



Serving a hidden sentence

The financial and emotional impact
of a loved-one's imprisonment

October 2023



Prisoners • Families • Communities
A Fresh Start Together

Imprisonment can be devastating for family members, especially parents, children and partners. Although they have committed no crime, they too serve a sentence. Separated from their loved-ones they are left to pick up the pieces, often struggling to make ends meet and dealing with the emotional turmoil that follows sentencing.

Prisoners' families are far from alone in feeling the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. However, our survey shows that the imprisonment of a loved-one can lead to families being at particular risk of slipping even further into poverty.

Many families affected by imprisonment already come from disproportionately economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Often they are then affected by a double whammy of costs – the loss of a partner's income, coupled with the extra costs associated with staying in touch with and supporting their loved-one. Many are parents, or care-givers for other family members as well.

At a time of economic hardship, these pressures have a worrying impact on hundreds of thousands of children and families.

The harms of imprisonment stretch well beyond the financial challenges. Our survey shows how people's mental and physical health suffer as they struggle to come to terms with a new reality without their wives, partners, children or parents. It also shows how shame, stigma, isolation and poverty have a devastating impact.

Families matter to the criminal justice system. Family contact helps to keep people safer during their sentence. It also helps to reduce reoffending. Prisoners who get family visits are 39% less likely to commit another crime.

In recent years, giant strides have been made in recognising the crucial role of families and significant others in the criminal justice system. I would like to thank all the parliamentarians, officials and partner organisations who have worked together to achieve this.

However, there remains much more that needs to be done. Lord Farmer's landmark reports of 2017 and 2019 conclude that families need to be the 'golden thread' running through the justice system. But life is far from golden for these families.

I would like to thank everyone who took part in the survey. I hope you feel that we have done justice to the experiences you have shared with us. I would also like to thank Families Outside and Dr Briege Nugent who have carried out similar research in Scotland and who generously shared their research methodology with us.

Andy Keen-Downs
CEO, Pact



Methodology

The survey was promoted on Pact social media channels from 28 June to 2 August 2023 with 164 respondents. Not all questions were answered by all respondents. 110 people completed all the questions. In addition, two focus groups were held in June and July 2023 with family members of people currently in prison. In total 15 people took part in these sessions.

We would like to thank Families Outside and Dr Briega Nugent for providing the research tools from similar research that was carried out in Scotland 'Paying the Price: The Cost to Families of Imprisonment and Release.'

We recognise that there are some limitations to the research. It was reliant on participants being willing and taking the time to share their experiences. Whilst respondents came from all parts of England & Wales, a larger survey and more focus group sessions would provide even more robust analysis. Pact will continue to carry out research into the issue and update these findings where appropriate.

Respondents' answers about the financial impact of imprisonment are likely to be affected by the general cost of living pressures, which have fluctuated in recent months. Whilst the trend in inflation has been downwards in recent months, prices are still rising quickly (August CPI was 6.3%).

The financial impact of imprisonment

Family members are often affected by the loss of a partner's income, coupled with the extra costs associated with staying in touch with and supporting their loved-one.

- 38% said that they spent a quarter or more of their monthly income supporting a loved-one in prison.
- 71% said that they spent two days a week or more supporting their loved-one.
- More than half said that they are finding it difficult or very difficult to pay for some of the basics, including being able to afford food (49%), heating (50%) and clothes / shoes (68%).
- Many said that it was difficult or very difficult to do a range of other things that other families would do, including social activities, such as going out (72%) and being able to afford transport (61%).
- 34% were unaware of the Help with Prison Visits scheme set up to support people on low incomes with prison visits and 36% had heard of it but hadn't applied.
- 56% said that money had affected their ability to stay in touch with their loved-one.

The emotional impact and social stigma

Family members' health suffers as they struggle to come to terms with the new reality. The stigma associated with imprisonment can often result in their leading a 'double life' as they seek to hide or avoid talking about what has happened to their loved-one.

- 83% said that their mental health was a lot worse or a little worse.
- 71% said that their physical health was a lot worse or a little worse.
- 70% said that they had lost relationships with friends and family members because of imprisonment.
- Only 29% say that they are always open about their loved-one's time in prison and 46% say that they always or often avoid mentioning where their loved-ones are.

Existing support for prisoners' families

Strong family relationships play a crucial role in supporting the delivery of safer prisons and in reducing reoffending. Government research shows that prisoners who receive visits during their sentence are 39% less likely to reoffend. Helping families and prisoners to maintain strong relationships benefits everyone through less crime and safer communities.

Significant improvements have been made to the support available to prisoners' families in recent years.

Under contract to His Majesty's Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS), every prison has a FaSOS (Family and Significant Other) provider. Their role is to keep prisoners in touch with and to build or maintain positive and strong relationships with their families or significant others. There is also an increasing focus on support that can be provided to prisoners who have no family or significant others.

FaSOS providers across England & Wales, including Pact, run dedicated Visitors' Centres, make visits as family-friendly and as welcoming as possible, and work directly with prisoners to maintain or repair relationships with loved-ones.

The Prisoners' Families Helpline is also commissioned by HMPPS and delivered by Pact. The helpline and website provide advice and support for prisoners' families and deals with more than 35,000 calls a year.

The Help with Prison Visits Scheme, run by HMPPS, allows people to get help with the cost of visits including travel to the prison, overnight accommodation and meals. In order to be eligible, applicants must be in receipt of certain benefits or have a health certificate.

Lord Farmer's Government-commissioned reviews of 2017 (The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime) and 2019 (Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and Other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime) have done much to drive forward this agenda.

The Government welcomed the publication of these reviews and provides updates on the delivery of their recommendations.

The financial impact of imprisonment - the existing research

Little dedicated research has been carried out into pre-existing, economic disadvantages faced by prisoners' families in England & Wales. However, it is clear that the majority of people in prison are more disadvantaged economically in comparison to the general population.

Although now twenty years old, the Social Exclusion Unit's research on reducing re-offending reported that over two-thirds of people were unemployed at the time they entered prison, over 70% were in receipt of benefits, and almost half had a history of debt[1]. Research by the University of Cardiff, published in 2022 found that the imprisonment rate for the ten most deprived local authorities in England was ten times greater than that of the ten least deprived local authorities in England.[2]

As such, even before imprisonment, it can be said with some certainty that a high proportion of prisoners' families are more economically disadvantaged in comparison to the general population.

There is also a body of research which has identified a range of increased risks and poorer outcomes for children whose parents have been sent to prison.

Many children will thrive in spite of the odds, thanks to the love and care of parents, other care givers, schools, communities and professionals. However, a range of research indicates increased risky behaviours among prisoners' children [3], poorer mental health outcomes [4] and the potential lifelong negative impact of parental imprisonment. When a mother goes to prison, 95% of children have to leave their home.[5]

[1] [Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

[2] [People from England's most deprived areas ten times more likely to be in prison, analysis finds - News - Cardiff University](#)

[3] [Children's antisocial behaviour, mental health, drug use and education performance after parental incarceration: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#)

[4] [The COPING project – children or prisoners, interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health](#)

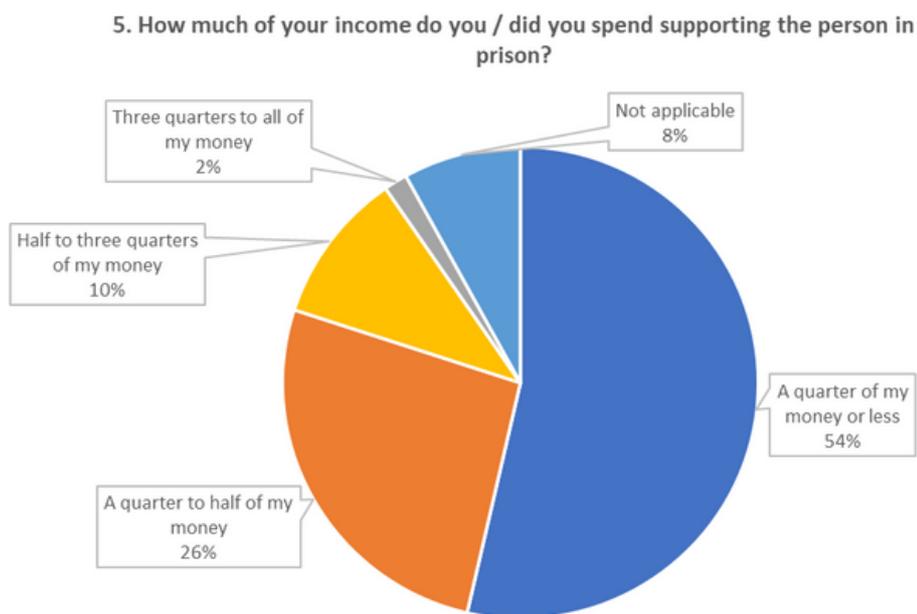
[5] [Women in Prison, Key Facts](#)

The financial impact of imprisonment

The cost of living crisis has had an impact on the whole country. However, the survey findings suggest that additional costs associated with the imprisonment of a loved-one are pushing families, carers and children further into financial difficulty.

Once their loved-one has been sent to prison, the financial impact falls largely into two main areas – the additional cost to them as individuals; as well as, for people who have partners in prison, a loss of income.

38% of respondents to the survey said that they spent a quarter or more of their monthly income supporting a loved-one in prison .



The financial impact of imprisonment

Prisoners and their families are allowed to buy clothing, as well as other products, from a list of approved suppliers. Whilst family members who took part in the focus groups understood the need for this policy for security purposes, they also talked about the financial impact of this policy.

For example, one participant said that the prison their loved-one is in only allows clothes from JD Sports and Very, both of which they feel are expensive. They wanted to buy a dressing gown for their loved-one, which was £17 on M&M Direct, but £45 at JD Sports, which is the approved supplier.

“They don’t realise how much the difference is. The families should be able to choose where we get the clothes from because we’re paying for them, not the prison.”

It is estimated that men in prison are held, on average, 50 miles from their home, and women 65 miles.[1] However, many families face a round trip of well over 100 miles. Participants of the focus groups raised the issue of the cost of fuel, but also costs such as car maintenance incurred through frequent, long journeys.

For people travelling by public transport, the remote location of many prisons posed a particular problem. One participant talked about having to take a 20-minute taxi journey from the station to the prison and then back again. Respondents to the questionnaire raised similar concerns.

“I live in Leamington Spa and my brother was moved to prison on the Isle of Wight. It costs £500 a visit. This has caused financial challenges. I am unable to visit as often as I wish due to my financial situation I applied for financial assistance from a charity and for a health certificate to claim assistance and both methods have failed. This is affecting me emotionally and causing distress.”

“My partner is 300 miles away from us, so I have to travel a 600 mile round trip with two young children and stay overnight in hotels each month. It’s exhausting, and financially I can’t afford to do it more often. So we lose visits. Bonds are weakened because of this.”

[1] [The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders’ Family and Other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime](#)

The financial impact of imprisonment

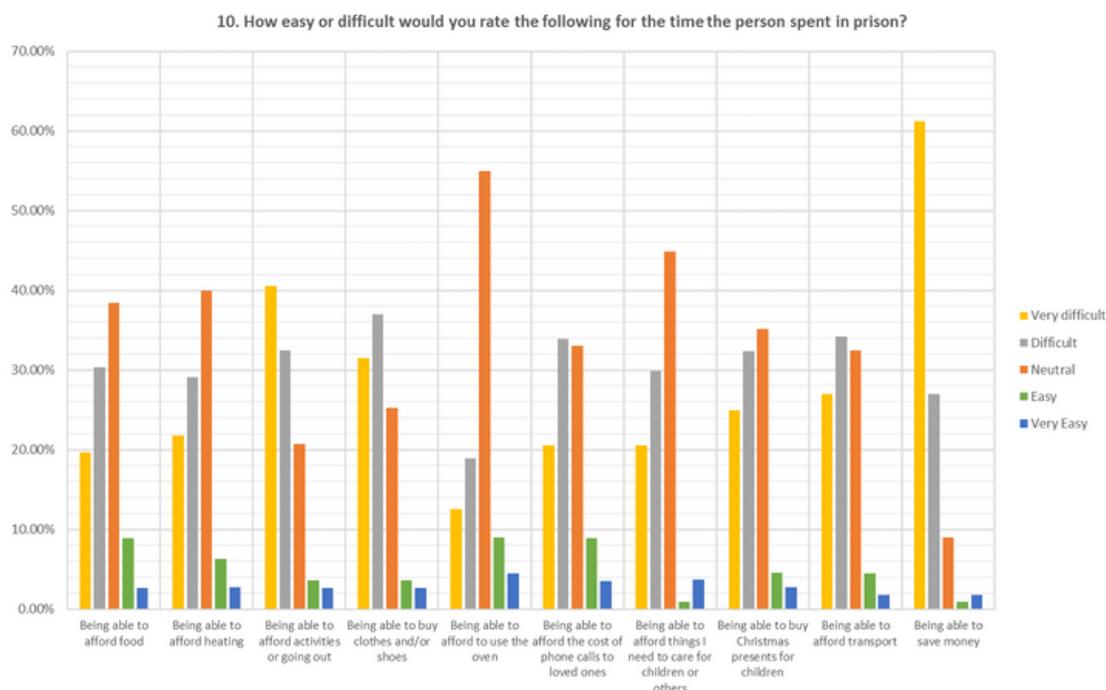
71% of survey respondents said that they spent two days a week or more supporting their loved-one in prison. Focus group participants also talked about the need to have their phones with them all the time to take calls.

“I have to be glued to my phone all the time. You need to be able to answer because it's not like you can call them back. The phone calls are a lifeline for him so it's really important that I answer.”

More than half of respondents (56%) said that money had affected their ability to stay in touch with their loved-one in prison.

More than half of respondents said that they are finding it difficult or very difficult to pay for some of the basics, including being able to afford food (49%), heating (50%) and clothes / shoes (68%).

Respondents also reported that it was difficult or very difficult to do a range of other things that normal families would do, including social activities such as going out (72%) being able to afford transport (61%).



The financial impact of imprisonment

Participants of the focus groups and people who left comments on the questionnaire also spoke about the loss of income they experienced when their partner went to prison. A number said that they played down the financial impact with their partners when they visited so as not to make them worry about the financial situation.

“We had two salaries and now it's one. He paid the bigger part of the mortgage.”

“Everything was halved and now it's doubled – all the household bills, council tax. It's worse if you have kids.”

Around one in three (34%) respondents were unaware of the Help with Prison Visits scheme (formerly the Assisted Prison Visits scheme), set up to support people on low incomes with prison visits. Also around one in three (36%) had heard of it but hadn't applied.

There were comments left in the questionnaire from people who felt that the reimbursement didn't reflect the reality of the costs of visits or that the thresholds to apply were too high.

“I can't get assisted visits scheme because the threshold for how much you are allowed to earn is too low, given the cost of living. It needs to be increased. Especially given that I live in London where the cost of living is higher anyway, and he is in Manchester which is over 160 miles away.”

“It's good but doesn't pay the full amount a person actually spends with a stay and travel. I went for 4 days and it cost me a lot of money and I was given not even half of what I spent.”

“The cost of petrol I got just wasn't worth me applying for it again it was very unrealistic the amount they give me.”

“The earnings threshold needs to be increased so that more people could access. £1200 is too low with the cost of living rising. The threshold has not increased in almost 10 years.”

The emotional impact - shame and stigma

70% of survey respondents stated that they had lost relationships with friends and family members because of imprisonment.

The stigma and shame of having a family member in prison was a theme that ran throughout the focus groups.

"I can't face people. I'm so ashamed of what he has done. I don't want to go out. I don't want to go into town because I don't want to meet anybody and face them."

"You're treated like you've got some sort of disease. We've now got the same sentence that my son has got – we're being treated like we're doing his sentence."

"You find out who your true friends are. I had a best friend of 30 years and when she found out my partner had gone to prison and what the accusation was she didn't come near. She never texted me, she never rang me to see how I was, she just automatically thought he was guilty."

"The good thing that came out of this is that it shows the true colours of people ... The people you thought you would get the most support from ... They just turned their backs and the ones you expected the least from, they have been really, really supportive and helpful. It's actually a gift because otherwise you would never know who your true friends and enemies are. It was shocking at that point when you ask for help – you're vulnerable, you're devastated, you're crushed, all your life is upside down and you get nothing."

"I hate walking into a room full of people and you don't know who knows and who doesn't. I don't like people talking behind my back. It's the most horrible sensation."

This stigma can lead to people leading a 'double life'. They make up aliases and different stories for their loved-ones to avoid admitting that they are in prison.

"It's devastating. Every day is hard. Heartbreaking. We essentially lead a double life. At work our partners are different people."

"You do an awful lot of lying. It feels horrible to lie – you feel a bad person. I've never lied so much in my life but you do it for a good reason. It just rolls off my tongue now."

"You're judged by other people – it's not just him, it's me as his partner. Lying constantly – I sometimes get lost in my stories because I tell different stories to different people and I can't remember what I said."

The emotional impact - shame and stigma

This theme is backed up in the survey. Only 29% say that they are always open about their loved-one's time in prison and 46% say that they always or often avoid mentioning where their loved-ones are.

"We tend to avoid situations where you've got a group of people where some may know, some may not know. I've got a guy who regularly confronts me He walks past and says 'shame he didn't get life'."

A connected theme that emerged in the focus groups was families being treated with a lack of respect by police and prison officers. A number of family members felt that they were being treated as criminals.

"They don't treat you humanely. You feel like you are a criminal when you go there."

"It's the way they talk to you. They talk to you like you're something they've trodden in. No respect at all."

"Staff are rude – not all of them, there are some nice people. You don't feel that you can go and ask for that help. It is very hard to find that help. Everything takes such a long time to be able to get information – you try to ring someone 'no it's not us'. Right so where do you go 'oh I don't know'. No-one is willing to help or advise. You're not treated like a human being."

Recommendations

It is important to point out how far the criminal justice system has come in recognising the role of family and significant others in recent years.

Many parliamentarians, officials and partner organisations have worked together to improve significantly the support available to families. However, there remains much to be done and we would like to make a series of recommendations on the back of these findings.

1. His Majesty's Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) should review the Help with Prison Visits scheme to ensure that the threshold for eligibility keeps pace with the rising cost of living and that the application process is user-friendly.

2. HMPPS should review its list of approved suppliers from which prisoners and their families can buy items such as clothing to ensure that it represents value for money.

3. HMPPS should continue to take steps to ensure that prisoners are held as close as possible to families and significant others. This should include delivering in full two specific recommendations from Lord Farmer's 2017 Review:

- Governors should arrange, in collaboration with HMPPS Population Management Unit, to ensure prisoners moved out of area are repatriated at the earliest opportunity to the prison region of their family and wider community (if beneficial to the successful completion of their individual sentence plan).
- As part of any decision concerning prison re-rolling, governors in collaboration with HMPPS, should be required to produce a family impact assessment that considers the proximity of prisoners to their families or other supportive relationships. This should also be published.

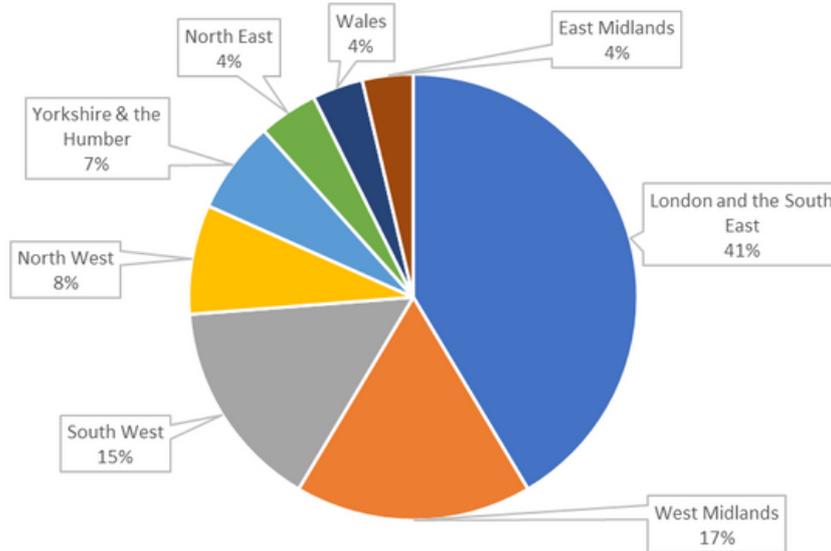
4. The Government has recently announced (16 October) new measures to deal with the pressure on prison capacity. However, the Ministry of Justice is yet to publish detailed information about the long-term impact of these new measures on its prison population forecasts. The Ministry of Justice should also publish an impact assessment setting out the potential broader impact of high rates of imprisonment on families, children and significant others.

5. HMPPS should review its prison officer training to ensure that frontline staff treat families with respect and understand the importance of keeping people in prison in touch with their families and significant others.

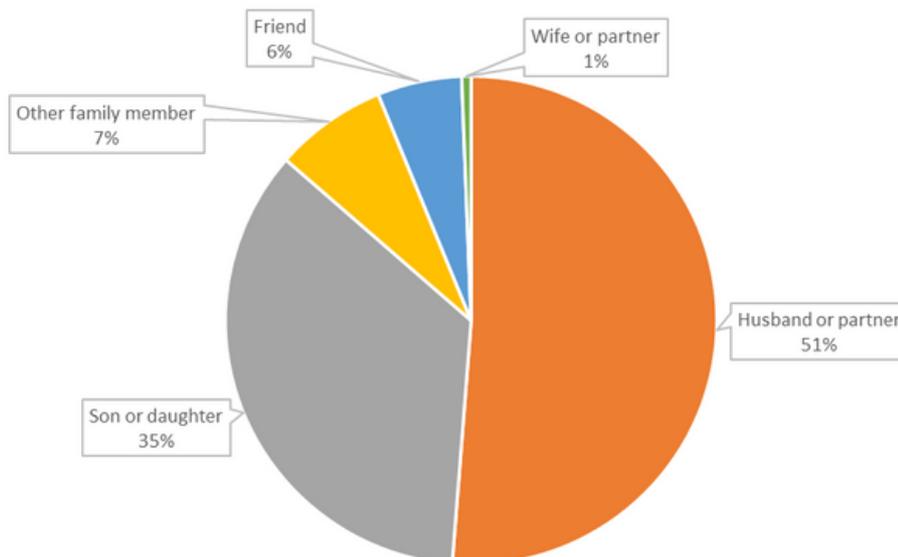
Recommendations cont.

6. Schools and nurseries should have readily available guidance about the potential impact of imprisonment of family members and children, including the impact on physical and mental health.
7. Public figures should be careful not to make sweeping statements about the criminal justice system that could, inadvertently, stigmatise families at the same time.

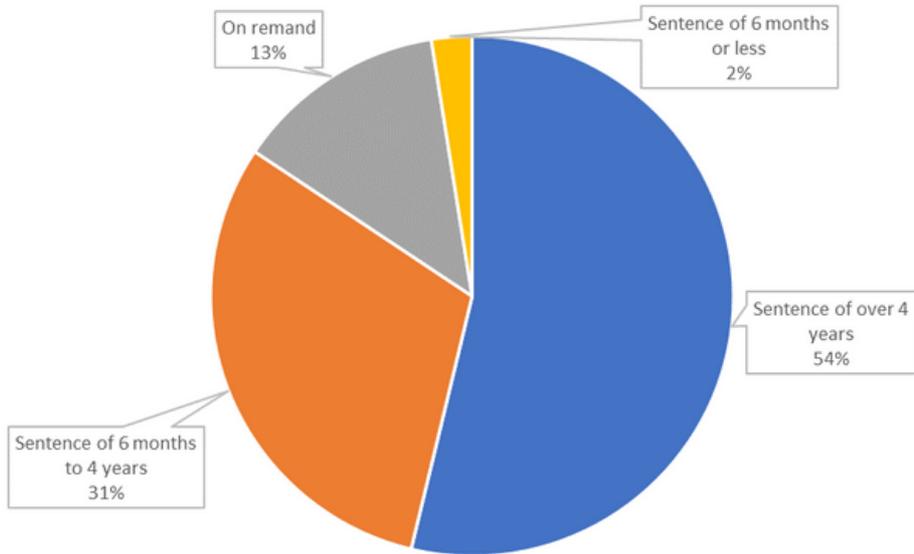
1. Which part of the country do you live in?



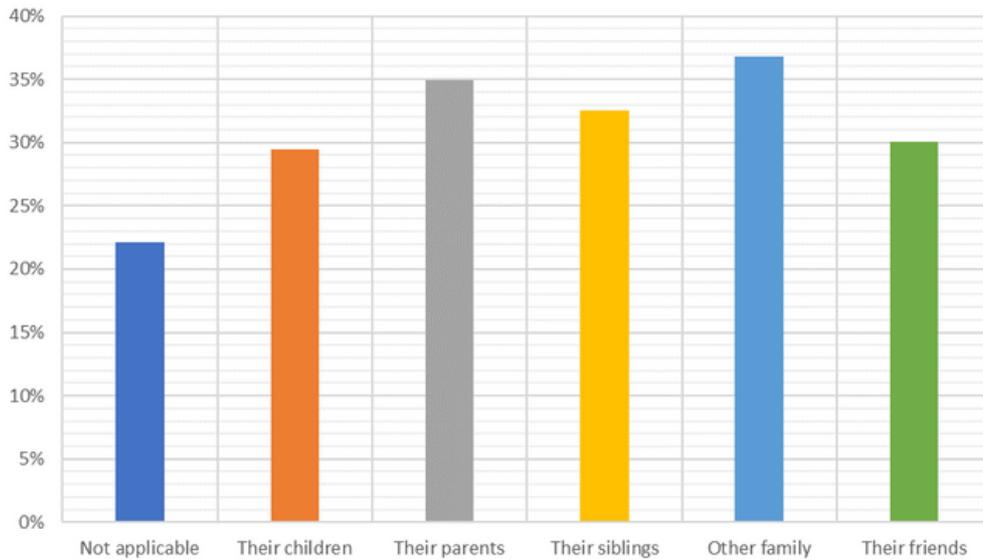
2. Who are you supporting?



3. What is their current situation?

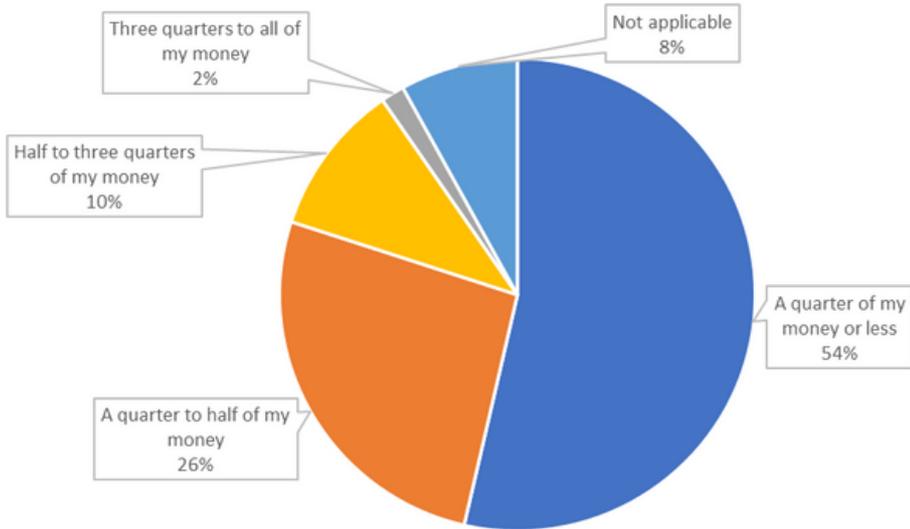


4. If helping them to maintain contact with other people, who are you helping them to stay in contact with?

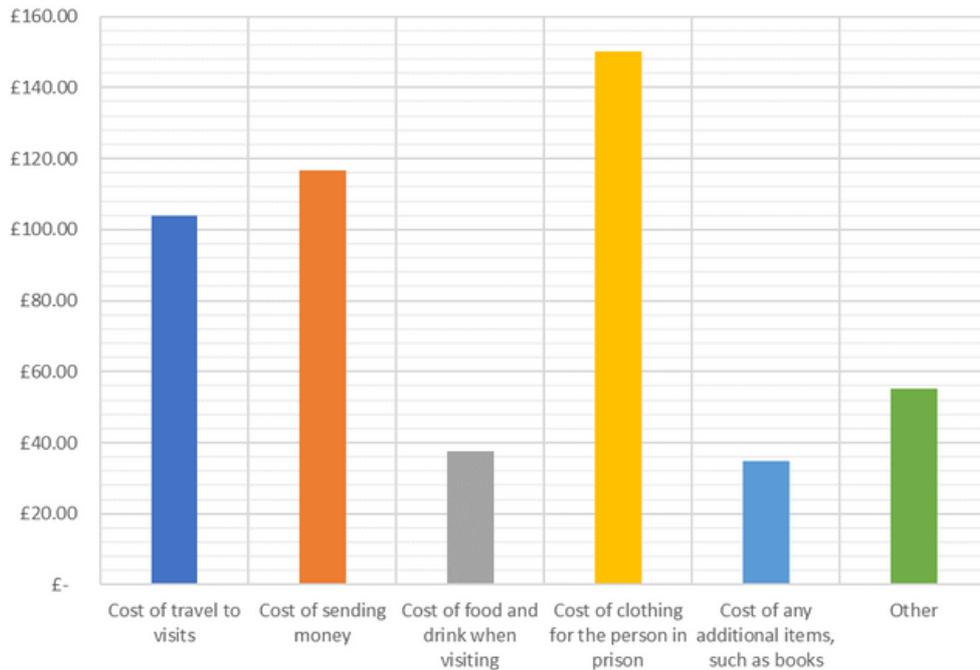


Full survey charts

5. How much of your income do you / did you spend supporting the person in prison?

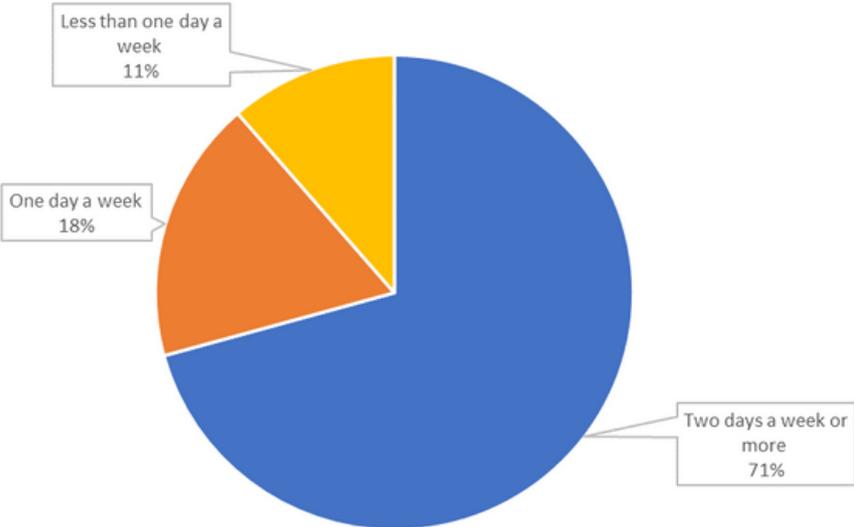


6. Average spent supporting someone in prison every month by type of purchase

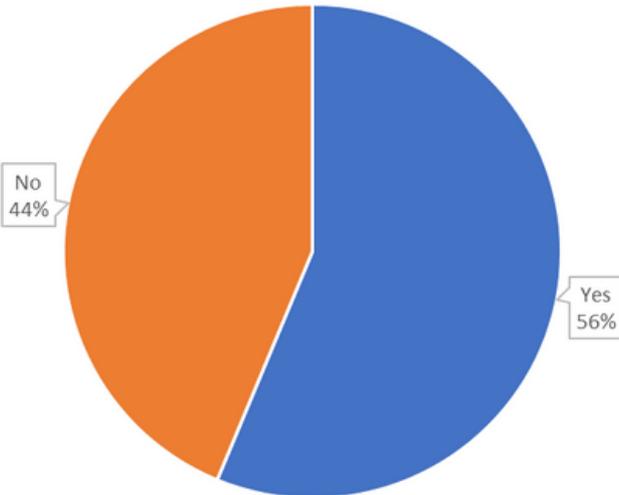


Nb - the findings of this question have been disregarded in the body of the document. We believe that an element of double counting has inflated some of the figures.

7. How much time each week do you / did you spend supporting the person in prison (calls, visits, etc.)?

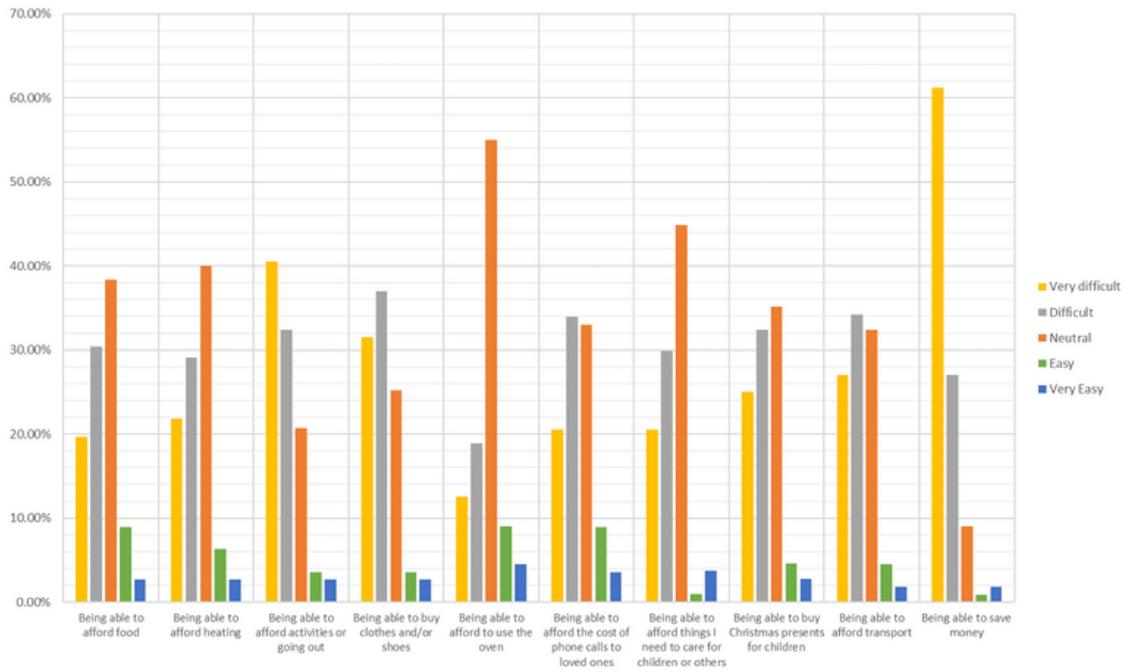


8. Has money affected your ability to stay in touch with the person in prison?

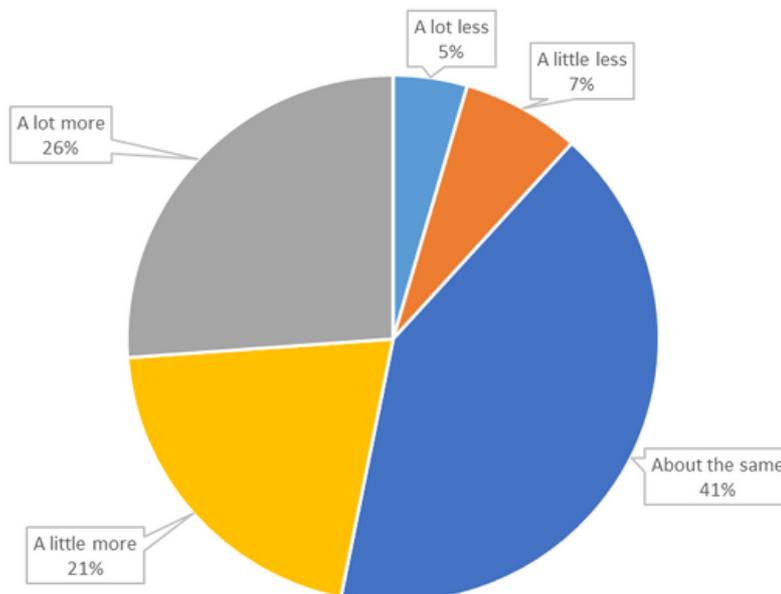


Full survey charts

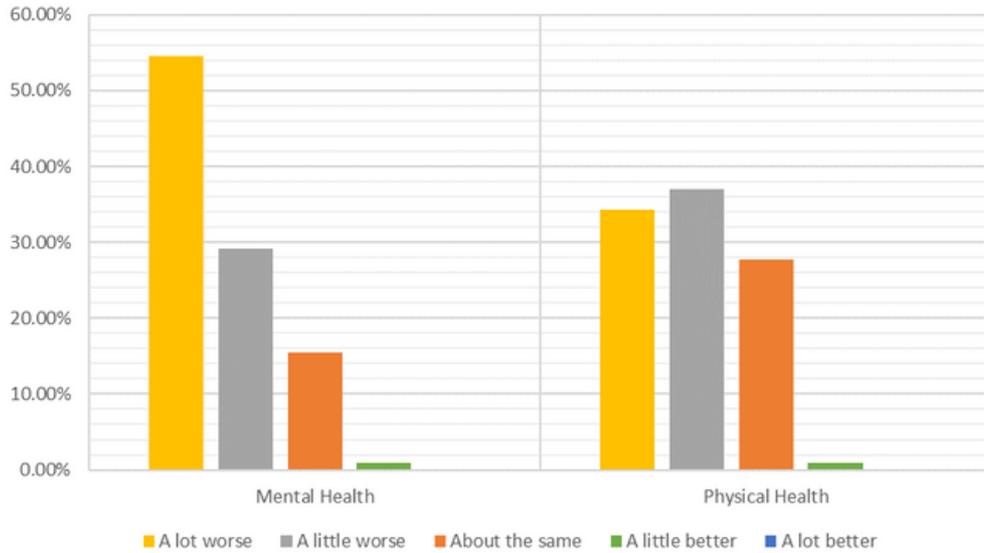
10. How easy or difficult would you rate the following for the time the person spent in prison?



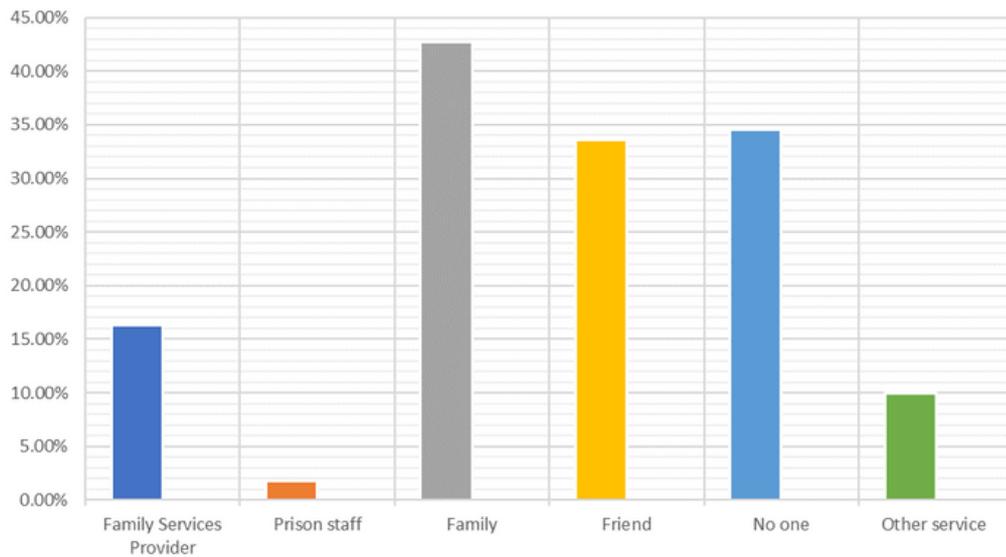
11. Since COVID and the rise in the cost of living, how much more or less have you spent supporting your loved one in prison?



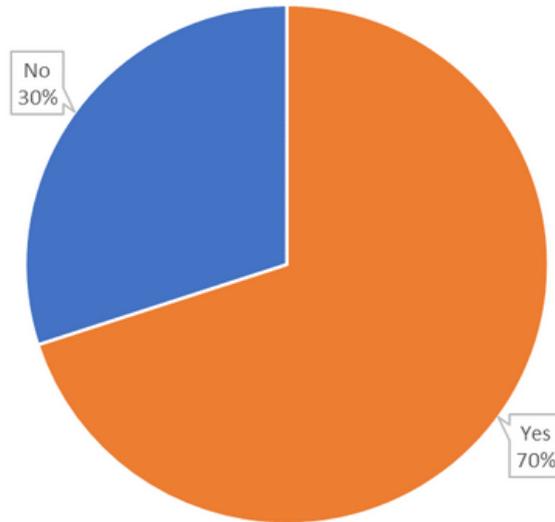
12. How would you describe the impact on your mental and physical health as a result of these costs?



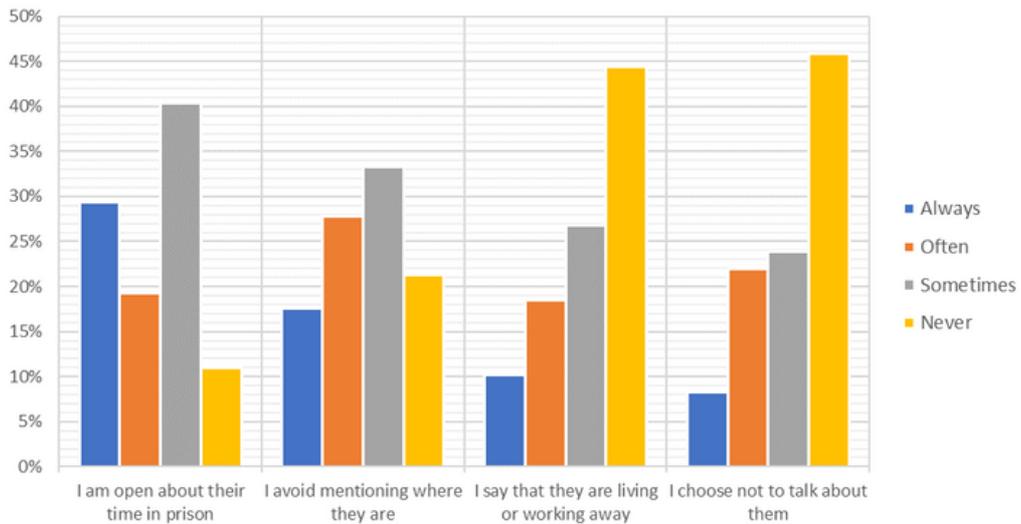
13. Whom would you say has been your main support over this time?



14. Have you lost relationships with friends and family because of the imprisonment of a loved one?



15. When talking about your loved one in prison, how do you usually describe their situation?



16. Are you aware of the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme that provides some families with financial support for visits?

