Just Visiting

Experiences of children visiting prisons

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Children with a parent in prison

Almost three times more children experience parental imprisonment than are placed in care each year\(^1\). The experience has a significant impact on these children’s life chances: they are twice as likely as other children to experience mental health problems, more likely to be excluded\(^2\), and three times more likely to be involved in offending activity themselves\(^3\). Although it is estimated that more than 200,000\(^4\) children in England and Wales are affected by parental imprisonment, we don’t know who or where they are. They are therefore often ‘hidden’ from the services that they desperately need.

Barnardo’s runs 13 specialist services in prisons and communities across England and Wales to support these vulnerable children. We provide family support services in prisons; work at a strategic level to raise awareness and improve practice amongst frontline professionals; and run three innovative services in Bristol, Wales and the Isle of Wight working with children and families in the community\(^5\).

New figures collated through a Freedom of Information request by Barnardo’s show that there were more than half a million visits made to prisons in England and Wales by children in 2013. Despite the high numbers, children and their families often report the experience as traumatic, with considerable variability in visiting facilities and practice. As one teenager recounted - “Visiting is scary. When you’re being searched you are pulled apart – it is horrible. While some staff are respectful, others look at you like you’re the scum of the earth”.

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1 73,853 children were in care in England and Wales at March 2013


3 Ministry of Justice, Department for Children Schools and Families (2007) *Children of Offenders Review*


5 The Community Support for Offenders Families services were part-funded by NOMS for two years between 2012-14. An evaluation will be published this year
Barnardo’s is calling on the Government to appoint a lead Minister with responsibility for this group of children in England and Wales. By developing a National Action Plan for England, the Minister can bring together and promote best practice for central Government and local agencies, focusing on improving the experiences of children visiting prisons and establishing better support in the community to improve their life chances in the long-term.

In order to support any Plan, the Government needs to put in place mechanisms to identify children with a parent in prison so that they can receive the support they need, whether as part of a prison visit or within the community.

This briefing paper sets out the experience of prison visits from a child’s perspective, highlighting the considerable barriers that can and do prevent children from visiting prisons, as well as setting out children’s experiences once in the prison estate.

**Why is visiting important for children who have a parent in prison?**

Our work with children with a parent in prison has shown us how important it is that they are able to maintain meaningful contact with their parents. While letters and phone calls clearly contribute to this (and research suggests that many children stay in telephone contact with their parents, often speaking on a daily basis) many children welcome the opportunity to visit their parent and to spend quality face to face time with them. One of the most comprehensive studies on children of prisoners, undertaken across four European countries, found that regular contact with parents is crucial in maintaining children’s emotional wellbeing and capacity for resilience. Research by Loper and Tuerk also found that higher levels of contact between mothers and their children during imprisonment greatly assists the

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6 University of Huddersfield (2013) *Children of Prisoners: Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health*

7 Ibid

continuation of their relationship and protects both from experiencing the separation as a total loss.

Evaluation of Barnardo’s work in this area has found that the support we offer has: helped parents to settle back into family life after prison; supported contact with their children whilst in prison; enabled families to access vital information on housing, health and benefit rights; and improved the emotional well-being of children. A recent report by the Criminal Justice Joint Inspections concluded that “overwhelmingly...an offender’s family are the most effective resettlement agency”\(^9\).

Carers who work with children impacted by parental imprisonment have also reported the positive impact that high quality prison visits can have, particularly for children who are not being cared for by a parent. As one carer involved in the evaluation of our work with the Acorn Centre and HMP Askham Grange commented\(^10\):

> “Personally I think it is crucial, they are living essentially with myself, another family... It is really important for them from an identity perspective to know ‘that’s my mum that’s the person that brought me up until a year ago’. And it’s really important that they have that tie with their mum that she has the responsibility with regard to the children... If certain things are raised I will say ‘really we ought to discuss that with your mother and see what she says’.” (a family friend who was caring for a 12 year old son)

As well as being important for children, we also know that maintaining relationships can have a positive impact on offenders, particularly in terms of their rehabilitation. Statistics show that prisoners with family ties are 39 per cent less likely to re-offend than other prisoners\(^11\). Our evaluation also showed that staff at HMP Askham Grange

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\(^9\) Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2014) A joint thematic review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation and Ofsted. Resettlement provision for adult offenders: Accommodation and education, training and employment


\(^11\) Ministry of Justice, Department for Children Schools and Families (2007) Children of Offenders Review
acknowledged that prisoners benefited from spending quality time with their children:

"I certainly haven’t seen any negative impact, only positive things from the women" (prison officer, commenting on the Acorn Centre)

The number of children who visit prisons

Little has previously been known about how many children visit a parent in prison. A Freedom of Information request from Barnardo’s reveals that there were 506,694 visits by children to public prisons in England and Wales in 2013. This amounts to an average of 42,225 visits per month or an average of just under 10,000 prison visits by children a week – the size of 39 primary schools. A number of children will be visiting prisons more than once during a month or a year, however, the same data also showed that the number of unique children visiting prisons is around 18,000 per month.

What do we know about the experiences of children who visit prisons?

Children and families often tell us about their negative experiences when visiting a family member in prison. This is backed by research, which has shown that children can find visiting upsetting and frightening, and searches daunting – particularly the first few times they experienced these. With poor facilities and strict rules around prisoner movement, children can become bored and agitated during visits, reporting that they would prefer fewer restrictions.

This evidence relating to poor visiting standards is supported by a recent report by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman. The report identified a list of areas for improvement including more consistency in

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13 University of Huddersfield (2013) Children of Prisoners: Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health
processing applications and limiting contact between a prisoner and their family, and better adherence to procedures\textsuperscript{14}.

Some of the difficulties experienced by the children and families Barnardo’s works with are highlighted below:

**Travel**

Logistics are a significant issue. Travelling long distances to see their parents puts a strain on young children and on those caring for them. As there are fewer female prisons, this is a particular problem for children with a mother in prison. Research shows that female prisoners are held on average 62 miles away from their homes\textsuperscript{15}. The stress of long travel on children is described by the following case study of Amy and Jack\textsuperscript{16} who are supported by Barnardo’s Bristol Community Support for Offenders’ Families service.

Amy, 9, and Jack, 11, visit their father with their grandparents as their parents are separated. It is a long journey and they set off at 6am to get to the station for the train – its takes them about 4 hours each way to travel. They are anxious to see their Dad but say they get bored on the way. The grandparents say they find the journey stressful as the children are anxious on the way there and they are very tired and can be tearful on the way back.

We know that the stress and cost of long journeys can mean that families feel that they cannot take children to visit a parent as often as they would like, as a parent Barnardo’s is supporting reported:

"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" \textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Prisons and Probation Ombudsman for England and Wales (2014) Learning lessons bulletin, complaints investigations, issue 5: Maintaining family ties
\textsuperscript{16} Names changed
\textsuperscript{17} Gill (2009) Every night you cry: case studies of 15 Bristol families with a father in prison
Financial implications

In addition to the logistical difficulties of travelling long distances, we also know that the families we work with find the costs associated with visiting prohibitive. Research has shown that the average personal cost to the families and relatives of a prisoner is £175 per month and that the loss of prisoners’ or partners’ earnings average £6,200 over a six month period\(^\text{18}\). Costs associated with long distance visits can therefore seem prohibitively high for these families who are often already at risk of poverty and debt – as the following examples from families we work with show:

“\text{It was about £10 there and £10 back. But obviously I don’t get a lot of money each week, because I’m living off benefits and that’s a lot of money really}”\(^\text{19}\)

“\text{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}”\(^\text{20}\)

Whilst Government provides financial assistance to help families struggling with the cost of visiting, this is often not known about, can be difficult to claim and does not provide for all of the associated costs of travelling long distances. One mother of four told us that her 200-mile journeys to prison costing £200 had been crippling the family finances for six months. Only later did someone tell them that they could apply for Government funding for help.

Intimidating environment

The environment that children are faced with can often come across as intimidating and unfriendly. Families we work with have reported that

\(^{18}\) Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007) Poverty and disadvantage among prisoners’ families
\(^{19}\) Gill (2009) She just cries and cries: case studies of Devon families with a father in prison
\(^{20}\) Gill (2009) Every night you cry: case studies of 15 Bristol families with a father in prison
some prisons do little to ensure that young visitors feel safe and welcomed. Children tell us that they are made to feel like they have done something wrong and that guards are unfriendly and intimidating.

Beth, aged 10, has visited her father in prison three or four times. On meeting her Barnardo’s worker she couldn’t remember exactly how many times but said she had found it distressing. Beth said “the prison guards made me angry, they don’t treat you very nice, they made me angry – it was the way they talk to you like you are rubbish”.

The impact of the environment can influence whether a carer feels comfortable bringing a child into the prison environment. Some adults find the whole process too intimidating to risk exposing a child to the experience.

As one parent said:

“Unless they (children) were pestering, I left them behind because it’s just not fair on them. The wait and the whole process of it. You walk through the actual prison and they’re all shouting out of the windows, and the main door of A wing is open so all the prisoners congregate downstairs playing pool and stuff and they’re all shouting at you as you walk past. It’s quite a frightening experience for an adult so for a child I think it’s very intimidating and scary to have to go through.”

Visiting Rules and facilities

Rules around prison visiting can make the experience difficult and stressful for families with children – particularly small children. Children have reported finding restrictions on physical contact or privacy difficult. The amount of time that families have to wait before they can see a prisoner can be very difficult, as one parent Barnardo’s works with explained:

“I go early as I can. It is rubbish that you have to wait for so long. Yesterday I left home at eleven and got there at twelve,”

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21 Gill (2009) She just cries and cries: case studies of Devon families with a father in prison
but there were people before me. I didn’t get called down till two. Then there is all the V.O. stuff (sorting out visiting orders). It takes half an hour out of your visit. They ought to call you down earlier for searches” 22

Visiting times can often be inflexible and, due to the long distance that families often need to travel, some carers have to take children out of school so that they can visit their parent at the set times.

Once in the room in traditional visiting settings, children report being upset that their parents are unable to move from tables. The inability to interact and play is particularly difficult for young children. There are often only minimal opportunities for physical contact, and as children under the age of 18 have to be accompanied on visits, there is little privacy and no opportunity for them to have any one on one time with their parent.

“And it just felt weird because at the tables...you couldn’t like get up and give her a hug and it just felt like you were there but you felt like really distant from her...because you can’t do what you naturally want to do.” (daughter, aged 16) 23

“No, you couldn’t talk to her at all because it was like everybody’s around you, your sisters and your Auntie and everything, so you can’t talk to her really, it’s hard like that.” (son aged 12) 24

“It’s hard for her to leave her dad after the prison visits. She just cries and cries. She knows she’s not going to see him.”

(mother)

22 ibid
24 ibid
Helping to improve the experience of prison visits for children

The work that Barnardo’s and other charities do in a number of prisons shows that the experience of visiting can be enhanced for both the child and the prisoner. We manage a number of prison visitor centres, as well as running family days and child-centred extended visits. These provide a vital opportunity for children to spend time with their family in a more normalised environment. The success of enabling extended visits is shown in the evaluation of our work in the Acorn Unit at HMP Askham Grange - a women’s prison which provides inmates with the opportunity to have extended overnight visits with their children in the separate Acorn Unit:

Julie was sentenced to prison in December 2012. Prior to custody, she was a primary carer for three children; at the point of sentence they were aged 9 years, 3 years and 14 months.

Initially Julie was received into closed conditions and her extended family were finding it difficult to make the journey due to the distance from their home. The children were unsettled during the journey and they had little opportunity to have quality time with their mother during visits.

Julie was then moved to HMP Askham Grange in March 2013 where she was supported in accessing extended children’s visits. They spent time playing games, doing crafts, cooking and eating together as a family. Julie became confident and capable in responding to her youngest child’s needs. Julie’s personal confidence, mental health and emotional well-being were significantly enhanced by the extended contact. Her extended family were able to see Julie maintain her role and this supported her re-integration and re-settlement on release.

It was clear that good quality prison visiting services were beneficial to Julie’s children both when she was in custody and on release, and had a positive effect on her as well.
In Bristol we have worked with a group of children and young people to produce a charter for children of prisoners. This sets out a number of areas that are particularly important for these children, including writing letters and making phone calls to maintain contact, visiting their parents in prison, and being welcomed by prison staff during visits. Bristol City Council has accepted the charter and is working with the young people to take it forward.

**Improving the experiences of children with a parent in prison**

Barnardo’s has been working with children who experience the imprisonment of their mum or dad for over 20 years. We know that many children feel an acute sense of loss and grief when a parent is incarcerated but do not get the support they need. Many do not seek support due to the stigma of having a parent in prison.

Supporting children affected by parental imprisonment benefits the children, their families and the offender. By reducing re-offending\(^{25}\), it also will save the taxpayer money\(^{26}\). That is why Barnardo’s is calling on the Government to identify these children, appoint a lead Minister and create a National Action Plan for England.

These children have done nothing wrong, yet this briefing shows how they can be treated like criminals just because of their parent’s actions. They are a hidden group of victims whose needs must be brought to the fore.

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\(^{25}\) The likelihood of re-offending is reduced by 39% when family ties are maintained. Ministry of Justice, Department for Children Schools and Families (2007) *Children of Offenders Review*

\(^{26}\) The estimated cost per prison place is around £38,000. Ministry of Justice (2012) *Costs per place and costs per prisoner: National Offender Management Service – Annual Report and Accounts 2011/12*
Barnardo’s call to action

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

Action - The Minister should work with the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education to develop a National Action Plan for England. The plan should set out steps to bring together Government departments and local agencies to support children of prisoners. It should focus on improving the experiences of children visiting prisons and establishing better support in the community to improve their life chances in the long-term. As part of the plan, Government should work to better understand the scale of child prison visits and examine the culture and practices that surround them.

Identification - As members of the Families Left Behind Campaign we call on Government to place a statutory duty on courts in England and Wales to ask an individual at the point of sentencing whether they have any children or dependents and, if so, whether the immediate care arrangements that have been put in place for those children are satisfactory.

Barnardo’s work with children impacted by parental imprisonment

Barnardo’s has been working with children affected by parental imprisonment for over 20 years in both prison and community-based settings. This includes working with families in the community to plan, deliver and co-ordinate interventions for the family. We run young people’s groups, therapeutic residential weekends and on-going peer group activities for families. We also run the Department for Education-funded Information Hub on Offenders’ Families with Children for Professionals service - an online information hub for professionals working with children of prisoners - in partnership with Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group.
We train frontline professionals to help them gain a better understanding of the impact of the criminal justice process on children and have set up multi-agency steering groups in several localities. We have set out best practice guidance for frontline professionals in schools and children’s centres through the publication of resource packs. We offer consultancy services to prisons to review their practice around dealing with families of prisoners. We also work within prisons themselves, running visiting centres and supporting family days where parents and their children have extended time together to engage in activities.

In Wales, Barnardo’s ‘Invisible Walls’ programme integrates the interventions offered to men in custody with support, treatment and advice to the whole family. The range of services is tailored to individual families. It includes parenting programmes, individual support for prisoners and family members, producing resettlement plans on release, and advocacy work to improve family support from local services.