

Parents In Prison

Adrienne Katz describes the experience of children when a parent or relative is sent to prison.

At the heart of our penal system is a clash. The welfare principle, which ought to protect children, is crushed by the justice discourse of crime and punishment. The overlooked victims are the children who are punished by the damage to family life when parents or family members are sent to prison, as the research project *Parenting Under Pressure: Prison* shows. This was the result of eighteen months of collecting information and interviewing parents in prison and families of prisoners. The report illuminates the necessity of a re-think about punishment and families, and shows that welfare and justice need not be in opposition. They might even be harnessed to the same end – crime reduction.

The debate might instead take account of the large body of research on the role of fathers in children's development (Boswell and Wedge, 2002, Marsiglio, 1995), the parenting profiles of those already in prisons, the reduction in re-offending when family ties are strong, and the enormous impact the imprisonment of a relative has within a household. It might develop in the direction of the work on the effect of divorce and separation on children (Neale

In practice, when adults are sentenced and again when prison visiting and contact regimes are implemented, the welfare of the child is very often ignored at best and actively harmed at worst. Of the prison mothers we surveyed, almost half reported that their children had no say in arrangements made for their care. But more telling than this – the tiniest steps that could have been taken for the child's welfare were often neglected. For example, a three week old baby was required to wait forty minutes in the wind and rain outside a visitors' centre for the only bus, which regularly came 45 minutes after the centre closed. Small babies were aggressively searched and sniffer dogs terrified toddlers. After the children had been travelling and waiting around for hours, there was seldom any reasonably healthy food for children available for sale in visitors' centres. Fathers having a visit from a toddler were not allowed to leave their chair to play or respond.

The *Parenting Under Pressure: Prison* project sought to interview prison parents about how they maintain a parent/child relationship while inside, and how they deal with their relationships with partners and relatives. At the same time another arm of the

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and Smart, 2001). It might also include greater awareness of the role of communication between children and non-resident fathers (Catan *et al* 1997).

As the prison population topped 70,000, in autumn 2002, 125,000 children were thought to be affected by having a parent inside, but that does not include those with a sibling or non-parental relative in prison. Well over 11,000 prisoners were held more than 100 miles from home, causing immense suffering to children and often impoverished families. The rules of the assisted visits scheme mean that many families don't qualify because they live in more unconventional family types that – while increasingly common – are not recognised by the scheme.

In most circumstances involving the welfare of the child, the *Children Act 1989* is the principle by which decisions are made for children if parents are parting. Children also have a right to maintain contact (unless harmed) with a parent from whom they are separated. Under the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, children should be protected from any form of discrimination or punishment on the basis of their parent's status or activities (Article 2). In addition, their own views should be sought on decisions affecting their best interests, while the Human Rights Act enshrines respect for family life.

project worked with relatives of prisoners and focused on the parenting aspect of the relationship. This included parents on the outside with a child inside. 347 prison parents completed a questionnaire and over 100 gave one to one interviews or sent written contributions. A further 71 family members gave one to one interviews. These interviewees ranged in age from seven to 74.

Children already experiencing the loss of a parent and sometimes the poverty plunge that accompanies the loss of this person's income (from whatever source) also regularly face aggression and attacks from neighbours, shame because the story has appeared in the local newspapers, and days lost from school while they go to visit the parent in prison. Visiting times are set so that it is impossible to fit visits around school hours, or to visit and still manage to pick up a child from school. This leads to an either/or choice – visit or school? In many families, hanging together by the thinnest of threads, visits win out if there is enough money to go and a VO has arrived. If children's friends know about the situation they may be supportive but more often children are bullied. Families may move away to another part of the country suddenly and a child may be ripped away from everything familiar and other sources of



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emotional support.

Another fundamental issue for children is that many families decide not to tell them the truth. Some children imagine that their absent parent has simply abandoned them, others never know why they have suddenly had to move. There are others who guess at the truth or simply read the notices during visits, and their imaginations begin to create a scenario far worse than the truth. Some children said they believed their Dad was in a dungeon, others that he was in a terrible hospital or army.

These children also lose out because their remaining parent (it was most often their mother or grandmother) may herself be so traumatised by the whole experience that she cannot effectively parent. Mothers often felt that the prisoner had it relatively easy: "I feel that my punishment has been worse than that of my husband. He has had a lot of support, some people even praised him for what he did, he's had work, made friends. Life out here just seems to be one long struggle."

Desperate mothers talked of turning to drink or anti-depressants: "I could go for so long," said Karen 38, "and then I'd shut myself upstairs in my room. I turned to drink in a big way as well. I'm getting counselling now. I just couldn't handle it so I tried to shut it all out." Her daughter, 'K.' age 16, remembers: "My Mum used to sit in a chair in the corner of the living room and just stare at the walls for ages." Her Dad is inside. 'K.' herself was in court not long afterwards for burglary – she had gone to live with her boyfriend because she could not take the tension at home, and got involved in supporting his heroin habit. She is now pregnant.

Inside prisons, 51% of men aged 22 and under were fathers, while 79% of women aged 22 or under were mothers. Their children were inevitably very young and a vital opportunity to prepare the next generation for parenthood and build their family ties was often lost despite some examples of good practice.

Outside we met mothers who did not know for two days and nights where their teenager had been taken after sentencing.

Others don't know about visits, and what they are allowed to take in for their child. Shock, denial, anger, guilt and despair create emotional tinderboxes that flare with the slightest flame. The suicide rate among remand prisoners is high, but we also found family members taking overdoses. The repercussions amongst sisters, grandmothers, fathers and especially mothers outside is so severe that the children in their care suffer hugely. These children should be recognised as vulnerable or they in turn might become destabilized, marginalized, excluded and pose new problems in turn.

But these families inhabit a secret parallel world - in the words of novelist Rachel Billington who wrote the foreword 'A world lived parallel to the ordinary world, but... hardly known about or understood... This is a world vibrant with unhappiness and pain but also shot through with hope and love. A first step towards changing that secret world for the better... is to open a door so that we cannot overlook these parallel lives any longer.'

Adrienne Katz is Chief Executive of *Young Voice*, a charity making young people's views heard, and editor of *Parenting under Pressure: Prison*, reviewed in this issue.

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