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Children of Prisoners: Their Situation and Role in Long-Term Crime Prevention

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Abstract

Studies suggest that maintaining family ties can help reduce the likelihood of reoffending, and that while parental imprisonment can increase a child's likelihood to offend, positive responses to the situation can aid the children's well-being, attitude and attainment. Drawing on findings from the recently completed EU-funded COPING Project on the mental health of children of prisoners, this chapter explores the factors that aid a child's ability to cope with parental imprisonment and the actions that different stakeholders can take to support them. It identifies some of the mental health impacts at different stages of parental imprisonment, the roles played by non-imprisoned parents/carers and by schools, and suggests options for further clarifying the factors that help and hinder children of prisoners in the short and long term.

1 Introduction

Children of prisoners have become increasingly visible in academic and policy circles since 2000, though are still widely ignored compared to other situations¹ and marginalised groups. As research has moved on from small-scale or anecdotal accounts to more robust studies, it has been possible to say with more confidence the ways in which children can be affected, as well as highlighting interventions that may assist them in coping with parental imprisonment.

Children can be affected at all stages of a parent's involvement with the criminal justice process, from the point of arrest to the time of reintegration into the community following release. The ways in which they can be affected are also varied and include emotional, psychological, financial, material, physical and social impacts. For example, the loss of a working parent can mean reduced finances and potentially the need to move to a different home, if the current property can no longer be afforded. The parent-child relationship may come under strain because of greatly reduced and highly controlled opportunities for contact. And the distress caused by the parent's imprisonment and the responses of others to it (especially if they are stigmatising – “your dad's a criminal”) can mean that children become isolated, angry and/or scared, and in some cases develop physical or mental health problems. It should also be noted that there can be positive effects for children, for example when a dangerous or chaotic parent is removed from the family home.

¹ The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the United Nations Children's Fund are among the key global intergovernmental actors who deal with children in conflict with the law and children as victims and witnesses of crime.

It immediately becomes clear, when looking at different countries and world regions, that this is not an issue confined to one part of the globe, or that it particularly affects wealthier or poorer countries. Every country has prisons, and it is virtually certain that at least some of the prisoners have children. The range and extent of impacts will vary depending on the country context and the individual child (even children from the same family may react in very different ways), but it is striking that children from many different countries describe the same feelings, with the most universal being loss.

In recent years, the policy and (particularly) academic research on children of prisoners has become increasingly rigorous, with both longitudinal studies (following a group over many years or decades to see the impact of a particular event, in this case parental imprisonment) and large-scale studies (of hundreds or more participants) verifying what previous studies and practitioners have stated, and in a few cases refuting it.² One consistent finding across anecdotal and scientifically robust research is that having a parent in prison is generally negative for children, both at a population level (most children report it being a negative experience) and an individual level (most children report more negative impacts than positive).

However, there are a number of interventions that research suggests have positive impacts on children's ability to cope with parental imprisonment. A number of these emerged through the research of the EU-funded COPING Project (Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health), whose methodology and results are detailed and discussed below.

Positive interventions may help in maintaining the relationship with the imprisoned parent, or in supporting the children in other parts of their lives. Research suggests that (at least in some countries) having a parent imprisoned can increase the likelihood of boys going on to exhibit antisocial behaviour later in life. While no research known to the authors has yet been completed identifying whether children that cope better with parental imprisonment have a reduced risk of future antisocial behaviour compared to those that do not, many of the behaviours and factors reported by children of prisoners (including anger, truanting and lack of social ties, as well as having a parent with previous convictions) are recognised risk factors

² One example is the finding from the COPING study (see below) that children are as affected by a father's imprisonment as by a mother's, which went against previous findings that a mother's imprisonment had more severe effects (due at least in part to the greater likelihood for imprisoned mothers to be raising children on their own, meaning that children would be more likely to change carer and possibly home and school, as well as losing their parent). However, the COPING researchers speculated that this may be due to the cohort of children that participated, almost all of whom were in contact with their imprisoned parent and who were taken to visit by their non-imprisoned parent or carer.

predicting antisocial behaviour and offending (Mortimer 2010; Becroft 2006). Therefore, helping children of prisoners now may reap benefits in terms of future crime prevention. (There is also the long-recognised role played by maintenance of family connections in reducing the probability of reoffending by released prisoners; while not the focus of this chapter, it is relevant to bear in mind as an additional benefit.)

2 Literature review

Parental imprisonment does not necessarily signal the onset of problems for children; for many, it will represent the continuation of an already difficult family situation. Literature consistently reveals that children of prisoners are more likely than their peers to come from families severely disadvantaged by poverty, unemployment, poor educational outcomes, domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health problems (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). Although the imposition of a custodial sentence might present clear benefits for some children, for example, by providing a welcome relief from domestic violence and substance misuse, there is considerable evidence to suggest that *most* children suffer following parental imprisonment (Murray, 2005). Parental imprisonment has a variety of adverse consequences for children including breakdown of family relationships, disruption to caregiving arrangements, financial hardship, unwelcome adjustments to roles and responsibilities, and stigma and bullying (Smith et al. 2007; Murray 2007).

Children experience a diverse range of negative emotional reactions to parental imprisonment including feelings of rejection, sadness, despair, confusion, depression, withdrawal and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Hissel et al. 2011; Bocknek et al. 2009; Murray and Farrington 2008). Responses to parental imprisonment are not limited to the aforementioned internalising or ‘acting in’ problems, but also include externalising or ‘acting out’ behaviours such as anger, aggression, conduct problems, truancy, sexual promiscuity, and underage smoking and alcohol consumption (Schlafer and Poehlmann 2010; Hanlon et al. 2005; Boswell and Wedge 2002).

3 Criminal and Anti-Social Outcomes

Of particular concern are the numerous studies that indicate a strong association between parental imprisonment and children’s involvement in antisocial and criminal behaviour (Barnardos 2014b; see Murray et al. 2009 for a review). For example, USA research identified imprisonment as a powerful determinant of mobility for both former inmates and their children, with children of prisoners suffering reduced educational

attainment and lower lifetime income (Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). Although it has been widely recognised that the adverse behavioural outcomes could be attributed to pre-existing disadvantage and might not be a direct result of parental imprisonment, the emergence of more robust methodological approaches provides more convincing evidence that parental imprisonment might actually *cause* criminal behaviour in children. Of particular note is the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development (UK), which found that children of prisoners are significantly more likely than their peers to engage in criminal and antisocial behaviour both in adolescence and adulthood (Murray and Farrington 2005), suggesting that the effects are both profound and long-lasting.

Adopting similarly robust methodological approaches, the Criminal Career and Life Course Study (Netherlands) found only a weak causal relationship between parental imprisonment and offending behaviour (van de Rakt et al. 2012), and Project Metropolitan (Sweden) found no causal effect (Murray et al. 2007). This is not to suggest that the results are inconclusive, but rather highlight the importance of understanding cross-country differences in the mechanisms underlying the transmission of criminal and antisocial behaviour. The authors suggested that the combination of Scandinavia's more welfare-orientated justice systems, shorter prison sentences, family-friendly prison policies, extensive social support systems, and more sympathetic attitudes towards crime and punishment might explain why children were less affected by parental imprisonment than in the UK.

4 Risk and Protective Factors

The extent to which an individual child might be affected by parental imprisonment will depend greatly on the existence of a range of risk and protective factors. In order to design effective interventions to reduce the likelihood of criminal and antisocial outcomes, it is crucial that we develop an understanding of factors that might mediate the impact of parental imprisonment.

4.1 Individual Differences

Research indicates that boys who have experienced parental imprisonment are at greater risk of developing criminal and antisocial behaviour than girls (Murray et al. 2009). Indeed, there is supporting evidence that boys tend to display more externalising problems in response to parental imprisonment, whereas girls tend to display more internalising problems (Murray and Farrington 2008). As already noted, the effects of parental imprisonment persist throughout the life-course, but have found to be most pronounced in adolescence suggesting

that there might be a "critical period" for intervention (Murray et al 2009). Nevertheless, children's responses to parental imprisonment are highly individualised, and there is evidence that certain temperaments and coping styles can promote more successful adjustment (Hagan et al. 2005).

4.2 The Parent-Child Relationship

Research has also demonstrated that custodial sentences (rather than community sentences), imprisonment since birth (rather than before birth), repeat incarceration, and longer periods of imprisonment all increase the risk of the child engaging in criminal or antisocial behaviour (Murray et al. 2009). This suggests that actual separation due to imprisonment (and not just having a criminal parent) is a significant contributory factor. Secure parent-child attachments are known to be important for development, not least positive behavioural outcomes (Bowlby 1973a), yet children of prisoners are less likely to have secure attachments to their imprisoned parent (Poehlmann 2005). Children variously report feelings of alienation from their parent, problems communicating, difficulties coming to terms with the situation, and shame and embarrassment at their parent's involvement in criminal activity (Tudball 2000; Schlafer and Poehlmann 2010).

There is strong evidence that maintaining frequent contact with the imprisoned parent can act as a significant buffer against the deterioration of the parent-child relationship and adjustment problems on behalf of the child (Lösel et al. 2012; Poehlmann 2005; Murray 2005). Unfortunately there are multiple barriers to sustaining frequent contact, including prison policies governing arrangements for contact, the remaining parent/carer's capacity to facilitate contact, and the distance to prison and associated travel costs (Arditti and Few 2006). Contact that occurs in child-friendly environments or in the context of interventions designed to support positive parent-child interaction also has more positive outcomes for relationships and adjustment (Sharratt 2014; Poehlmann and Schlafter 2010). There is considerable evidence that in the absence of such environments and interventions, many children find the prison environment intimidating and interaction with their parent unsatisfactory (Nesmith and Ruhland 2008; Brown et al. 2001; Tudball 2000).

The maintenance of family relationships also has positive implications for the parent in prison. Enabling prisoners to be actively involved in their child's development is important for their rehabilitation, not least their sense of parental competence and self-esteem (Loper et al 2009; Clarke et al 2005). Prisoners who maintain contact also have better resettlement outcomes, for example they are more likely to have accommodation and employment

arranged for their release, and are also less likely to reoffend (May et al. 2008; Niven and Stewart 2005).

4.3 Support: Families, Schools and Peers

Research evidence indicates that maternal imprisonment is a greater risk factor for criminal and antisocial outcomes than paternal imprisonment (Murray et al. 2009). Imprisoned mothers tend to be located further from home, presenting greater challenges to visiting and reducing the chances of sustaining parent-child relationships (Robertson 2007; Prison Reform Trust 2013). Maternal imprisonment also causes comparatively more disruption to children's caregiving arrangements, with children being more likely to move in with members of the extended family or to be taken into care (Williams et al. 2012). A change of home might necessitate a change of schools, disrupting children's education and separating them from existing support networks (George and LaLonde 2002). However, positive educational attainment and strong social ties are known to protect against criminal and antisocial outcomes (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

Research evidence indicates that stable and nurturing caregiving arrangements are critical to ensuring successful adjustment to parental imprisonment, and can protect against the development of behavioural problems (Mackintosh et al 2006; Poehlmann 2005). The extent to which the non-imprisoned parent/carer successfully copes with parental imprisonment also has a bearing on the child as this can affect their capacity to support the child (Wildeman et al. 2012; Jones and Wainaina-Woźna (eds.) 2013). Although parents/carers might prefer to provide false explanations or incomplete information regarding the parent's absence with the best interests of protecting the child from harm, there is unequivocal evidence that honest, sensitive and developmentally appropriate communication about the parent's imprisonment facilitates better adjustment on behalf of the child (Poehlmann 2005; King 2002).

It is not uncommon for parents/carers to insist that the child keeps the imprisonment a secret in order to protect them from negative reactions from peers and the community; this denies them the opportunity to seek social support and has been found to be associated with more severe internalising and externalising problems (Hagan and Myers 2003). Conversely, when children share selectively with their closest and most trusted friends, peers can serve as an invaluable source of support and this is associated with more positive emotional and behavioural outcomes (Jones and Wainaina-Woźna (eds.) 2013).

Families affected by imprisonment can be reluctant to access support from outside agencies due to stigma, lack of information about available support, and in some cases mistrust of statutory services (Pugh and Lansky 2011). This concern is not unfounded; teachers for example, have been found to hold less favourable expectations of children with a parent in prison (Trice and Brewster, 2004; Dallaire et al 2010). This is unfortunate, since families have an existing relationship with schools, making them a key site of support. Teachers have been observed to be instrumental in supporting children of prisoners to overcome the emotional challenges associated with parental imprisonment and in providing support to enable them to fulfil their academic potential (Roberts 2012). This underscores the need for training and greater understanding of these issues within schools and communities, who can be an invaluable source of support.

5 Methodology³

The COPING study included four data collection elements to identify issues related to the mental health and well-being of children of prisoners and their imprisoned and non-imprisoned parents/carers, primarily in Germany, Romania, Sweden and the UK. The children of prisoners and their parents/carers were investigated through a self-reporting questionnaire and in-depth qualitative interviews were held with a subsection of families who took part in the survey. Other stakeholders, such as prison staff, school staff, social services workers and government officials, were consulted using a qualitative questionnaire and a mapping of available relevant services inside and outside prison was undertaken in the countries.

The questionnaire was administered to 730 children aged 7-17 and their parents/carers. It included closed and open-ended questions, and had embedded within it four existing instruments: the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman 1997), the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965), the KIDSCREEN-27 (KIDSCREEN Group Europe 2006) and the World Health Organization Quality of Life assessment (World Health Organization 2004). It was administered following pilots in each participating country. Selection methods varied by country and comprised: prison staff identifying prisoners meeting the selection criteria (Germany, Romania, Sweden and UK); meetings with families as they visited prisoners (Germany, Sweden and UK); NGOs identifying families of prisoners

³ The remainder of this chapter draws on the findings of the EU-funded COPING Project (Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health), which was conducted in 2010-2012 by a combination of academic and NGO researchers based in France, Germany, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

(Germany and Sweden); notices via newspapers, radio or websites (Germany, UK); and support from statutory agencies working with children affected by parental imprisonment (Germany, Romania).

In-depth interviews were held with families that completed the survey questionnaire and agreed to take part. Semi-structured interviews were held individually with the children, their parents/carers and their imprisoned parents. Interview guides were constructed, taking into account analysis of data from the surveys as well as feedback from research assistants and available literature. Across the four countries, interviews took place with 161 children (85 boys and 78 girls), 123 non-imprisoned parents/carers and 65 imprisoned parents/carers. Although the initial idea was to recruit equal numbers of children under normal and combined borderline-abnormal ranges according to scores on the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire, this was only partially met due to refusals from participants. The mean ages of children were: 10.66 years in Romania, 11.60 in the UK, 11.69 in Germany, and 11.83 in Sweden.

Stakeholder consultations comprised interviews and/or focus groups with children of prisoners, imprisoned parents, caregivers, social workers, prison staff, staff within institutional homes, school-related stakeholders, NGO staff, and government staff involved in policy relating to children/families of prisoners in each country. They aimed to identify stakeholders' perceptions regarding the needs of children of prisoners. 122 stakeholders were consulted through in-person meetings, telephone interviews and completion of an online questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions.

The mapping of interventions for children of prisoners in the participating countries included four categories of services and interventions. These were: prison-based specialised interventions for the families of prisoners; community-based specialised services for the families of prisoners; community-based non-specialised services for the families of prisoners; and mental health services for children and adolescents. Questionnaires used for prison and non-prison-based services were sent via email, links to online versions and through telephone conversations with trained NGO volunteers. 289 prisons were involved in the prison-based research. The number of community-based services varied from country to country, from 0 in Romania to 32 in Germany (the UK had 25 services and Sweden 9).

6 Results

6.1 Context

Europe is a small continent, but the national situation, and the context surrounding children of prisoners, varies significantly among its countries. Economic development in 2010 ranged from per capita income (at purchasing power parity) of \$16,254 in Romania to \$39,569 in Sweden (World Bank 2014). Imprisonment rates (per 100,000 population) also differ greatly, with Romania imprisoning 158 persons per 100,000 of national population, the UK (England & Wales) 148; Germany 77 and Sweden 67 (International Centre for Prison Studies 2014). Precise data on children of prisoners are unavailable: this group is not systematically recorded⁴ and existing figures are extrapolations or estimates. For Sweden, the estimate is 10,500 children per year having a parent in prison (Mulready-Jones 2011, p. 5).⁵ In the UK, 200,000 children were estimated to have had a parent in prison at some point in 2012 (Barnardos 2014a, p2) – more than experienced their parents divorcing (Action for Prisoners' Families et al 2007, p1). Mean imprisonment length varies, with Sweden the shortest at 3.2 years.

None of the four COPING countries had a nationwide governmental agency or department focused on children of prisoners. What provision there was tended to be provided by voluntary agencies or statutory services with a wider or different focus (such as social services).

6.2 Results: *emotional and mental health impacts*

While children of prisoners are far from a homogeneous group, the extent to which an individual child might be affected by parental imprisonment will depend greatly on the existence of a range of mediating factors, such as the child's age at separation, the sentence length, the strength of the parent/child bond, the availability of support and the number of previous parent-child separations.

Most children in the COPING Project reported being negatively impacted by the imprisonment of a parent. These mirrored reported impacts from other research, including mental and physical health problems (Hissel et al 2011; Bocknek et al 2009; Murray and Farrington, 2008), difficulties related to education (Trice and Brewster, 2004; Dallaire et al

⁴ This is due both to the widespread non-recognition of this group by authorities and that children and parents may hide their status due to stigma or fears about the actions authorities may take upon discovery.

⁵ The number is significantly higher than the prison population because many parents, like other prisoners, serve less than a year.

2010; Roberts 2012) and stigmatisation by others (Pugh and Lansky 2011). More children were reported as having negative impacts by parents than self-identified as such.

Table 1: Does parental imprisonment have good and/or bad effects on children?

Description	Germany (n=145)	Romania (n=251)	Sweden (n=50)	UK (n=291)	Overall (n=730)
% bad effects (reported by parent/carer)	75.0	50.8	79.4	53.7	58.6
% bad effects (reported by child)	54.2	38.4	60.0	51.3	48.0
% good effects (reported by parent/carer)	24.1	19.1	33.3	15.6	19.8
% good effects (reported by child)	18.7	<i>Not asked</i>	25.6	9.8	14.3

Children reported a range of psychological and mental health impacts. Specific reported impacts included aggressive behaviour, sleeping disorders and nightmares. Emotional support was the issue with which Swedish children of prisoners felt they most needed help. Children in Germany emphasised wanting to live a normal life and were looking forward to their imprisoned parent's return home.

A number of the children in the UK who had been separated from their imprisoned parents for much of their lives appeared to be more vulnerable. Some, mostly boys, had been damaged by their parents' imprisonment, resulting in psychological distress, or displaying anger and disruptive behaviour at school. Children whose parents (fathers in all cases in this study) had been convicted of sexual assaults on other children could also be particularly vulnerable. Of the UK interviewees, four children had been receiving counselling or psychiatric support.

Examining the mental health and well-being (by the SDQ scores⁶) of the children, it is clear that in all countries bar Sweden, children report their well-being more favourably than do their parents (see tables 2 and 3). In all countries, more children fell within the "normal" range than in the "borderline" or "abnormal" ranges. Additionally, children in all countries scored "reliably higher than the UK norm" (Jones and Wainaina-Woźna 2013, p. 270),

⁶ SDQ scores refer to Goodman's (1997) Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, which is a behavioural screening instrument eliciting children and young peoples' perceptions of their conduct, concentration, emotions and social relationships. The SDQ incorporates five different subscales (hyperactivity; emotional symptoms; conduct problems; peer problems; and a prosocial scale) which, when summed, provide a total difficulties score (TDS). It is generally agreed that the SDQ instrument provides one means to measure a child's mental health.

meaning they were closer to the ‘borderline’ or ‘abnormal’ ranges than UK children generally. The numbers in the abnormal columns indicates that approximately one tenth of the sample (by self-reporting) or one quarter of the sample (by parental report) was at heightened risk of experiencing mental health difficulties.

Table 2: SDQ categorisation of children by Total Difficulties score (self-assessment)

Country	Normal (number, %)	Borderline (number, %)	Abnormal (number, %)
Germany	n=105, 74.5%	n=17, 12.0%	n=19, 13.5%
Romania	74.1%	16.7%	9.3%
Sweden	n=11, 57.9%	n=5, 26.3%	n=3, 15.8%
UK	n=101, 80.8%	n=13, 10.4%	n=11, 8.8%

Table 3: SDQ categorisation of children by Total Difficulties score (parental assessment)

Country	Normal (number, %)	Borderline (number, %)	Abnormal (number, %)
Germany	n=74, 53.6%	n=22, 15.9%	n=42, 30.4%
Romania	49.4%	15.4%	35.2%
Sweden	n=18, 58.1%	n=6, 19.4%	n=7, 22.6%
UK	n=112, 64.7%	n=29, 16.8%	n=32, 18.5%

In all countries bar Germany, older (11+) children had a slightly to moderately higher risk of mental health problems than younger (under 11) children, as measured by parent SDQ ratings. (Parent/carer (along with teacher) ratings are considered a more reliable guide to a child’s risk of mental health problems than the child’s own rating (Goodman et al 1998).) The children who scored high were doing generally quite poorly.

Furthermore, the SDQ results showed that boys experienced more difficulties than girls, a disparity which was most notable among surveyed children (11+) in the UK and Sweden especially, though children (of both genders) in Romania experienced more difficulties than children in any other country.

Table 4: Children scoring high on SDQ Total Difficulties Score, by country

Country	% children aged under 11 scoring high on SDQ Total Difficulties Score	% children aged 11+ scoring high on SDQ Total Difficulties Score
Germany	29	28
Romania	35	47
Sweden	21	27
UK	21	28

Table 5: Difficulties of boys and girls from the SDQ total scale and subscales

	UK	Germany	Romania	Sweden
Girls	n=48	n=36	n=49	n=9
Boys	n=77	n=38	n=73	n=6
Total Difficulties Score (sd)				
Girls	10.5 (6.4)	12.0 (7.1)	14.6 (6.7)	9.8 (6.5)
Boys	13.0 (6.4)	12.6 (7.3)	15.7 (8.0)	13.7 (8.9)
Difference (Boys/Girls)	B +2.5	B +0.6	B +1.1	B +3.9
Emotions Subscale (sd)				
Girls	3.1 (2.7)	3.7 (2.9)	4.9 (2.8)	3.0 (2.4)
Boys	2.6 (2.2)	3.1 (2.8)	4.7 (2.8)	2.5 (1.6)
Difference (Boys/Girls)	G +0.5	G +0.6	G +0.2	G +0.5
Hyperactivity Subscale (sd)				
Girls	3.2 (2.6)	3.4 (2.2)	4.0 (2.3)	3.6 (2.8)
Boys	5.0 (2.0)	4.4 (2.6)	4.6 (2.8)	6.0 (3.9)
Difference (Boys/Girls)	B +1.8	B +1.0	B +0.6	B +2.4
Peer Subscale (sd)				
Girls	2.3 (1.8)	2.4 (2.0)	3.1 (2.0)	1.7 (1.5)
Boys	2.3 (1.8)	2.3 (2.1)	2.9 (2.0)	2.7 (1.5)
Difference (Boys/Girls)	EVEN	G +0.1	G +0.2	B +1.0
Conduct Subscale (sd)				
Girls	2.0 (1.7)	2.5 (1.9)	2.6 (2.1)	1.6 (1.9)
Boys	3.0 (2.2)	2.7 (2.0)	3.5 (2.9)	2.5 (3.3)
Difference (Boys/Girls)	B +1.0	B +0.2	B +0.9	B +0.9
Prosocial Subscale (sd)				
Girls	8.6 (2.0)	7.4 (1.7)	8.4 (1.9)	7.4 (1.9)
Boys	7.3 (2.0)	7.6 (1.8)	7.5 (2.4)	7.3 (2.6)
Difference (Boys/Girls)	G +1.3	B +0.2	G +0.9	G +0.1

The self-esteem of children of prisoners varied, with German and Romanian children reporting higher self-esteem than their country norms on the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale⁷, and UK children scoring lower than the country norm. The authors have found no country norm for Sweden.

Well-being, as captured by the KIDSCREEN survey⁸, varied: while as a whole group, the surveyed children reported lower well-being compared to pan-European norms, with psychological well-being the lowest, the results varied significantly by country and Swedish and UK children scored above the norm in some areas (notably the social support and peers subscale), while Romanian children reported in almost all areas lower well-being than their peers in other countries.

Table 6: KIDSCREEN-27 total scores (untransformed)

	Germany	Romania	Sweden	UK	Overall
Parent	N=139	N=245	N=50	N=216	N=634
Child	N=143	N=243	N=50	N=269	N=698
KS-27 Total: original scale					
Parent	91.4 (11.0)	80.2 (13.8)	90.8 (11.0)	93.6 (14.6)	87.8 (14.7)
Child	93.8 (11.8)	83.2 (15.4)	97.5 (11.8)	98.0 (13.4)	92.0 (15.2)

Finally, the WHO Quality of Life Scale⁹ found that ‘Swedish and UK parents/carers judged their [children’s] quality of life higher than those in Germany and Romania. On the overall quality of life item, Swedish parents/carers score on average much higher than the others (66.7 on the 0-100 scale) and Romanian parents/carers score much lower than those in other countries (44.6). For the general health item, UK parents/carers score highest and Romanian parents/carers score lowest. Breaking down the total scores into the four specific domains also shows major differences between countries. For the physical domain, German, Swedish and UK parents/carers score quite high, while the Romanian parents/carers score

⁷ The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) was devised by Morris Rosenberg (1965) and provides an indication of children and young people’s perceived levels of self-esteem (self-evaluation). The scale consists of ten items which are summed to produce an overall score ranging from 10-40, where higher scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem. Self-esteem is one aspect of a child’s well-being and influences aspirations, personal goals and interaction with others.

⁸ The KIDSCREEN instrument elicits children and young peoples’ ratings of their health and well-being. This is a self-report instrument and covers five dimensions (physical well-being; psychological well-being; autonomy and parental relation; support and peers; and school environment) with a higher score indicating more positive health and well-being. The KIDSCREEN-27 is a shorter version (27 items) of the original KIDSCREEN-52 questionnaire (Ravens-Sieberer et al (2007)).

⁹ The WHO Quality of Life-BREF instrument (WHOQOL) was used to ascertain the non-imprisoned parents/carer’s health-related quality of life as well as their aspirations, using a 26-item questionnaire. For more on the WHOQOL-BREF, see Skevington et al (2004).

much lower. For the psychological domain, German parents/carers score the lowest, although quite similar to the Romanian parents/carers, with UK and Swedish parents/carers scoring much higher. For the social domain, the Swedish parents/carers score much higher than the others, with the Romanian parents/carers scoring the lowest. For the environmental domain, the UK parents are scoring highest, but not much different from the Swedish and German parents/carers, while the Romanian parents/carers are scoring much lower' (Jones and Wainaina-Woźna (eds.), 2013, pp287-288).

Table 7: WHOQOL-BREF scores across the four countries (0-100 scale)

	Germany (n=139)	Romania (n=244)	Sweden (n=36)	UK (n=226)	Overall (n=645)
QoL-overall	54.9	44.6	66.7	62.6	54.3
QoL-health	51.1	48.0	61.1	65.4	55.4
Physical	63.2	56.5	67.6	71.7	63.8
Psychological	54.1	56.8	61.6	61.7	58.2
Social	53.1	51.8	64.1	58.6	55.2
Environmental	60.0	43.6	63.9	68.1	56.8

Alongside these reports on children's general well-being, quality of life etc. there were also accounts (primarily through in-depth interviews) about times that were particularly difficult for children and could trigger peaks of emotion. These included the arrest and period after arrest, and court appearances at which bail or sentencing were being decided. Arrests were generally sudden and unexpected, and many police operational procedures (such as forced entry into the family home, conducting searches and uprooting belongings, and splitting family members and confining children to a room) could be frightening and shocking for children. Children were often not considered at arrest, but "the level of distress could be lessened significantly by sensitive Police practice" (Jones and Wainaina-Woźna (eds.), 2013, p. 353). One parent in the UK thought their child had been traumatised during their arrest because the parent was unable to explain to them what was happening. Children spoke of their distress at discovering police searching through their personal belongings or becoming emotionally withdrawn since the arrest of the father. In both the UK and Germany, children's rage and helplessness was most intense in the period following arrest: some

participants described screaming uncontrollably on discovering the accusations against the parent.

Following arrest, there was often acute uncertainty about whether the arrested parent would be imprisoned while awaiting trial, and the wait for the case to come to court could also leave children and families in a "limbo" state, whether or not the parent was imprisoned while awaiting trial. This could be increasingly difficult as the length of wait increased; the longest example reported was of three years for one UK family. Delays in hearings could mean repeated good-byes and reliving the emotional upset these likely caused. When a parent was imprisoned while awaiting trial, the level of contact their children could have with them varied widely between countries, from daily visits for some UK children to no contact at all (in person or by telephone) for some in Sweden, where contact can be denied if it is believed it may result in interference with or may jeopardise the case.

Sentencing following conviction was another particularly difficult period, especially if the child had not been informed about the situation and was not expecting their parent to face a long custodial sentence, or had been unaware of the (alleged) offence. Other difficult times for children would be celebrations such as birthdays and Christmas and other special family occasions where they would often miss the imprisoned parent.

The impact of parental imprisonment on school performance varied significantly among the four countries. School performance declined among half the children in Germany, whereas in Romania the impacts were minimal (except where children had to move home following parental imprisonment). Only in the UK were significant percentages (12%) suspended or expelled from school; however, this may relate to schools' attitudes more than the extremity of behaviour. School-related issues constituted the second-most important need for Swedish children.

A minority of children in the UK appeared to be more educationally at risk, and this was clearly linked to parental imprisonment in several cases. The interview data also indicated that the school performance of siblings varied considerably, itself influenced by the children's relationship with their imprisoned parent and their emotional development, as well as their age and sex. For some of these children the transition to secondary school can also be difficult for them to manage, although children who struggled here had more complex family circumstances than those who successfully managed moving to secondary school. Communication about the parent's imprisonment appeared to be handled poorly and may have contributed to the child's difficulties. In Germany, nearly half of the parents interviewed did not inform their children's school about their parent's imprisonment; in Romania, the

majority did not (and further advised their children not to tell peers at school about the imprisonment).

A significant issue in Romania, the UK and especially Germany, was stigma. It can often result in children who do know about their parent's imprisonment turning inwards and not sharing the reality of their situation outside the family. While about half of the children in Germany spoke to friends, they feared negative consequences, although none of them reported actually experiencing hostility or prejudice. Fear of stigma led to a focus on secrecy and stress. Romania had the highest proportion of children who lied about or were not told the reality about their parent's situation, with the explanation for a parent's absence often being that they had gone abroad to seek work. Lying about the parent's absence is not universally negative: it is one of the most common strategies of resilience and can be employed to protect the family's image and prevent the children being stigmatised.

The UK had the highest proportion of children reporting victimisation or bullying in school as a direct result of having a parent in prison (15 (22%) self-reporting, 20 (30%) according to reports from parents). There were several other cases where it was unclear whether bullying had taken place, so this may still be an underestimate. This contrasted with just two Swedish children or parents (7%) reporting victimisation or bullying due to parental imprisonment.

As might be expected, the main site for bullying was within the school and conducted by other children. In most cases the bullying was a result of secondary social stigma towards the children; bullying usually took the form of verbal abuse through name calling, sarcastic remarks etc. However, there were several cases in the UK where bullying escalated into physical fights, usually as a result of (verbal) retaliation by the child of a prisoner leading to a physical confrontation. There were several other more serious cases of bullying, where a child had been physically attacked and beaten up by peers because of the parent's offence. More usually, children could experience some degree of ostracism, with family friends and acquaintances no longer associating with their parent, usually by ignoring them in the street. On these occasions it was more likely the case that any animosities were levelled by adults against other adults, rather than directed against the children. This was generally driven by negative local media coverage of the case. This could prompt concern by the child for their parent's welfare, causing the child heightened anxiety and stress. The period following a parent's sentence and the ensuing publicity is often reported as one of heightened stress and concern. Over several weeks or months the loss of status, labelling, ostracism and rejection could peak for families. Children could also lose some school friends and be ostracised by

others; however, friends who were supportive were an important source of resilience. Indeed, being able to confide in a few close friends (and family members) could buffer some of the negative effects of bullying and stigma, and better enable the child to cope in stressful and challenging circumstances: the majority of Swedish children had done so. Not all schools were supportive of bullied children and there was some evidence of additional stigmatisation from some teachers in Romania and the UK, probably due to the failings of individual staff members. Furthermore, a minority of bullied children reported interpersonal expectancy effects taking place within the school, with some teachers showing lowered expectations for pupils' competency or classroom discipline when they knew the child's parent was imprisoned.

Stakeholders felt that there must be a major change in society's view of detainees so that children do not have to endure a stigma for crimes they did not commit.

Financial concerns were an issue in all countries, but much more so in Romania: "It was not unusual for families to have to choose between visiting prison or meeting basic needs (food and clothing) and purchasing school equipment for children" (Jones and Wainaina-Woźna, 2013, p.357). Material and financial support was the area in which Romanian children most wanted assistance. There were also physical health impacts, which in Romania constituted the greatest risk area for children, according to responses to the WHO Quality of Life Scale.

Not all children found parental imprisonment a negative experience: a quarter of children and a third of parents/carers in Sweden reported good effects from the imprisonment. These centred around improved family relations, and for a minority, how they were feeling, especially where the imprisoned parent had been abusive or had addictions.

Table 8: Reports of good effects of parental imprisonment

Description	Germany	Romania	Sweden	UK
% good effects (reported by child)	18.7	<i>not asked</i>	25.6	9.8
% good effects (reported by parent/carer)	24.1	19.1	33.3	15.6

While a substantial number of children seemed to be quite resilient and seemed to be surviving quite well, it should be stressed that all children suffered some degree of distress. It appears that many from this group of children had mainly strong relationships with their parents, maintained positive relationships with the imprisoned parent, and their parent's

sentence was short enough that they could reasonably anticipate the opportunity to resume their relationship upon release. For instance six families in this position described themselves as just "normal families" coping with a difficult period, who managed to adjust to a difficult situation with support from wider family and friends. For others there was a more pronounced period of disruption or crisis followed by a gradual improvement where things got back to normal.

6.3 Results: relationship and contact with imprisoned parent

Maintaining family ties during imprisonment has been found to reduce the likelihood of reoffending; the COPING research found that the reverse was also true, with children having the best chances if they had strong relationships with both their parents. The evidence from the interview data demonstrates the importance of parental relationships and the quality of caregiving in building the child's resilience. This was the case for both paternal and maternal imprisonment. Maintaining contact only works when both parties are willing to stay in touch (although support for children and parents by psychologically trained volunteers or professionals can in some cases overcome this caveat).

Some of the children in Romania and Germany developed an unrealistic and idealised image of the imprisoned parent. This often had knock-on impacts on the relationships with the remaining parent/carer and meant that emotional and behavioural problems were fought out between parents and children at home. In the UK, children's vulnerability could be higher where their parents' relationship appeared strained, or unbalanced (for example, one parent expecting too much of the other).

A key method of maintaining contact is in-person visits. A majority of children in all countries visited their parent in prison: 81.5% in Germany, 87.9% in Romania, 75.9% in Sweden¹⁰ and 92.9% in the UK.¹¹ Barriers to visiting in all countries included travel distance (especially high in Romania, followed by Sweden, with Germany and the UK having shorter average distances) and the high financial cost of visiting. The quality of visits themselves varied widely, with features such as visit length, privacy and possibility of physical contact dictated by the prison regime in the country and the security classification of individual prisons. As reported in Robertson et al 2012, p.104:

¹⁰ In Sweden, a higher proportion of interviewed parents were entitled to temporary release/home leave, so this may account for the lower prison visiting rate.

¹¹ Note that participants in the study were almost exclusively recruited during prison visits and through NGOs working with prisoners' families, which almost certainly affected the sample.

However, stakeholders report that relatively small changes, such as hanging pictures on the walls, painting the walls with bright colours and providing toys or magazines, can make a big difference to children's experience of visiting prison, with children being calmer and more at ease, as well as more positive about returning for subsequent visits. Having special visits shortly after imprisonment can help allay children's fears, while allowing children to meet with parents in special family visiting rooms away from other prisoners can make visits more pleasant. Children can also be helped by being accompanied on prison visits by NGO staff or volunteers or, for children living in institutional settings, by institutional staff. All these accompaniers can provide emotional and practical support, particularly in relation to their fears and how to deal with the parent's imprisonment.

When in prison, the amount of contact parents have varies widely, both in terms of visits and in terms of indirect contact (mainly letters and telephone calls). Children's experiences of prison differed greatly depending on the security levels, with Swedish and UK children "acknowledging that as the security rating of the prison decreased, the environment became less intimidating and they were afforded more freedom. As a result, less secure establishments were found to be more conducive towards quality interaction between children and their imprisoned parent" (Jones and Wainaina-Woźna (eds.) 2013, p361). Within England and Wales (UK) prisoners receive as standard between two one-hour visits and four two-hour visits a month. Phone calls are permitted but prisoners have to buy phonecards from their own funds. Germany's criminal justice policies prioritise rehabilitation and prisoners, including those convicted of serious offences, have generous home leave entitlements throughout their sentence. Government policies support prisoners' family ties, although there are significant variations between the sixteen German states (Länder). The Romanian prison system allows monthly visits depending on the security level.¹² For example, those in maximum security prisons are permitted two visits per month, with only two people allowed to visit and physical contact prohibited. However, there are no child-friendly facilities or arrangements in Romanian prisons: authorities have stated that prison is a hostile environment and lacks facilities for family meetings. Other countries include in-prison programmes and interventions for children and families: these are covered in the next section.

¹² Romania has four levels of security in the prison system: maximum security, closed, semi-open and open.

There is also indirect contact. This was particularly important in the UK, where the overwhelming majority (95.9%) of surveyed children had maintained some contact with their imprisoned parents, most frequently by phone calls (179 children), email or letters (159 children). However, while 90% of children in Sweden and the UK have frequent telephone contact with their parents in prison, this is very restricted in Germany. Indeed, the importance of telephone contact came across strongly, especially in the UK: regular contact by telephone was found to promote the child/imprisoned parent's relationship as well as supporting the consistent involvement of the imprisoned parent in the upbringing of their children. Early telephone contact not only helped reassure the child the parent was safe and well, but also helped support the child's adjustment in losing a parent to prison, which was an important factor in their continuing resilience. Overall, the evidence from the interview data demonstrated the importance of parental relationships and the quality of caregiving in building the child's resilience. This was the case for both paternal and maternal imprisonment.

The questionnaires and in-depth interviews identified the critical role played by the non-imprisoned parent, in terms of practical and emotional support for the child, but also their role in facilitating contact between the child and imprisoned parent. The relationship between the imprisoned parent and the non-imprisoned parent/carer is extremely important; when the non-imprisoned parent/carer refuses to visit prison, this can mean the children do not go either, as many prisons require children to be accompanied by an adult. Conversely, when the non-imprisoned parent/carer is committed to maintaining the child-imprisoned parent relationship, they can enable it even when the child may be reluctant to visit. More widely, there is a rule of thumb that if the non-imprisoned parent/carer has a good relationship with both the child and the imprisoned parent, the child-imprisoned parent relationship is likely to be maintained.

6.4 Results: positive effects and interventions

The number and effectiveness of interventions varied both between and within countries. Many community-based interventions were small and locally focused, while prison-based ones often operated in a single prison. Services could provide information, advice and practical support for families of prisoners.

COPING found that almost 57% of prisons surveyed across the four countries had specific interventions for children and families focused on family relations, 47% on the parent's imprisonment and 34% on mental health issues. Germany has a broad spectrum of

community-based interventions for children of prisoners and their families, including counselling services, youth welfare provision and psychotherapeutic support. These, as well as prison-based father/child groups, were highly regarded by families taking part in the research. However, the study indicated that community and prison-based interventions available in Sweden today are not sufficient to strengthen children's resilience when they have a parent in custody, even though over 80% of Swedish children had received some kind of help: a third of all Swedish children indicated that they would like (more) help.

A particularly problematic area was the timing of support for children, which is not adapted to the chain of events associated with a parent's imprisonment: the desire for information about having a parent/carer in prison and available support for children was the top desire of German children. In order for the child to better cope with the situation, it may be crucial that the first parent-child visit occur shortly after detention – parents/carers for the children specifically named the periods immediately after arrest and after release as times when they need the most support.

Sources of economic and personal/emotional support were primarily family members (grandmothers/grandparents were especially likely to be mentioned, particularly in Romania). The care provided by mothers, and grandparent and sibling support, was a key protective factor in Germany. The extended family also plays an important role in the resilience process of Romanian children. However, non-imprisoned mothers in Germany did not always have time to support their children emotionally: they were described as 'over challenged and focusing on pragmatic issues'.

After speaking to the family, children were most likely to confide in teachers or other people in school. Moreover, the interview data strongly suggested that the majority of schools in Germany, Sweden and the UK made an important contribution to reassuring parents and carers, and in maintaining the morale and self-confidence of children while their parent was in prison (Romanian participants reported less school support). This ability to help could be impaired where parents/carers had not openly discussed issues with school staff. Some children did confide in a few trusted teachers (irrespective of the parents informing the school) allowing them to talk through any problems (school or family) they were having and also allowing the school to make adjustments in light of their difficulties.

Interview data from Sweden and the UK showed that the majority of schools were an important source of support and normality for many children and could build their capacity for resilience. This was the case for junior and secondary schools, special schools and private schools, though unsurprisingly only when they knew about the imprisonment. Staff members

within schools could work with and complement parents, offering understanding if children were upset as well as dealing firmly with any instances of bullying or inappropriate remarks. A lot of children described particularly valuing support from a staff member whom they trusted and were able to confide in: younger children in Sweden mainly turned to their class teacher, while older children would get support from a school counsellor or school nurse. Girls in the UK tended to talk more openly about their experience of emotional support from school staff, whereas boys tended to say less, but to place an equal value on the support provided. Examples include schools helping children stay calm and to behave properly, as well as providing ongoing emotional support. Schools could also emphasise the importance of academic achievement (doing homework, attending classes and task orientation); the general picture across the four countries was that for most children academic achievement was not strongly adversely affected by imprisonment, and the fact that many children performed well at school itself indicated resilience.

One response that was found to be positive across countries was to have open, honest (and age-appropriate) communication with the child concerning the situation and what was expected to happen. This helped the children to cope when the various stages of the process became a reality. Furthermore, children who chose to tell friends about their imprisoned parent seemed to do well; open discussion helped children to handle their situation; and parents who talked openly with schools received sympathetic responses. Having a trusting and caring relationship between children and school staff when discussing parental imprisonment appeared to function as a protective factor against conduct problems. Indeed, one of the key findings from the COPING research highlights the idea of "community resilience", the importance of social support systems, especially of school, teachers and peer support for children.

7 Discussion

The general picture from the COPING research is that parental imprisonment can have adverse effects for children in a number of areas, but that these effects can be mitigated by formal or (very often) informal support and interventions. This finding reflects and reinforces much previous research, as well as the experience of NGOs in these and other countries. It brings validation that for many children with imprisoned parents there are measurable health impacts and reinforces the understanding that for children the best chance of being resilient to the experience of parental incarceration arises when they have: strong, emotionally capable parents; support from schools; the possibility of good contact with their

imprisoned parent; inclusion in society at large; and their needs considered at all stages of the process.

One especially valuable part of the COPING research is the large number of participants compared to most previous studies of children of prisoners (thereby providing some statistical robustness) and the embedding within the survey of the four existing mental health and well-being questionnaires. This provides a quantitative account of children's well-being (the term being used here broadly to include the mental health, self esteem and quality of life aspects recorded by other embedded studies), as well as allowing comparison with other groups who have completed such studies. Such comparisons give evidence of the impact that parental imprisonment has, separate from other factors, and can mean that risk factors for future mental health and well-being can be identified. For example, while only a few UK children were in the lowest group of scores for the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (2.7%, n=6), such low scores are a concern because low self esteem is a non-specific risk factor in mental ill-health and is involved in the development of a range of internalising and externalising problems.

However, it is important when dealing with such risk factors to consider their likelihood as well as the range of possibilities. So when considering the self-esteem example above, we should remember that the majority of the sample showed higher or intermediate levels of self-esteem, which would assist children of prisoners in negotiating and surviving through the experiences of parental imprisonment and allow them to progress more easily in to a fruitful adult life.

One clear finding was the importance to children of strong, emotionally capable parents or carers, both inside and outside the prison. Given the importance of their role in helping the child, it seems that additional support to non-imprisoned parents/carers (including both practical and emotional support) would benefit the children and build their resilience.

Additionally, imprisoned parents should be supported in building or maintaining a relationship with their children, not least to strengthen an attachment that is often weaker than when the parent has not been imprisoned (Poehlmann 2005), but also (from a crime prevention perspective) because of the impact that good family links have on reducing reoffending. Prisoner-parent support groups such as those offered by the NGO Relais Enfants Parents in France and parental training sessions in Croatia are examples of schemes that help reduce the alienative effects of prison (Goffman 1961), loss of personal responsibility and diminished agency that can adversely impact parenting capacities. Assisting and enabling

parents to talk to children about the imprisonment empowers them as parents and allows children to better process the incarceration.

However, contact with an imprisoned parent can face systemic hurdles, such as a lack of appropriate visiting facilities. Where such facilities and other child-friendly systems do exist (and prison visits do seem to be the area with the most innovation), they are often only in a single or a few prisons. Often they depend on the continued involvement of a concerned staff member or NGO. This is obviously damaging for their sustainability, as the departure of even one key individual could cause the collapse of positive programmes. One recommendation from stakeholders was that more funding be given to organisations that support children of prisoners. However, there also need to be efforts to share good practice between and within prisons and to educate all staff members. Even when child-friendly facilities are available, staff attitudes (down to such things as whether the staff smile or explain what they are doing) can make the difference about whether children report a positive or negative visiting experience (Robertson 2012, p. 35).

As well as examples described in the COPING countries, positive visiting innovations include private visits in Norway (where the family meets without other visitors or guards present¹³), and opportunities for play and creativity (such as puppet shows and painting) in some Italian and Belgian prisons. A major benefit of all child-friendly settings is that children are often more relaxed and can focus more on their relationship with their parent, rather than on fears of the prison. Recent innovations regarding indirect contact include the use of IT to allow children to immediately inform their imprisoned parent about meaningful events, such as Skype in the Czech Republic and in Oregon (USA), and limited mobile phone use by prisoners in some prisons in England and Slovenia. Given the value that many surveyed/interviewed children placed on being able to have regular contact with parents, and the increasing proportion of their communication that is done digitally, such innovations could be expected to be fruitful.

Outside of the family, the next-most important institution in the lives of the children is the school, which plays multiple roles. It is the site of adults and children who can support or stigmatise children of prisoners, and its formal educational role can have both short-term (in terms of being a focus for children) and long-term (in terms of improved employment opportunities and earnings) benefits. 'Children's school performance provides important evidence about their resilience. Their performance is likely to be closely related to their

¹³ There are guards outside the room, however.

intellectual ability, their motivation and their commitment to their school work. A sudden and potentially traumatic event such as parental arrest and imprisonment is likely to contribute towards a downturn in children's performance at school. This may be only temporary if children adjust to their changed circumstances and receive support where needed' (Jones and Wainaina-Woźna (eds.), 2013, p. 341). School teachers sensitised to what a child is experiencing are better equipped to provide support. Examples include a programme run by the NGO Families Outside in Scotland, which raises awareness amongst teachers, and activities by FFP Norway, which sensitise both teachers and students. Outside of families, focus on the school experience may be the most fruitful place to concentrate analysis and support for children of prisoners, because of the long parts of their life they spend in school and the fact that teachers are the non-family adults that children spend most time with and (probably consequently) feel closest to.

Beyond these institutions, many others interact with children of prisoners, whether or not they know it. A key problem is the low level of awareness of children of prisoners, particularly among professionals in the criminal justice system, who can too often maintain a narrow focus on the suspect/offender and not think about the wider impacts of their decisions. Making institutions aware of their existence can itself spur change: after being consulted, stakeholders in Sweden had ideas to facilitate contact with the detained parent, beginning with a child-oriented focus during visits to imprisoned parents. In Romania, there were a series of conclusions related to the improvement of procedures for children's visits in prison, an appropriate space for parent-children meetings, and the development of supporting services – not all of them prison-based (counselling activities, personal development, leisure activities, material support etc.) – for children with parents in prison.

More generally, proposals to systemically improve the situation of children of prisoners generally focus on either compelling consideration of the children by all officials through changes to laws or regulations, or giving a particular individual responsibility for advocating for the children, such as a child's ombudsman in court or prison officer with responsibility for child-friendly visits. The predominant example of considering the children is the landmark judgment of *S v M* (2007) in the Constitutional Court of South Africa. There, the Court ruled that the best interests of the child have to be considered when sentencing a parent (regardless of whether custodial or non-custodial sentences are planned). "If the possible imprisonment will be detrimental to the child, then the scales must tip in favour of a non-custodial sentence, unless the case [is] so serious that that would be entirely inappropriate" (Robertson 2012, p. 15). In the judgment, Justice Albie Sachs said:

Every child has his or her own dignity. If a child is to be constitutionally imagined as an individual with a distinctive personality, and not merely as a miniature adult waiting to reach full size, he or she cannot be treated as a mere extension of his or her parents, umbilically destined to sink or swim with them. [...] The sins and traumas of fathers and mothers should not be visited on their children.

(*S v M* [2007] ZACC 18, at para 18)

Occasionally, though increasingly, laws rather than court judgements include some provision for children of prisoners, whether it is allowing parents who are both sentenced to prison to serve their sentences consecutively to provide continuity of care for children (Egypt and Slovenia) (Robertson 2007), or giving particular importance "to a child's right of access to his or her parents during the execution of a sanction" and ensuring that visits be 'carried out in a room designed for this purpose' (Norway). France is developing national policy for children affected by parental incarceration, and already requires courts to consider alternatives to custody for men and women who are sole carers of children under age 16.

Aside from having adults become more aware of the children, there is also the possibility of involving the children themselves in decision-making. Such an approach was integral to the research design of the COPING study itself. As well as giving the children agency, involving them can also lead to better decisions, as they may be able to identify solutions and potential flaws. In Norway, advisory groups of young people with a parent in prison are consulted to describe their needs, give advice and suggestions, and contribute to UN Convention on the Rights of the Child shadow reports. Relais Enfants Parents Romand in Switzerland works to foster agency in the child during support sessions by letting the child lead the play and the session, rather than forcing them out of their world of imaginary play by imposing adult ideas and realities on them. This interactive approach is characteristic of similar schemes that operate in Luxembourg, Belgium, France and Italy. Swedish children created "10 wishes" of things they wanted done differently (such as being allowed to telephone into prison, not wait for a call from the parent): these were presented at the UN in Geneva in 2010.

It is true that all stakeholders can make changes to support these children, helping them gain an internal sense of what John Bowlby¹⁴ called a 'secure base' in the world (Bowlby 1973b). But it is also the case that even where support is available, it is not always provided in the most efficient way. One concern was that interventions were not linked with the times when the children most needed it, such as the period following arrest. Those providing such support should learn from the results of COPING and other studies to align their interventions to when the need is greatest.

On the specific case of arrest, research from the USA reveals that children can experience violence not only during but also before a parent's arrest. One study found that over 75% of women imprisoned in South Carolina (USA) said their children had witnessed domestic violence and/or had been victims of physical or sexual violence themselves (DeHart and Altshuler 2009); 20% to 80% of these children were likely to have witnessed their parent's arrest (Phillips and Dettlaff 2009). Given that arrest is often a peak time of stress for children, but can be "lessened significantly by sensitive Police practice" (Jones and Wainaina-Woźna (eds.), 2013, p. 353), the development of detailed protocols on conducting child-friendly arrests are welcome. These protocols, which exist in places including San Francisco (USA), Poland and Denmark, describe how to consider children during arrest, covering such issues as explaining what is happening, and taking children into another room to avoid witnessing their parent being handcuffed. If and when other police forces develop similar protocols, they should take into account not just good practice, but also research on the impact of a parent's arrest on children.

The other issue that affects the provision of support is the still incomplete knowledge about who is affected by parental imprisonment. The COPING study highlighted the difficulty of knowing what exact percentage of children of prisoners in each country had been surveyed. Few countries record prisoners' parental status and the actual number of affected children is unknown. Countries that do record data often do not systematise the information, basing it on self-reporting by parents, some of whom are wary that their child may be removed from them and taken into care. Were such data recording made mandatory, it would not only help identify the size of the population of prisoners' children, but it would also mean that those recording the information would be sensitised to the children's existence and potentially to their needs.

¹⁴ Since 1947 his work has inspired the UN and WHO crime prevention and health programmes for children (Redo and Platzer (2013)).

It should be noted that the COPING study on which most of this chapter is based did not look at children whose parents had been released from prison, though this is both an important area of need and support in itself, and the period in which the longer-term results of any interventions or responses become more clearly seen. These longer-term impacts of interventions can therefore only be surmised, with a presumption that interventions that have a positive effect on the children during a parent's imprisonment will help their coping and resilience in the longer-term also, or at least not damage it.

8 Conclusion

Children of prisoners are slowly shedding their labels as "invisible" and "forgotten" children. Academic and NGO awareness of them is growing, and children affected by parental incarceration now appear on EU and UNICEF lists of vulnerable children. This growing awareness has in turn led to more understanding of both the risks that parental imprisonment has for children's future well-being, and of the effectiveness of certain responses and interventions.

The COPING study of children of prisoners in Germany, Romania, Sweden and the UK is notable in particular for two reasons. Firstly, the large size of the investigated population meant that the impacts and the efficacy of interventions could be studied with some degree of statistical certainty. Secondly, the focus on mental health and well-being meant that there was less emphasis on outputs from interventions (what they did) and more on their outcomes (how they made children feel). Especially relevant findings include the fact that as a population, children of prisoners are more likely than their peers to be at risk from mental ill-health, the importance of non-imprisoned parents/carers and the major support that can come from schools.

It seems clichéd for academic chapters to call for more research into the issue that has just been described at length, but in this case there is more cause than most. Children of prisoners and their needs are still under-recognised, and if many of the major issues (maintaining relationships, stigma, schooling etc.) are known, the specifics, details and (especially) national and regional differences are not. Having a better understanding of how children of prisoners in different countries cope with parental imprisonment is not just helpful in knowing better how to respond to those children; it also helps with sharing good practice. This is an issue where the best answers are not always found in expected places: Uganda and Uruguay have practices that others could learn from, as well as the UK.

However, despite the large gaps in knowledge that remain, there is reason to hope. We do now know what some of the immediate impacts are of parental imprisonment and what the negative long-term consequences can be. We also know of some of the interventions and institutions that can provide support and (to a degree) of their effectiveness. What is not known, and needs to be better understood, is whether and to what extent positive interventions can help prevent negative future outcomes, such as future offending by the children. To get answers with the highest level of confidence, we would need to wait for the outcomes of prospective longitudinal studies comparing (at the least) children of prisoners who receive such interventions with children of prisoners who don't, but in the interim much can be done to find out whether the COPING findings hold for children elsewhere, and to identify further interventions and institutions that appear to have a particularly positive or negative effect on the children.

The other thing that is needed is to continue to raise public and political consciousness about children of prisoners. This should help to reduce stigma towards them and also prevent them falling through the gaps in governmental and non-governmental service provision. Children of prisoners commonly occupy a space between justice and children's ministries in government, with both believing the other should be supporting the children. However, COPING study findings show that there is also a mental and public health dimension to children of prisoners, as well as a significant role that can be played by educational establishments.

Secondary or collateral victims of imprisonment, children of prisoners have committed no crime and should not suffer because of the crimes of others. From the standpoint of fairness, they should be assisted when they face ill-effects caused by another's actions. From the standpoint of expediency, they should be supported in whatever way will most reduce the likelihood of future offending, by the child or their imprisoned parent. But whatever the reason, considering and assisting children of prisoners will most likely benefit the children, those around them and society at large.

Five Questions

1. What can be done to increase awareness and consideration of children of prisoners among criminal justice professionals?
2. What is the best way to ensure governmental provision of support for children of prisoners?

3. What examples of good practice related to children of prisoners can be found in your country/jurisdiction?
4. How would you go about replicating the COPING research in your country/jurisdiction?
5. How involved are children in designing programmes aimed at supporting them?

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