The Role of Schools in Supporting Children Affected by Parental Imprisonment

A combined research report

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Foreword

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Every year, more than 200,000 children and young people experience the imprisonment of a parent. Yet, for too long, many of them have remained largely invisible to the systems designed to support them.

Parental imprisonment can have a profound impact on a child's life. Alongside the loss of a parent's daily presence, children may experience disruption to family life, financial hardship, uncertainty and stigma. Many feel unable to talk openly about what they are going through for fear of being judged or treated differently. As a result, they often carry an enormous burden in silence.

This report provides an important contribution to our understanding of how schools can help. Bringing together the voices of young people with lived experience and professionals working in education, it highlights both the challenges these children face and the opportunities schools have to make a meaningful difference.

One message emerges particularly strongly - schools matter. During periods of uncertainty and change, schools are often the one constant in a child's life. They can provide stability, trusted relationships and a sense of belonging. They are uniquely placed to recognise when a child may be struggling and to offer support at an early stage.

The young people whose experiences are reflected in this report remind us that effective support is built on trust, understanding and respect. They do not ask to be defined by a parent's imprisonment. Instead, they ask to be listened to, understood and treated as individuals.

The report also arrives at an important moment. Recent government commitments to improve the identification and support of children affected by parental imprisonment represent a significant step forward. However, identification alone is not enough. Awareness must be matched by practical action. Schools need the training, resources and guidance necessary to respond confidently and consistently when these children need help. Encouragingly, 97% of education professionals who took part in the training evaluation reported feeling better equipped to support children affected by imprisonment afterwards.

My hope is that this report encourages educators, policymakers and practitioners to work together to ensure that no child affected by parental imprisonment feels alone. We now have both the evidence and the opportunity to do better. The task ahead is to ensure that every child affected by parental imprisonment is recognised, supported and given the opportunity to thrive.

Executive summary

This report brings together findings from both school professionals and young people who have experienced parental imprisonment.

A consistent picture emerged: children affected by parental imprisonment often remain hidden within school communities, support is frequently dependent upon individual members of staff rather than established systems, and schools require greater awareness, training and resources to respond effectively. Both professionals and young people identified schools as uniquely positioned to provide stability, early intervention, emotional support and advocacy. However, significant barriers remain, including stigma, poor identification processes, inconsistent recording systems, and a lack of national guidance.

The voices of young people and practitioners demonstrate both the challenges and opportunities facing schools. As one practitioner observed:

"*Schools are the people who see that child the most. We are the only constant.*"

This report identifies key themes and recommendations for improving educational support for children affected by parental imprisonment.

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Introduction

Parental imprisonment can have profound and lasting consequences for children and young people. Children may experience emotional distress, disrupted family relationships, financial hardship, caring responsibilities, social stigma, and educational challenges (Children of Prisoners Europe 2018). A recent longitudinal qualitative study by Griffin et al. (2026), provides some of the most detailed evidence to date regarding children's lived experiences of familial imprisonment. Participants reported significant impacts on education, including difficulties concentrating, reduced attendance, disrupted routines and emotional distress. School was often viewed as a potential source of support; however, children described inconsistent experiences, with many feeling that teachers lacked understanding of the effects of imprisonment on families. Fear of stigma frequently led children to conceal their circumstances from schools and peers, increasing feelings of isolation and limiting access to support.

Evidence suggests that approximately 2% of school-aged children in England and Wales have experienced parental imprisonment within a twelve-month period, highlighting the importance of understanding their educational experiences and support needs .(Ministry of Justice, 2026).

Yet despite the scale of the issue, parental imprisonment remains a largely hidden childhood experience. Buchanan et al. (2026) note that children frequently remain unidentified because schools depend on families sharing information voluntarily. As the Children's Commissioner's School Census 2025 identified, 'relatively easily identifiable, clear, and ongoing needs – such as having a parent in prison – are often not shared with schools'.

Schools are often one of the few stable environments available to children during periods of family disruption. They are also often the only support system that remains throughout the length of a family member's prison sentence. Recent guidance from the Department for Education (2026) states that "*staff should understand the need for tailored, trauma informed and sensitive support that can help mitigate potential harm and help encourage stability.*"

School's therefore have a vital role in identifying need, providing support, and mitigating the negative impacts associated with parental imprisonment. Scoping research for Welsh Government found that children wanted schools to "listen to us", "talk to us and find out what we want", and proactively offer support rather than waiting for children to seek help themselves (Loucks et al., 2025).

Children affected by parental imprisonment often describe school as either a place of safety and support or a source of stigma, misunderstanding and exclusion. Shaw, Woods and Ford (2022) found that schools can either perpetuate stigma and discrimination or act as champions for children affected by imprisonment.

Almost all available, recent research points to the need for training for schools on supporting children affected by imprisonment. This training should be grounded in children's rights and focus on the child' individual experience (Loucks et al., 2025). Whilst

also creating awareness of the unique stigma, grief and isolation experienced by children and the role of compassionate, trauma informed adults in overcoming this. (Griffin et al. 2026).

This report explores how schools currently support children affected by imprisonment and identifies opportunities to improve practice through the combined perspectives of young people, education professionals, and training participants.

Methodology

The report draws upon three complementary sources of evidence:

School professional focus group (six practitioners)

Participants included school leaders, safeguarding leads, additional learning needs practitioners, mental health practitioners, and professionals working in alternative provision. Discussions focused on identification, support mechanisms, policy development, training needs, and barriers to effective support. The focus group was facilitated by an independent consultant.

Young people's focus group (five young people)

Young people with lived experience of parental imprisonment explored their experiences of school, disclosure, support, stigma, prison visits, and recommendations for improving practice. The focus group was facilitated by an independent consultant.

Training evaluation data

Feedback from 51 education professionals attending specialist training on parental imprisonment was analysed to assess existing knowledge levels, learning outcomes, and planned changes to practice.

Findings

1. Children affected by parental imprisonment often remain hidden

One of the strongest themes across all datasets was that many children affected by parental imprisonment remain hidden from schools.

School professionals explained that they frequently learn about imprisonment only through family disclosure or changes in a child's behaviour. Information sharing from police and social services can be inconsistent. One practitioner reflected: "*(We may be told) when there has been social services involvement, but it is very dependent on the relationship, even sometimes with social workers sadly, to make sure that information is passed on to the school.*

A common theme from practitioners completing feedback on Pact training was surprise at the lack of formal identification of children when a parent goes to prison. When asked 'what was the most interesting thing you learnt today?', one participant responded *"How little awareness we have of who the children are who have a parent in prison." and ''How children are not thought about in any part of the process of sentencing."*

Young people confirmed that schools were often unaware of their circumstances. One participant recalled: *"I think they probably wouldn't have known if I didn't say it in show and tell."*

A lack of identification and reporting when a parent goes to prison can cause real safeguarding risks. One of the young people interviewed was left at home alone with his sister when his Mum went to prison, he said "*They only found out because basically, because I had no one taking care of me and my sister. We were like, just left to our own devices. And I was 5 at the time and my sister was 16. She had to take me to school and then go to school."*

Another described a failed attempt to seek support *"I did make someone aware of it and it was like completely dismissed. So it wasn't like on record or anything... it was never addressed in any kind of sense."*

These experiences demonstrate how easily children can fall through gaps in support systems. Only one participating school reported having a formal method for recording parental imprisonment, at the other schools information was often dependent upon individual staff knowledge and relationships.

2. Stigma and shame create significant barriers

Young people and professionals consistently identified stigma, shame, and fear of judgement as major barriers preventing families from informing schools about imprisonment.

Young people described concerns about:

- being treated differently
- bullying by peers
- negative assumptions about themselves
- teachers judging them based on their parent's offence
- family expectations that imprisonment should remain secret
- importantly, participants stressed that disclosure should be voluntary, respectful, and focused on support rather than surveillance.

Stigma emerged as one of the most significant barriers preventing children and families from seeking support.

Young people described feelings of embarrassment, fear of judgement, and concerns about being treated differently by teachers or peers. One participant explained:

"It was very much drilled into me that it's just like a secret."

Another young person reflected: *"I kind of immediately held off from telling people in secondary school because it's so harsh, like you don't know how someone could use that against you."*

Even with school staff, the young participants were cautious about stigma and judgement from staff: *"Unfortunately there's a lot of prejudices against kids with parents in prison. So I don't think it's necessarily like good to have their main teacher know if you don't know what their views are about that, because that could affect how they view them and treat them."*

Another young person reported that the type of crime could impact the way they themselves were viewed: *"I think there's a lot of prejudice based off of the crime your parent committed as well... I think sometimes it can kind of seep into how they deal with you."*

One of the young people were concerned that race could impact on how they were supported *"the difference between kids of different races and how they're treated when their parents are in prison. I feel like there's like kind of assumptions made."*

Professionals recognised these same barriers. They recognised that families may fear judgement or gossip or feel like they don't have the relationship with the school to know how they'll respond. Professionals observed similar challenges, noting that some families did not perceive schools as safe spaces for disclosure or were uncertain about how

schools could help. One practitioner highlighted the uncertainty many families experience regarding school support: *"I think what the issue is, is that not everybody is aware of the support we can offer. It's 'oh I can't tell them because what are they going to do?"*. Secondary schools were considered particularly vulnerable to weaker family relationships due to reduced day-to-day contact with parents and carers:

"Once they go to secondary they may only see school staff at the end of school year meeting… so it is not an easy relationship at all."

Participants agreed that schools must prioritise creating environments where children and families feel safe disclosing sensitive family circumstances without fear of judgement.

3. Trusted relationships are central to effective support

Both young people and professionals consistently emphasised that support is most effective when children have access to trusted adults within school. Young people spoke about the importance of having someone who understands their circumstances and can provide consistent support. One participant stated: *"There should be at least one person, like a safeguarding lead, who does know."*

However, the young people were clear that the information should only be used to support a child and understand any changes in behaviour. They also wanted to decide who else at school knew and who the adult would be that would check in with them. The Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) might not be the person they felt most comfortable with. One participant explained, *"A lot of young people are attached to one teacher in particular... they can be a safe space for the student."* Another added *'It's important that teachers shouldn't really be involved unless the child has gone to them as someone that they feel comfortable to be involved.'*

Professionals echoed this view. A recurring theme was the value of having a designated person responsible for coordinating support. Several professionals suggested a model similar to designated teachers for looked-after children. *"It's almost like they need a go to person in the same way that a child in care would have a designated teacher. You need that one person who is going to have their back."*

Another reflected on supporting a pupil through difficult decisions:

"From our experience it has been about having someone to just listen. She knew what decisions she wanted to make but she wanted to tell someone else who wasn't her family... so basically just being there for her."

These findings suggest that relationship-based approaches are fundamental to effective support and should form the basis of school responses.

4. Schools provide stability during family crisis

Young people described school as a potentially important source of safety, stability and normality during periods of family upheaval.

One participant stated simply: "*School should be a safe space for all kids.*"

Another explained: "*School was like a place to escape from what was going on. School should be more a place where you feel at home and more like you can talk to people about this.*"

Professionals similarly recognised the stabilising role schools can play. As one participant observed: "*Schools are the people who see that child the most. We are the only constant.*"

Another practitioner described the positive outcomes that can occur when support is sustained: "*In the beginning they went through different transitions, it was a roller coaster... but as time went on they found themselves and they blossomed.*"

These accounts highlight the important protective role schools can play in children's lives during periods of instability.

5. Individualised support is essential

Both young people and practitioners stressed that there is no single experience of parental imprisonment.

Children's experiences vary according to factors including the nature of family relationships, the circumstances of imprisonment, age, trauma history, social support, and family resilience.

Young people cautioned against making assumptions: "*Don't assume and don't categorise. Every situation is different.*" Another participant added: "*When it comes to siblings, there can be very different support needs... keep it on an individual basis.*"

Professionals reinforced this point: "*It's unique to that set of circumstances for that individual. It's about building that relationship and developing that understanding so that you can provide the right sort of support they need at the right time.*" One practitioner added that the offence can impact how the child feels "*I have one child who has a parent in prison for driving offences for example which probably doesn't feel as big an issue as for another young person I have whose parent is in prison for murder.*"

This highlights the need for flexible and child-centred approaches rather than standardised interventions.

6. The impact of prison visits is frequently overlooked

Prison visits emerged as an important but often overlooked aspect of children's experiences.

Young people described how visits could affect school attendance, emotional wellbeing and participation in school life. One participant reflected: *"Growing up, I missed Christmas stuff, like nativity plays and even celebrations that the school had prepared for my birthday because they weren't aware that I wouldn't be in."*

Another explained: " *And I think you just need to understand like how the child is feeling after they've actually seen their parent in prison"*

Professionals recognised the emotional challenges prison visits can present. One practitioner described a young person's experience: *"The student I support... hates that getting through the security process. It's really off-putting for her."* Practitioners acknowledged, however that for some children, visits aren't what they want or need: *"The children we have supported, they hardly ever want to visit their parent in prison – they don't want to visit or even talk to them."*

School staff who had completed Pact training at a prison, found the experience of walking in a child's shoes on a prison visit particularly valuable. One professional noted that *"The experience of going to the visits hall was a great chance to see how children may feel"* and another said, *"having never been in a prison it's an eye opener to be at one, especially walking the path that the children have to."*

Participants suggested schools need greater awareness of prison visiting arrangements and greater flexibility around attendance linked to family contact.

7. Schools need better systems, policies and resources

A significant finding was the lack of formal structures within schools to identify, record and respond to the specific needs of children affected by imprisonment.

None of the schools consulted reported having a dedicated parental imprisonment policy. Support was often reliant on the knowledge, commitment and initiative of individual staff members.

Professionals highlighted a need for:

- better identification systems
- consistent recording mechanisms
- designated leads
- improved referral pathways
- enhanced multi-agency communication
- access to specialist resources.

One practitioner highlighted the importance of family trust:

"It is about fostering that situation where parents feel like they can reach out to schools to let us know things and know they won't be judged by that."

These findings suggest a need to move towards whole-school approaches that enable consistent, individualised support to be provided to all children affected by imprisonment.

8. Training improves knowledge and confidence

Training evaluation data demonstrated the significant value of specialist learning opportunities for education professionals.

- **80% of school staff attending training had supported a child with a parent in prison.**
- **97% reported feeling better equipped to support children affected by imprisonment following the training.**

Despite 80% of teachers having supported a child affected by imprisonment, over half of school staff (52%) said that their knowledge and understanding about the impact of parental imprisonment on children was poor or satisfactory.

Many participants entered the training with limited knowledge of parental imprisonment and its impact on children. One attendee reflected: *"How little awareness we have of who the children are who have a parent in prison."*

Another commented: *"... There are lots of students experiencing this in school that we are not aware of."*

Professionals also emphasised the need for widespread staff training. One participant argued: *"Every single member of staff should have training on this as well as trauma informed training."*

Another noted: *"Trying to get across an understanding of the impact it will have on the young person, and that's the whole process, right from arrest to being incarcerated."*

Following training, participants reported greater confidence in identifying and supporting affected children, alongside intentions to raise awareness within their schools and improve existing provision.

- **95% of participants rated the overall training experience as Very Good or Excellent.**

Key recommendations

For schools

1. Establish systems to consistently record parental imprisonment where information is disclosed.
2. Appoint a designated trained staff member to coordinate support.
3. Develop safe and confidential mechanisms for children to access help.
4. Recognise prison visits within attendance and wellbeing policies.
5. Include parental imprisonment within PSHE, wellbeing and inclusion work.
6. Provide tailored support plans developed alongside children and families.
7. Ensure staff understand the impact of stigma and trauma and how to provide effective support in response.

For training providers

1. Integrate parental imprisonment into trauma-informed practice training.
2. Increase awareness of available resources and referral pathways.
3. Incorporate lived experience perspectives into training delivery.
4. Provide practical guidance for sensitive conversations.
5. Develop whole-school approaches rather than focusing solely on specialist staff.

For policymakers

1. Develop national guidance and resource banks for schools.
2. Promote information sharing with school DSLs.
3. Provide a national training programme for teachers to understand how to respond and support children affect by imprisonment.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates substantial agreement between young people and education professionals regarding what effective support looks like for children affected by parental imprisonment. Schools are uniquely placed to provide stability, consistency, advocacy and emotional support. However, current approaches remain inconsistent and too often depend upon individual staff members rather than established systems.

The voices of young people are particularly clear. They want schools to be safe places where stigma is challenged, disclosure is respected, and support is tailored to individual circumstances. As one young person succinctly stated:

"School should be a safe space for all kids."

Combined with increased awareness, better policies, stronger recording systems, designated support staff and improved training, schools have the potential to significantly reduce the negative impacts of parental imprisonment and help affected children thrive.

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