

Barnardo's Scotland briefing Labour Debate: Justice – Female Offending - 28th January 2015

Key Points

- Prison has a greater detrimental impact on female offenders than their male counterparts when sent to prison, they receive fewer visits, they are more likely to lose tenancies and more importantly contact and custody of their children.
- Children affected by the imprisonment of a parent or family member are a particularly vulnerable and often hidden group.
- There is a lack of a co-ordinated approach, at a Scottish level on how to support children affected by imprisonment. These children remain hidden; they are all too often slipping through the cracks in statutory services. The stigma attached to criminality also means that even if services are working with a child affected, the child might not disclose this information.

Barnardo's is the UK's largest children's charity; we work with some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in Scotland; we do a wide range of work within the justice sector, both inside and outside the prison estate. We run over 120 services and work with over 20,000 children, young people and their families every year throughout Scotland, many of these services provide essential support to families struggling with multiple adversities.

We welcome this Labour debate on justice and more specifically the focus on a different approach to female offending. We also recognize the work carried out by the Scottish Government and their commitment to radical reform in this area.

Impact on Women

Whilst the percentage of women in prison compared to men is very small; there are only 412 women in prison in Scotland compared to around 7,000 men; the evidence shows that females are disproportionately disadvantaged when they are sentenced to custody and maternal imprisonment tends to disrupt families to a much larger extent than paternal imprisonment. When a mother is removed from the family unit the likelihood is the child will also be removed, when a father is sent to prison it is far more likely that the mother will be left behind to support the family as a single parent.

In the last 18 months Barnardo's youth work staff in HMP Cornton Vale have worked with 5 young women under 21yrs who had children. **None of these children were living with their fathers** whilst their mum was in prison. 1 child was living with foster carers, 1 was living with a grandparent and 1 was living with an aunt, 2 children were in the process of being freed for adoption. Our project workers were aware that most of the young women were lacking information about the processes affecting their children whilst they were in prison. The young women were isolated from family and community support, with infrequent visits from their children.

The impact of imprisonment on the relationship between a mother and her children can often be the most devastating. In one of our partnership projects¹ providing a mentoring service for women involved in the criminal justice system, it was shown that of the women with children **only 33% had custody** of them, **45% were in the care of a family member** and **22% were looked after and accommodated**. Furthermore out of a caseload of 21 women, there were 14 dependent children and **none of these children were in the care of their mum**.

Impact on Children

We recently carried out a survey of our children's services in Scotland where we asked staff if they had ever worked with children who had experience of parental imprisonment. These services were not specifically targeted at children with a parent in prison.

- **69% of the 72 staff members** who responded to the survey stated that at some point they had worked with a child who had experienced parental imprisonment.
- Staff cited issues such as **isolation, stigma, secrecy, social exclusion and trauma** among other things. These experiences reflect the international literature on children affected by parental imprisonment and highlight for Barnardo's Scotland just how significant an issue this is within our own services.

The mother of a child in one of our partnership services in Perth² reflected on the impact on her son:

"I noticed my sons behaviour was getting really bad, things like hitting out, wetting the bed since his dad went to prison, I thought this was just happening with me at home until I got a note from his teacher saying that his behaviour was really bad at school since Christmas, disrupting the class, not doing his work and telling lies"

A co-ordinated approach – examples of good practice

Barnardo's recently published an evaluation of our Community Support for Offenders' Families (CSOF) services in Bristol, Wales and the Isle of Wight³. The evaluation highlighted several areas of good practice, in particular the Bristol Charter for Children of Prisoners which was developed by the young people using the service in response to their concerns that they were not being heard. This Charter is now being used as a vehicle to promote change within individual agencies in Bristol. Through direct work the CSOF services were also able to support parents and carers to manage and understand their situation, as well as enabling children to talk about the issues confronting them in a safe, non-stigmatizing environment.

Barnardo's Scotland is also involved in the Thrive Public Social Partnership, funded through the Scottish Government, Early Years Change Fund in Perth & Kinross and Angus where we are working within Perth prison and in the community providing support to both the offender and their families through early intervention and parenting work.

¹ Shine public social partnerships in Ayrshire and Tayside.

² Thrive, see description further on

³ http://www.barnardos.org.uk/16509_csaf_evaluation_v2.pdf

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