and mental health

Conclusion

The increasing prison population in England and Wales will have resulted in more parents being involved with the Criminal Justice System and receiving prison sentences. There is no systematic collection of the number of parents currently in prison or the number of children impacted by parental imprisonment. Parental imprisonment has long-term and wide-reaching consequences for parents, children, and wider family members.

Children with parents involved in the Criminal Justice System are not a homogenous group and the impact parental imprisonment has on children is influenced by a number of factors including a child's developmental stage, family environment, and wider social factors. Involvement with the CJS is intertwined with the influential factors for criminality, and in households where parents are in prison, substance dependence, domestic violence, and poverty are common. These vulnerabilities continue after parental imprisonment, exacerbating the negative impacts on children leaving them at increased risk of criminal offending, mental health problems, drug and alcohol addiction, premature death, and leaving education early. There are opportunities to tackle these risk factors, improving the experience of parental imprisonment for both parents and children.

Looking ahead, the VRP intends to continue to expand our knowledge of data gathering within the Criminal Justice System to understand where information about parents in prison is (or is not) gathered and where this may be lost during an individual's journey through the system. This information will hopefully form a basis to argue for the introduction of a system similar to Operation Encompass for children in West Yorkshire impacted by parental imprisonment.