



Identifying children affected by parental imprisonment

Recommendations from Pact

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The context

The Labour government's manifesto for the July general election pledged:

"The children of those who are imprisoned are at far greater risk of being drawn into crime than their peers. We will ensure that those young people are **identified** and **offered support** to break the cycle."¹

Broadly speaking, those of us in the charity sector, including many with personal experience in our own families, responded to the announcement in two ways.

Some of us enthusiastically welcomed the announcement. This was particularly the case for charities that provide frontline services in prisons and the community to prisoners' children, and who have seen the extreme dangers that can befall a minority of children whose sole parent or parents are unexpectedly removed from their lives due to imprisonment.

Others focused on how the Ministry of Justice framed the announcement, particularly the debate around the risk of 'intergenerational offending'. This public messaging, they felt, portrayed children as potential future offenders, rather than simply as children, and was inadvertently stigmatising and harmful to innocent children and young people.

As the conversation has progressed, there has been a risk of polarisation of opinion and a lack of nuance.

This short paper aims to outline a way forward to safeguard children who are most likely to be at risk of harm, while also ensuring that we do not cause further harm through stigmatisation. We believe that this is in full alignment with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and its overarching principle, as articulated in Article 3:

Article 3 (Best interests of the child): The best interests of children must be a primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All relevant adults should do what is best for children. When decisions are made, the impact on the child must be considered. This particularly applies to budgetary authorities, policymakers and legislators.²

1 The Labour Party (2024) [Labour Party Manifesto 2024: Our Plan to Change Britain](#).

2 United Nations (1989) [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

An automatic mechanism for identifying children with a parent in prison

Some people have expressed the view that an automatic mechanism to alert professionals when a child's parent is sent to prison is either unnecessary or unachievable. We do not accept these arguments. However, we believe it is vital to listen to the legitimate concerns of children and young people with lived experience about who is made aware of their circumstances, how, and, most importantly, why.

Children's and young people's voices

Every child and young person is unique and will have their own perspective. Parents also have a legitimate responsibility for their care and support. Views may differ within families. When discussing children's and young people's views, it is important to recognise that there will be diverse perspectives. Nevertheless, we do hear consistent core messages:

"**Stop labelling** us. We did not commit the crimes."

"We are serving a '**hidden sentence**'. Do they not think about the children?"

"We **do** want to be able to talk to someone. But we don't want everyone up in our business and gossiping about us."

"At school, we just want to be normal."

Many children and young people also share a profound feeling of isolation when coping with a loved one's sentence. As part of our 'Hear Our Voice' project, which supported children affected by familial imprisonment, one young person shared: "I was annoyed and confused. I had nobody to talk to about how I was feeling", while another told us: "I felt like I had done something wrong. I felt like that for a while. I kept it all to myself."³

Several years ago, we ran a series of workshops in inner London with young people (aged 13-17) affected by familial imprisonment. We asked them what they wanted from adults in power; from their parents, the police, teachers, magistrates and judges, prison staff, and from charities such as Pact. Together, they created a charter⁴ of what they felt were their key rights:

- for their homes to be respected
- for them to be informed about their family member's location, welfare and how to keep in touch
- to be heard by those with authority
- to have a choice about visits and where their loved one is sent to prison
- to be understood, not judged
- to be offered emotional support
- to be respected throughout the criminal justice process

3 Pact (2018) '[Hear Our Voice: recommendations for action to safeguard children affected by the arrest and imprisonment of family members](#)'.

4 Pact (2016) '[Our Voice: a charter for children and young people who have experienced a parent or brother or sister being arrested, tried and imprisoned](#)'.

Stigmatisation of children and young people

When the government, charities, and other professionals speak publicly on the risks of 'intergenerational offending' or use statistics clumsily, they clearly risk adding stigma to the lives of children and young people, many of whom are already struggling. It is, therefore, the responsibility of all of us to frame public discourse with sensitivity and care. In seeking to bring about change and to attract support for children and young people, we must avoid inadvertently doing them harm.

Does identification lead to stigmatisation?

Some third sector staff have suggested that the identification of children with a parent in prison will automatically cause stigma to those children. This perspective may stem from the assumption that those in the criminal justice system, including HM Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS) and police forces, will oversee the identification and referral process. We understand and share this concern. We accept that if not properly handled, this could pose a risk. However, we believe this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to safeguard children who would otherwise fall through the cracks and may come to serious harm.

The current situation leaves some children completely vulnerable due to their invisibility. Both [Children Heard and Seen](#) and Pact have numerous examples of cases when children were left home alone, at school, or in precarious and unsuitable care when a parent disappeared into the prison system. The balance of risks must be at the forefront of our minds.

For a minority of prisoners' children, the risks they face outweigh concerns about stigmatisation, underscoring the urgent need for an effective system of identification. This system must include safeguarding escalations for children whose circumstances meet the threshold for intervention by children's social care teams or the police. Indeed, the UNCRC states that:

Article 20 (Children unable to live with their family): A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.⁵

At the same time, we believe that for most prisoners' children and their parents and carers who do not need a statutory 'intervention', this is also an excellent opportunity to ensure we can offer support to mitigate the range of harms of parental imprisonment. The evidence on the poorer outcomes for prisoners' children as a group is clear. We owe it to them to ensure that support is offered to enable them to thrive. However, for this to work, we must make the case that it comes from the right people, at the right time, and in the right way.

⁵ United Nations (1989) [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

Do children and young people want to be ‘identified’?

Most recently, research carried out by the Welsh government found that nine out of ten young people in Wales thought schools should be told automatically when a parent goes to prison.⁶ However, children and young people also spoke of the need for information about their circumstances to be used with care and discretion by schools or other professionals. They, along with other children we have spoken with through our services over the past two decades, welcome the idea of an emotionally available, well-informed, and sensitive adult whom they can trust and with whom they can talk about sensitive and complex issues.

Children and young people fear, however, the idea of being treated as ‘mini criminals’, or ‘criminals in waiting’, or the subject of staffroom gossip. They want to be heard and their views and feelings to be considered as is their right under the UNCRC:

Article 12 (Respect for the views of the child): A child capable of forming his or her own views will be given the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, with those views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. In particular, a child will be provided with the opportunity to be heard in any judicial or administrative proceedings affecting them, either directly, or through representatives.⁷

Children and young people want to have someone to support them whom they can trust. But they also want that person to respect boundaries, possess the right information and attitudes, and uphold a degree of privacy. This is also supported by the UNCRC:

Article 4 (Protection of rights): Governments have a responsibility to take all available measures to make sure children’s rights are respected, protected and fulfilled. This includes assessing domestic legislation and practice to ensure that the minimum standards set by the Convention are being met.⁸

What does the research say about ‘intergenerational offending’?

There is, as ever, a lively and healthy debate about what the research says. The ‘six out of ten’ statistic⁹ is now rarely used within the voluntary sector due to doubts about its validity. It is probably not true that six out of ten children with a parent in prison will end up in prison.

There have been voices within the sector claiming that there is no evidence of increased risk to children whose parents go to prison. This claim is not valid either.

The increased risk to children stems from a range of factors that are not easily disaggregated. Parental imprisonment is widely recognised as a significant Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). Children with a parent in prison are at greater risk of experiencing a range of interconnected issues, including poverty, negative school experiences, and mental health problems.

6 Welsh Government (2025) [‘Improving wellbeing and educational outcomes for children in Wales affected by parental imprisonment: scoping study’](#).

7 United Nations (1989) [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

8 Ibid.

9 Murray, J. and Farrington, D. P. (2008) [‘The effects of parental imprisonment on children’](#), in Tonry, M. (ed.) Crime and justice: A review of research. Vol. 37, pp. 133–206. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

The impact of a parent's offending prior to arrest will be a factor in some cases. Some children will personally witness the arrest and removal of a parent. Others may experience 'bereavement without a body', as their parent simply vanishes without explanation, or they struggle to reconcile their parent's conviction with the person they thought they knew. While contact with an imprisoned parent should be supported where it is in a child's best interests (UNCRC, Article 9.3)¹⁰, others may need help coming to terms with restrictions on contact or whether visiting their loved one in prison is right for them.

Some children experience significant trauma. Families often face loss of income, status, and stability alongside stigma and social ostracisation. Children may be forced to move away from their friends, school, and everything they know. Those who previously had no experience of the police or authority figures find themselves grappling with fear or hostility. The remaining parent faces enormous stress, which can affect their ability to provide consistent care. Media coverage of the crime further amplifies these challenges, placing additional strain on the family. The cumulative pressures on children's mental health, wellbeing, health, and education can be profound.

It is not inevitable that a child who experiences all these potential harms will end up in contact with the criminal justice system. Children do not inherit criminality. Children have extraordinary resilience. Some children go to extraordinary efforts to overachieve – to prove to themselves and others that they will not follow in the footsteps of their imprisoned parent. Nevertheless, we can confidently say that the risk of negative outcomes from the Adverse Childhood Experience of parental imprisonment is very significant for prisoners' children, as a group, when compared to the general population of children.

It should not, therefore, be any surprise that there is also evidence and academic research to indicate that children with a parent in prison may be at greater risk of personal contact with the justice system themselves:

1. Research published in 2017 by academics from the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Cambridge found that the risk for 'criminal behaviour' is roughly 2.4 times higher for children with parents caught up in the criminal justice system. The researchers conducted a systematic review and pooled results from 23 samples in 25 publications (including 3,423,483 children) in a meta-analysis of the intergenerational transmission of 'criminal behaviour'.¹¹
2. Research published in 2024 by Bangor University found that a third of fathers in prison had lived with someone who had been in prison and that their children were twice as likely to be exposed to domestic violence and over seven times more likely to live in a household where mental ill health is present.¹²
3. Ongoing research by the Swedish Institute for Social Research (SOFI) has so far found that the risk of being prosecuted yourself if you have had a parent in prison increases by 23 per cent and that "the incarceration of a parent in childhood leads to a significant increase in teen crime and significant decreases in educational attainment and adult employment".¹³

10 United Nations (1989) [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

11 Besemer, S., Ahmad, S.I., Hinshaw, S.P. & Farrington, D.P. (2017) '[A systematic review and meta-analysis of the intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior](#)', *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 37, pp. 161–178.

12 Ford, K., Bellis, M.A., Hughes, K., Judd, N. & Barton, E.R. (2024) '[Exploring the intergenerational continuity of ACEs amongst a sample of Welsh male prisoners: A retrospective cross-sectional study](#)', *Child Protection and Practice*, 3, p. 100053.

13 Swedish Institute for Social Research (2019) '[What Happens to Children with Parents in Prison?](#)', Stockholm University.

While the risk of ‘intergenerational offending’ may be an uncomfortable term for some, we should consider it as an increased risk, among many others, rather than a predetermined path. We should use it with care to avoid any risk of misinterpretation. It is not fate or genetics that determines whether a child should grow up to be someone who goes to prison. It is how we, as a society, organise systems to ensure that the child is safe, secure, loved, nurtured, and able to thrive.

‘Offending’ is, in fact, only one of a range of indicators of the unintended harm we inflict on children when we incarcerate their parents without due care for the effect it may have on them. This issue deserves a rightful place in policy discussions. The Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education hold a duty of care towards these children, and we should commend their collaborative efforts to develop solutions to implement the manifesto pledge.

When conducting this debate in the public domain, we must be mindful of unintentionally labelling prisoners’ children as ‘future offenders’ or framing them as a ‘problem.’ Public conversations should steer clear of discussing the risk of ‘intergenerational offending’ and instead focus on highlighting that, with appropriate support, these children can lead happy and fulfilling lives. At the same time, as professionals dedicated to making a difference in children’s lives, it is crucial that we engage in mature conversations and accept that there is room for nuance in our debates.

What might be the mechanism for identification and referral?

We believe that there are currently two workable solutions, and it may be feasible to combine them.

1. Operation Paramount, run by the Thames Valley Violence Reduction Partnership, and including a partnership with the independent charity Children Heard and Seen, demonstrates that automatic identification can work reasonably effectively.¹⁴ In this model, information from the prison service’s NOMIS database is used to track not just a prisoner’s entry, movement through, and release from prison but also to identify and offer direct support to family members. While further work may be needed to refine the system and scale it up to a national level, it provides a workable technical model.
2. An alternative or complementary model would be to expand and utilise the services of prison-based family engagement workers and/or prison-based social workers. These models of practice were developed initially by Pact, which delivers services in multiple prisons and has also shared its practices with other providers of ‘Family and Significant Other Services’ commissioned by HMPPS. Pact services, and some others, utilise a case management system that has the functionality for referrals from prisons to statutory professionals, including schools and, where there is a particularly high risk, children’s social care teams. One of the benefits of this approach is the active engagement of people entering the prison system by trusted intermediaries from the voluntary sector, which encourages disclosure and information sharing among remanded and sentenced parents.

14 Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership (2025) ‘[Operation Paramount](#)’.

To Whom Should Referrals Be Made?

Operation Paramount has undoubtedly referred many children for support that they would not have otherwise received. Children Heard and Seen provides valuable services to children in community settings, including many who do not visit their imprisoned parents. The initiative and energy demonstrated by those in the police who created and led the scheme are inspiring and laudable. There is ample evidence that, at the local level within the Thames Valley, a team of police officers works very sensitively with children and families. However, it is our view that this is not the most desirable or scalable way forward as a national approach.

Children and families who have been affected by imprisonment are naturally fearful of police involvement in their lives. A visit from the police may cause alarm, embarrassment and stigma. Many children and families will have already suffered the collateral damage of family members being arrested in the family home or in the presence of children, or homes being searched in the sight of neighbours. While great efforts have been made in the Thames Valley to carry out visits sympathetically, we believe this is due to a particular set of local relationships and circumstances. We do not see this translating effectively to places like London, Manchester, or West Yorkshire.

There is also a fundamental question regarding the most appropriate professional to engage with a child and their parent(s) when that child has committed no offence. We recommend that the government identify appropriate professionals outside the justice system for referrals unless that referral requires police and/or children's social care action.

- The natural point of contact for school-age children is the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) within the school. DSLs handle highly sensitive information about individual children's circumstances and needs and work closely with school headteachers.
- Health Visitors would be more suitable for children under five and their parents or carers. They are often the first to recognise whether a child is at risk of harm and regularly work with other health and social care partners.
- A leaflet or digital product should be sent to the child's parent/carer, advising them of the referral and signposting them to advice, guidance, and support. This could be modelled on a Pact 'calling card' that was developed in partnership with Avon and Somerset Police for use by police officers during the execution of warrants in family homes.
- Clear protocols must be in place to ensure that only necessary and relevant data is shared for the purpose of achieving the best outcomes for the child (UNCRC Article 3) with appropriately trained adult professionals. This approach aligns with Article 16 of the UNCRC:

1. No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation.

2. The child has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.¹⁵

15 United Nations (1989) [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

How should referrals be handled?

Teachers, social workers, health visitors, and other professionals have varying levels of experience and understanding of the criminal justice system and the experiences of children impacted by it. Some hold attitudes that mirror those held by members of the general public. Our culture is steeped in language that perpetuates negative assumptions, such as the saying, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” It would be unwise to assume that all professionals are fully equipped, in their thinking or practice, to respond appropriately to referrals.

Pact, along with a number of other charitable and non-profit organisations, provides training, resources, and toolkits for professionals. Pact’s digital ‘Schools’ Toolkit’ is being used in more than 350 schools and 45 local authorities in England and Wales, and we have provided face-to-face training, including prison visits, to 360 teachers and practitioners from 267 schools. Our experience is that there is a ready acknowledgement of the lack of expertise, as well as an interest and enthusiasm for training, in many schools. Some, however, are in denial regarding their schools having children who are affected and require more encouragement.

Our basic training and resources for schools are well-received, and feedback indicates that they are significantly improving the quality of schools’ responsiveness. By providing training and support for teachers and whole school communities, we can minimise the risk of children facing stigma and discrimination, in line with Article 2 of the UNCRC¹⁶.

Conclusion: finding effective and proportionate solutions

The identification of prisoners’ children, at the earliest possible opportunity, combined with referral pathways to trained child-centred professionals, offers hope for nearly 200,000 children a year that there will be at least one trusted adult, outside of the family, to whom they can turn for support.

Children of prisoners **should** be heard and seen, and offered support within safe settings. Their parents and carers in the community should also be engaged with, with respectful recognition for their rights as parents and the challenges they are facing, and signposted to sources of support.

At Pact, we believe that these children and families are worth the full support of a joined-up government and a joined-up voluntary sector. We hope this paper may make some small contribution to bringing that about.

16 United Nations (1989) [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

Resources and advocacy for children affected by parental imprisonment

- Books and animations for children and young people
- Supporting a child with a loved one in prison: a parents' guide
- Collateral damage: an inquiry into the impact of police home raids on the children and siblings of offenders in England
- Our Voice: a charter for children and young people affected by familial imprisonment
- Hear Our Voice: Recommendations for action to safeguard children affected by the arrest and imprisonment of a family member
- Schools' Toolkit (from early years to secondary)

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