

Prisoners' Children – Key Facts

"I missed him loads...It was my birthday 2 days after he went away which was horrible. Me and my sister we bought a puppy at Christmas so that when we had town visits we could take him for a walk with Dad like we used to before he went away."
(Claire, 15)

- Over 135,000 people are committed to custody each year in England and Wales, leaving behind them children, partners, parents and other family members to share the stigma but not the guilt.
- At least 150,000 children in England and Wales experience the imprisonment of a parent each year. As a result, a minimum of 7% of the child population will live through the imprisonment of a parent during their time in school¹.
- 66% of women prisoners have dependent children. Of those, 34% have children under 5 and 40% have children aged from 5 to 10². For the majority of these, imprisonment is the first time they have been separated from one another³.
- It is estimated that more than 17,700 children are separated from their mothers by imprisonment each year. At least a third of imprisoned mothers are lone parents.⁴
- There are 15 women's prisons in England. Only seven have Mother and Baby Units, which are reserved for mothers who have children under the age of 18 months. A small minority of mothers are able to stay with their infants in such specialised units as spaces are few (currently 84 overall⁵). Prisoners who want to apply for a place can get help and advice from Mother and Baby Liaison Officers, who work in every women's prison⁶.
- In 1997 HM Prisons Inspectorate found that of the children whose mother was in prison, 25% were cared for by their father or their mother's new spouse or partner; 25% by their grandmothers; 29% by other family members or friends; 12% were in care, with foster parents, or had been adopted⁷.

¹ DfES (2003) *Every Child Matters*

² Home Office Research Study 108

³ Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners*

⁴ Prison Reform Trust, *Prison Factfile* November 2006

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk/adviceandsupport/prison_life/femaleprisoners/

⁷ HM Prisons Inspectorate (1997) *Women in Prison: A Thematic Review*

- In 2004 92% of fathers in prison reported their partner was looking after the children, compared to 25% of mothers⁸.
- There is no official agency catering for the needs of prisoners' families and children and no information or support is routinely offered to them.
- Following the imprisonment of a parent children are often left feeling confused, guilty, scared and as if 'their world has fallen apart'⁹. Among the emotional and health problems that children often experience are: becoming withdrawn or secretive; displaying anger or defiance (especially against authority figures); attention-seeking or self-destructive behaviour; low self-esteem; poor educational performance¹⁰. Nearly 30% of children with a parent in prison experience mental health problems, compared with 10% of the general population¹¹.
- Incarceration of a parent can affect children in a variety of other ways, including reduced family income, home and school moves, disrupted relationships, stigma, shame, decreased social support.
- Children and families can play a significant role in supporting offenders¹² and prisoners are less likely to re-offend if good family relationships are maintained throughout their sentence¹³. Positive contact with family and friends on release can help successful resettlement.
- However, a significant proportion of children lose contact with their imprisoned mother or father, and many parents separate during imprisonment. Visits to prisons have been decreasing in recent years as prisoners tend to get moved further from home because of overcrowding. Because there are very few women's prisons across the country, mothers are particularly likely to be a long way from home. Booking visits is also often problematic and can mean relatives are unable to get through to prison telephone booking lines.
- Visiting a parent in prison can be an upsetting and frightening experience for many children. Long journeys, waiting at the prison gates, searches and sniffer dogs, an environment where physical contact or play is difficult can all exacerbate the problem.¹⁴

The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* outlines basic rights that all children should enjoy. The following articles from the Convention from are particularly relevant to children with an imprisoned parent:

⁸ Home Office (2004) *Women's Offending Reduction Programme Action Plan*

⁹ Mazza, K (2002) 'And the World Fell Apart: The Children of Incarcerated Fathers', *Families in Society*, 83:5/6, pp.521-529

¹⁰ *Exploring the needs of young people with a prisoner in the family*. 2003 Action for Prisoners' Families

¹¹ *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners*. Social Exclusion Unit 2002

¹² Home Office, NOMS May 2007

<http://noms.homeoffice.gov.uk/managing-offenders/reducing-re-offending/children-families/>

¹³ Niven, S and Stewart, D (2005) *Resettlement Outcomes on Release from Prison, Home Office Findings* 248

¹⁴ See e.g. Murray, J (2003) *Fathers in Prison*, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge

- children who have been separated from their parents have the right to maintain personal relations and personal contact, unless this is contrary to their best interests (Article 9c);
- children's best interests should be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them (Article 3);
- both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child (Article 18);
- children have the right to express and have their views considered in all matters affecting them (Article 12);
- all the rights in the Convention apply to all children without discrimination, irrespective of their parent's status (Article 2).
- *UNICEF* states that the imprisonment of parents, particularly of mothers of dependent young children, is deeply problematic, because the child is being punished along with the parent. Where young children are concerned the effects can be particularly catastrophic to them and costly to the State (both immediately, in terms of providing for the children's care, and long term, in terms of the social problems arising from early separation)¹⁵.
- Recent research found that imprisonment costs state agencies (NHS, social services) an average of £4,800 over six months per family. Families provide financial support for an imprisoned relative averaging £208 over six months, together with around £60 of clothing costs and just under £400 of visiting costs over such a period¹⁶.
- Research has also indicated that children who have experienced the incarceration of a parent are more likely to become involved in offending themselves.
- *UNICEF* states that to avoid the trauma of separation, young infants should not be separated from their mothers and should be accommodated together with them wherever possible. However, a much better solution would be to find more constructive sanctions to deal with parents' offending.¹⁷

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¹⁵ UNICEF (2002) *Convention on the Rights of the Child Implementation Handbook*

¹⁶ Smith, R, Grimshaw, R, Romeo, R and Knapp, M (2007) *Poverty and Disadvantage among Prisoners' Families*, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies and Joseph Rowntree Foundation

¹⁷ UNICEF *ibid*