



Briefing Paper

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Troubled Families Affected by Imprisonment

People affected by imprisonment come from all walks of life, and each family situation is unique. For some, it is imprisonment itself which may be the trigger for becoming a troubled family. Many families show great resilience and cope remarkably well with the traumatic experiences of arrest, trial and imprisonment, and re-establish relationships after release. Nonetheless, for a very significant number of imprisoned parents, their children, and those caring for them, the research evidence reveals particularly high levels of long term underlying need. For many families, this is exacerbated by imprisonment, triggering an immediate crisis situation. The evidence about prisoners' families with children shows a high degree of overlap with the defining characteristics of 'troubled families', with many children living in poverty, in insecure housing, and on the edge of care.

Prisoners are drawn from the most socially deprived sections of society (Houchin, 2005). Imprisonment itself brings a multitude of challenges for families who already face systematic impoverishment and disadvantage in the wake of a prison sentence (Smith et al., 2007). Criminal justice and social welfare policy combine to impoverish, disadvantage, and exclude the relatives of people in prison – in particular prisoners' children (Smith et al., 2007).

Lifetime of Social Exclusion

Those who end up in prison have often faced a lifetime of distress, disadvantage and social exclusion prior to their incarceration. Briefly, here are a few social characteristics of the prison population:

- **27% of people in prison have been taken into care** compared with 2% of the general population.
- **47% of male prisoners and 50% of female prisoners ran away from home** as a child compared with 11% of the general population.
- **29% of prisoners** reported experiencing emotional, sexual, or physical **abuse** as a child. These offenders had a higher one-year reconviction rate than those who did not (58% compared with 50%).
- **42% of prisoners** had been expelled or permanently **excluded from school**. 63% of offenders who had been expelled or permanently excluded from school were reconvicted for an offence within a year, compared with 44% of offenders who were not.



Compared with the general population, parents in prison are:

- **thirteen times as likely** to have been **unemployed**
- **two and a half times as likely** to have had a **family member convicted** of a criminal offence
- **six times as likely** to have been a **young father**
- **fifteen times as likely** to be **HIV positive**

Added Distress and Social Costs of Imprisonment

A recent report funded by the Joseph Rowntree Trust (Smith et al., 2007), found several disadvantages associated with imprisonment included: housing disruption; high rates of depression and physical illness among adults and children; and permanent loss of a parent through deportation of foreign national prisoners.

Additionally, the study noted that the pressures borne by families throughout a term of imprisonment had a destabilising or fragmentary impact on relationships, with negative implications for reunion after release (Smith et al., 2007).

Families were vulnerable to financial instability, poverty and debt: household incomes fell as the prisoners' income was lost; those who cared for prisoners' children left paid work; and damaging financial transitions caused further disruption (Smith et al., 2007).

There is a considerable risk that a prison sentence might actually make the factors associated with re-offending worse. While in prison...

- ... **one third of people** lose their home,
- ... **two-thirds of people** lose their job,
- ... **over a fifth of people** face increased financial problems,
- ... **over two-fifths of people** lose contact with their family (SEU, 2002).

There are also **real dangers of mental and physical health deteriorating further**, of life and thinking skills being eroded, and of prisoners being introduced to drugs (SEU, 2002).



Children of Prisoners & the Specific Risks They Face

Recent estimates suggest that around 200,000 children will experience the imprisonment of their parent at some point during the year (Williams, et al 2012). Imprisonment has a specifically disturbing effect that threatens family and childhood development (Smith, et al 2003).

Evidence suggests that there is a strong association between parental imprisonment and adverse outcomes for children. Children of prisoners have about three times the risk for antisocial–delinquent behaviour, mental health problems and other adverse outcomes, compared to their peers (SCIE 2008).

Further, evidence is emerging about increased financial hardship among those caring for prisoners' children and supporting the prisoner, and about how imprisonment both creates and entrenches existing poverty (Smith, et al 2003).

Imprisonment disrupts a family's finances through a reduction in income – loss of the prisoner's income, exit from paid work to fulfil caring responsibilities, financial transitions – and new expenses associated with subsidising the imprisonment (Smith, et al 2003).

Additionally, as the material costs of imprisonment accumulate, family members pull back from the relationships and norms that usually bind them together (Braman, 2004).

Children of incarcerated parents...

- **experience a greater total number of risk factors than other children.** As the total number of risk factors increases, so too does the likelihood that children develop serious problems. (Phillips et al., 2002; Phillips et al., 2004; and Phillips et al., 2007)
- ...are **more likely to live with caregivers who abuse drugs, have mental health problems, or are inadequately educated** (Phillips and Gleeson, unknown date).
- ... are **more likely to live in single-parent families and in households with incomes below poverty level** (Phillips et al., 2007).
- ... are **more likely to experience sexual abuse or physical abuse; and are subject to multiple changes in residences and caregivers** (Phillips et al., 2006).
- ... are at **increased risk of living in poverty or experiencing household instability independent of other family problems** (Phillips et al., 2009).
- ...are **exposed to more risk factors** than other children and experience very diverse risks that require tailored services (Phillips and Gleeson).



Children whose **mothers** are imprisoned...

- ... will often be separated from her for the first time ever. **85% of mothers involved in the justice system, prison was the first time they had been separated from their children** for any significant length of time (Prison Reform Trust, 2011).
- ... will be forced to leave their home. **Only 5% of prisoners' children, who previously lived with their mothers, will remain in their home** following their mother's incarceration (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).
- ... are **more frequently exposed to substance abuse, domestic violence, and extreme poverty** than children whose mothers had never been arrested. Even when compared to other children who have been involved with social welfare service (Phillips et al., 2009).
- ... will be cared for by family or friends who have also experienced extreme hardship. **Most kinship carers are poor, unemployed**, often struggle **with health issues** (such as arthritis, diabetes or high blood pressure), are likely to have **mental health issues**, and usually **have not completed secondary school** (Hairston, 2009).



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