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The Impact of Parental Imprisonment on Children: Factors Influencing Resilience

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Invisible Children

Every year, 200,000 children affected by parental imprisonment
Mothers in Prison

- 54% of prisoners have dependent children aged under 18
- Male and female prisoners equally likely to have children
- **BUT** women twice as likely to report problems concerning children and families
- Women more likely than men to live alone with children before imprisonment (58% vs. 43%)
Caregiving Arrangements

Children with a father in prison:
- 94% live with mother/stepmother
- 5% other family members
- 1% in care

Children with a mother in prison:
- 27% live with father/stepfather
- 69% other family members
- 4% in care
Vulnerabilities

- Family instability, financial hardship, domestic violence, substance misuse, mental health problems
- Effects are **profound** and **long-lasting**
- Poorer educational outcomes
- **Three times** more likely to offend or display anti-social behaviour
In relation to antisocial & offending outcomes......

- Custodial sentences
- Longer periods of imprisonment
- Maternal imprisonment
- Boys
- Imprisonment since birth, and during adolescence
Vulnerabilities

Internalising or “acting in”
Sadness, loss, confusion, despair, depression, shame, guilt, worry, fear, social withdrawal, bed-wetting, nightmares, eating disorders, self-harm, PTSD symptoms

Externalising or “acting out”
Aggression, conduct problems, underage smoking, drug or alcohol consumption, sexual promiscuity, anti-social/criminal behaviour

Three times more likely to experience mental health problems in adulthood, and disproportionally represented in clinical populations
Prison Visiting

Maintaining *frequent* contact associated with:

- more satisfying parent-child relationships during imprisonment and upon release
- better emotional adjustment and more effective coping skills on behalf of the child
- better outcomes for the imprisoned parent
COPING Project

UK, Germany, Sweden, Romania

Children aged 7-17 with a parent in prison

Over 700 questionnaire surveys

In-depth interviews with 135 families

Mapping of services and interventions

Consultations with NGOs, prison staff, social workers & policy makers

Inspiring tomorrow’s professionals
• 25% of children at heightened risk of mental health problems

• Considerably more difficulties in terms of emotions and peer relations (in particular) and conduct and hyperactivity
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visiting parent/carer in prison</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about having parent/carer in prisons</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about support for children of prisoners</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological problems because parent/carer is in prison</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help with homework</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spending time with family</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological problems (general)</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visiting dentist</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eating well enough</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Following rules at school/work</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Playing sports</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visiting child or family doctor</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basic body care</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spending time with children – outside school</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using telephones</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Having a place to live</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spending time with children – school time</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Going on holiday</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting to school/work</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managing own money</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using the internet</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting a place in school or a job</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exposure to bullying or harrassment</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information about general healthcare system</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with school authorities</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical health problems</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information about mental health care system</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with social welfare authorities</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contraception</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with general health authorities</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reducing harm caused to others</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reducing self-harm</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with mental health authorities</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing alcohol/dug use</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Initial period of destabilisation and trauma, followed by children and families adjusting and emphasising being ‘normal’.

“For me coping has meant getting through a tough time in life. The tough time has been from the moment my Father was sentenced, I’ve had to continually adapt to changes in my life.” Young Person
Resiliency Factors

1. Caregiving arrangement
2. Extended family
3. School & peer support
4. NGOs and agencies

- Honesty and openness
- Effective coping strategies
- Early, continuing, good quality contact with imprisoned parent

- Family violence, drugs, alcohol, caregiver stress and depression
- Communication delayed, less open, secrecy
- Maladaptive coping strategies
- Contact with imprisoned parent sporadic, awkward, future uncertain
“Children are good at imagining things when we are not told the truth. The grown ups always say that they don’t know, but they know more than we do, and that is what we want to know.”

13 year old girl

“I know she’s done wrong, and she needs to be in there, but she’s still my mum.” 9 year old girl

“My sister and me – we are real masters at suppressing things.” 14 year old girl
Stigma & Secrecy

“There is stigma, and we women and children suddenly have a flaw, for which we are not responsible. We can’t go into public with this flaw. And that’s bad. Really bad”. Non-imprisoned mother

“I was nervous telling them. I told them and the head teacher said ‘I am glad you came straight away and didn’t leave it for ages…we care about what’s happened, and we are there for your kids…’. Non-imprisoned mother

“Say if I wanted my mum, the teachers would say ‘Calm down and go and wash your face because you have been crying...there is nothing to worry about’. The teachers, they aren’t nasty, they are nice.” Girl aged 9