

Every night you cry

The realities of having
a parent in prison

**Believe in
children**



Barnardo's

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By Jane Glover



Foreword

In recent years the administrations of all four nations in the UK have paid considerable – and welcome – attention to children, and in particular to those who experience poverty and disadvantage. But one significant group of children still remains invisible when it comes to support for them and their families. Children who have a parent in prison are more likely than others to experience poverty, mental ill health, poor housing and other negative outcomes, but are much less likely to receive any help or assistance. Although government policies refer to them as one of the groups of disadvantaged children who should receive attention, out of 208 local authorities and health boards across the UK, only 20 make any reference to this group in their children’s plan.

It is in all our interests to ensure that these children get the support they need – we know that children of prisoners are more likely themselves to go on to offend. As well as addressing their immediate needs, timely intervention can break this damaging cycle.

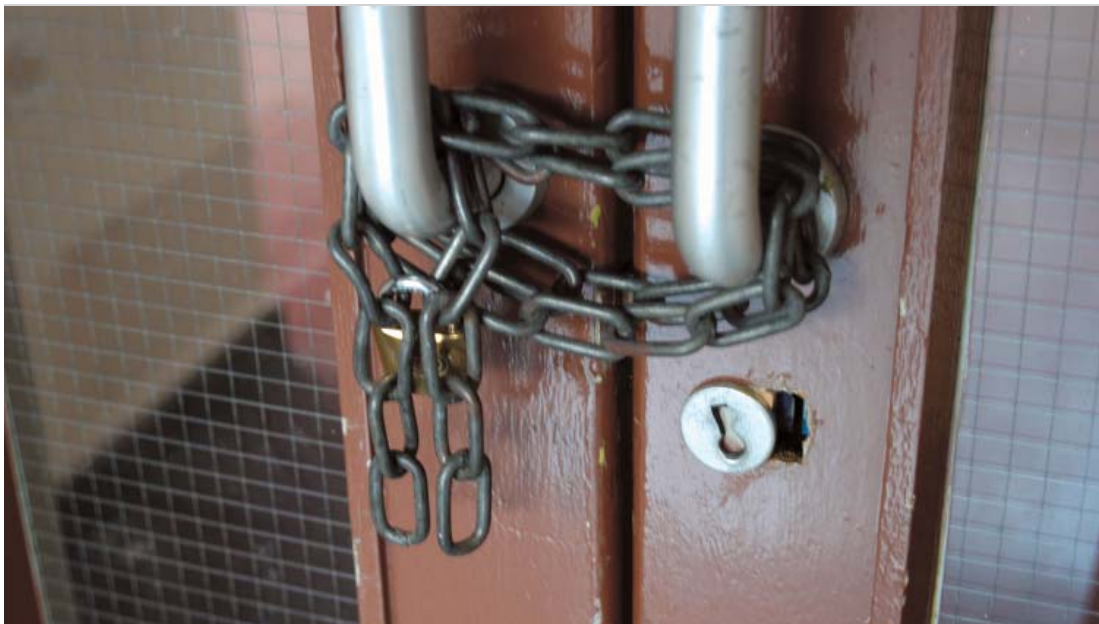
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Background

An estimated 160,000 children in the UK have a parent in prison.¹ This is more than twice the number of children in care and over six times the number of children on the child protection register.² A lack of recording means that this number may be even higher and it is expected to rise as a consequence of sentencing reforms (in the Criminal Justice Act 2003) which have increased the use of custody and the length of prison sentences.³

Policy responses to children and families of prisoners in each of the four UK nations are largely based on the fact that re-offending rates fall if prisoners stay in contact with their families.⁴ Attention has tended to focus on how children can contribute to the prisoner’s rehabilitation, rather than how they are coping, or whether their rights, as children, are upheld. An estimated 45 per cent of prisoners lose touch with their families.⁵

There is a strong association between parental imprisonment and adverse outcomes for children. The children of prisoners are about three times more at risk than their peers of committing antisocial or delinquent behaviour,



Research methodology

Barnardo's identified 15 women whose children have a father in prison, and who were willing to tell their story. Eleven of their children (aged five to 13 years old) also agreed to speak to us. All families were based in or around the Bristol area. The sample was recruited through visiting facilities and support projects at the different prisons.

Thirteen interviews took place in the family home and two were carried out by telephone. The researchers worked with some of the children in a separate room, but most of the discussions took place in an open room, with the mother or other family members present.*



and more than twice as likely to have mental health problems during their life course⁶ Sixty-five per cent of boys with a convicted parent go on to offend.⁷ These children undoubtedly constitute a group 'at risk'. By failing to buffer the impact of parental imprisonment on children, we are failing to break the cycle – not only of offending behaviour, but of a whole spectrum of poor outcomes.

Nonetheless, children of prisoners are a hidden group. *The Children of Offenders Review*⁸ stated that 'we know very little about children of prisoners'⁹ and Tam Baillie, the new Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People, agrees: 'The truth is we don't really know [how many]. The reason we don't know is we simply don't count them, and the reason we don't count them is because they are invisible.'¹⁰ The Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE) recently reviewed the literature¹¹ and concluded that more

research is needed on the experiences of children and young people with a parent in prison.

In this report we capture the reality of parental imprisonment for the children and partners of 15 male prisoners in Bristol, England. Their voices remind us of the profound impact that parental imprisonment can have on a child's well-being and life chances.

Barnardo's supports children and families affected by parental imprisonment through 21 services across all four UK nations. Our experience convinces us that providing support to the whole family is the best way of protecting and promoting positive outcomes for children who have a parent in prison. The work buffering the impact of parental imprisonment will be discussed in the second of this series of briefings, to be published in November 2009.

* Eleven of the mothers identified as 'white' and three as 'mixed parentage'. Information about ethnicity was unavailable for one family. Between them, the mothers had five children who were disabled. Eleven of the mothers lived with their partner immediately prior to his imprisonment; one saw the child's father every day when he came to the family home to help with child care; one had little contact with the father but had been taking the children to visit him in prison. For the remaining two mothers, the relationship status was unclear.

Audit of children's plans (Barnardo's 2009)

Barnardo's (2009) carried out an audit of children's plans across the four UK nations. In England and Wales, 172 local authorities are required to publish children and young people's plans (CYPPs). In Scotland, each unitary authority is expected to publish an integrated children's services plan, and in Northern Ireland the strategy is outlined in the *Northern Ireland children's services plan*.

- In England, just 13 out of 150 CYPPs make reference to children of prisoners as a vulnerable group, and just five of those outline a strategy to address their needs. Three of these receive government funding through the Families do matter initiative (see policy section of this briefing).
- In Wales, two out of 22 CYPPs specifically mentioned children of prisoners.
- In Scotland, four out of 32 integrated children's services plans specifically mention children of prisoners. (Footnote: in 14 cases, our audit relied on the 2005-08 plans because these were the most recent available).
- In Northern Ireland, the four Health and Social Services Boards merged on 1 April 2009 to create one board, but the current *Children's services plan* refers to the four individual boards. Just one of the four plans mentions children of prisoners.

The realities of parental imprisonment

When a parent goes to prison, the effect on those left behind can be profound. The remaining parent may find themselves facing added financial pressures, living with the stigma of what has happened and learning to manage their own emotions while supporting their child through the loss of a parent. Children themselves are not only affected by these changes, but face their own challenges such as supporting their parent, coping with bullying and reconciling conflicting emotions such as grief and anger.

The voices of the parents and children that we spoke to are presented here alongside UK-wide evidence from a literature review carried out by Barnardo's in early 2009. The findings are organised beneath the five ECM outcomes.

Achieving economic well-being?

Imprisonment of a family member is often associated with the loss of a wage, a change to benefit entitlements¹² and additional costs, including childcare and travelling to visit the prisoner (in the UK, more than half of prisoners are held further than 50 miles away from home¹³). Prisoners' families are vulnerable to financial instability, poverty, debt and potential housing disruption, and it is estimated that the average personal cost to the family and relatives of a prisoner is £175 per month.¹⁴ The Assisted Prison Visits Scheme (AVPS) allows reimbursement of travel costs in some cases, but many families remain unaware of the scheme.¹⁵

'Cost is a big thing, petrol money and stuff. He was in Gloucester for two or three months, that was hard... It used to be £15 in petrol, £4 to park and then just say £10 to go and get some canteen stuff in prison. Dinner on the way there

for the kids, which would be £10 from McDonalds.’ (partner of a prisoner)

‘[There is] no pocket money at the moment.’ (12-year-old daughter of a prisoner)

‘They kind of expect you to take money to buy things at the canteen. It does tend to be a little bit expensive really. You can easily spend £10 in that canteen. And you’d feel so bad if you went there with no money to spend, because they don’t get a lot in there and you want to sort of treat them when they’re in there.’ (partner of a prisoner)

Enjoying and achieving?

Children of prisoners face multiple barriers to educational achievement and later employment.¹⁶ In some cases, new care arrangements mean that a child is moved to a new area and school, resulting in loss of friendship groups and disruption to their education.¹⁷ Incidents of bullying are common – some children of prisoners are goaded into being ‘as tough’ as the incarcerated parent. It is not unusual for a child to behave antisocially or to truant from school in such circumstances.^{18, 19} In addition, the practicalities of having a parent in prison can have an impact on a child: inflexible visiting times and long distance placements mean that parents are often left with no alternative but to take a child out of school to visit their father or mother.

‘I asked him what was wrong and he started crying and said that the little boys were laughing at him, saying his dad was in prison and on *Crimestoppers* and stuff. So I told him it was nothing to be embarrassed about and it could happen to anybody. Then he said they were calling him burglar and stuff like that. “Mummy, it upsetted me,” he said.’ (mother)

‘I’ve been thinking about him. Usually when I go out to playtime I think about my dad. Usually when it’s working time I carry on work. Usually at playtime I play with six friends. That’s at the same time as thinking about my dad.’ (seven-year-old girl)

Children’s rights

Children have rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989 (ratified by the UK) to benefit from the guidance of a parent (article 5), to know and be cared for by parents (articles 7 and 8), and to be separated from their parent only when it is in his or her best interests (article 9). Article 9 acknowledges that separation might be caused by intervention of the state, but where that happens, the child should be given information, and has the right to maintain relations and direct contact on a regular basis, if this is in his or her best interests.



Being healthy?

When a parent goes to prison, a child is left coping with a new situation and conflicting emotions: children often still love their father but know he has done wrong; they are aware that others (often including their mother) are critical of him; they may feel guilty when they become bored during a prison visit; they may find that their other parent relies on them for emotional support; they may need to support a younger sibling; and, as they experience these new challenges, they may be keeping their situation a secret from friends, relatives or teachers. Alternatively, for some children, a parent's imprisonment can have some positive outcomes; for example, if it means that an aggressive person has been removed from their home, or a chaotic lifestyle becomes calmer.

The emotional and physical reactions to the loss of a parent to prison have been likened to the grief felt at death.²⁰ However, imprisonment does not always elicit the same sympathetic or supportive response of family members and the community, so normal outlets for grieving can be denied.²¹ At this time, when a child most needs emotional support, the remaining parent can struggle to provide it.²² It is, therefore, unsurprising that children who experience the imprisonment of a parent during their school years are more than twice as likely than their peers to have a mental health problem.²³

'He is affected. He is happy but he is scared... he is more nervous. He says, "be careful, things might catch fire", and things like that.' (mother talking about her 16-year-old son)

'Before, he used to see his father once a week. Now, he doesn't go. He doesn't talk much [but] he has been affected by it. He is very reserved. He doesn't show his emotions. He is not sleeping and he has lost weight.' (mother talking about her 19-year-old son)



'He's quite a happy little child in his own way, when he's not having a paddy... he has got a lot more clingy. His behavioural difficulties have deteriorated since his father has been in prison.' (mother talking about her two-and-a-half-year-old child)

'He don't even talk to no one any more. He's just a closed book. He won't open up to anyone.' (mother talking about her 11-year-old son)

'[I would like] for my sister to have like a counsellor, someone she could talk to because she seems to keep all her feelings inside, then if you say the wrong thing at the wrong time, she'll lash out and be really angry for no complete reason.' (13-year-old girl, when asked, 'what would help?')

'He's a good child, but it's just when the dad rings. They'll talk to their dad, he'll pretend to be fine, and give it a few minutes after and he'll cry. They're lonesome children. They miss their dad.' (mother)

'I didn't know he was going into prison but I felt sad when I found out... I felt sad when I knew he wasn't coming home.' (seven-year-old boy)

'[She] cries a lot because sometimes when I get upset she's upset for me.' (mother talking about her 12-year-old daughter)

Staying safe and making a positive contribution?

Children display a whole range of behavioural responses to the new challenges they face when a parent goes to prison, including defiance; hyperactivity; persistent truanting; lack of concentration; fear and anxiety; nightmares; withdrawal; bed-wetting; aggressive or antisocial behaviour and substance misuse.^{24, 25}

Children of prisoners are three times more likely to engage in anti-social and delinquent behaviour than their peers²⁶, and 65 per cent of boys with a convicted father go on to offend.²⁷

It is generally agreed that there is a strong link between parental imprisonment and anti-social behaviour in children. There is less consensus on whether the link can be explained by factors such as additional financial pressures or whether parental imprisonment causes the anti-social behaviour.^{28, 29} But it is undisputed that a decrease in quality of parental care (and the associated greater influence of the peer group) that can result from parental imprisonment can contribute to anti-social behaviour.³⁰

'I don't know, he's just gone really. Playing up a lot. Real attitude problems and not doing what he's told... It's on his mind constantly. Even in school they're having trouble with him crying in school saying, "I want my dad, I miss my dad". He'll start fights with [his brother]. He will really aggravate him so that [his brother] will hurt him.' (mother talking about 10-year-old son)



Family ties

Many parents are aware of the importance of maintaining a child's relationship with their imprisoned parent, and make every effort to facilitate this bond. However, there are challenges associated with maintaining these ties.

Keeping secrets

Families often want to keep their situation hidden from the local community – particularly from neighbours, the school or social services. In many cases, children receive no explanation about where their parent is or are given an alternative explanation for their parent's absence. Sixty-two per cent of prisoners in Ireland stated that their children did not know that they were in prison.³¹ Parents explain that this is because either their child is too young to understand, or they don't want the child to think prison is an acceptable outcome, or they are concerned their child may be bullied.³² A report by Scotland's (previous) Commissioner for Children and Young People (2008) observed that, 'The family becomes a clencher of secrets: parents from children; parents from the world; children from the world'.³³

This culture of secrecy within the family can prevent a child from getting the support they need to cope.³⁴ One young girl told us: 'Mum doesn't want me to tell'. But when asked, 'if you could have a dream to make school easier while your dad is in prison what would be in that dream?', she told us: 'Talk to people about it... Go to a group thing once in a while... a chance to talk'.

'They shouldn't know. There is still stigma. Bad behaviour. People would think that everybody in the

family is like that. School might think they are the same as their father. There is a lot of ignorance around.' (mother)

'No, [I didn't tell the teacher] because if I tell that my dad's in prison then I'll get told off by my mum.' (seven-year-old girl)

'Well, for the first month he cried because he missed his dad. But I didn't tell him. Because [his dad] is a lorry driver, I told them he was working because I didn't know what was going to happen, whether he was going to get convicted, and they accepted that, but they're not stupid. After a couple of months, they started crying saying they missed their dad, when's he coming home, and I thought then, I've got to tell them he ain't. They did get upset then.' (mother)

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

Visiting the prison

Relationship breakdown between a prisoner and those acting as the primary carer for a child may prevent him or her from being taken to visit an incarcerated parent. Children in care in particular may find visits difficult due to a lack of accompanying adults. Forty-three per cent of sentenced prisoners reported having lost contact with their family since entering prison.³⁵

Prison governors receive no specific funding to meet the costs of family support work, parenting courses, family visitor centres or supervised play areas. This means



any family provision must come from a governor's already stretched and shrinking general prison budget³⁶ and prisons often tend not to be child-friendly settings.³⁷ Visiting procedures often require visitors to wait for long periods of time in uncomfortable, intimidating conditions that lack play facilities.³⁸ A lack of privacy and restrictions on physical contact increase the difficulty in maintaining personal relationships and disciplining children.³⁹

'They've got that kids' bit but they never even open it. It's never open. Never. If you want a toy or something you have to ask this prison officer and they'll pass you one over. I know it's a higher category of prison, which is maybe why, but it's not a different category for the children.' (partner of a prisoner)

'When we get to see him we get to huggle him... because we never get to see him lots of times. We have to wait and then he comes out. He has to sit on the red seat. He's not allowed to get up but he's allowed something to eat, but he's not allowed to get up and choose.' (seven-year-old girl)

'It's not that I don't want to go and see him, there's just a lot of prisons around Bristol that he could be in, instead of being so far a distance away... It's not fair on the family they have to go on such long journeys.' (partner of a prisoner)

'It would have been nice if the staff could have taken a picture of him with his baby. I don't think they think about things like that.' (partner of a prisoner)

'Well, obviously it was good that I could see my dad and stuff but it's, like, really bad that you have to be there. I mean, it's not bad they're in prison, but it's just I don't wanna be there again, because it's a complete waste of time. You wanna be doing other things not going to see your dad in prison.' (13-year-old girl)

'If I could change the prison to make it better for children, I'd let them make it so you could take a picture of them without being asked loads of questions about it and be, like, not so scared about what we're actually going to do, but they could kind of trust us a bit more.' (13-year-old girl)

Government policy across the UK nations

Across the UK, unless a child of a prisoner is known to children's services or presents as a 'child in need' for a different reason, they come very low down the list of priorities and are unlikely to be offered any targeted support. Barnardo's practitioners in each of the four nations report that any funding they secure to support children of prisoners is usually short-term, and any progress that has been made has mainly been driven by the voluntary sector. Many prisons, in partnership with Barnardo's and other charities, have invested in more child-friendly facilities, better visiting centres and family visits, but there is no consistency across the secure estate.⁴⁰

In England, while the government has an increasing awareness of the importance of the families of prisoners, a recent review of UK-wide policy and procedure⁴¹ highlighted the absence of a coherent strategy to consistently support this group through children and family services, and through prisons and probation.

The *Every Child Matters* (ECM) agenda and the *Children's Plan* form the legislative spine for supporting children of prisoners, and a series of strategy papers have identified the need to maintain family ties through multi-agency working when a parent is in prison.

The National Offender Management Service's (NOMS) *Reducing Re-offending Delivery Plan*⁴² identified seven pathways to reduce re-offending (now a mandatory national indicator for local authorities), including maintaining prisoners' relations with children and family.

The *Youth Crime Action Plan*⁴³ reaffirmed a government commitment, first noted in the Cabinet Office *Families at Risk Review*, to ensure that parental risk factors – including

parental imprisonment – would trigger an assessment and provision of any additional services needed. However, funding has yet to be announced.

Despite government recognition of their poor outcomes⁴⁴, children of prisoners are not recognised as 'children in need' and therefore denied the protection and support required by the Children Act 1989. Nor are they recognised as a priority group by local safeguarding boards. Government guidance for children's centres does, however, recognise children of prisoners as a vulnerable group⁴⁵, and guidance for children and young people's plans (CYPPs) identifies children of prisoners as a group requiring additional support.

In the West Midlands, the *Families Do Matter* initiative received funding from the Home Office and HM Treasury under its Invest to Save budget to raise awareness of the needs of prisoners' families, and to forge partnerships between children and family service providers and probation and prison services. The initiative is now expanding its remit, with funding from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) and Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) to include other regions in partnership with Action for Prisoners' Families (APF).**

In Wales, The Welsh Assembly Government's (WAG) strategy for supporting children and young people is underpinned by the adoption of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). *Children and Young People: Rights to Action* (2004)⁴⁶ sets out seven core aims based on the UNCRC, and forms the WAG's overarching policy for implementing the Children Act 2004 in Wales.

The WAG's *Shared Planning for Better Outcomes* (2007) states that children and young people's partnerships should support families of offenders,

and children with parents in prison are included as children and young people 'in special circumstances' in the *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services in Wales* (NSF).⁴⁷ The recently proposed *Children and Families Measure* (2009) introduces new duties on local authorities which may apply to children affected by parental offending, although these children are not explicitly mentioned.

The WAG has issued guidance that children's plans should take account of children and young people experiencing parental separation, including those in families of offenders (WAG, 2007).

In Scotland, *Getting it Right for Every Child*⁴⁸ broadly mirrors the *Every Child Matters* agenda in England. Key ministerial targets for the prison system do not include reference to children and families of prisoners⁴⁹, but the *National Strategy for the Management of Offenders* lists nine "offender outcomes" to reduce re-offending, including 'maintained or improved relationships with families, peers and community' and an '...understanding of the impact of their offending on victims and on their own families'.⁵⁰

Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People reported: 'There is... scope within current policy for a focus on children as members of prisoners' families; however, this is all within a framework aimed at reducing re-offending, with children appearing as potential contributors to satisfaction of this agenda'.⁵¹

In Northern Ireland, the importance of recognising and acknowledging the needs of prisoners and their children is reflected in the Northern Ireland Prison Service resettlement strategy (2004)⁵² and the *Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland*

(2006).⁵³ More broadly, *Families Matter*⁵⁴ promotes social inclusion through developing strong families, communities and services to prevent children being adversely affected by discrimination and social and economic disadvantage.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service has recently published a draft *Family Strategy* (2009) for consultation, which follows a model developed by the National Offender Management Service. The strategy highlights the contribution that families make in supporting prisoners to achieve effective rehabilitation and reduce offending, but also recognises the effect that imprisonment can have on offenders' families; for example, increasing the likelihood of intergenerational offending, mental health problems and financial difficulties.

Key aspects of the strategy include the development of the family support officer role and family centred visits at all three Northern Ireland prisons. The Prison Service has also recently published the draft *Gender-specific Standards for Working with Women Prisoners* (2009) for consultation, which has sections focusing specifically on the affects that having a mother in custody can have on women, children and families.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) recognises that 'effective partnerships between social care, social security, health, education, housing, employment and criminal justice organisations are essential to ensuring equitable access to services for the families of prisoners'. It is currently consulting on a memorandum of understanding⁵⁵ between all agencies and organisations involved in the lives of children and families of prisoners. This will set out respective roles, responsibilities and terms of engagement for partnership working.

** See <http://www.familiesdomatter.org.uk/index.big.php> for more details.

Summary and recommendations

Barnardo's has 21 services working with the children and families of prisoners. We believe that administrations across the UK could do more to ensure that these children do not remain invisible. We would like to see:

- systematic collection of data on the children of prisoners to ensure that they are identified at the earliest opportunity and their support needs addressed
- measures put in place for courts to have information on the impact on the children of a defendant of any sentence they may make
- guidance in place to ensure that the needs of these children are specifically addressed in children's plans

- Westminster and devolved governments consider following the example of DHSSPS, Northern Ireland, in developing a memorandum of understanding between all agencies and organisations involved in the lives of children and families of prisoners – setting out respective roles, responsibilities and terms of engagement for partnership working.

Barnardo's second briefing in this series will outline the work that Barnardo's is doing to help families like these. It will be available in November 2009.

A third briefing in spring 2010 will explore in more detail what policy changes may be needed and how the recommendations from this briefing might be implemented.



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The report was written by
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Some images posed by models.
Names have been changed to
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