

# Locked out

Children's experiences of visiting a parent in prison

More time to visit dad or family member!

Quicker to go into the prison - lose time on visits!

no arguing  
Mum & dad

More toys for kids aged 13 PLUS.

Nice people  


Recognise certain events!

If search was not a pat downs!

Bit more private times!

Believe in children



Barnardo's

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to:

All the children and parents that contributed to this research. We promised them anonymity, so cannot name them.

Governors, officers and Barnardo's staff and volunteers at

- HMP Buckley Hall
- HMP Erlestoke
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- CSOF Isle of Wight
- CSOF Bristol
- Barnardo's i-Hop
- Barnardo's Cymru
- Barnardo's in the South West

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# Executive summary

This report is about children's experiences of visiting a parent in prison. The Government estimates that about 200,000 children are affected by parental imprisonment each year in England and Wales<sup>1</sup>, and each week, children make nearly 10,000 visits to public prisons<sup>2</sup>.

Outcomes tend to be worse for prisoners' children than for their peers. Yet they are hidden, because no one counts them, and stigmatised, because their families often feel ashamed to ask for help. Barnardo's, along with other voluntary organisations, supports prisoners' children both in the community and inside prisons.

We spoke to children at our community services, at prison visitor centres (where families wait before visits) and at prison visit halls. They told us what they experienced during prison visits, what worried them and what they appreciated.

The children and parents we spoke to are asking for small changes to the system, not major policy changes. They simply want their families' lives to be easier and to gain more from the relationship that they have with the parent in prison.

Some prisons, for example HMP Parc in South Wales, approach family visits as a valuable resource in the resettlement of offenders. They view visits as a family intervention, rather than a security risk or a privilege that can be sanctioned. Barnardo's encourages this ethos. As well as improving outcomes for offenders and benefiting the prison, it is more positive for children.

## Recommendations

Based on our research, we are making the following recommendations:

- 1. All prisons should view visits as a family intervention, under the remit of reducing reoffending, rather than a security risk.**

At HMP Parc, where visits are delivered as a family intervention rather than a security function, behaviour within the visits facility has improved, and there is greater engagement in family opportunities. There has been a notable impact on positive resettlement and rehabilitation. In addition, behaviour in the prison has improved and passing of contraband in the visits hall has declined. While we acknowledge that the security and reducing reoffending functions need to work closely together, the responsibility for visits should shift to those prison staff (usually in the reducing re-offending/resettlement team) who have expertise of engaging with families, often in partnership with the voluntary sector.

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1 [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/278837/prisoners-childhood-family-backgrounds.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/278837/prisoners-childhood-family-backgrounds.pdf)

2 Freedom of Information request (2014). Barnardo's, Barkingside.

**2. Searches of children and babies should be made more child-friendly and proportionate to the security risks posed.**

Prison governors should use their discretion to locally amend the guidance for searches of children set out in the National Security Framework.

We also recommend that the National Offender Management Service amends the National Security Framework<sup>3</sup> or issues separate guidance on searching children, to assist governors in setting local procedures. Taking a child-centred approach in the implementation of security measures supports the emotional wellbeing of children.

**3. Children's visits to male prisons should be separate to the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme, as they are for women's prisons.**

The Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme allocates the duration, frequency and quality of visits to prisoners according to their behaviour. This sharply impacts on visits that can be made by their children. Visit entitlements should be separate from the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme, as they are in the women's prisons. In particular, family visit days should not be restricted to 'enhanced' prisoners. Children have a right to contact with their parents, including in circumstances where they are separated from a parent through imprisonment.

**4. The National Offender Management Service should simplify the form and process for applying to the Assisted Prison Visits scheme.**

The Assisted Prison Visits scheme makes a financial contribution towards the cost of visits. However, it takes too long to find out about the scheme and it is too complex to apply, which causes hardship. The guidance and application forms must be simplified. With plans to build new prisons out of towns, this will become even more important as distances travelled for visits increase. Children with a parent in prison are at greater risk of child poverty<sup>4</sup> than their peers. The financial burden of visiting should not be a barrier to children enjoying their right to contact with their parent.

**5. 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.**

There is a lot of variation between prisons in terms of what is provided for children. While many excellent organisations provide play and support

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<sup>3</sup> The guidance for visitor searches is set out in the National Offender Management Service Framework 3.1 PSI 3.1 and can be accessed at [www.justice.gov.uk](http://www.justice.gov.uk). The current framework makes specific reference only to babies.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-and-disadvantage-among-prisoners-families>

facilities in prisons, too many play areas are only for very young children, are often unsupervised or are even locked. Visiting a parent in prison should be made as positive an experience as possible, in order to support family relationships and children's wellbeing.

## 6. Children should be permitted to bring homework and school reading books into and out of prisons.

This is allowed in some, but not all, prisons. Governors should make arrangements to allow children to share their educational progress with parents in prison. This offers an opportunity to link into education for prisoners, many of whom have very low levels of literacy and numeracy. Prisoners may be motivated to improve their skills so that they are able to help their children with their schoolwork. Engaging parents in prison in family learning opportunities will help to mitigate the increased risks of poor educational outcomes for the children of prisoners.

### **Article 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**

Children whose parents do not live together have the right to stay in contact with both parents unless this might hurt the child.

More children are separated from a parent by imprisonment than there are children in care. Thousands of visits to prison are made by children every year.



# Introduction

Barnardo's objective is to make prison visits as positive as possible for children. By influencing policy and disseminating good practice, we aim to encourage positive contact between children and their parents that supports their wellbeing and promotes their rights.

Positive side effects of maintaining protective family relationships are reduced reoffending rates, reduced intergenerational offending and improved school attendance for children affected by parental imprisonment.<sup>5</sup> The likelihood of reoffending is reduced by 39% when family ties are maintained in prison.<sup>6</sup>

We made four visits to three prisons – HMP Buckley Hall, HMP Erlestoke and HMP Guys Marsh – to observe visits, and heard the views of about 25 children and six mothers both individually and in small groups.<sup>7</sup>

## A hidden and vulnerable group

Children affected by parental imprisonment are a poorly recognised, but nonetheless vulnerable, group. Government estimates<sup>8</sup> suggest that there are 200,000 children with a parent in prison in England and Wales – more than three times the number of children in care – but because there is no systematic attempt to identify these children this remains no more than an estimate.

Such uncertainty about a large group of vulnerable children means that services and support they could benefit from may not always be available. Many frontline practitioners in both universal services, such as schools, and targeted services do not systematically identify these children, because they are a 'hidden' group. Without reliable figures, children of prisoners are not included in national or local planning. We are asking the Government to identify prisoners' children, so that effective and consistent support services can be planned and offered. The National Probation Service (NPS) engages with defendants after they have been found guilty to prepare a Pre-Sentence report. This report should be updated by NOMs to include a question on whether defendants have children as currently this question is not routinely asked. This would enable the NPS to signpost defendants to local support services for their families as well obtaining information on the number of children affected. Barnardo's is also calling on the MoJ to collate and publish anonymised information on children identified through the Basic Custody Screening Tool.<sup>9</sup>

It has been well documented that the children of prisoners are a vulnerable group. They are likely to experience mental health problems, embarrassment,

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5 Schools involved with the Invisible Walls programme at HMP Parc note a marked improvement in school attendance for children affected by parental imprisonment.

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

7 See appendix B for methodologies.

8 [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/278837/prisoners-childhood-family-backgrounds.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/278837/prisoners-childhood-family-backgrounds.pdf)

9 The Basic Custody Screening Tool was rolled out to all prisons in March 2015 which probation staff must complete within the first 48 hours of admission to prison. This includes a question on prisoners' children and the local authority where the prisoner lived.

stigma, bullying and poverty, as well as a decrease in school attendance and achievement.<sup>10 11</sup> Life-course studies show that the children of prisoners are likely to go on to be offenders themselves when they grow up.<sup>12 13 14</sup> Research has found that 65 per cent of boys with a parent imprisoned before they were ten went on to offend themselves.<sup>15</sup> This has led some authors to argue that they are ‘the innocent and overlooked victims of the offence’.<sup>16</sup> Supporting these children to maintain their family ties has been shown to improve these outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

Children can also be hidden through stigma. In some cases, parental imprisonment is kept secret even within the family. At a prison visitors centre run by Barnardo’s, some women told us that whether or not they brought their children for a visit, they would not let them know that their father was in prison (most allowed them to believe that it was a workplace). Barnardo’s community services, such as Community Support for Offenders’ Families (CSOF)<sup>18</sup>, and parenting courses, such as Fathers Inside<sup>19</sup>, enable these families to manage their situation honestly and obtain support.

## Barnardo’s work<sup>20</sup>

Children affected by parental imprisonment have been a priority for Barnardo’s for over 20 years. We work with children and families inside prisons by providing play facilities and visitor centres, and in the community through our CSOF services. We also provide parenting courses and other support to offenders and their families. For example, we provide family support, advocacy and family group conferencing services as part of the Invisible Walls Wales programme at HMP Parc and the surrounding community. We also deliver Hidden Sentence training<sup>21</sup> to raise the issue of children affected by parental imprisonment with professionals such as teachers and social workers, and run a national rolling programme of two-hour briefings for multi-agency professionals through our i-Hop service<sup>22</sup>, in partnership with Partners of Prisoners.

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10 COPING (2013) *Children of Prisoners: Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health*. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield.

11 Morgan, J, Leeson, C, Dillon, R C, Wirgman, A L and Needham, M (2013) ‘A Hidden Group of Children’: Support in Schools for Children who Experience Parental Imprisonment. *Children & Society*, Volume 28, Issue 4, pp269-279.

12 Loureiro, T (2010) *Perspectives of children and young people with a parent in prison*. SCCYP, Edinburgh.

13 Comfort, M, Nurse, A M, McKay, T, Kramer, K (2001) ‘Taking children into account: addressing the intergenerational effects of parental incarceration’. *Criminology & Public Policy* (American Society of Criminology), Volume 10, Issue 3, pp839-849.

14 Rakt, M, Murray, J and Nieuwbeerta, P (2011) ‘The long-term effects of paternal imprisonment on criminal trajectories of children’. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Volume 49, Issue 1, pp81-108.

15 Social Care Institute for Excellence (2008) *Children’s and families resource guide 11: Children of prisoners – maintaining family ties*. SCIE, London.

16 Loureiro, T (2010), *ibid*.

17 Teachers involved with Parc prison’s Invisible Walls programme have noted increased attendance rates among children affected by parental imprisonment.

18 [www.barnardos.org.uk/csof\\_evaluation\\_summary.pdf](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/csof_evaluation_summary.pdf)

19 [www.safeground.org.uk/programmes-services/fathers-inside](http://www.safeground.org.uk/programmes-services/fathers-inside)

20 See Appendix A for full details of Barnardo’s work in prisons and the community.

21 [www.i-hop.org.uk/app/answers/detail/a\\_id/116/~/hidden-sentence-training---bristol-children-affected-by-parental-imprisonment](http://www.i-hop.org.uk/app/answers/detail/a_id/116/~/hidden-sentence-training---bristol-children-affected-by-parental-imprisonment)

22 [www.i-hop.org.uk/app/answers/detail/a\\_id/681/](http://www.i-hop.org.uk/app/answers/detail/a_id/681/)



Because of this work, we understand how important it is for children and young people to maintain contact with their parents. Our support work enabled us to hear the views of an otherwise concealed group of children, aged three to 18, for this research.<sup>23</sup> In addition, parents were able to speak with us at our services, and in prison visitor centres.

The work we do in our services allows children and parents to address what has been described as the 'ambiguous loss' of having a parent in prison – 'the grief experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported.'<sup>24</sup>

## Children's rights

Policy making typically focuses on the contribution that maintaining contact with family makes to a prisoner's rehabilitation<sup>25</sup>, rather than recognising it as important for the child's welfare, or acknowledging the child's right to have contact with their parent.<sup>26</sup>

In 1989, the UN stated that children should have the right to maintain relationships with their parents.<sup>27</sup> In 2011, it was explicitly stated by researchers that children should have the right to regularly visit their parent in prison if it is in their own interest to do so.<sup>28</sup> Many researchers argue that adequate and regular prison visits should not be an inconsistent privilege for some, but a consistent policy, which supports children's rights to maintain contact with both their parents.<sup>29 30</sup> Using prison visits as part of an internal system of sanctions and privileges for offenders goes against children's rights. Prison visits should be designed to meet children's needs, for example, prisons should 'provide access to the most generous visitation compatible with public safety'.<sup>31</sup>

## Rehabilitation

The recent joint thematic review of resettlement of adult offenders noted that:

'Helping offenders maintain or restore relationships with their family and friends, where this is appropriate, should be central to the resettlement effort. But too often, these relationships are seen simply as a matter of visits which may be increased or reduced according to an offender's behaviour.'<sup>32</sup>

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23 For research methods, see Appendix B.

24 Doka, K J (1999) *Bereavement Care* Volume 13, Issue 3.

25 Ministry of Justice (2008) Research summary 5: *Factors linked to reoffending*. Ministry of Justice, London.

26 Boudin, C (2011) 'Children of incarcerated parents: the child's constitutional right to the family relationship'. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Volume 101, Issue 1, pp22-118.

27 [www.unicef.org.uk/UNICEFs-Work/UN-Convention](http://www.unicef.org.uk/UNICEFs-Work/UN-Convention)

28 Morgan, J, Leeson, C, Dillon, R C, Wirgman, A L and Needham, M (2013) 'A Hidden Group of Children': Support in Schools for Children who Experience Parental Imprisonment. *Children & Society*, Volume 28, Issue 4, pp269-279.

29 Boudin, C (2011) Children of incarcerated parents: the child's constitutional right to the family relationship. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Volume 101, Issue 1, pp22-118.

30 SCCYP (2011) *Not Seen Not Heard Not Guilty: The Rights and Status of the Children of Prisoners in Scotland*. SCCYP, Edinburgh.

31 Manning, R (2011) 'Punishing the innocent: Children of incarcerated and detained parents'. *Criminal Justice Ethics*, Volume 30, Issue 3, pp267-287.

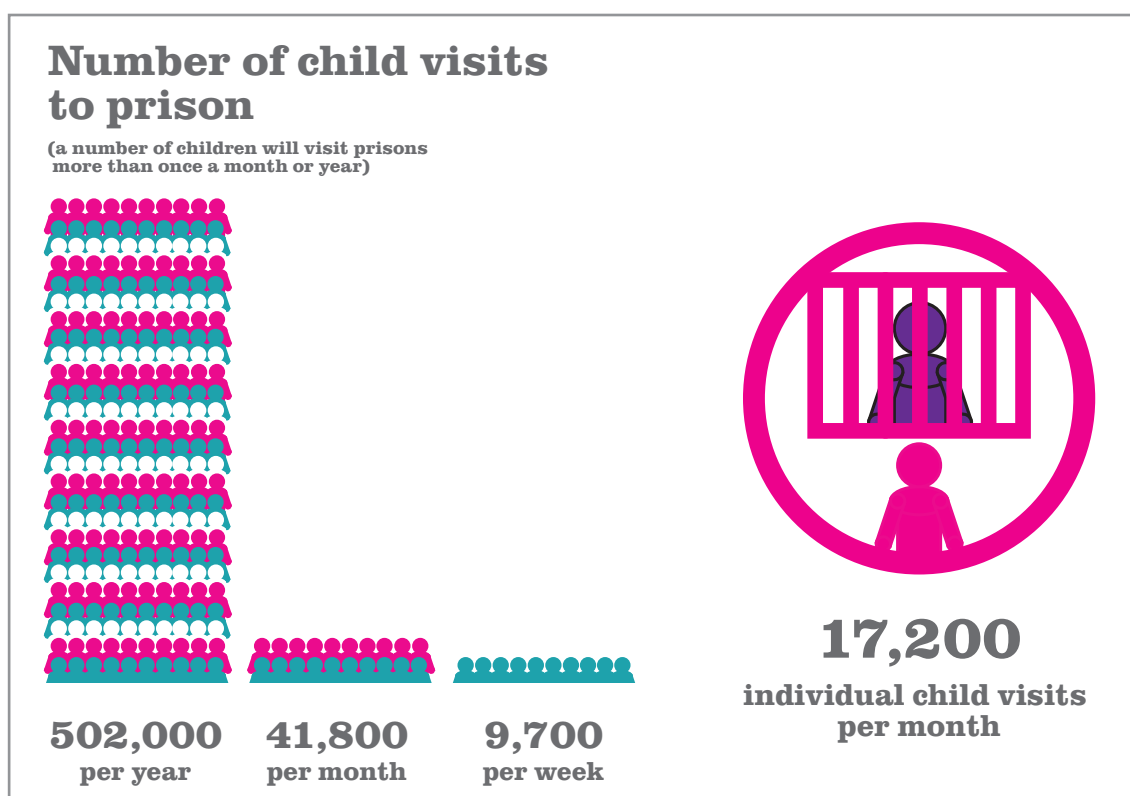
32 [www.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/cjji/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/09/Resettlement-thematic-for-print-Sept-2014.pdf](http://www.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/cjji/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/09/Resettlement-thematic-for-print-Sept-2014.pdf)

The findings and recommendations in this report concur with the joint inspectorate. The visits that are of most benefit to the prisoner, their family, the prison more broadly<sup>33</sup>, and society as a whole, are those that promote family relationships, rather than being viewed as a security risk and a removable privilege.

A well-run, satisfying visit is a potential intervention in the rehabilitation of the offender as it builds ‘social capital’, enabling a stronger reintegration into society<sup>34</sup> for offenders.

## Number of children’s visits to prisons

Improving the experience of prison visits for children is important, because the number of visits by children is significant. A Freedom of Information request by Barnardo’s revealed that there were around 502,000 visits by children to public prisons in England and Wales in 2014. This amounts to an average of 41,800 visits per month or 9,700 prison visits per week (a number of children will visit prisons more than once a month or year).<sup>35</sup> The same data shows that around 17,200 individual children visit prisons each month.



<sup>33</sup> For example, HMP Parc has noted an 82% reduction in drug indications during family visits since following a family intervention model for visits.

<sup>34</sup> Kirkwood, S and McNeill, F (2015) *Integration and Reintegration: Comparing pathways to citizenship through asylum and criminal justice. Criminology and Criminal Justice.*

<sup>35</sup> The visits reported are for the establishments that use the NOMIS system to record visits data. Visits data for some prisons, particularly those not run by the public sector, are therefore not included.

## Previous research

Very little research has been conducted to date about the experiences of children visiting a parent in prison.

In 2013, nine children in Bristol offered their views and produced a charter, which was adopted by Bristol City Council.<sup>36</sup>

PACT Cymru, together with Public Prisons Wales, conducted a consultation about prison visits and the part they play in reducing reoffending, as well as detailing the support they provide for families visiting prisons in Wales. This consultation will inform the way they deliver services in Welsh state prisons in the public sector.<sup>37</sup>

A few research studies have asked families and children about what prison facilities they need in prisons:

- Children would like activities they can do with their imprisoned parent.<sup>38</sup>
- Parents would like to receive information about visiting, and what support services they can access, as soon as possible after their family member is arrested.<sup>39</sup>
- Parents wish to have details of what prison visits entail (for example, searches on arrival), so that they can explain to their children what to expect.<sup>40</sup>
- Search procedures should be kept to a level that causes minimal distress.<sup>41</sup>
- Some prisons work in partnership with charities to ease the stress of the visit, offering special ‘family days’, special child and baby facilities, better visitor centres, and support workers who welcome visitors to the prison.<sup>42 43</sup>
- Waiting times should be kept to a minimum.<sup>44</sup>
- Visit halls should have clean and safe play areas, with age-appropriate toys.<sup>45</sup>

It is clear from our conversations with children and parents and observations in prisons that these needs and wishes are not yet being consistently met.

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36 [www.i-hop.org.uk/ci/fattach/get/66/0/filename/Bristol+Charter+for+children+of+prisoners.pdf](http://www.i-hop.org.uk/ci/fattach/get/66/0/filename/Bristol+Charter+for+children+of+prisoners.pdf)

37 Mulcahy, J (2015) *Every Visit Counts*. HMPS and PACT Cymru.

38 Gill, O (2009) *Every Night You Cry: Case studies of 15 families in Bristol with a father in prison*. Barnardo's, Barkingside.

39 Gill (2009) *ibid*.

40 Barnardo's (2013) *Working with children with a parent in prison: Messages for practice from two Barnardo's pilot services*. Barnardo's, Barkingside.

41 Glover, J (2009) *Every Night You Cry: The realities of having a parent in prison* Barnardo's, Barkingside

42 Glover, J (2009) *Every Night You Cry: The realities of having a parent in prison* Barnardo's, Barkingside

43 Galloway, S, Haynes, A, and Cuthbert, C (2014) *An unfair sentence. All babies count: Spotlight on the Criminal Justice System*. NSPCC, Scotland.

44 Hairston, C F (1996) *Fathers in prison and their children: Visiting policy guidelines*. University of Illinois, Chicago.

45 Hairston, C F (1996) *Fathers in prison and their children: Visiting policy guidelines*. University of Illinois, Chicago.

We did, however, hear of, and observe, examples of visits that were clearly satisfying for children and their families. These were successful because the prison staff understood the value of these visits both to prisoners and to families, and because the families were well supported by volunteers and organisations that understand the issues affecting children and families visiting prisons.

This research asks ‘what needs to be done to ensure that visiting a prison is a decent, satisfactory experience for all children, on every visit, at every prison?’ The children from across England and Wales that we spoke to, make an important contribution to answering this question for policy makers, governors and practitioners.

Crucially, children told us that small changes to certain policies and practices could make big differences to their lives and relationships. This report focuses on six key issues that could improve the experience of prison visiting for this large, but hidden, group.





# Introducing a family intervention approach to visits

## **Recommendation 1: All prisons should view visits as a family intervention, under the remit of reducing reoffending, rather than a security risk.**

‘Sometimes I find prison staff intimidating and they make me feel like I have done something wrong.’ Boy, 14

‘Most of the time staff are polite.’ Girl, 17

Children should not have their right to contact with a parent removed unless there are safeguarding or serious security concerns. We recognise the need for prisons to maintain security, but this should not be a barrier to a family intervention approach.

The prison service officially recognises the benefit to prisoners and families of promoting satisfactory visits in Prison Rule 4. One prison officer described the process as ‘maintaining a balance between humanity and security’.

Prison Rule 4 puts the case for promoting family visits from the point of view of the prison, the prisoner, and their family, at the governor’s discretion:

- (1) Special attention shall be paid to the maintenance of such relationships between a prisoner and his family as are desirable in the best interests of both.
- (2) A prisoner shall be encouraged and assisted to establish and maintain such relations with persons and agencies outside prison as may, in the opinion of the governor, best promote the interests of his family and his own social rehabilitation.<sup>46</sup>

At HMP Parc, the management of social visits and family visits was moved to the family interventions team instead of the security team in 2010. As well as a functional shift, this was, more importantly, a cultural shift. Those officers engage socially with families visiting the prison and encourage fathers to develop positive relationships with their children.

In other prisons, at visits observed for this research, uniformed security staff may have been low key but took a purely surveillance role in the visit hall, engaging only when there was a potential security breach, such as when a mother and father had close physical contact momentarily. Changing the ethos at visits to promote positive family relationships would inform and support all our other recommendations and improve outcomes across the board.

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<sup>46</sup> <http://legislation.data.gov.uk/ukxi/1999/728/part/II/made/data.htm?wrap=true>

### **Family visit days**

Family visit days enable prisoners, their partners, children and other family members to meet in a much more informal way than would normally be possible. Family visit days are held approximately quarterly in the three prisons we visited for about 15 families at a time.

The events are held in the sports hall in Erlestoke and Guys Marsh and in the visit hall at Buckley Hall. Researchers helped out with games and activities at family visit days in these prisons and observed how much children and families appreciated the relaxed atmosphere of these events.

At Erlestoke prison, the family visit was for men who had successfully completed the intensive Fathers Inside parenting course and was combined with a graduation event, at which the prisoners presented what they had learnt on the course. The family day at Guys Marsh prison was a Christmas-themed event with small gifts for each of the children and babies. At each event, prison officers were a low-key presence and at Guys Marsh they were not in uniform.

Craft, sport and play activities were offered for children to do with their fathers. This was unusual, as the children would not normally be able to make things for their fathers, and most were clearly proud to do so.

There was a sense of occasion at the family visit days, with a similar atmosphere to other major celebratory events where families come together. Children and mothers were dressed up and fathers also wore smart clothes, indicating that they were on enhanced status and so did not have to wear prison uniforms. The opportunity to share food as a family was important. At Buckley Hall, families had a chance to go outdoors to an enclosed garden attached to the visit hall.

Although children appreciate family visit days, most of the children in our focus groups had never attended a family visit day. It was the routine domestic visits available to all prisoners that children told us could be improved.



# Searches

## **Recommendation 2: Searches of children and babies should be made more child-friendly and proportionate to the security risks posed.**

‘No one speaks to me when I am being searched.’ Girl, 11

‘Staff can be intimidating, even something as small as a smile would make the searching process less intimidating.’ Girl, 17

Surprisingly, children were calm about some of the routine security checks, such as those involving passive drugs dogs and pat-down searches. Children were prepared to undergo the searches as a preliminary to visiting their parent, which was the main focus for them.

They commonly described prison staff as ‘grumpy’. Some prisons see the work of prison staff with families as key to good rehabilitation prospects. This should mean speaking to the children that are being searched and not, as one child told us, conducting the search in complete silence. Nonetheless, it seemed clear that these searches could be, and often were, carefully handled by prison staff, so as to minimise distress to children.

There are considerable variations in searching. One young girl described the searching of her hair and extensions as ‘gentle’, and reported that she was allowed to keep the loom band bracelet she was wearing. In contrast, another girl, visiting a different prison, was upset that her hair bands were removed and taken away. In a focus group, girls asked to be allowed to keep their small items of jewellery and hair accessories when visiting.

Some search procedures sounded disproportionate. One woman told us that her week-old granddaughter was strip-searched and her daughter’s sterilised bottle of expressed breast milk was opened and sniffed, a distressing experience for the newborn and humiliating for the mother.

The prison service uses a rigorous search process to control the problem of drugs and ‘legal highs’ in prison. However, the extent to which children might be used to smuggle drugs and contraband into prisons seems to be undocumented. Alternative accounts in prisons suggest that most drugs come in ‘over the wall’ and with other adults, not necessarily social visitors, coming into prisons. One recent HMIP inspection<sup>47</sup> report identifies the causes of drugs entering the prison as gang activity (both within and outside the prison), diverted prescription medication (especially Subutex), and illicitly brewed alcohol, noting that:

‘Some of the considerable perimeter fence remained vulnerable to packages being thrown over due to some insufficient preventive netting, and there was

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47 HMIP 2014.

a lack of CCTV coverage. There was also inadequate staff supervision in some areas, including the administration of medication, increasing the potential for the diversion of medication.’

There is no clear evidence that parents use their babies and children to smuggle drugs into prisons. There is, however, evidence<sup>48</sup> that a more child-friendly approach to the search process does not equate with increased security breaches. Searches of very young children could be limited to cases where there is clear intelligence.

Prison governors should use their discretion to locally amend the guidance for searches of children set out in the National Security Framework.<sup>49</sup> We also recommend that the National Offender Management Service amends the National Security Framework or issues separate guidance on searching children, to assist governors in setting local procedures.

Restricting heavier searches to where there is clear intelligence would be more reassuring and encouraging for children, and consistency across the prison service would mean families know what to expect. A child-centred approach in the implementation of security measures supports the emotional wellbeing of children who have to visit prison to have contact with their parent.



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<sup>48</sup> Data currently being collected at HMP Parc

<sup>49</sup> The guidance for visitor searches is set out in the National Offender Management Service Framework 3.1 PSI 3.1 and can be accessed at [www.justice.gov.uk](http://www.justice.gov.uk). The current framework makes specific reference only to babies.

# The Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme

## **Recommendation 3: Children's visits to male prisons should be separate to the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme, as they are for women's prisons.**

'My children have never experienced a family day, and they are three and one. It should be the child's right to have family days, not a carrot or stick for the offender.' Mother

'I would like visits to be longer, as two hours is not long enough when you haven't seen someone for a long time.' Boy, 14

Mothers taking part in our research told us that certain policies have a direct impact on the quality of visits for their children. Recent changes to the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme were frequently discussed by parents and some older teenagers.

The Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme for prisoners was established in 1995. It was reviewed in 2013 and substantial changes came into operation under PSI 30/2013<sup>50</sup> in April 2014.

The Prison Reform Trust described the original scheme as 'an important tool for prison management' that 'encourages responsible behaviour by prisoners'.<sup>51</sup> The scheme had three levels: basic, standard and enhanced. Prisoners were able to move up the levels and gain improved privileges through demonstrating good behaviour and constructive activity, especially through engaging with their rehabilitation.

The privileges are:

1. improved and extra visits
2. eligibility to earn extra pay
3. access to in-cell television
4. opportunity to wear own clothes
5. access to private cash
6. time out of cell for association.

The privileges are issued as a package to prisoners at each level. The television, clothes, cash and association privileges are similar for most prisoners once they are on standard level, but most prisons differentiate duration and frequency

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<sup>50</sup> National Offender Management Service (30 January 2015, fourth revision) Incentives and Earned Privileges.

<sup>51</sup> Prison Reform Trust (April 2014) *Punishment without purpose*.

of visits for each level. The difference in visits allowed between enhanced and basic prisoners can be as much as eight hours a week. In many prisons, enhanced prisoners are also the only prisoners who get a family visit day.

## Changes to the IEP scheme

Following the 2013 review, new restrictions intended to improve rehabilitation and reduce reoffending have been introduced. Much media and public attention focused on changes to material privileges, which are different to the first, social, privilege, 'extra and improved visits', which is central to this research. Three main changes to the IEP scheme have the potential to impact negatively on the number and quality of visits allowed by a prisoner's children.

### Entry level of privilege

An entry level of privilege has been introduced during the first 14 days of incarceration (at which point the prisoner may earn an upgrade to basic privileges). This level includes restrictions on cash to send letters or make phone calls and limitations on visits. Taken together, these restrictions reduce the opportunities for a family to make contact with a prisoner in the early stages of imprisonment, just when children may be in most need of reassurance. This may also be when the parent in prison is most concerned that adequate arrangements have been made for the care of his or her children.

### Behavioural expectations

The behavioural expectations required to reach enhanced level demand a high level of performance, including, for example,

'demonstrate a proactive and self-motivated level of engagement with the requirements of their sentence plans... demonstrate an exemplary attendance and attitude towards purposeful activity such as education/work and where possible seek to obtain qualifications... help other prisoners or prison staff.'

Without meeting this requirement, the prisoner will not be upgraded to enhanced status.

Requirements such as commitment, proactivity, motivation and contributing to the wellbeing of others may be achievable by an able minority of prisoners but very unlikely to be met by those with depression, low mood, withdrawal symptoms or other mental health difficulties. At some prisons, residents on drug rehabilitation programmes are excluded from enhanced status.<sup>52</sup> In addition, many prison regimes, especially in prisons that are overcrowded, provide very limited opportunities for prisoners to demonstrate commitment, proactivity or motivation.

### Behavioural breach triggering an IEP review

Any behavioural breach will now trigger an immediate IEP review, with a presumption to downgrade. This means that changes to visiting arrangements

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<sup>52</sup> HMIP 2012.

could occur at short notice and not through any fault of the child. It is not clear what prisons are doing to motivate prisoners other than using the threat of downgrading.

Basic status prisoners are entitled to a minimum of two hours every four weeks to see their children. Although this varies between prisons, two hours is the standard offer at basic level with greater variations for standard and enhanced status prisoners. In most prisons weekend visits and school holiday family visit days are allocated to enhanced prisoners only, meaning other prisoners' children have to take time off school. Between 2012 and 2014 the proportion of prisoners on basic status increased by 52%. In the same period those on enhanced have decreased by 16%. The current IEP scheme was introduced in 2013.

Source: Table 1: Prisoners by Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) status as at 31 March, 2011 - March 2014 NOMS offender equalities annual report Annex A

## Gender differences in the IEP scheme<sup>53</sup>

Children's visits are officially only part of the IEP scheme in male prisons. The guidance for women's prisons states:

'Losing a parent to imprisonment is often an extremely damaging life event for a child and it is one of the international rights of the child that they are able to keep contact with their parent...'<sup>54</sup>

and continues that:

'Children should not be penalised from visiting or contacting their mother because of the mother's behaviour. The number of visits by children should not be restricted in order to serve the needs of an incentives scheme. Incentives schemes therefore should never be linked to any access to family visits.'<sup>55</sup>

This effectively detaches the duration and frequency of children's visits, and special family visit days, from the IEP in women's prisons.

PSO4800 on Women's' Prisons also quotes the 1989 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child on children's contact with their parents.<sup>56</sup> Barnardo's has worked for many years to promote the importance of children's relationships with their fathers.<sup>57</sup> It is obvious from our work in prisons and from our other work (for example, in over 190 Children's Centres) that relationships between children and their fathers are often strong and caring.

<sup>53</sup> It is not clear that this is in accordance with the Equalities Act of 2010, [www.equalityhumanrights.com/your-rights/human-rights/prisoners-rights](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/your-rights/human-rights/prisoners-rights)

<sup>54</sup> PSO 4800 Women Prisoners 26/04/08 Issue 297.

<sup>55</sup> PSO 4800 Women Prisoners 26/04/08 Issue 297.

<sup>56</sup> Children should not be separated from their parents except in their best interest; that both parents should have responsibility for the child; and that the best interests of the child 'shall be a primary consideration'.

<sup>57</sup> [www.barnardos.org.uk/are\\_we\\_nearly\\_there\\_yet\\_dad.pdf](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/are_we_nearly_there_yet_dad.pdf)



We, therefore, argue that supporting children's rights to contact with their parent should not be determined by the parent's gender. Children's visits should be detached from the IEP scheme in male prisons as they are in women's prisons. In particular, family visit days should not be restricted to 'enhanced' prisoners.<sup>58</sup> PSO4800 makes some insightful suggestions about privileges that could be used to incentivise women. Similar thought should be given to the incentives suitable for men other than their children's visits.

The management of visiting rights is the privilege that impacts most on prisoners' children, sometimes unexpectedly when enhanced status is removed without notice for example. At the same time, prison staff observe that good-quality visits with families help to improve the behaviour of residents, with one prison, paradoxically, noting a reduction in IEP 'adjudications' after a satisfactory family visit day.



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<sup>58</sup> Although it is not clear that women's prisons are heeding this section of PSO4800.



# The Assisted Prison Visits scheme

## Recommendation 4: The National Offender Management Service should simplify the form and process for applying to the Assisted Prison Visits scheme.<sup>59</sup>

‘The taxi from the station and back costs me £38 because there is no bus. I don’t think I can claim that back.’ Mother

‘I can’t believe I’ve been visiting for two years and no one’s told me before about assisted prison visits. I’ve got debts and I’ve gone without food to make sure [my son] sees his daddy.’ Mother

‘It takes me ages to see my dad, I wish he was in a prison closer to home, and then I would be able to see him more.’ Boy, 14

Having a parent in prison creates financial hardship for many children and families. Families face a loss of income and several mothers spoke frankly of the unmanageable debts and fines they had built up since their partner was imprisoned. Many also lacked motivation to get on top of their finances, as they were depressed and overwhelmed by their circumstances. One of the biggest expenses they faced was travel with children to visit the prison.

Financial assistance is available through the Assisted Prison Visits scheme, but the application process is challenging. The ‘customer’ guide<sup>60</sup> to making an application is 21 pages long. The application form is four pages and has to be submitted with original documents to prove eligibility and, following the journey, all receipts, tickets and warrants, plus a stamped confirmation of visit, have to be sent in. Changes to tax credits and benefits have to be evidenced with each application.

The scheme does not cover the whole cost of visits and some modes of travel are not covered. Taxis are not included, despite the fact that many prisons are remote from public transport. A taxi driver we spoke to explained that although there is a bus service to HMP Erlestoke, its timetable does not fit with prison visiting times, even though these are the same each day.

The Assisted Prison Visits scheme is apparently poorly communicated. Two mothers told us that it had taken over six months to find out about the scheme, by which point they had already made several visits, which could not be claimed for retrospectively. At our Bristol CSOF service, one mother patiently explained the system to another. The second woman had difficulty facing the amount of paperwork involved, but the service manager was able to print out the documents for her and help her to complete them. However, many families can’t access this level of peer and service support. A mother waiting in the Erlestoke

<sup>59</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/assisted-prison-visits-form](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assisted-prison-visits-form)

<sup>60</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/251964/Assisted-Prison-Visits-Guide.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251964/Assisted-Prison-Visits-Guide.pdf)

visitor centre did not claim train fares as she said she was not on benefits. However, she did receive Child Tax Credits, which did entitle her to claim. She had not realised this despite having visited many prisons over several years.

One mother explained that the distances travelled meant that she spent over £200 per visit and had to calculate very carefully whether she would be able to pay this in advance, then only claim back a proportion. Her three children and a grandchild could not see their father more than about once every two to three months for this reason. She explained that the distance required an overnight stop so,

‘we’re going up this weekend, staying overnight Saturday night. Some of our family members have clubbed together to give us money for a Travelodge, so that we can afford to do the overnight stop as well.’

Most of this money would not be refunded under the terms of the Assisted Prison Visits scheme.

With plans to close the ‘Victorian’ prisons<sup>61</sup> in town centres and build new prisons outside towns, travel will be increasingly difficult and costly for many. The Assisted Prison Visits scheme should be updated to reflect these changes. For example, shuttle buses should be provided when prisons are more than a mile from public transport. Children with a parent in prison are at greater risk of child poverty<sup>62</sup> than their peers. The financial burden of visiting should not be a barrier to children enjoying their right to contact with their parent.



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61 The treasure in the heart of man, 17 July 2005. Secretary of State’s speech to the Prisoner Learning Alliance.

62 [www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-and-disadvantage-among-prisoners-families-2007](http://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-and-disadvantage-among-prisoners-families-2007)

# Conditions and play facilities in visit halls

**Recommendation 5: 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.**

‘The play area was locked, so I was really bored and my baby sister started crying.’ Girl, 6

‘Every time we’ve been there have been no toys available. In one prison there were none at all and in another they were always locked away – when I asked, I was invited to climb over a wall to get them myself. Two hours is too long to expect a three year old to sit still on a seat with nothing to do.’ Mother

‘It’s quite hard to keep a conversation going with my dad for two hours as we just sit across a table and there’s nothing to do. It would be great if I could show him pictures of what I’ve been doing or we could play a game together.’ Boy, 14

Of course, the children we spoke to focused on the play facilities available to them when they visit and this is an obvious area where small, beneficial changes could be made. Children don’t always want to sit still for up to two hours, so the opportunity to get up and play is important.

Many organisations provide play facilities and crèches in visit halls. In addition to Barnardo’s, these include PACT, Spurgeons, Ormiston Families, NEPACS and POPS. However these organisations rely on volunteers, as well as professional play and family support workers.

Space, equipment and discussions with governors and others are required to set up and sustain play areas. Too many children told us that play areas were often shut, that they didn’t have enough toys, and that many were only suitable for babies and toddlers. Parents said they worried when play areas had no adult supervision, which could occur as many are staffed by volunteers.

Sadly, one child explained in a focus group that she went into the play area even though, at seven, it was already too young for her. Her parents argued during visits, so she would sit in the play area and think about what she knew was going on between her parents. There was nothing and nobody to distract her from these thoughts.

This points to the need for visit centre staff to be equipped to intervene in a positive way when there is conflict during a visit. In this way, the need for support can be identified and the impact on the child minimised. With the right support, families in conflict can improve the ways in which they interact to ensure that visits are a positive experience for children.

Children made other suggestions about how make visit halls more child-friendly. For example, children spoke of sometimes feeling exposed and uncomfortable during general visits. Therefore, there may even be a case for having visits just for parents with children on occasions. These do not need to be the special family visit days.

When allowed, children enjoyed hugging their parent. However, many prison visitor halls have chairs that are fixed in position by a metal bar attached to a low table. Children said they wanted this changed so that the chairs could be moved. Good examples of upholstered modular seating were noted at HMP Erlestoke and HMP Buckley Hall, although an officer observed ‘they are too easy to move about’, reflecting the ongoing concerns with security for prison staff.

The provision of services by volunteers were highly valued by children and parents, but the availability and quality of these services is inconsistent. Some prisons have freshly prepared food for sale, and the children we spoke to said they appreciated ‘nice food’ when it was available. One mother said the local Women’s Institute sold food at the prison she visited. She would buy something for each family member, including the prisoner, and they would have a ‘family meal’. For birthdays, she was able to buy a homemade cake to share. At Buckley Hall, residents, trained by POPS, run a snack bar for visitors, but at Erlestoke the cafeteria is run by a large US facilities company. Some prisons have only vending machines.

### **Improved play facilities at Askham Grange**

Barnardo’s runs the onsite Acorn Children’s Centre at the women’s prison Askham Grange. Staff from the centre worked with the prison to improve the two-hour family visits on weekend afternoons.

While cupboards of toys had been available, they had remained locked during visits. There is now a rota for orderlies to open the cupboards and set out toys in the play area. Different categories of toys are available each month, for example cars one month and a train set another month. The orderlies then tidy the toys back into the cupboard at the end of the visit.

A Barnardo’s staff member is now available to look after a table with craft or other children’s learning activities on either a Saturday or Sunday each week.

Staff have also introduced Barnardo’s Boredom Busting Bags, age-appropriate activity bags that children and young people can bring back to the visit hall table to do with their parent and other family members.



# Bringing in schoolwork

## **Recommendation 6: Children should be permitted to bring homework and school reading books into and out of prisons.**

*'We like it when there is a homework club and we can show our dads what we are doing at school.'* Group of primary school children

Increasingly, prisons are introducing homework clubs and children who had experienced a club (for example at HMP Parc since 2008), found them very positive. Not all prisons offer homework clubs, however. One mother visiting prison without a club described pleading for her young son to be allowed to bring a book through security, as he wanted to show his reading progress to his father. At Buckley Hall, POPS staff photocopy worksheets for children to complete with their fathers.

An outstanding example of bringing children's education into the prison is the 'Children's Showcase' at HMP and YOI Parc in Bridgend. At these events, the child's teacher comes into the prison to discuss their progress with their parent inside, connecting the parent with their education in a way that other parents take for granted. Many parents on the outside realise that to help their children with schoolwork they need to improve their own skills and become motivated to learn for the first time. This is often through attending family learning courses run by primary schools and adult education centres.<sup>63</sup> Allowing children to bring homework, school reports and reading scheme books into prisons may be one way to incentivise prisoners to improve their own literacy and numeracy.

This is an area where education partners could become involved and run the same sort of family learning classes that they provide in the community. Family learning sessions for prisoners could be reinforced with special homework visits, at which parents could share their new skills with their children and vice versa. This would be in keeping with the Secretary of State's emphasis on prisoners undergoing training and learning to gain early release<sup>64</sup>, and could prove highly popular with prisoners and families alike. Engaging parents in prison in family learning opportunities will also help to mitigate the increased risks of poor educational outcomes for the children of prisoners.

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63 [www.redbridge-iae.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=127](http://www.redbridge-iae.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=127)

64 The treasure in the heart of man, 17 July 2005. Secretary of State's speech to the Prisoner Learning Alliance.

# Conclusion and further research

This report focuses on the experiences of children visiting a family member in prison, and makes key recommendations to improve this experience. Our research identified examples of best practice and highlighted the concerns of children and families in our community services and those visiting prisons. We urge policy makers to improve the lives of these vulnerable children, which have been disrupted by crime and imprisonment.

That said, our research also shows that there is considerable appetite in the prison service to understand more, in greater detail, about how family visits can develop prosocial behaviour of prisoners and reduce reoffending.

The Invisible Walls Programme at HMP Parc uses all the available evidence on desistance from crime and the importance of maintaining strong family relationships to inform its intervention model of social and family visits. This has led to improved reoffending rates and better behaviour within the prison. School attendance, wellbeing and health have improved for the children involved, and there are improved outcomes for prisoners around employment, training, education, accommodation, and substance misuse post release. The prison is currently in the process of quantifying those outcomes through evaluation, evidence has been sent to the Ministry of Justice's Data lab<sup>65</sup> to analyse five years' worth of prisoners who have been released through the prison's family interventions unit.<sup>66</sup>

The Owers report on prisons in Northern Ireland emphasised that:

*'It is ... important to identify and strengthen prisoners' 'social capital': the relationships, communities and economic circumstances to which they will return. This requires partnerships with and across government, civil society, voluntary and community organisations and families.'*<sup>67</sup>

As a children's charity, Barnardo's can join with other voluntary organisations working in prisons in supporting, strengthening and sustaining some of those relationships, particularly those with families and children. But, as such, we are not in a position to undertake research into reoffending more broadly, although it is clear that quantifying the benefits to the prison service and reducing reoffending rates are powerful incentives to support family visits, which in turn would make life better for the children we work with.

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<sup>65</sup> <http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/JusticeDataLabFAQSv2.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> A personal communication from the Head of Families Intervention and Invisible Walls Wales at HMP Parc notes that 'Since we changed the function, ethos and culture of visits and family engagement at Parc in 2010, we have noted a significant decline in the amount of times per month that the drug dogs indicate on domestic visitors. Compared to pre 2010 figures, the monthly drop has been around the 70-80 per cent mark. Similarly, we have seen a 99 per cent reduction in physical indiscipline during live visits since the change five years ago. We also note that in comparison to the national average of 48 per cent of prisoners who have 'regular' visits, our own monitoring of our 1,700+ population evidences an uptake on average of 69 per cent. We average around 6,000 visitors a month. More children, families and prisoners want to have visits here and we put that entirely down to the culture shift we have achieved and the overall experience of visiting.'

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.dojni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doj/owers-review-of-the-northern-ireland-prison-service.pdf>



There is a strong case for updating research, which has demonstrated benefits such as improved behaviour, decreased violence, improved reoffending rates, declines in intergenerational offending and the long-term impact of strong family engagement both in the prison and through the gates.<sup>68</sup>

We recommend new research to bring both sides of this important issue together.

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<sup>68</sup> The work of professor Frank McNeil at The University of Glasgow on desistance is informative in this context.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Barnardo's services

Barnardo's has more than 20 years of UK-wide involvement in direct work with children affected by parental imprisonment.

As part of our mission to transform the lives of vulnerable children we work in 960 services in England and Wales, and in related services in Northern Ireland and Scotland, with children affected by parental imprisonment. We also work with children affected by parental imprisonment in many of our other services, such as family support, and in Children's Centres, where specialist training to support children affected by parental imprisonment is now being delivered in Essex and Cumbria.

We also run Community Support for Offenders' Families (CSOF) services,<sup>69</sup> three ground-breaking community-based services in Bristol, Wales and the Isle of Wight. Running these services for prisoners' families over the past three years has added to Barnardo's understanding of the issues faced by children with a parent in prison. As well as providing practical support and advice to families, the services provide a safe, non-stigmatising space for children to come together to discuss the issues they face. Participation groups run by CSOF services have also taken some of those issues forward by raising them with local politicians and others in the community who can affect their outcomes for the better.

Other services are working 'through the gate', supporting children of prisoners both in the community and within prisons. Some of the work, like that at Erlestoke, involves developing the parenting skills of prisoners through courses such as Fathers Inside.<sup>70</sup> Along with other voluntary sector organisations, Barnardo's is involved in delivering services in visitor centres, crèches, and on family visit days, to make sure, as far as possible, visiting a prison is a child-friendly experience.

Barnardo's is also one of the agencies involved in delivering the Invisible Walls Wales project, funded by the Big Lottery Fund until 2016. (G4S is the lead agency and grant holder, working in partnership with Barnardo's, Bridgend County Council, Gwalia and Welsh Centre for Crime and Social Justice.) We give support to the offender and their family for 12 months before release from prison and for up to six months in the community.

The project aims to reduce reoffending by strengthening family ties, and to reduce intergenerational offending by working across HMP Parc and the surrounding community. This model enables the service to work with both the imprisoned fathers and their partners and children living in the community.

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<sup>69</sup> [www.barnardos.org.uk/csof\\_evaluation\\_summary.pdf](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/csof_evaluation_summary.pdf)

<sup>70</sup> [www.safeground.org.uk/programmes-services/fathers-inside/](http://www.safeground.org.uk/programmes-services/fathers-inside/)

Family intervention workers based inside the prison and practitioners based within the community (although workers will often work across both areas) provide a number of interventions and services to prisoners and their families:

- parenting programmes
- advocacy services
- family group conferencing
- volunteering programmes.

We work with any children affected by parental imprisonment. Whatever crime the parent has committed, the child's need for practical support, advice, understanding and empathy is the focus of our work. Although this report is about prison visits, we work with any child who has a parent in prison, even if they do not visit.

## **Appendix B: Research methods**

All the research for this report was conducted with children, young people and mothers visiting male prisons in England and Wales. Prisons policy for Scotland and Northern Ireland is devolved to those nations. Ethical approval was obtained from Barnardo's Research Ethics Committee.

### **Participant observation**

The research for this report aimed to understand the experiences, and gain the views, of children, young people and their families visiting prisons in as direct a way as possible. To do this, we attended family visit days and ordinary domestic visits on four occasions at three prisons – HMP Buckley Hall, HMP Erlestoke and HMP Guys Marsh.

We used participant observation to build an in-depth understanding of these events. This means that one or two researchers volunteered with a Barnardo's support service in a prison to help run a play activity or crèche, while directly observing and noting the facilities and the children's responses to the visit. Many of the children visiting spoke to researchers during their play activities.

Researchers often use recording devices to record speech. Of course, within prisons, this is not possible, so verbatim quotes from the children involved have not been used. Instead, their comments have been reported from notes made by researchers after the visit.

## Focus groups and interviews

To discover children's views about visiting a parent in prison, we conducted two focus groups. Around 25 children and young adults, aged five to 18, took part in the focus groups, which were held at CSOF services in Bristol and in Cardiff. We used a series of activities designed to get the children and young people thinking and talking in a focused way about the aspects of visiting that they found difficult and those that they valued.

Three individual children also spoke to us in short interviews at services and informally about their unique experience of visiting a prison. Numerous conversations took place with children during play activities at prison visits.

As well as children, we spoke to mothers, individually, in a small group at our Bristol CSOF centre, and informally in a prison visitor centre about the issues that affected them when taking their children and babies to visit a parent in prison. The community focus group mothers were a group of five who happened to visit the centre on the same day and the visitor centre mothers were also an opportunistic sample of those who visited that afternoon – approximately seven.

## New statistical analysis

These direct and personal accounts are central to this report, but we also analysed data on the facilities that prisons in England and Wales provide for babies, children and young people who visit. We added to this information with a Freedom of Information request about the numbers of children visiting prisons.

## Literature review

We systematically searched academic literature to discover more about the significance of prison visiting in children's lives and their rights to have contact with their parents. Much has been written about the impact that maintaining strong family ties have on reoffending. This is an important factor when considering prison and rehabilitation more broadly, but our focus is on vulnerable children and young people. The literature we reviewed offered an insight into the rights, needs and opinions of children regarding prison visits.

### **Observations of a domestic visit session at HMP Erlestoke**

HMP Erlestoke is a state-run prison where Barnardo's offers services to prisoners and their families. As well as delivering Safe Ground's 'Fathers Inside' parenting course, we run a cosy visitor centre, where families can wait until visit time. A volunteer also provides one-to-one advice to men who may have care or custody issues relating to their children.

The visit started at 2pm and ended at 3.45. By 11.30, several women and children were waiting in the visitor centre.

The visit hall itself was warm, noisy, and crowded, but fairly comfortable, with modular upholstered seating. A canteen in one corner sold basic fast foods, which the children enjoyed as they were hungry after a long wait. The families appreciated the opportunity to eat together.

Prisoners sat on a single seating module opposite their visitors and some occasionally stood up and moved around. Physical contact was allowed and children cuddled their fathers and sat on their laps.

The play area was screened with Perspex panels from the rest of the hall. It was a good size and was well equipped with toys and games for all ages, with small items locked away and taken out by volunteers when required. It was staffed by a highly experienced and warm volunteer, a retired social worker, helped by the Barnardo's researcher.

Most of the children who visited the play area were girls aged between three and seven. The most popular activities were colouring and drawing and the girls particularly enjoyed using blank greeting cards and envelopes. They made cards using coloured pencils and stickers, wrote messages inside (one girl wishing her parents a Happy Anniversary), sealed them and gave them to their father. Fathers were permitted to take cards and drawings back the wings at the end of the visit.

Children were able to take toys and games out to play with their parents, and two older children came to the play area to get a game to play as a family in the hall. From time to time, two toddlers also came into the play area.



## **Locked out**

Children's experiences  
of visiting a parent  
in prison

Jane Evans

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