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A European Study of Children's Resilience to Parental Imprisonment

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Project Introduction



- “Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health” (COPING)
- European Union Seventh Framework Programme
- 3 year project, ending December 2012
- UK, Romania, Germany, Sweden
- Academic institution + non-governmental organisation (NGO)
specialising in supporting families of prisoners

Aims & Objectives



- To explore characteristics of children and young people with an imprisoned parent or carer;
- their vulnerability to mental health problems;
- and factors that promote resilience.

Methodology



1. Questionnaire based survey

- 707 children aged 7-17, 646 non-imprisoned parents/carers
- Recruited at prison visitor centres (UK), via specialised NGOs (Germany and Sweden), from prison databases (Romania)
- Demographics, caregiving-arrangements, support needs, sources of support, contact with imprisoned parent
- • Goodman Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire, Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale, WHO Quality of Life Scale, Kidscreen

2. In-depth interviews

- 161 children, 123 non-imprisoned parent/carers, 65 imprisoned parent/carers
- Family relationships, friendships, leisure activities, school experience, stigma and bullying, physical and psychological health, support needs and sources of support, experience of the criminal justice system and contact with imprisoned parent
- Thematic analysis using Nvivo software



Table 1: Children's Relationship to their Imprisoned and Non-imprisoned P/C

	UK (n=67)	Germany (n=29)	Romania (n=38)	Sweden (n=29)
Imprisoned Parent/Carer				
Biological father	44	14	30	23
Biological mother	16	3	3	2
Step-father/male partner	6	11	5	3
Grandfather	1	0	0	0
Other	0	1	0	0
Non-Imprisoned Parent/Carer				
Biological mother	48	25	30	26
Grandmother	10	2	4	1
Biological father	4	0	0	1
Grandfather	1	0	1	0
Step-father/male partner	1	0	1	0
Step-mother/female partner	0	1	0	0
Other	3	1	2	1

Standardised Scales

Table 3: Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (parent rating)

	UK (n=57)	Germany (n=29)	Romania (n=38)	Sweden (n=22)
Normal (0-13)	32 (56.1%)	14 (48.3%)	21 (55.3%)	12 (54.5%)
Borderline (14-16)	11 (19.3%)	5 (17.2%)	4 (10.5%)	5 (22.7%)
Abnormal (17-40)	14 (24.6%)	10 (34.5%)	13 (34.2%)	5 (22.7%)

*UK normative data

Mental Health Outcomes



- Unwanted episode vs. profound shock
- Disrupted sleep, anxiety, low self-esteem, withdrawal, aggressive behaviour
- Girls more resilient than boys (*only tested in the UK)

Attachment to Imprisoned P/C

- Conflicting emotions (separation anxiety vs. breaking moral codes)
- Offence = “elephant in the room”
- Severity of offence, length of sentence, learning difficulties and ADHD
- Imprisoned mothers vs. fathers (*only tested in the UK)

Coping Strategies

- Emotional expression (Sweden) vs. suppression (UK, Germany)
- Idealisation of imprisoned parent (Germany, Romania)
- Idealistic ideas about release (UK, Germany, Romania)
- Dissociation from guilt (UK)

Relationship with Non-Imprisoned P/C



- Conflict and substance misuse
- Emphasis on normality (UK, Germany)
- Disclosure and communication

Stigma, Bullying & Support Mechanisms



	UK (n=67)	Germany (n=27)	Romania (n=38)	Sweden (n=29)
Child report bullying (parent report)	15 (20)	0 (0)	2 (6)	2 (2)
Disclosure to school	Most	Half	Very few	Half
Disclosure to friends	Most	Half	Very few	Most

*approximate figures

Conclusion

- Many children display high levels of resilience to parental imprisonment, but there is also a significant proportion who experience adverse outcomes for wellbeing and mental health
- Variety of risk and protective factors but these are relative to the social and economic climate
- Other mediating factors = contact with imprisoned parent, experience of arrest, support received from school, access to support agencies

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