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Overview of COPING project findings

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# Coping with a Parent in Prison: An Agenda for Policy Reform

## Conference Outcome Report

A presentation of research findings and  
policy recommendations at the EU level

*For me, COPING has meant  
getting through  
a tough time in life...from  
the moment my father  
was sentenced, as I have  
continually adapted to  
changes in my life"*

*-Young Man from the  
COPING Research*



**Featuring recommendations from  
the young people who presented.**

**With Keynote Speech highlights from MEP Jean Lambert and  
an introduction by the Right Hon the Baroness Hale of Richmond**

**6 November 2012 / Brussels / Musée du Cinquantenaire**



The COPING (Children of Prisoners: Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health) Project  
was funded by the EU Seventh Framework Programme Contract # 241988

# Introduction

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## Contributed by the Right Hon the Baroness Hale of Richmond

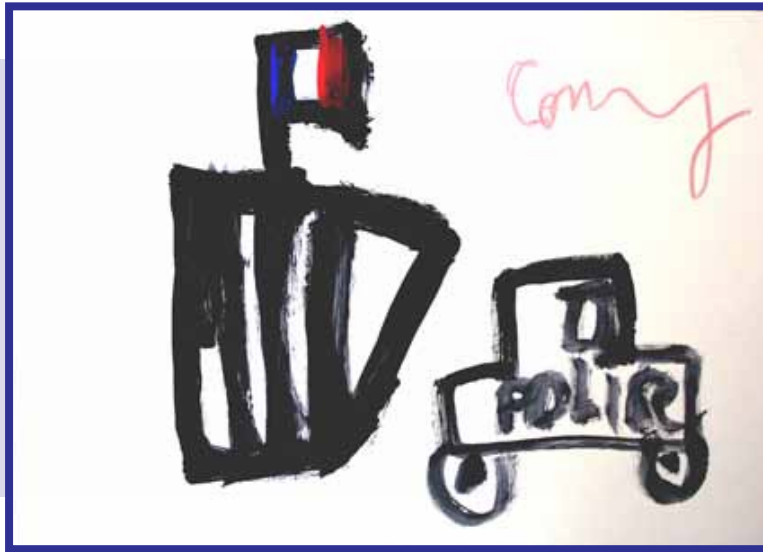
*It was a great pleasure to have been invited to open the COPING end-of-project conference in Brussels on 6 November 2012, and to draft the introduction to this ensuing outcome report. The COPING project has brought together ten partners to study the characteristics, vulnerabilities and resilience of children with a parent in prison in four very different European countries. I am very happy that this project is being led by Professor Adele Jones of the University of Huddersfield, in my own county of Yorkshire in the north of England. I am much less proud that my country of England has one of the highest rates of incarceration in the European Union. We are seventh out of the twenty-seven countries; we imprison one hundred fifty-four people per one hundred thousand of our population. Among those imprisoned, there are many parents, both mothers and fathers. For far too long our criminal justice system has operated without giving much, if any, thought to the impact on the children of those who are arrested, remanded, tried, convicted, and sentenced to imprisonment. Children can be seriously affected at each stage in that process, and each of the agencies involved needs to be alive to this to see what they can do to mitigate the harm done to the children.*

*The COPING study shows, for example, that being there when a parent is arrested can be deeply traumatic for a child. My own experience as a judge in the family division of the High Court has shown that the trauma is much worse when the parent arrested is a sole carer. When the parent is remanded in custody, the COPING study shows that children need to be able to visit their imprisoned parent very soon so that they can be reassured that the parent is safe and well. This also helps dispel some of the scary stories about prison which are put around by our media. The more people we lock up, the harder it is to find the money to provide facilities for families, which some may see as inessential luxuries. But we should never forget that children are not to be blamed or punished for what their parents have done; they are not the guilty ones.*

*In the long term, children need two things: good parenting while the other parent is away; and, in most cases, regular contact with the imprisoned parent. This study points to the importance of schools in providing support for these children, helping to head off the stigma which they might feel. Another important finding in COPING is that children miss their fathers as much as their mothers, and it is therefore just as important to remain in contact, either direct or indirect, with whichever parent is in prison. Unless proper attention is paid to each of those needs, these children are vulnerable in a variety of ways, as this study shows.*

*Until quite recently, the issue of children affected by parental incarceration has not been regarded as a children's rights issue—but it surely is a children's rights issue. Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights guarantees to "everyone" the right to respect for their private and family lives. "Everyone" includes children as well as grown-ups. The prevention of a disorder or crime is of course the legitimate aim of the interference, but the question remains whether the seriousness of the crime is such as to justify the seriousness of the interference of the child's rights. The European Court of Justice is clear that the European Convention must be interpreted in the light of other international instruments; Article 8, in particular, has to be interpreted in light of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 3 of the UN Convention states that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration, not the paramount, not even the primary consideration, but still a primary consideration, which has always to be taken into account. Article 24(2) of the European Union*

# Introduction



Drawing from a child in France - expressing his emotions and perspective of the police in the waiting area of a prison before visiting his father.

*Children's drawing provided by the European Network for Children of Imprisoned Parents (Eurochips)*

*Charter of Fundamental Rights is to exactly the same effect. Article 9(3) of the UNCRC requires that States Parties 'respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests'. Article 24(3) of the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights says exactly the same. Article 9(4) CRC states that if a parent is imprisoned, 'States Parties shall provide essential information concerning the whereabouts of the parent unless the provision of the information would be detrimental to the well-being of the child'— not the well-being of the system.*

*The legal systems of our countries should therefore also be recognizing and respecting the rights of these children. I am proud that the UK has gone some way towards doing this. Sentencing judges are required to give thought to the impact upon family life of his or her children if a parent is to be imprisoned. The English Court of Appeal decided that in two important cases. Recently the Supreme Court of the UK held that extraditing judges, including those executing European Arrest Warrants, are required to treat the welfare of any child involved as a primary consideration. I have a feeling that the UK is somewhat in the forefront of recognizing the family rights of children and the welfare rights of children in these particular contexts. I hope that this is a trend that will spread throughout Europe.*

*Sometimes there is no realistic alternative to imprisonment, however great the detriment to a child. The important lesson to emerge with the COPING research is that everyone who plays a part—either in the criminal justice system or in the parenting and education of the children involved — needs to recognize the needs of these children and make proper provision for them. This research is vital to introducing these matters to the wider policy agenda, but it is of course only the beginning of what I hope will be a great movement to recognize the interests of these very important and vulnerable children in our criminal justice systems.*

*-The Right Hon the Baroness Hale of Richmond*

# The COPING Project

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**On any given day, an estimated  
800,000 children  
have a parent in prison in the European Union\***

Although the rights of children of prisoners to family life and welfare are enshrined in international conventions, policies and support initiatives are not keeping pace.

The COPING (*Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health*) Project is a landmark FP7 Framework-funded study providing scientific data on children of prisoners. The child-centred research spanned three years, during which time over seven hundred children affected by parental incarceration in Sweden, Germany, Romania and the UK were interviewed to better understand their resilience and vulnerability to mental health issues.

From the early stages of the project, emerging findings suggested similar themes and consistencies regarding children of prisoners throughout the four nations involved. As the years progressed and the findings continued to be examined, the consortium members of the COPING Project began to plan for the international and Pan-European implications of their research. It was the similarities amongst the children throughout the study which provoked the end of project conference in Brussels, in an effort to have maximum policy-impact at the EU level by presenting COPING to an international audience of experts.

*Coping with a Parent in Prison: An Agenda for Policy Reform* brought together over one hundred professionals, practitioners and policymakers from across Europe to participate in the launch of findings and policy recommendations from the project.

The following report summarizes the events of the day, including presentations from the researchers, children of prisoners from Sweden and individual pledges from the afternoon expert panel session.

\* Source: Eurochips. Extrapolation based on a demographic 'parenting rate' established by France's national statistics institute (INSEE) in 1999 as part of a national census, which included 1,700 male offenders.



# Chair & Opening Speech

Conference Chair Maja Gabelica Šupljika is the Deputy Ombudsman for Children in Croatia and is a psychologist by profession. Her main activities in the Office of Children's Ombudsman are coordination and supervision of substantial activities in the Expert Service Department. She has worked as a psychologist in a kindergarten, has conducted diagnostic procedures in the psychiatric department of a health institution and provided courses on children's rights and on developmental psychology to students and to those who come into contact with children's rights such as police officers and journalists. Gabelica Šupljika was instrumental in getting the issue of children of prisoners off the ground in Croatia, demonstrating the key role that the Children's Ombudsperson Offices throughout Europe can play in garnering support for these children. Gabelica Šupljika announced the programme for the day. She welcomed Baroness Hale, who introduced the subject and opened the conference.



*Maja Gabelica Šupljika*

***"All in the criminal justice, social welfare and education fields should recognise the needs of this group of children and make proper provision for them."***

*-The Right Hon the Baroness Hale of Richmond*



*RT HON LADY HALE OF RICHMOND,  
DBE, PC, LL.D, FBA- Justice of the Supreme Court*

Lady Hale is a Justice of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, which was set up in October 2009 to take over the jurisdiction of the "Law Lords" in the House of Lords. She was the first woman "Law Lord" and is the first and so far the only woman Justice of the Supreme Court. Unlike most UK judges, she has had a varied career - as an academic lawyer, a member of the Law Commission (a statutory body set up to promote the reform of the law), and then a judge of the High Court, Court of Appeal and now the Supreme Court. She is President of both the United Kingdom Association of Women Judges and the International Association.

In her opening speech, Hale stressed the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in relation to children affected by parental incarceration.

# Keynote Speech

***“I don’t think that the children whose parents are in prison are taken into consideration in terms of resources, attitudes and awareness at the EU level.”***  
*-MEP Lambert*



*MEP Jean Lambert*

Jean Lambert, MEP London, gave the keynote speech of the conference. Lambert has campaigned specifically for refugee children throughout her career. Outlined the difficulties relating to children of prisoners, she acknowledged challenges in defining what constitutes the best interest of the child. In particular, Lambert focused on child poverty rates throughout the EU.

One-fifth of children in the European Union live in poverty. Lambert suggested utilizing the existing EU 2020 Strategy and National Action Plans aimed at child poverty to better focus on children of prisoners. She emphasized her shock that the number of children affected by parental incarceration exceeds those affected by divorce, those in state care, and on the child protection register. (UK statistics)

Given the mental health difficulties Coping found, Lambert also drew attention to the Council of the European Union conclusions on ‘The European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being: results and future action (3095th EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL POLICY, HEALTH and CONSUMER AFFAIRS Council meeting - Health issues - Luxembourg, 6 June 2011). The Mental Health in Youth and Education (preventing abuse, bullying, violence and social exclusion) strand involves:

- Programs for parenting skills
- Programs for training of professionals
- Programs for early intervention

In addition, Lambert also:

- Outlined various channels to raise the profile of this vulnerable group of children such as the European Parliament – in particular through the Alliance for Children.
- Offered her personal support to work on behalf of these children.

Lambert reminded the conference that the EU works within the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and urged that the EU should further link in with recommendations on its implementation issued by the Council of Europe. Since the

# Keynote Speech

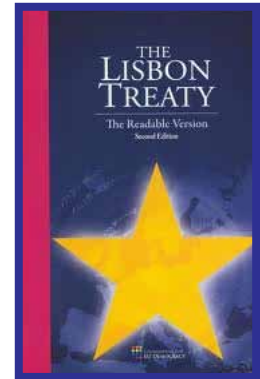
Lisbon revisions (2006) Article 3 of Treaty of the European Union states that the Union “shall combat social exclusion and discrimination, and shall promote social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child.” In addition Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights guides the Commission in drafting all relevant EU legislation to ensure it provides children the same protection, care and requirement to have their best interest considered, their voices heard and a right to personal direct contact with their parents, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since 2006, the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Charter of Fundamental Rights have introduced indicators looking at the impact of EU law and policy on children including the family environment, education and access to health care. The Commissioner reports annually with the Charter of Fundamental Rights and this provides an opportunity to raise the issue of children of prisoners. She mentioned the need to develop processes to ensure children are properly consulted.

Lambert also drew delegates’ attention to the possibility of funding, particularly for training through the Daphne Programme strand on Fundamental Rights and Citizenship.

She also emphasized the need for proper training of professionals to ensure that policies are put into practice and would also offer a way of taking Coping conclusions to the Member States.

*“ I look forward to working with you for children of prisoners in the Parliament.”*

*-MEP Jean Lambert*



In 2008, MEP Roberta Angelilli produced a report aimed at mainstreaming child rights, and since then she has created the Alliance for Children, which works across all political groups and countries. Another consideration for the Alliance is the child’s voice and how children can be supported to be able to be active participants and can access support and information.

Lambert mentioned that later in November, the Forum would be discussing child poverty and health. Looking at any legislation or policy, MEPs should consider the impact on children of prisoners.



# Presentation of Project Findings

Adele Jones, Director of the COPING study, presented an overview of the landmark project.

Jones focused on the primary objective of the project - mainly to identify the characteristics of children of prisoners, their resilience and their vulnerability to mental health problems. The research reflects a spectrum of various levels of incarceration, welfare policies and interventions to support children of prisoners across the four EU countries studied.

COPING identified broadly comparative data about children's needs, resilience and self-esteem, across the four countries.

The project is one of the most in-depth qualitative studies of children of prisoners, involving a substantial number of participants, producing a high volume of transcript data, and employing advanced analytical techniques. COPING is unique in having a child-centred and child-focussed approach. The quality of data has been enhanced by including both children's, parent/carers and imprisoned parents perspectives; as well as through stakeholder consultations.

Project findings take the research of this hard-to-reach and under-supported group to a large-scale pan-European level and will provide the basis for much work by researchers and NGOs for years to come in taking forward the understanding of, and development of support for the needs of children of prisoners.

Jones concluded by thanking all those who took part in the study, particularly the children.

COPING findings about existing services for children of prisoners were presented at the conference by Matthias Schuetzwohl from Technische Universitat Dresden.

The existing targeted and general services and interventions for children of prisoners in the

**25% of children  
with a parent in prison are  
at risk of mental health problems**



*Adele Jones  
Director of COPING  
University of  
Huddersfield*



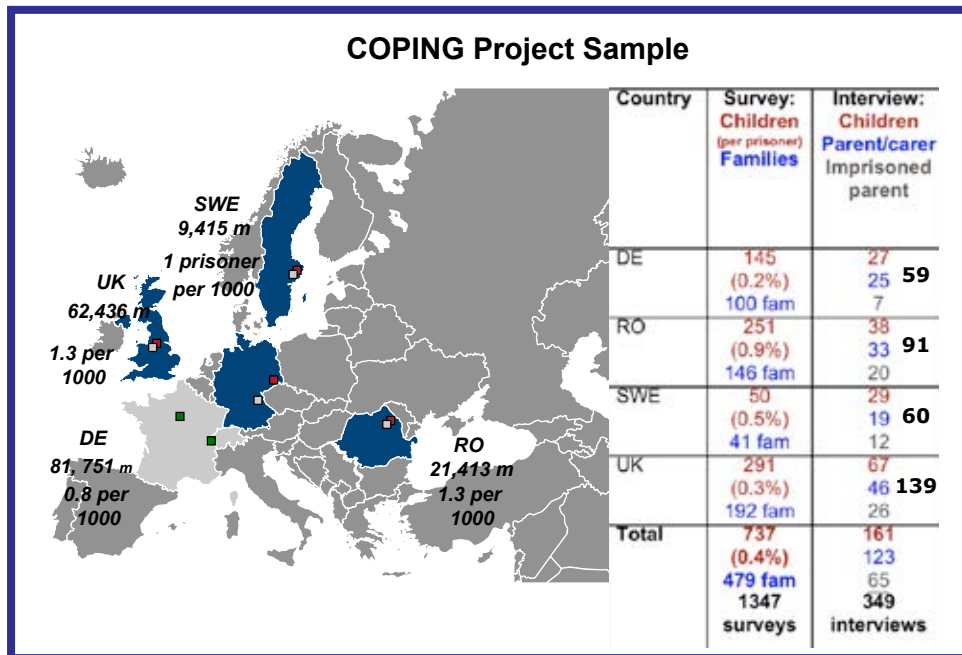
*Matthias Schuetzwohl  
Universitat Dresden*

community and in prisons across the four countries have been identified, mapped and documented and these are the summary findings.

- In the UK, Germany and Sweden, a significant number of prisons do not offer any intervention that explicitly aims to meet the special needs of children of prisoners.

- Across all countries assessed, the number of community-based specialised services and interventions for families of prisoners was rather low and non-existent in Romania.

# Presentation of Project Findings



88% of imprisoned parents were fathers



Martin Manby  
University of Huddersfield



Anne H Berman  
Karolinska Institutet

The presentation of the COPING research findings was given by Anne H. Berman of the Karolinska Institutet and Martin Manby of the University of Huddersfield.

Berman began by presenting background information regarding the prison populations in the four countries researched in the study.

The study concluded that there are about 81 million prisoners in Germany with 0.8 prisoners per thousand inhabitants, 9 million prisoners in Sweden, with 1 prisoner per thousand, 62 million prisoners in the UK and 21 million prisoners in Romania, both with 1.3 prisoners per thousand. A total of 0.4% of the estimated total population of children of prisoners in the four COPING countries were surveyed with a total of 737 children, 479 families and 1,347 individual surveys. COPING researchers also conducted face-to face interviews, a total of 349 divided between the children, their parent/carers, and their imprisoned parent.

The two presenters underpinned several important theoretical concepts to provide a background of information for the audience.

These concepts are as follows:

## 1. Risk for intergenerational crime

One background aspect to the COPING project is the risk for intergenerational crime,

# Presentation of Project Findings

which is whether parental imprisonment increases the risk for children to grow up to commit crimes. There have been various studies in this (Murray, Janson & Farrington, 2007) and Murray, Farrington, Sekol & Olson (2009). The latter, comparing 16 studies from several European countries and the US, showed that children with imprisoned parents ran twice the risk of antisocial behaviour and poor mental health outcomes compared to children without imprisoned parents. Also, processes of stigma, attachment disruption, financial and social strain on the family, and poor quality childcare are also associated with later mental health problems for these children.

## 2. Stigma

The situation of having a parent in prison can easily lead to stigma. Parental imprisonment can lead to children being labelled as different, as having an undesirable characteristic and being in a category of "them" as opposed to "us". The main emotion connected to stigma is shame. Being stigmatized can have negative mental health effects, related to loss of status and discrimination. COPING hypothesized that children of prisoners would experience stigma and its effects.

## 3. Attachment issues

The concept of attachment refers to the quality of the bond between parent and child. A child can have different styles of attachment to different adult caregivers. John Bowlby's theory and research by Mary Ainsworth and others have shown four basic attachment types: secure, where the child trusts that the parent will be available in any frightening situation; or three types of insecure attachment: ambivalent, where the trust has been interrupted and the child

is not sure of whether she will be comforted or rejected; avoidant, where the child has learned from experience that he will be rejected by the parent in times of need; and disorganized, where the pattern of attachment is unpredictable. Earlier secure attachments can be disrupted when a parent who was trusted is suddenly taken away to prison. And insecure attachments—existing or new—can lead to deficient social and moral functioning in adults.

## 4. Ambiguous loss

The theoretical concept of ambiguous loss can contribute to disruption of more secure attachment patterns. Ambiguous loss, a term minted by Pauline Boss, refers to loss where a loved person is physically absent but psychologically present, like divorce, immigration or imprisonment. Boss says that ambiguous loss is the most stressful kind of loss, because the normal funeral rites are absent and so is and mourning that allow normal grief leading to acceptance and closure. But with ambiguous loss, it can be very confusing over a long time whether the imprisoned parent is in or out of the family. It is not possible to grieve over the absent parent, and with uncertainty and stigma, children of prisoners tend to suffer from post-traumatic stress and internalizing behaviour leading to depression, or externalizing, antisocial behaviour (Bocknek et al., 2009).

## 5. Resilience

The concept of resilience, positive adaptation to life after adverse events, is helpful to understand how children deal with stigma, attachment issues and ambiguous loss. Resilience can be seen as a process affected by personality factors, biological factors, environmental systematic factors or an interac-

# Presentation of Project Findings

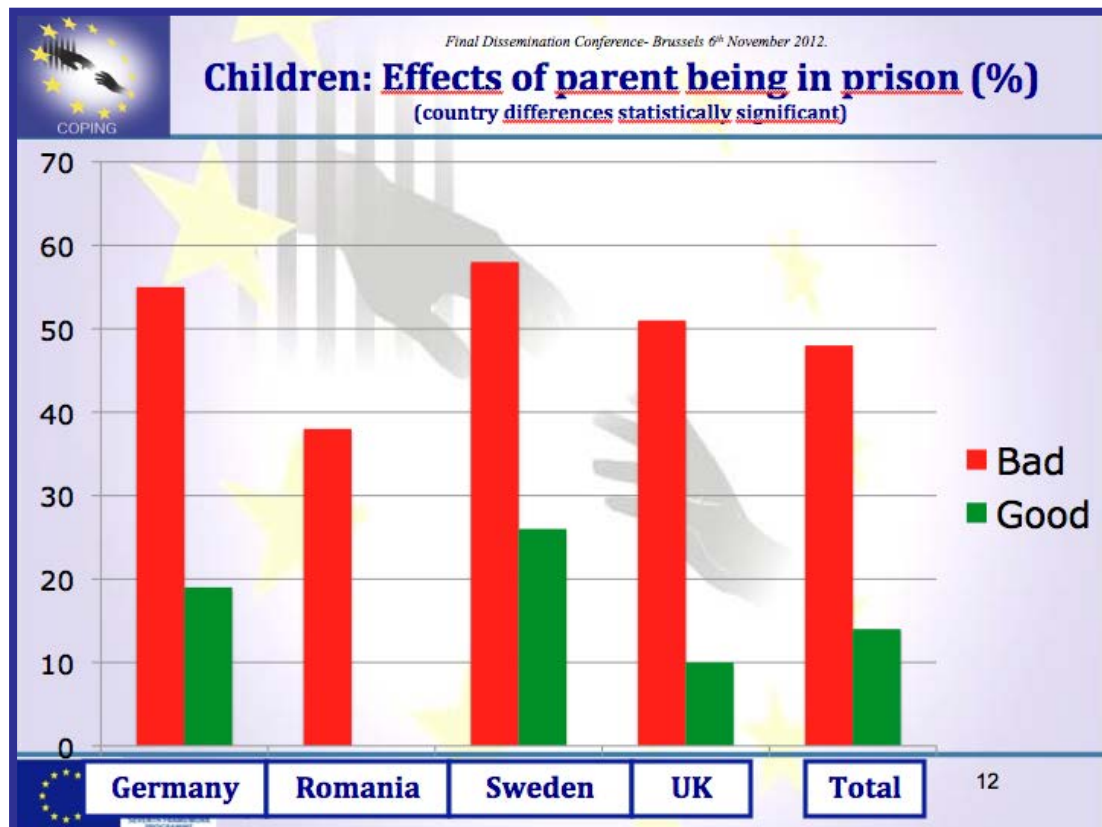
interaction between all three. Particularly important are environmental aspects termed protective and vulnerability factors. Pauline Boss suggests that resiliency when faced with ambiguous loss involves finding meaning, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, revising attachment and discovering hope.

Berman and Manby continued by presenting the COPING findings on children's perception of parental incarceration and well-being effects of having a parent in prison.

Generally, about 50% of all the COPING children (90% of whom had contact with their parent) felt there were bad effects of having their parent in prison, slightly higher in Sweden and slightly lower in Romania. Over 10% of the children overall experienced

good effects, about 20% in Germany, 25% in Sweden and under 10% in the UK. (The question was not asked in Romania).

However children did not avoid the negative consequences of the imprisoned parent's behavior. One Swedish child said: "He never calls. Because mum says like when he gets out the only thing he has on his mind are drugs and alcohol, or theft. And when he is in prison then he thinks only of me or mum and calls." UK children saw good effects because the imprisoned parent's health had improved in prison after better diet, and not using drugs. Children were also glad their imprisoned parents gained access to education courses in prison.



Overall, 91% of children had contact with their imprisoned parent

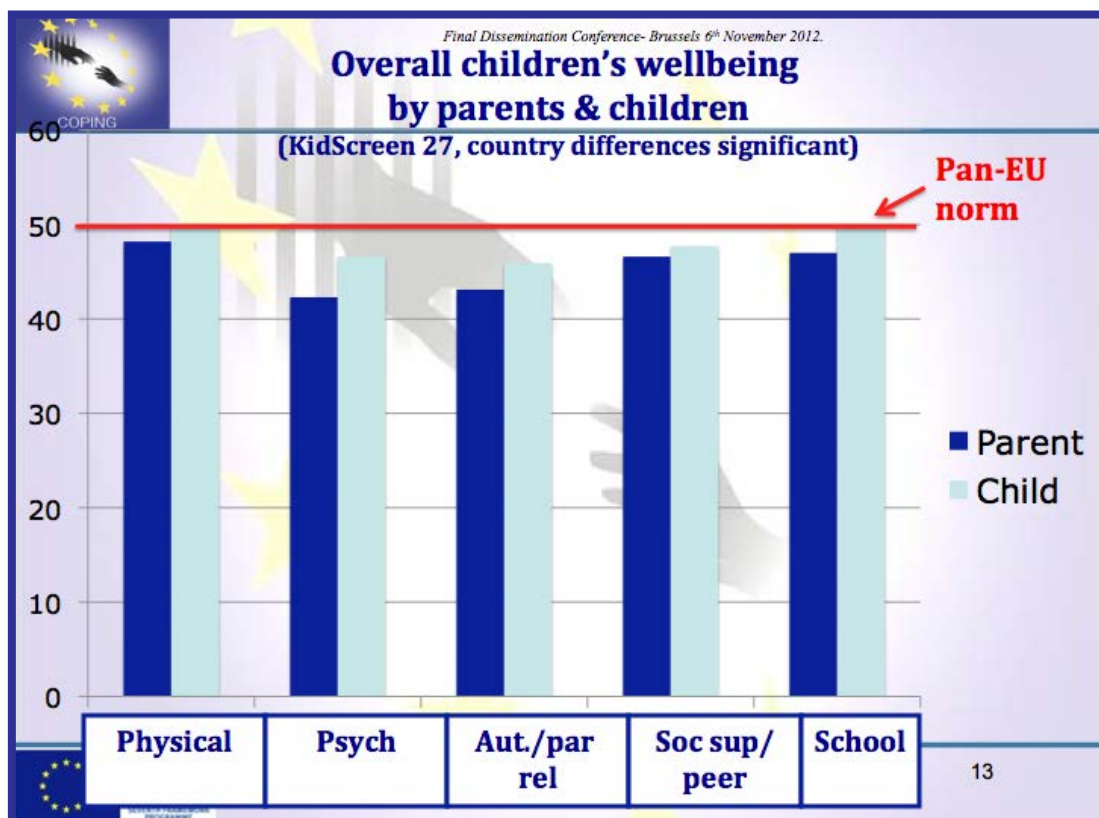
# Presentation of Project Findings

Continuing with their presentation, Ber-  
man and Manby also discussed the overall  
children's well-being by parents and chil-  
dren.

The pan-European norm, or mean, for the  
KidScreen questionnaire, based on 22,000  
European children, the parent assessment  
and the children's own reports all suggest  
the level of their overall well-being. All are  
generally below the mean, although quite  
near it. The lowest dimensions are the psy-  
chological and the autonomy/parent rela-  
tion dimension. There were country differ-  
ences but Romanian children have generally  
lower well-being than the other countries.

**Children 11+ risk higher mental health  
difficulties (see figure on next page).**

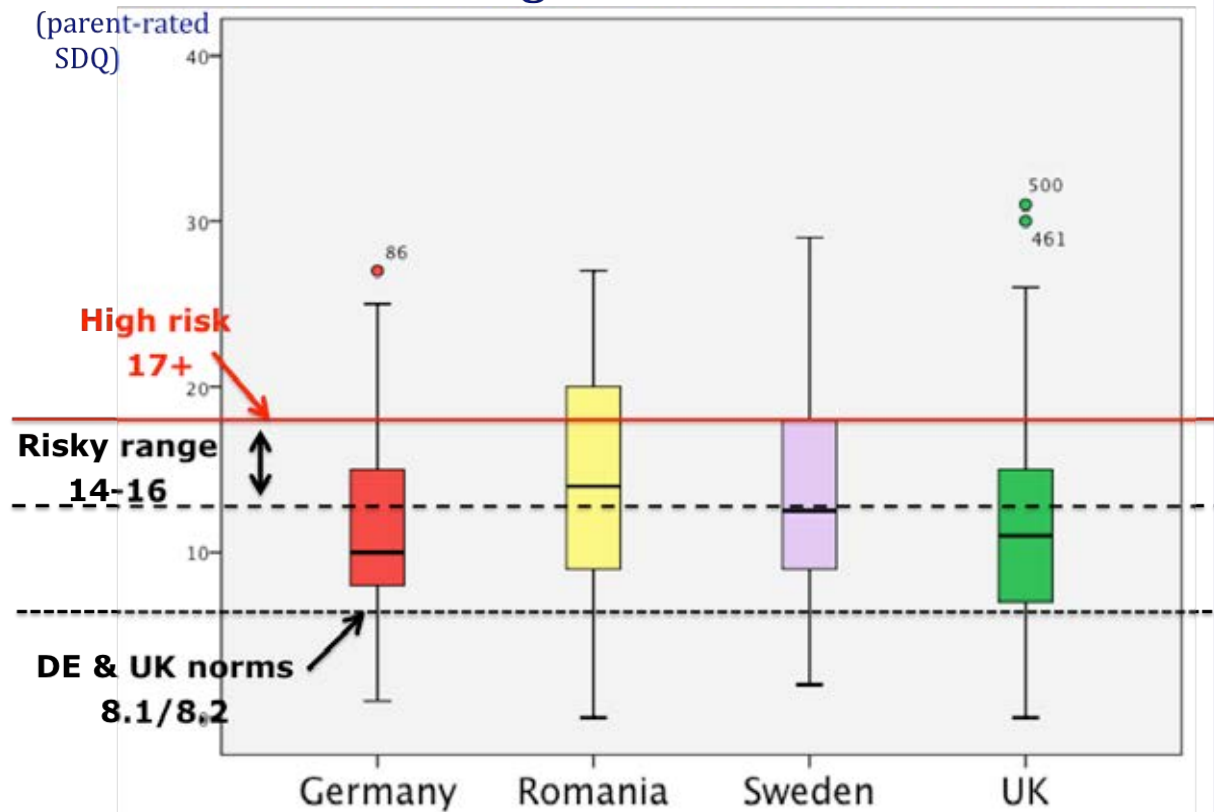
The Strengths and Difficulties question-  
naire reveals how many difficulties the chil-  
dren generally are experiencing, here chil-  
dren 11 and older, rated by their parents.  
The higher the score, the more difficulties  
they have. Generally the Romanian children  
have more difficulties than the children in  
the other countries. Children from all coun-  
tries are significantly higher than the norm.  
Only the Romanian children are clearly  
in the risky range (risk for higher mental  
health difficulties) and none of the children  
in the COPING sample are in the high-risk  
range. So perhaps despite difficulties, the  
COPING children have quite a lot of resil-  
ience.





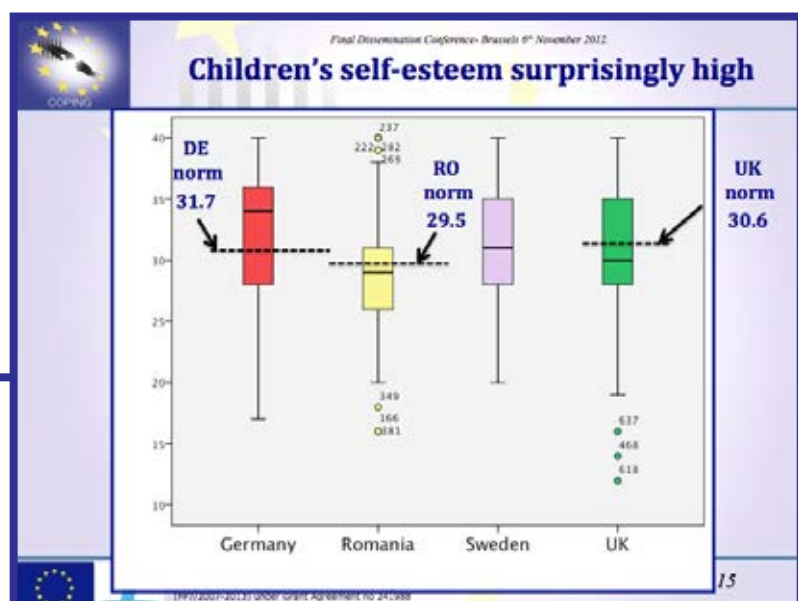
# Presentation of Project Findings

## Children 11+ risk higher mental health difficulties



The presentation continued with a focus on children's self-esteem.

The COPING children's self-esteem is surprisingly high, particularly in Germany, where the COPING children are slightly higher than the norm. They are slightly lower than the norm in Romania and the UK and there are no usable norms in Sweden for the Rosenberg Self-esteem questionnaire used.



DE Norm - 31.7, RO Norm - 29.5 & UK Norm - 30.6

# Presentation of Project Findings

## COPING data from interviews

Manby introduced some general themes emerging from the interview findings: One theme is about children and families adjusting to parental imprisonment, emphasising being 'normal' as far as possible. Another theme is about children being traumatised and confused.

A main challenge for children is coping with mixed, ambivalent and contradictory feelings. One of the main findings is that how parents talk to children about imprisonment is crucial. Friends and schools matter to children, as does having an adult to talk to. Mainly from UK evidence, children appear to miss imprisoned fathers as much as imprisoned mothers.

### Resiliency Factors:

**Care-givers' and extended families' support** was found to be crucial for children's resilience in all four countries. The Romanian report described "... close emotional relationship/secure attachment to (the) care giver (as the) main resilience factor for children". The report also found evidence of "increased child empathy, acting as a cohesive factor that reflects on relationships with others, especially with (the) mother left alone".

**The child's relationship with the imprisoned parent** is crucial. Children need help with coping with the imprisoned parent's moral failure and sense of shame, and their own embarrassment. Children also need to understand the nature of the offence. They may tend to idealise the imprisoned parent.

**Family conflict, family violence and substance use impair children's resilience.** Family violence was found to be particularly prevalent in the Romanian study. One Romanian parent commented: "In terms of family life it is hard because my husband is violent, to me and the children."

### Country differences:

A key coping strategy for children in Sweden was their **ability to acknowledge and share distress**. They seemed articulate at describing their feelings and were able to talk to their care-giving parent, their school, friends and NGOs.

Two young people from Sweden talked about information sharing:

*"We children are good at imagining when we are not told the truth. The grown-ups always say that they don't know, but ... they know more than what we do and that is what we want to know." (13-year-old girl)*

*"Well it feels like if one is going to tell that the parent is in prison for murder ... (then) one wants to like explain that he had been submitted to abuse 8 years before as an explanation, so it becomes a rather long story. Because otherwise I think it gets very uncomprehending." (Young woman aged 17)*

**Strong evidence about support from schools for children in the UK, Sweden and Germany.** One child, aged 9 with a mother in prison, in the UK, spoke about her school:

*"Say if I wanted my mum, they (teachers) would probably say: 'Calm down and go and wash your face because you have been*

# Presentation of Project Findings

*crying, wipe it with a paper towel and sit down and calm down and carry on with your work, there is nothing to worry about.' The teachers, they aren't nasty, they are nice."*

Two children in the UK aged 9 and 10 described their ambivalent feelings about their father being in prison:

*"I did try not to let out my tears and tried to move on, but it didn't really work."*  
(10-year-old girl)

*"I don't really want to say what's happened. I don't like keeping it in, but I don't really want to say it out loud."* (9-year-old girl)

**In Germany, children's coping strategies included:** dissociation from the guilt of the imprisoned parent; talking to other children of prisoners; and whitewashing, avoiding negative feelings. The latter has been described as "cognitive dissonance reduction" (reducing the discomfort of holding contrary emotions). This is against the key role of strong family and school support in Germany.

A 14-year-old girl in Germany said:

*"My sister and me – we are real masters at suppressing things."*

A German parent commented:

*"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."*

**In Romania children showed strong signs of resilience by maintaining social relationships and valuing ties with their extended families.** Poverty is

widespread in Romania and this impacts on prison visits and schooling.

**More evidence was found in Romania of stigmatisation and moral disapprobation,** possibly linked to parents in the Romanian sample having been convicted of more serious crimes; and there was more evidence of bullying by peers at school.

In the Romanian sample there were seven examples of children becoming "an adult in miniature" taking on parental roles.

One Romanian mother commented:

*"It helped that I told the truth, as we started talking more."*

A Romanian imprisoned father didn't want his children to know about his crime...

*"but everything came out in time ... my middle son told me once: 'Dad, you killed someone and you didn't say anything about this'; and I could not respond anything. I was speechless."*

## Further General Resiliency Factors

**Schools are able to enhance children's resilience.** They emerge from the research as children's most important resource after the family. Schools can help with academic performance and homework. They are also able to provide emotional support, and signposts for counselling. However, it is also important to note that some schools are less helpful, or even punitive.

**Early, continuous and open contact with the imprisoned parent,** and a child-friendly environment within the

# Presentation of Project Findings

prison, contribute to children's resilience. Support from the care-giving parent and extended family are important in facilitating children's contact with the imprisoned parent, providing transport and support. Telephone contact emerged as important for day to day communications and support.

## Support from Agencies

NGOs play a key role in supporting children of prisoners. Examples include Trefpunkt father-child groups in Germany; Bryggan's therapeutic support for children of prisoners in Sweden; and POPS expertly facilitating access to prisons in the UK. There were mixed views about statutory services in Germany, Sweden and the UK. Support services for children of prisoners are under-developed in Romania.

## Gender

A key area for further research is to explore whether parental imprisonment impacts differentially on boys and girls. COPING evidence indicates that girls seem to handle their feelings better, and that boys seem more likely to be disruptive. As noted already, there are indications that having a mother or father in prison impacts equally on children.

## Psychological well-being of parent/carer

Additionally non-imprisoned parents were surveyed. Their well-being may affect their ability to provide the crucial support children need.

**Non-imprisoned caregiving parents suffer from significantly reduced quality of life** in comparison to the general

population in their respective countries. In Romania the non-imprisoned parent experienced extremely low physical quality of life (possibly because in the Romanian COPING sample prisoner parents there were high levels of substance users and violence), and in Germany their psychological quality of life was markedly lower than elsewhere.

## COPING analysis and correlation between children's needs and services:

With significant variations between the countries, just under 50% of the children said they needed more help and 70% said they had received help with coping with a parent in prison.

The top three needs for children of prisoners identified in all four COPING country studies from a questionnaire including questions on health, school, holidays and other aspects of children's daily lives were:

1. **Help visiting a parent in prison**
2. **Being with family after school** (interpreted as a need for strengthening family relationships)
3. **Help with homework:**

A. There is a clear statistical correlation between the children's lower self-esteem, well-being physically and satisfaction with school, as well as greater difficulties, identified in all four countries by all the measures used (Kidscreen, Strengths and Difficulties and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale), and the children identifying their "need to be with family after school" the second most prevalent need among children.

B. On the basis of the numerical mapping, there is a further association between the children's "need to be with

# Presentation of Project Findings

family after school” increasing as the provision of community and prison-based interventions designed specifically for children of prisoners declines across the four countries.

Manby concluded by highlighting the following points:

- Romanian children have greater difficulties (SDQ) and more need for help than children in the other countries
- High difficulties (SDQ) and low self-esteem (R) correlate highly with need for help in all countries
- Less physical well-being (Kid-Screen), less school satisfaction (Kid-Screen), lower self-esteem (R) and greater difficulties (SDQ) predict the need for help with strengthening family relationships.
- Higher level of country intervention seems to be associated with less need.

However:

COPING is exploratory and the sample selective. COPING had many more children who already had contact with supportive services, and those who don't, were missing except in Romania. Further research is needed.

**Main conclusions about children's resilience are:**

- The type of offence and the length of sentence are important variables.
- 25% of children of prisoners were found to be at high risk of mental health problems, rising to nearly 50% of children in Romania.
- Having a mother or father in prison impacts differently on boys and girls.
- The evidence has highlighted the

important roles of the care-giving parent and the extended family (particularly in Romania).

- Schools have a key support role, particularly in Sweden, Germany and the UK.
- Most agency support is provided via NGOs in Sweden, Germany and the UK. There is an absence of support services in Romania.
- While many children are initially traumatised at the point of parental arrest and imprisonment, it seems that a majority adjust, eg., to prison visits and security.
- Good quality contact with the imprisoned parent is important for children's resilience.
- Most children's self esteem survives parental imprisonment.

**Theoretical conclusions:**

**Resilience Theory:** COPING found much evidence of children 'bouncing back' after the shock of parental imprisonment.

**Attachment Theory:** the damaging impact of separation is mitigated by the role of care-giving parents. Impacts vary for different ages of children of prisoners.

**Intergenerational Crime:** evidence from the interviews was that positive support from social services and NGOs can mitigate the impact of parental imprisonment, particularly in Sweden.

**Causality Debate:** COPING confirms the significance of parental imprisonment as a key risk for children of prisoners (in Sweden, UK and Germany, which are comparatively wealthy, as well as in Romania, which is much poorer).



# Presentation of Project Findings

**Gender Differences:** evidence from the UK is that children miss their father in prison equally as much as their mother; and also that girls are more able to talk about their feelings, and that boys are more likely to display disruptive behaviour at home and at school.

**Ambiguous Loss:** the relevance of this concept is strongly confirmed for children of prisoners.

**Stigma:** evidence found of wide country variations. Self-stigmatisation was highlighted in Germany. Societal stigma may be harsher in Romania.



*Children's drawings provided by Eurochips*



# Project Recommendations

## COPING research recommendations paralleled by young people's solutions

Alex Hirschfield from Huddersfield University introduced the COPING study recommendations.

On the basis of the findings, COPING has developed recommendations, which seek to promote the rights, needs and wellbeing of children of prisoners at pan-European, international and national levels. Hirschfield outlined the method used to write the recommendations by establishing:

- (1) Context
  - What is the reason for the recommendation
  - Why is it necessary?
- (2) Recommendation
  - What needs to happen?
- (3) Action Plan
  - How might it be implemented & by whom?
- (4) Preconditions
  - What does the recommendation depend on?
  - What needs to be in place for it to work?

He identified and gave some outline to the following five areas where improvements in policy and practice are needed across the EU:

1. Child-friendly Criminal Justice Systems
2. Maintaining Contact with the Parent in Prison
3. Advice and Support to Parents and Care Givers
4. The Role of the School
5. Public Awareness and Policy Recognition



*Alex Hirschfield  
University of Huddersfield*



Later in the day, young people from Sweden who had been working with the NGO Bryggan on their recommendations, presented their solutions to the difficulties they faced; perhaps not surprisingly and validating the research findings, the young people's solutions considered almost all the topics raised by the COPING research study in areas 1-5. For this reason the recommendations raised by COPING and presented by the young people are displayed in the following pages alongside the official COPING recommendations, according to the different issues the young people raised.

# Recommendation 1

*Children have the right to get information that is important to their health and well-being*

## Issue for children of prisoners (presented by young people):

- Often adults lie for different reasons, such as to protect children from harm or to avoid disappointing them.
- The children may often have questions long after the parent is released which are ignored.
- Children are not getting enough information about what is going on with the parent, where they are going to be or when their coming back.
- All children should be given the truth however the information should be adjusted according to the child's age.

## Solutions by young people:

- Guidelines and advice should be available for parents on how to tell their children about parental imprisonment.
- Parents ought to tell the children right away, which will make it easier for the children to understand the situation.
- If the parent is not willing to tell their children after receiving support, a trusted adult or social services should tell the child. The one telling it should know about children's needs.
- Children should always have the opportunity to ask questions to their parents, either at the time being or afterwards, without fearing the parents' reactions.

## COPING Recommendations:

- Care-giving parents and imprisoned parents should consider the crucial importance of sharing information with children about parental imprisonment.
- Mental health and social welfare professionals should give advice and support to parents and caregivers about telling children about the imprisonment of their parent.
- Parents/caregivers and imprisoned parents should carefully consider sharing information about parental imprisonment with their child's school
- NGOs should advertise support services to families and criminal justice agencies
- EU Member States should recognise support of care-giving parents, grandparents and siblings.
- Imprisoned parents should be offered opportunities to contribute to their children's daily lives, including involvement in schooling, when feasible.

## Recommendation 2

### *Child's right to privacy /police raids*

#### **Issue for children of prisoners (presented by young people):**

Police raids on family homes are often an uncomfortable and frightening process for young people and little regard is given to the children's needs.

#### **Solutions by young people:**

- A more sensitive approach to arrest when dealing with families.
- Providing a safe place for children to go when houses are being searched.
- Provide families with information leaflets (designed by young people).
- Training of police to be more child-focused.
- If police arrest parents when children are present they should have some kind of special training in child's needs. Possibly one member of the police stays behind/or comes back to give information to the children and parent.

### **COPING Recommendations:**

All governments and/or state bodies should review their arrest and search policies and procedures in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), giving due consideration to manner of an arrest, the delivery of a timely, age-appropriate explanation to the child at the point of arrest and the means by which the child and their family access support during and subsequent to an arrest.

## Recommendation 3

### *Children have the right to not be discriminated against*

#### **Issue for children of prisoners (presented by young people):**

- People hear rumours and make up their own stories and make it worse than it already is.
- People talk badly about both the children and parents and that the child is as dumb as their parents were.
- Often people get the picture that all the people in prison are evil and dangerous.
- Sometimes the parent hasn't done anything evil but all people from the outside make a picture that all people in prison are bad people, just bad and evil people, period.
- Children can feel not welcomed to school because they feel different from everyone else.

#### **Solutions by young people:**

- Schools should take more responsibility because children who have a parent in prison can feel lonely and different like they stick out.
- Schools should have theme days to clear out rumours and give a better picture of how it is for a child to have a parent in prison. To make it normal to have a parent in prison, and to not make it awkward.
- Schools should talk about the legal system in civics class, to give the pupils a better picture of the criminals and prisons.

### **COPING Recommendations:**

- Media should be sensitised on the relationship between reports on parental incarceration.
- Decision-makers should ensure that anyone whose work impacts children of prisoners considers their best interests, needs and rights.
- Schools should identify children of prisoners who are pupils in ways that are discreet and non-stigmatising, develop greater awareness of their needs and offer them appropriate support.
- Across the EU, education authorities should include the children of prisoners as a vulnerable group in their strategic planning.
- Training materials for teachers, school counsellors and others should be produced and used to raise their awareness of the emotional and educational support needs of children of prisoners.



## Recommendation 4

### *Children have the right to information and support and the right for their parents to receive support*

#### **Issue for children of prisoners (presented by young people):**

- It's not always easy for young people to speak to parents about issues arising from parental imprisonment. Fear of overburdening parent/carers in an already stressful time.
- There could be conflicts and sometimes violence between parents, and they could be because of drinking or taking drugs.
- The children might not tell anyone because they want to protect their parents.

#### **Solutions by young people:**

- Provisions of counsellors.
- Support groups with other young children of imprisoned parents.
- Formation of closed groups is significant to feel safe in disclosing.
- Police and social services should act when someone worries about a child.
- Helpers have to build trust with the child so that the child can be honest about what the problems in the family can be.
- The parent on the outside has to get support, themselves and to understand what it is like for the child.

### **COPING Recommendations:**

- NGOs and support agencies should be encouraged to include support for families of prisoners and run activities specifically for children of prisoners.
- NGOs should advertise support services to families and criminal justice agencies.

## Recommendation 5

### *Children have the right to maintain contact with the imprisoned parent and right to leisure activities*

#### **Issue for children of prisoners (presented by young people):**

- A problem for children when visiting a parent in prison is that they are placed in prisons far away. The child cannot visit as often as the child would like.
- Visits process may interfere with children's social life, especially as they get older.
- It is hard to keep contact that one would like with the imprisoned parent.
- When a parent is in remand prison in Sweden, it takes a long time to get into contact with them.

#### **Solutions by young people (advice to social services, parents and others):**

- Possibility of an adult to support children in visiting at times when parents are unable or unwilling.
- Young people should have financial support to go visit a parent in prison.
- Social Services should be more engaged in helping the child to visit.
- Contact between child and parent should always be out of the needs and will of the child. Sometimes it may not be something that the child wants or needs.

#### **Solutions by young people (advice to Prison Probation Service):**

- Prison Staff to be properly trained & flexible visiting hours within the prison
- Children and parents allowed to use the gym facilities.
- More use of Family Days & creative means of contact (i.e. video links, telephoning into prison etc..) - children suggestion boxes provided.
- Use electronic tags more instead of imprisonment.
- Parents on remand in Sweden should be allowed to have contact with their children.
- Consideration of the distance from the child when choosing a prison for a parent.

#### **COPING Recommendations:**

- Provide visit groups or visitor centres at or near the prison. This should involve easy booking procedures, information to families prior to the visit and support before and after the visit.
- Prisoners should be able to make and receive affordable telephone calls from their family.
- Prison authorities in all EU Member States should ensure that all prison staff behave in a respectful, child-friendly manner when dealing with families.

# Recommendations Conclusion

The overlap between the young people's solutions and COPING recommendations arising from the findings is striking and persuasive. Recommendations not covered by the young people's solutions included the court aspect of child-friendly criminal justice systems as well as policy awareness and consideration of children of prisoners throughout the judicial process.

Hirschfield questioned how far the best interests of the child were considered at the sentencing stage, especially when the imprisoned parent is the only carer. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child makes it clear that children should have the right to be heard in matters that affect them, including what takes place in judicial proceedings.

In conclusion, Hirschfield stated that the precondition of all other recommendations being implemented is raising society's awareness of the existence of children of prisoners and gaining the commitment of governments and agencies across the EU to make meeting their needs a policy priority. He concluded by stating: "We believe that raising their profile higher up the policy agenda at both the EU and national level would be a fitting legacy of the COPING study."



*Alex Hirschfield  
University of Huddersfield*

## The Impact of COPING on NGOs

Once the COPING recommendations were presented, members of the consortium representing the NGP partners presented the impact of COPING on NGOs. This was presented by Liliana Foca - Asociata Alternative Sociale, Diane Curry OBE- Partners of Prisoners, Kate Philbrick OBE - European Network for Children of Imprisoned Parents.

- COPING partner NGOs include the European Network for Children of Imprisoned Parents (Eurochips), Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO), Partners of Prisoners Families Support Group (POPS, UK), Bryggan (Sweden), Asociata Alternative Sociale (Romania) and Treffpunkt e.V. (Germany). Contact details provided at end of report.
- COPING partner NGOs welcomed COPING findings as a bedrock of solid research to complement their fieldwork and as a springboard for change to meet the needs of children of prisoners.

# Young People's Presentation

The conference were honoured that young people from the UK (mostly via DVD) and from Sweden were prepared to share both their experiences and their learning with the conference. The solutions presented by the young people are included in the general recommendations in the previous section. The following are drawings from children of prisoners and a quote and poem presented at the conference.



*"It was really hard. Me and my mum and my brother doing all the work while he was away. You can't ring him when he's in prison, because sometimes the phones are broken and he can't phone me and sometimes his credit goes."*

*-Swedish Child at Conference*

*Drawings provided by Eurochips*



## The teacher that didn't understand

I got the thing that I loved taken right out my hands.  
I snapped. I'm not taking this crap.  
I tried to get to you through this rap.  
You see you never see the truth beneath the lies.  
I got to pick up my remains.  
Why is it always me that gets blamed.  
You can't see through the fog you're just making it harder.  
You think you know the real truth about my father.

*-Provided via DVD presentation by a child from the UK*

# Expert Panel Session

## Using Findings to Develop Policy Change

A panel session of experts concluded the afternoon session by responding to questions and generating new ideas to address the various needs of children of prisoners within their own fields. They all agreed to place children of prisoners higher up on their agendas.

The panelists were as follows:



**Verena Knaus**  
UNICEF Brussels Senior Policy Advisor



**Margaret Tuite**  
Children's Commissioner Coordinator  
for Child's Rights



**Rachel Brett**  
QUNO Representative for  
Human Rights & Refugees



**Stefan Enggist**  
World Health Organization  
Prison & Policy Officer

Throughout the panel session each panelist was given the opportunity to present their reactions and reflections on the presentations of the COPING findings and recommendations. In addition, the floor was opened to questions from the children as well as other delegates - to which the panelists responded. This process facilitated conversation and generated new ideas and insights into the topic of children of prisoners throughout Europe.

The following pages highlight the contributions from each panelist during their opening remarks as well as the Q & A period.



## Expert Panel Session - Rachel Brett

The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) serves as a Quaker presence at the United Nations (UN). Brett chaired the panel session by guiding conversation through highlighting various project findings and recommendations.

Brett promised to lobby for clauses on health relating to prisons and children when the UN Standard Minimum Rules on the Treatment of Prisoners are revised.

In addition, Brett noted:

- The European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) is an important channel for raising the issues of children with parents in prison.
- Professionals may welcome changes, and working with them may be more effective than lobbying politicians.

## Expert Panel Session - Stefan Enggist

*“The current edition of the WHO Prison Health Guide chapter on women has a paragraph on children; but in the second edition, I will ensure that there is a focus on fathers and more consideration of children.”*

*-Enggist*

WHO Europe spans fifty-three countries, and the spheres of justice and public health, recognizing and respecting the issue of mental health in prisons.

Enggist addressed:

- Interest in looking at how the well-being of children would impact on prisoners' well-being.
- The importance that the COPING findings be disseminated everywhere.
- There is very little in the European Prison Rules about prisons and children; when the EPR are revised, they should consider children more.
- The fact that children are important to both mothers and fathers and the judicial process needs to reflect and acknowledge this fact.
- Men represent 95 per cent of prisoners.
- In terms of prison health, a father would be affected by the loss of contact with the child when he is in solitary confinement.
- In raising awareness concerning children of prisoners, he suggested using videos and testimonies of children, because this affects people's emotions.
- The fact that incarceration costs a lot can also be an influential argument and tool in raising awareness about the topic of children of prisoners.

# Expert Panel Session - Margaret Tuite

Tuite's role focuses on mainstreaming child's rights, particularly as enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (Article 24) and the UNCRC (Article 8) – specifically her involvement in data collection, particularly on children in judicial proceedings (children as suspects, witnesses, etc.).

Tuite pointed out that whether the issue is protected by law or policy doesn't matter. Contact between children and their imprisoned parents should not be reduced to a disciplinary measure and she suggested we lobby that this should be for all parents and not just for mothers.

*"My remit includes the rights of the child with a special focus on vulnerable children and, as of today's conference, vulnerable children will include children of prisoners."*

*-Tuite*

She highlighted three relevant framework decisions, all of which have broad objectives that could provide a focus for lobbying:

1. The transfer of prison sentences (implemented by 12 Member States + Croatia)
2. Probation (implemented by 7 Member States and Croatia)
3. European Supervision Order (implemented by Latvia)

In addition, Tuite addressed:

- Implementing the EU Agenda on the Rights of the Child-in Member States, strengthening the rights of children of prisoners; Eurochips is involved in the child-friendly justice issue and the child's rights forum. DG Justice is mapping rights with a particular focus on child participation and vulnerable children.
- Importance of data collection, to complement EU work.
- Current DG Justice finding through the Daphne Programme has prioritised training on the rights of the child, communicating with children and child-friendly justice.
- The recent deinstitutionalization campaign (to take children out of institutional care, that is orphans or other children in state care, should not be in institutions but in foster care). In that case, NGOs, civil society and Member State officials all worked together and developed tool kits and guidelines on deinstitutionalisation. She recommended using Member States in the advocacy strategy: "We don't necessarily need new laws to do things."
- The importance of mapping issues relevant to children of prisoners. It is of great value to governments to know what's happening. They are setting up a Member State expert group on the rights of the child. This could be an opportunity to start developing legislation and a European platform.
- The EU can encourage consultation with children with imprisoned parents and can develop practical approaches to issues such as arrest procedures.
- For a social inclusion angle, consideration should be given to the Recommendations on child poverty. There is currently no discussion of care in child's rights, whose funding programs and priorities are for training and child rights clinics.

## Expert Panel Session - Verena Knaus

One of UNICEF's roles is to develop best practice and guidelines relating to different groups of children. Knaus' role at UNICEF is as senior policy advisor relating to EU institutions.

Knaus advocated the need for prisons to develop normality of contact for these vulnerable young people using technology such as Skype and email (response to question from young person).

*"I hadn't appreciated until now what a large group children of prisoners are, and that they have common vulnerable specificities."*

*"This research has made invisible children visible and I will add children of prisoners to the group of vulnerable children who should be considered and recognised."*

*-Knaus*

In addition, Knaus addressed:

- The issue of fathers, particularly with respect to the idea of attachment of children. It is very important in terms of rehabilitation that parents and children know how to interact with one another. UNICEF and the Committee on the Rights of the Child focus on attachment for children up to seven years old. Input in the early years is much more cost effective.
- Prison layouts-how should they be constructed to accommodate the needs of children?
- The need for prisons to develop normality of contact for these vulnerable young people using new technology, and developing practical guidance for low-cost support based on good practice.
- The schools finding confirms what most people already knew and that there should be training and information for everyone in schools, as well as funding for that process. This could be raised at the UNICEF National Committees.
- Everyone who interacts with children of prisoners should receive training. It must be cross-cutting and holistic as an approach, consideration needs to be taken in how to best accomplish this goal.
- The silent harm of uncertainty as expressed in her own research on the impact of forced returns through migration on the psychosocial health of children. The research found that children need certainty of when and how things are happening to them and their parents. Knaus noted that the findings revealed that children of prisoners frequently experience the silent harm of uncertainty from arrest through to imprisonment.
- The fact that while there is some research on the child's right to health, there is less developed work on their right to mental health.
- All arguments must be used to raise this issue. The cost issue of imprisonment should be considered and the costs to children and society. Consideration is needed in how to extend the rule of law to include the softer aspects-for example into facilities for those who are affected.

## Conclusion



*Drawing provided by Eurochips  
(full gallery available on the  
Eurochips website)*



In her concluding remarks, Eurochips' Director Liz Ayre spoke about COPING's legacy for change, highlighting how, as a process, COPING demonstrated through its child-centred methodology that the opinions of children and young people matter.

In addition, COPING was not only an extraordinary vehicle for awareness-raising but also served as an instrument for change. Since 2011, for example, the Romanian Justice Ministry has been requesting that all prisons in Romania record the parental status of prisoners, a decision based on emerging findings indicating the need to record information on prisoners' children. This is a major step forward, given that the vast majority of EU countries do not record parental status of prisoners, and the actual number of affected children is unknown. The inability to establish this and other baseline measures, such as the number experiencing scholastic difficulties or housing problems, hinders efforts by NGOs to "report back" to decision-makers on the success of support initiatives for children.

COPING now provides scientific, robust data on a scale not seen before in the field, allowing practitioners to draw on this data instead of advocacy research data or "soft" data that resonates less with decision-makers. It demonstrates the need for future research, not only longitudinal but also research that reaches children who are not in contact with their parents in prison.

Another legacy of the COPING project is a special issue devoted to children of prisoners in the journal *Sociologie si Asistenta Sociala*, guest edited by Professor Adele Jones with the Department of Sociology and Social Work at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Romania and published to coincide with the COPING conference.

To obtain copies, contact: [an-soc-as@uaic.ro](mailto:an-soc-as@uaic.ro) (Daniela Soitu).

For more information on the COPING project please see <http://www.coping-project.eu/>

## Further Information

For a more in-depth understanding of what is available in the different partner countries for children of prisoners please look at the websites of these participating non-governmental organisations.

### **Alternative Sociale - Romania** [www.alternativesociale.ro](http://www.alternativesociale.ro)



- Work with probation, integration of former prisoners, and strong networks with the judiciary.
- Support for different groups of disadvantaged people.
- Team of trainers for professionals across Romania working with children and with prisoners.
- Authors of working methodologies addressed to professionals in the area of child protection and also for judges, prosecutors, and police workers.

### **Bryggan - Sweden** [www.riksbryggan.se](http://www.riksbryggan.se)



- NGO for children that have or had a parent in prison, on remand, or other sentences in court, including running youth groups.
- Support to families and teens including offering activities.

### **Partners of Prisoners & Families Support Group (POPS) - UK** [www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk](http://www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk)



- POPS is an organisation that not only helps young people but also their families from the point of arrest, throughout the sentence and after release. Prisoners' families founded POPS and they remain at the heart of everything POPS does.

### **European Network for Children of Imprisoned Parents (Eurochips) – pan European** [www.eurochips.org](http://www.eurochips.org)



- only pan-European network for children of imprisoned parents.
- active within prison-related, child's rights and child-welfare fields.
- seeking to boost awareness and achieve new ways of thinking.
- acting and interacting on issues concerning prisoners' children.

### **Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) – international** [www.quno.org](http://www.quno.org)



- Facilitates dialogue and works on specific issues, including children of prisoners in a manner that is unique in the UN community. QUNO advocacy is carried out in a number of ways, particularly by facilitating informal, open negotiating processes in which all participate on an equal footing.

### **Treffpunkt –Germany** [www.treffpunkt-nbg.de](http://www.treffpunkt-nbg.de)



- Over the past twenty years has been running a counselling centre for family members of prisoners.

Report created by Eurochips - 2013  
A downloadable version is available at [www.eurochips.org](http://www.eurochips.org)