

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Families and Imprisonment

Q How many people going to prison leave a partner or spouse behind?

A According to a Home Office survey carried out in 2001, 55% of male prisoners and a third of female prisoners had been living with a spouse or partner before imprisonment.

Q How many prisoners have children?

A Research carried out in the early 2000s found that 59% of male prisoners, and 66% of female prisoners, had dependent children under the age of 18. Most mothers going to prison leave behind children who are under 10 years old.

According to the Government around 170,000 children a year become separated from one of their parents as a consequence of imprisonment.

Q How many prisoners are single parents?

A At least a third of mothers in prison are estimated to be single parents.

Q What are the kinds of problem experienced by prisoners' families?

A Prisoners' families are likely to experience a range of problems as a consequence of their partner, parent or relative being imprisoned. These include:

- Financial and housing difficulties, caused by the loss of the prisoner's income. This can be especially damaging if the prisoner is the breadwinner and/or the tenant or homeowner.

- Emotional complaints, for example anxiety, depression, mood swings and disturbed sleep, inability to concentrate and unwillingness to communicate with others. Nearly 30% of children of prisoners suffer from significant mental health problems, compared to 10% of children in the general population.
- Health problems, often exacerbated by poverty and lack of adequate housing.

Q Who cares for the children once a parent is imprisoned?

A Only 5% of children remain in their home following their mother's imprisonment.

Research carried out in the late 1990s showed that of the children with a mother in prison, 25% were cared for by their father or their mother's partner/husband. 25% were cared for by their grandparents and 29% by other family members or friends. 12% of the children had been taken into care, were in foster homes or had been adopted.

Q How easy is it for families to stay in contact with an imprisoned relative, partner or parent?

A It can be very difficult. Many prisoners are held a long way away from their families, often in prisons which are in rural and inaccessible locations. The average distance of a prisoner from home is 50 miles for men and 58 miles for women. Visiting can therefore be expensive, tiring and time consuming, and can be impossible for some people if there is no public transport to reach the prison. Some people on low incomes may be able to apply for financial assistance under the Assisted Prisons Visits Scheme but this is not well known.

Booking visits can also be a frustrating process, with lines often engaged. Visits may be at times which clash with work and school commitments. Prisoners making phone calls have to pay very high rates, over five times more expensive than the national call box rate.

Visiting itself can be a long-drawn and stressful experience. Some prisons do not have provisions for visitors and/or children, which means that visitors may have to wait outside, with no toilet facilities or refreshments, often after long journeys. They may be subject to intrusive search procedures and drug dogs may be used. The prison surroundings can be intimidating and feel hostile. Many prisoners do not wish their children to go through such a fraught process.

Although the prison population has been rising continuously since the late 1990s, the number of prison visits has in fact declined. It is estimated that nearly half of all prisoners lose contact with their families while serving their sentence, with many separating from their partners or spouses.

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