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Research to Practice Series Children with Parents in Prison

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies **Research to Practice Series** links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families.

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Children with Parents in Prison

Issue 4 of this series discusses the issues experienced by children and young people who have a parent in prison, and implications for supporting this target group. It is based upon the findings of a qualitative research project, commissioned by SHINE for Kids and implemented by the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) in 2012-13, which interviewed 12 children and young people between the ages of 6 and 18 with a parent incarcerated in the ACT (either currently or in the past), along with 12 parents and caregivers. The project report was published in 2013: *Children of Prisoners: Exploring the needs of children and young people who have a parent incarcerated in the Australian Capital Territory*. More information about the project is provided at the end of the issue.

In Australia, 28% of prisoners have children who depend on them for their basic needs, and 21% of prisoners report that when they were children, their own parent had been imprisoned¹. Parental incarceration presents an opportunity to provide families, children and young people with supports to address current disadvantage and reduce the likelihood of experiencing further disadvantage as a result of parental incarceration.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2013). *The health of Australia's prisoners 2012*. Cat. no. PHE 170. Canberra: AIHW.

Involvement of children and young people

Children and young people with a parent in prison who were interviewed reported that they experienced many issues across the duration of their parents' involvement with the criminal justice system. They often spoke about these issues as a process, beginning with their parents' arrest and ending with their release (and commencing again if conditions were breached or new crimes were committed).

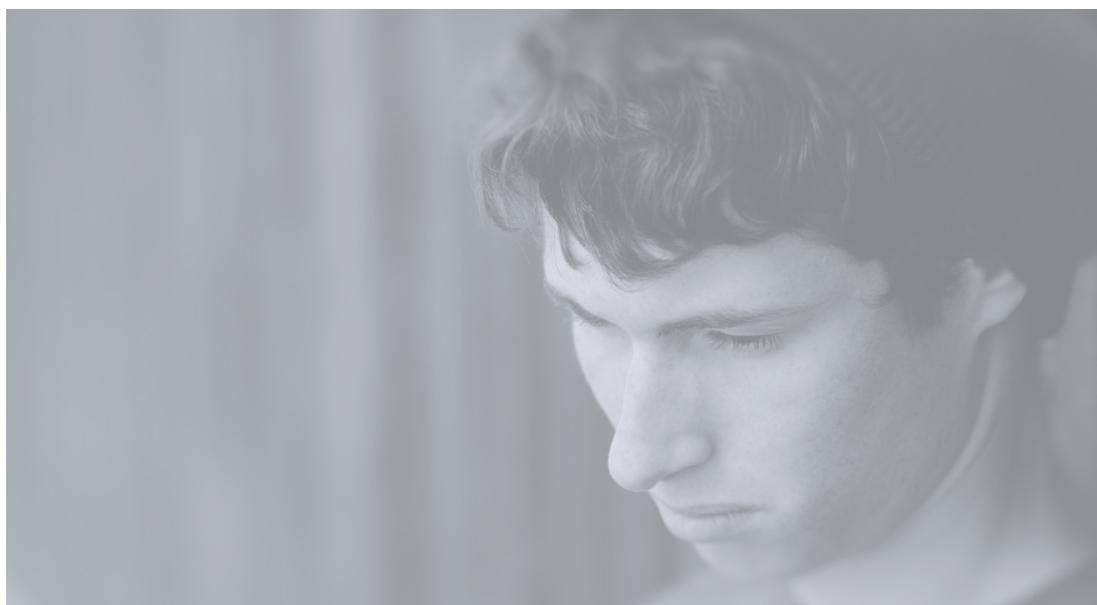
While some children and young people witnessed their parents' arrest, others were not initially told that their parent had been imprisoned. Some parents and caregivers who were interviewed discussed that they had not told their children about the parents' incarceration, due to the age of the child, because they wanted to protect them from that knowledge for fear of frightening them, or because they did not want them to know about the crimes that had been committed by their parent. Some carers believed that children should know that their parent was in prison, but did not need to know the details of why they were incarcerated.

Although some children and young people identified feelings of sadness and fear at witnessing the arrest of their parent, they all said they were happy to at least know what was happening, and where their parent was.

***I was young, I know that, I was early primary years. At first no one would really tell me and my brother, so we would be like I wonder what's happened to dad?
(15 year old female)***

*Well the first time that I actually found out was through the school because we were reading through a newspaper and he made the second page and I was just like - oh, this is just great.
(15 year old female)*

***We used to say Daddy was fishing and Mummy was at work, and then they accepted that. But now they're older they do know what jail is.
(Grandparent)***



Impact of parental incarceration

Children and young people who participated in the research experienced considerable and interrelated issues that they believed were related to the impact of their parents' criminal behaviours, arrest and incarceration.

- **Family relationships**

Regardless of how they felt about their parents' criminal behaviour, children and young people described incarceration as the 'loss of their parent'. They discussed losing extended family relationships because of parental incarceration, and how this loss affected them and other family members, particularly the remaining parent. Feelings of loss often began with children and young people not knowing where their incarcerated parent was, or what was happening to them. They also identified problems in maintaining contact with their incarcerated parent, particularly if there was a need for the remaining parent, or other family members, to facilitate and support that contact.

[I miss] like the connection you should have between you and a father. There's a young girl and her father that get a bus to her school every morning from my bus stop, and just seeing them connect and hang out is pretty depressing on my part because I haven't had that. (15 year old female)

He wants contact with his kids, and I guess he's probably aware that I could pull the pin on him and say, you know, "sod you, I'm not having nothing else to do with you" and stuff. But it's not about me, it's about the kids. (Parent)

- **Shame and stigma**

Many young people identified that they felt unable to trust, talk to, or access any person outside of their immediate family, or friends that were in similar situations, which prevented them from accessing help, support, and developing new relationships with peers. Those who had disclosed their parents' incarceration experienced bullying and teasing from their peers, or had been singled out by adults and consequently made to feel ashamed. Parents and care-givers also recognised that telling others about their child's parent being incarcerated increased their child's vulnerability and risk of being bullied.

Yeah, they [teachers] were just judging me because of my Dad ... Just basically just putting it in my face that Dad's in jail that's basically what it was. (14 year old male)

First starting with I don't want anyone to know, and then if I started opening up to people, it was like I'd open another window like should I trust these people? Are they going to tell anyone? What are people going to think of me if they find out? (15 year old female)

- **Educational outcomes**

Children and young people described difficulties with school, highlighting that the chaos at home, distress and extra responsibility they experienced severely impacted on their ability to concentrate, meet deadlines and achieve the academic success they aspired to. Support they received at school depended on relationships they had with teachers. If young people asked for help and didn't receive it, they were unlikely to ask again.

It was pretty much just me by myself, I had to rely on myself to get food for school so I could have food for school to feed myself, look after myself. You can only really rely on yourself, you can't blame anyone else... (15 year old female)

Since Dad's been away my grades have dropped dramatically. Just trying to find time to do homework – homework's hard to do, because I never have time to do it, I'm always running around for everybody else trying to, you know, taking mum grocery shopping, taking her here, taking her there. (17 year old female)

But yeah my best coping strategy is just my friends really, so yeah they've just been really, really supportive. And a lot of Dad's friends have been really, really supportive and helped me out a lot since he's gone away, with like money and helping out Mum get to work and stuff like that. So they've been really supportive, I've had a lot of people around me willing to help. (15 year old female)

- **Caring responsibilities**

A number of young people took on caring roles that they had not previously experienced, with added responsibilities for caring for siblings, household chores, providing transport, facilitating contact between siblings and their incarcerated parents, and caring for their remaining parents.

This is the first time he's been in there, so it's been pretty difficult, because my Mum's not very... stable. So a lot of the pressure's been put on me personally, looking after the family, and financially, yeah taking on a lot of responsibility since Dad's been gone. So it's been tough, yeah. (17 year old female)

- **Emotional distress**

Most children and young people described feeling stressed, and discussed experiences with anxiety and depression. This often related to their parents' incarceration, but also the 'by-products' of the incarceration – such as homelessness, loss, instability and insecurity. A number of young people described emotionally distancing themselves from the challenges they experienced, or talked about wanting to achieve something different in their own lives to what their parents had done.

I don't know like sadness and shit. Like with my dad being in trouble all the time and stuff like that. Just like depression. I don't know what else. (16 year old male)

I don't think I really have coped, like I don't think it's kind of like hit me yet because I've just been so busy looking after everybody else since Dad's gone away, it's kind of been really, really full on. (17 year old female)

- **Financial disadvantage**

Parental incarceration impacted significantly on family finances. While many of the participants were in families that already had low incomes, they described that the incarceration had further reduced joint incomes or inhibited the remaining parent's capacity to work. Low incomes also prevented some young people from accessing services and other social opportunities.

The electricity – Dad used to pay the electricity bill, now Mum can't afford it, so our electricity is going to get shut off, so that's been pretty full on. (17 year old female)

So she was the only psychologist that I would talk to, and when she went private it was just way too expensive – way too expensive for me to go see her. So I tried other psychologists, but (it didn't work out)... (17 year old female)

- **Instability and homelessness**

Many young people described instability in the form of insecure housing or a lack of secure adults in their lives. They talked about living with friends, boyfriends, or in refuges, sometimes due to their parents' incarceration, but for others, due to parental alcohol and other drug issues or family conflict. The need for stability and security was evident in many of these young people's lives, both in relation to stable housing and the need for trusting relationships they could depend on.

I was really young. It was really difficult and then my Dad, when he got out of jail... He couldn't cope... Then we ended up moving to [crisis accommodation]. (16 year old female)

I had no-one. Like I've pretty much been on my own the whole time... it is so hard. (16 year old male)

I just want my own place so if anything happens I'm not the one that has to leave. (16 year old female)



Implications for support

Schools and universal services, child, youth and family services, justice and corrections systems, and specialist services all have roles in supporting children and families affected by parental incarceration. Children and young people involved in the research experienced a range of interrelated issues, including homelessness, mental health issues, family conflict and divorce, neglect, isolation and poverty. Their lives were characterised by experiences of instability, the loss of important relationships, social exclusion, trauma, a lack of both formal and informal supports, low educational achievement and challenging transitions into adulthood. The complexity of these issues and circumstances, combined with the secrecy, fear and stigma they experienced, created many service barriers and often meant their needs were not addressed.

The major themes and implications for support that emerged in the research include:

- **Support with education:**
Young people highlighted the need for extra support within schools, to create more understanding and flexible environments that do not stigmatise children and young people. They identified the importance of community awareness programs and education for teachers and students about the impact of parental incarceration.
- **Support with parental relationships:**
Most young people wanted to maintain contact with their incarcerated parent but experienced difficulties doing so, if they did not have transport to the prison, were unable to visit during visiting hours, or needed an accompanying adult. Supports should assist child-parent relationships and have a 'family-focused' perspective, facilitating opportunities for families to raise and resolve issues.
- **Providing information to children and young people:**
Many children and young people felt insecure, scared and anxious, because they did not receive information regarding their parents' arrest, court appearances, sentencing or release. Information provided should recognise children and young people's developmental and emotional needs, and respond to children's interests and wishes.
- **Listening and talking to children and young people:**
Children and young people identified that workers need to recognise that a 'one size fits all' response is not always appropriate. Sometimes children want to know specifically what is happening, and sometimes they only want to know that things 'will be okay'. Workers and services should take their cues from the child, whilst also providing them with opportunities and appropriate spaces to express their needs.
- **Supporting parents and siblings:**
Some young people were unable to engage fully in education, social activities with peers and employment opportunities, because of their caring responsibilities. They were fearful of obtaining support from outside of the family, or from mainstream systems such as schools or general practitioners, in case they upset their parent or because they feared services might intervene in a way that put the family at risk. They highlighted the need to make connections with workers they could trust and talk to, within services they were already accessing.

- **Non-stigmatising referrals and linking to services:**

Children and young people identified that support must be free from stigma and embarrassment, and that families do not be singled out by services in a stigmatising way. Parents suggested promoting services and supports directly through the prison or Centrelink, and said programs would be considered more credible if people who had experienced similar situations were involved in the planning and management.

- **Stable and secure living arrangements:**

Identifying families and young people at risk of homelessness, and planning for safe, secure and stable accommodation should be made as early as possible - when a parent is incarcerated - pointing to the need for services to work with families in a more integrated way.

- **Building on strengths:**

The views of children and young people reflected a strengths perspective, focusing on what their parents could do (rather than what they didn't), reflecting on how their families did their best to ensure their safety and wellbeing, and discussing the coping strategies they used as individuals. They reported that services often framed their work around the deficits in their lives, and that services should assume that they could, with opportunities, support and information; make decisions to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their families.



SHINE for kids

SHINE for Kids is a registered charity which supports children with a parent in the criminal justice system, with support services in New South Wales, Victoria, and the Australian Capital Territory.

SHINE for Kids provides advocacy and support services to children and young people who have a family member in prison, including child and family centres, casework services, contact services (to support children and young people visiting a family member in prison to have a positive experience), group activities, and mentoring. SHINE for Kids also undertakes research, advocacy and community education relating to issues affecting children of prisoners.

For more information about SHINE for Kids, visit www.shineforkids.org.au.

About the Children of Prisoners Project

This research was commissioned in 2012 by SHINE for Kids to inform the project *Building resilience in a uniquely vulnerable group: Children of prisoners*, which was funded by the ACT Health Promotion Grants Program. It identified the perceived needs of children and young people who have an incarcerated parent, and provided recommendations to SHINE for Kids to develop support services appropriate and relevant to the ACT context.

More information and the full report is available at www.acu.edu.au/icps

References

Saunders, V., & McArthur, M. (2013). *Children of Prisoners: Exploring the needs of children and young people who have a parent incarcerated in the ACT*. Sydney: SHINE for Kids.

Available at: www.acu.edu.au/icps

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