

Families of Prisoners: A Review of the Evidence

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This paper draws on academic research and published reports to present a summary of research into the needs and experiences of children and families of prisoners; the impact of imprisonment on family relationships; and the role that families play in supporting the reintegration process.

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1. Executive Summary

The purpose of this paper is to increase awareness of the issues experienced by the children and families of prisoners and to provide a resource to be used in conjunction with other resources to inform the 'Child and Family Impact Assessments' and subsequent support proposed by the [Criminal Justice \(Scotland\) Bill](#). This paper represents a summary of research into the needs and experiences of children and families of prisoners; the impact of imprisonment on family relationships; and the role that families play in supporting the reintegration process.

The literature reviewed here highlights that the impacts of imprisonment on children and families can be significant and wide ranging, including emotional, social, psychological, financial, relational, physical and developmental effects. However, the extent to which a child or family will be affected will be influenced by a myriad of factors particular to that child and their family, and the impact will vary according to the nature of the offence, pre-prison variables and other underlying difficulties, relational dynamics, care arrangements (before and during the period of incarceration), and the wider support systems and socio-structural context. Likewise the impact of imprisonment on family relationships is not straightforward and is influenced by various factors including pre-prison factors (such as the residential status of the imprisoned parent and relationship quality), which relationship is being considered (i.e. with intimate partners or parent/child), and the level and type of in-prison contact. Moreover, whilst the role and range of supports that families can provide in resettlement support is recognised as critical, such generalisations obscure the complexity and contingency of the experiences and effects of imprisonment for prisoners' families, on relationships, and their capacities to provide this support.

Consequently, a number of implications for policy and practice are evident, including:

- Progressing the details of the [Support for Children \(Impact of Parental Imprisonment\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#) via the [Criminal Justice \(Scotland\) Bill](#);
- Reducing the use of imprisonment;
- Adopting a multi-disciplinary and "Whole Family" approach to all practice that takes seriously the views of the incarcerated parent, their child[ren] and their family and which identifies, assesses and builds on their needs and strengths;
- Ensuring the identification, and completion of individualised and holistic assessments, of the children and families of prisoners that include factors at the level of the individual, wider family and community;
- Supporting the needs of children and families of imprisoned parents through the proactive provision of timely information, practical advice, and emotional support, which may be via peer support groups; problem solving family work; and/or proactively referring such families to specialist services;
- Where appropriate, supporting contact with the imprisoned family member;
- Increased public and professional awareness of the prevalence of parental imprisonment and the needs and strengths of families of prisoners.

2. Introduction

After years of campaigning by family members, voluntary organisations and interest groups, changes proposed via [The Support for Children \(Impact of Parental Imprisonment\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#) have successfully resulted in amendments to the [Criminal Justice \(Scotland\) Bill](#) to formally recognise and respond to the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment. Families of prisoners have been widely referred to as a '[hidden population](#)', or similar terms. The amendment which was successfully passed at Stage 2 of the [Criminal Justice \(Scotland\) Bill](#) seeks to lift the veil on the effects of parental imprisonment, identify those families in need of support and, in so doing, to engender effective responses from a range of organisations and professional groups to the issues experienced by families. This will be achieved through the introduction of 'Child and Family Impact Assessments' when a parent or carer has been remanded in or sentenced to a period of detention in custody and the provision of immediate, individually tailored, wrap-around support thereafter.

This paper draws on academic research and on published reports to present a summary of research into the needs and experiences of children and families of prisoners; the impact of imprisonment on family relationships; and the role that families play in supporting the reintegration process. The purpose of this is to increase awareness of the issues experienced by children and their families and to provide a resource to be used in conjunction with other resources to inform the assessments and responses proposed by the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill.

3. The Effects and Experiences of Parental Imprisonment on Children and Families

Numerous studies, spanning decades of research, have highlighted the effects of parental imprisonment on children and their families – frequently testifying to the considerable emotional and financial strain that the removal of a parental figure causes (Dickie, 2013; Fishman 1983; Hairston and Hess 1989; Jones and Wainaina-Wozna, 2013; Lowenstein 1986; Smith et al. 2007). Indeed, prisoners frequently depend on parents, siblings, spouses and intimate partners both during and after imprisonment for emotional, financial and resettlement support in addition to assuming, in some cases, caring responsibilities (Naser and Visher 2006). Moreover, prisoners themselves are often acutely aware of and sensitive to the enduring effects that their imprisonment has on their family which can include financial burdens¹, emotional distress, social isolation and stigma (Council on Crime and Justice 2006). Even beyond imprisonment, the challenges of reintegration can exacerbate and amplify these effects due to a lack of and/or barriers to obtaining employment as well as inadequate housing – all of which can extend the duration of former prisoners' dependency on family members and which can have an impact on family dynamics and relationships (see La Vigne et al. 2005). Yet, as Loucks (2004) observes, although much research focuses on the imprisonment of partners or parents, the incarceration of any close family member including siblings, aunts, uncles, or grandparents can have a measurable impact on people's lives (Action for Prisoners' Families 2003; Wolleswinkel 2002).

¹ Financial effects relate both to reduced income into the family, increased expenses while in prison (which has a disproportionately negative effect on poorer families) and diminished capacity to earn an income post release as a consequence of barriers to employment (Council on Crime and Justice 2006).

Incarceration generally affects families socially; financially; emotionally; psychologically; and physically although how the incarceration of a family member is experienced by a given family and individual family member is more nuanced and variable. Turney and Wildeman (2013: 3) note that incarceration ‘sometimes undermines family life, sometimes improves it, and sometimes has no effect on it (Giordano 2010; Sampson 2011; Turanovic et al. 2012)’. This level of complexity and individual variation means that the effects of imprisonment cannot be simply and un-problematically characterised in terms of either positive or negative effects (Council on Crime and Justice 2006). For example, some aspects of family life or relational dynamics may be improved while other aspects e.g. financial well-being may be diminished and these effects can, in turn, have knock-on effects in other areas (King 2002). Others observe that many families affected by imprisonment are more likely to have *already* experienced social and familial disadvantage in the form of human capital or skill deficits, unemployment, mental health problems, marital difficulties, abuse and neglect (Arditti et al. 2004; Loucks 2004; Murray et al. 2012; Turanovic et al. 2012; Wildeman and Western 2010) the effects of which can, for some families, be compounded by subsequent imprisonment.

Turanovic et al. (2012) examined the effects of parental imprisonment on 100 caregivers to reveal the positive and negative consequences for caregivers and the broader familial processes that contributed to them. Critically, as the authors observe, the caregiver role has a profound effect on the child’s experience of parental incarceration and their relationship with the incarcerated parent. They found parental imprisonment had a negative effect for 58% of caregivers; no effect for 22% and an improved effect for 20% of caregivers. The authors identified three interconnected themes emerging from caregivers’ accounts that explain the variation in effects of parental incarceration. These are a) the level and nature of the prisoner’s prior parental involvement b) the nature or quality of the interpersonal relationship between caregiver and prisoner and c) the absence or presence of a family support system for the caregiver. Ultimately caregivers’ experiences will be shaped and influenced by the relational dynamics in these areas and, of course, the impact of the parent’s imprisonment on family functioning and wellbeing. Crucially, the authors further note that the processes that shape the experiences and effects of parental imprisonment are themselves embedded in and affected by a broader socio-structural context which, they argue, ‘set the stage for both the causes and consequences of incarceration’ (ibid: 945).

The *extent* to which a child will be affected by parental incarceration similarly depends on a large number of variables including: the age they are when the parent is imprisoned; the gender of the imprisoned parent; the type of relationship they had with a) their remaining caregiver prior to their parent’s incarceration and b) the type of relationship they had with the imprisoned parent prior to incarceration and the role their parent played in family life; the quality of care they receive during the period of imprisonment; the nature and frequency of contact they have with their imprisoned parent and what they are told about their parent’s absence; the length of separation; the nature of the parent’s offence; and attributions or perceptions of stigma (King 2002; Rosenberg 2009). In terms of the *nature* of the effects that parental incarceration can engender, Travis et al. (2005) note that imprisonment can have a significant and enduring effect on the emotional, social, psychological, developmental and financial wellbeing of children. Drawing together the outcomes of various research studies on this subject, the authors explain:

The immediate effects can include feelings of shame, social stigma, loss of financial support, weakened ties to the parent, changes in family composition, poor school

performance, increased delinquency, and increased risk of abuse or neglect. Long-term effects can range from the questioning of parental authority, negative perceptions of police and the legal system, and increased dependency or maturational regression to impaired ability to cope with future stress or trauma, disruption of development, and intergenerational patterns of criminal behaviour (Travis et al. 2005: 2).

Some of these effects were observed by Murray and Farrington (2005) who found that boys whose parents were imprisoned in the first ten years of their lives were at higher risk of both anti-social behaviour and criminality, poor school attainment and mental health issues compared to their peers (see also Geller et al. 2012; La Vigne, Davies and Brazell 2008; Murray and Farrington 2008 a and b). When compared to other European jurisdictions, Murray et al. (2012) assessed that these effects were much stronger in England than in Sweden (Murray, Janson and Farrington 2007) and the Netherlands (Beseemer, van der Geest, Murray, Bijleveld and Farrington 2011) which, they speculate, may be attributable to differences in welfare support as well as wider social and penal policies.

King (2002) interviewed 26 prisoners and 19 caregivers – and held informal discussions with children, childcare workers, visitor centre staff, people with convictions and probation and prison officers. In addition to the effects of parental imprisonment on parent/child relationships, discussed in the next section, she also examined the economic impacts and behavioural effects of parental imprisonment on children. Over 65% of respondents reported a worsening of their financial circumstances which affected the children's participation in various activities. 17 respondents stated that their children's behaviour had noticeably changed with the most common behavioural changes including hyperactivity, increased social withdrawal, and "acting up" with their caregivers, which imprisoned parents attributed to their absence from the home. Imprisoned fathers reported a reluctance to challenge children on behaviours because they didn't want to upset them – not least because reconciling conflicts from prison can be much harder than it is otherwise. Non-incarcerated parents who might not previously have assumed a disciplinary role experienced difficulties in assuming this role. Respondents also witnessed a change in their children's levels of engagement with them while in prison. In this vein, 25 of the prisoners (96.2%) stated that they found it difficult or very difficult to keep up a relationship with their children while they were in prison citing brevity of visits, the conditions in the visiting areas, and their loss of authority as contributing factors. King (2002) also reports that several parents felt that their ability to bond with and connect to their children had been affected by their absence during important stages of their development.

Hames and Pedreira equate the reactions of children with imprisoned parents to those whose parents have died: "Too frequently these children, like children whose parents have died, are disenfranchised grievors coping with compounded losses" (2003: 377). Yet, it is now widely recognised that the loss and its effects caused by parental imprisonment rarely elicits the kind of sympathy that divorce or bereavement tends to (Murray 2007). Moreover, as Vaswani (2015a) observes, the ambiguity, uncertainty and confusion surrounding the nature and extent of their loss can disrupt children and young people's effective coping strategies. Their experience of this loss is complicated by not only the stigma imputed to it but by the lack of understanding and, in turn, by the absence of support that distinguishes this loss from other forms.

'The very nature of disenfranchised grief means that young people often have to face their losses alone, a concern when even ostensibly small losses can be experienced as traumatic and can have an accumulative effect on young people, but may be missed or underestimated by the adults around them' (Vaswani, 2015a: 27).

These painful emotions, then, the effects on their coping strategies and the limited recognition of their loss – compounded by the fear and anxiety that children can experience for their imprisoned parent's well-being, can impact on their development (Martynowicz 2011). Developmental effects can also be engendered, for example, by the impact of disrupted parent-child bonds or attachment relations which can affect children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing, as well as through reduced economic resources which can, for some children and families, mean living in poverty and experiencing social exclusion and its associated outcomes (see for example, Geller et al. 2012; Smith et al. 2007). Other researchers have explored the effects of parental imprisonment on the health of children and young people; it has been suggested that traumatic events in childhood, including separation from a parent, may cause lasting changes in the brain, leading to adverse health and mental health outcomes (Schoore 2001). Murray and Farrington (2008b) found that, among their sample of boys, separation as a consequence of parental imprisonment was a strong predictor of a pattern of internalising problems² through the life course, even after controlling for other risk indicators. The authors speculate that the traumatic nature of the experience of separation in this particular context might, in part, explain this effect but that other consequential losses and traumatic experiences may equally play a contributory role.

A European study published in 2013, [COPING](#): *Children of Prisoners: Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health* used a mixed-methods multi-sequential research design to gather evidence from over 1500 children and adults from four European countries. Their aim was to explore the characteristics of children with imprisoned parents, their resilience and their vulnerability to mental health problems. The authors found that:

'Children with a parent/carer in prison were found to be at significantly greater risk of mental health problems than their peers in the general population. Children seemed at particular risk of internalising difficulties (emotional problems), rather than externalising problems (hyperactivity and conduct problems). Key factors relating to children's resilience included: children's innate qualities; family stability; and sustaining relationships with the imprisoned parent. The data confirmed that children's resilience is closely linked to open communications systems and that children need opportunities to discuss their experiences' (p.32).

4. The Impact of Imprisonment on Family Relationships

The impact of prison on families and on family relationships is likely to be affected by a number of factors including, but not limited to, the nature and quality of pre-prison

² "Internalizing problems' refer to 'a core disturbance in introjective emotions and moods (eg., sorrow, guilt, fear and worry)' (Zahn-Waxler, Klimes-Dougan and Slattery, 2000 p.443)' (Murray and Farrington, 2008: 274).

relationships and levels of parental involvement; prior histories of and length of imprisonment; and age of the child at imprisonment (Loucks 2004; Robertson 2007). As Codd (2008) observed, understanding the impact of imprisonment on families and family relationships is complex in terms of whether it *causes* adverse outcomes, aggravates *existing* adversities or, indeed, *alleviates* prevailing stressors – or even whether there are elements of all three in different ways.

The removal of a *resident* family member and, in particular, a parent or primary care-giver from the family home necessarily alters the operational structure of the family unit and, indeed, the roles and responsibilities of, and relational dynamics between, family members and the family and incarcerated person (Losel et al. 2012). For example, the responsibility for care-giving following the imprisonment of a parent or similar figure may fall to one person which may represent a significant change from prior arrangements; while the sudden removal of a care-giver from the family home will in itself mark a significant change, the extent of prior involvement of the imprisoned parent in functioning of the family is an additional consideration (Loureiro 2010). Intimate relationships are also often substantially strained by incarceration (Travis et al. 2005; La Vigne et al. 2005). Prisoners can experience role-frustration in being unable to directly influence and participate in family life while partners can gain in independence (Nurse 2002). These various shifts in relational dynamics and roles can, then, alter the spouses' (and children's) expectations of the role that the imprisoned person will play on release.

Relationship strain between intimate partners may be attributable to a wide range of factors relating to the pre-prison quality of the relationship and the status of the relationship which may be aggravated by the effects of imprisonment. Whether because of associated stigma, pre-existing strains, the impact of the individual's offending and incarceration on the family or even the effects of separation, the risk of relationship breakdown and divorce is much higher when a partner is imprisoned (Apel et al. 2010; Lopoo and Western 2005; Massoglia et al. 2011). The effects of strained intimate relations can also have a significant effect on the nature or maintenance of the relationship between the incarcerated parent and their child[ren], not least where this translates in to a reluctance by the caregiver to facilitate contact and visits (Buist 1997; Clarke et al. 2005; Rosenberg 2009; Roy and Dyson 2005).

The effects of paternal incarceration are likely to vary in accordance with fathers' pre-incarceration residential status, with more significant consequences being experienced by resident fathers and their families (Braman 2004; Nurse 2002) – not least because the experience and effects of separation will be more keenly felt. The Council on Crime and Justice (2006) interviewed ten non-resident fathers and six resident fathers who lived with their families pre- and post-prison to examine the effects of imprisonment on parenting and on participants' relationships with their own children. Non-resident fathers placed importance on the paternal role and reported a sense of pride and emotional well-being if they engendered the respect of their children although access to and relationships with children were generally contingent on their ability to maintain a collaborative relationship with the child[ren]'s mother. The majority of non-resident fathers, however, felt that prison had a negative impact on their relationship with their children, both in the short and long term, due not only to their physical separation from the family but also because of the internalisation or normalisation of prison subcultures and, as part of that, the way in which men became accustomed to interacting with others, which made it difficult to transition or adjust to normal patterns of family life after release (see also Nurse 2002, Carceral 2003). Resident fathers similarly discussed the impact of separation but this, the authors suggest, was expressed in

terms of feeling a loss of connectedness, their anxiety about losing relationships, heightened interpersonal conflict and mistrust towards their partner. Resident fathers also discussed the difficulties their children experienced with their transition back into the family home manifest in mood and attitudinal changes and emotional distancing. They observed changes in role relationships due to some children's assumption of more parental roles and responsibilities during the period of paternal incarceration. The resultant loss of relational legitimacy and children's acclimatisation to separation (Swisher and Waller 2008) can cause difficulties when the parent (which, statistically is often the father) returns home and attempts to resume their role as parent.

Turney and Wildeman (2013) examined the effects of paternal incarceration on paternal and maternal parenting and they found that paternal incarceration sharply diminishes the parenting behaviour of resident but not non-resident fathers. They suggest that the association between incarceration and parenting behaviours among resident fathers can be explained by changes in fathers' relationships with children's mothers. Indeed, the authors state that 'recent paternal incarceration sharply increases the probability a mother will re-partner, potentially offsetting some losses in the involvement of the biological father while simultaneously leading to greater family complexity' (ibid: 1). However, they found little evidence that paternal incarceration affects maternal parenting practices.

King's (2002) study on the effects of parental incarceration on children revealed similar relational effects to those later documented by the Council on Crime and Justice (2006). While she discusses the wider effects on children (discussed above), she also examined the effect of imprisonment on parent/child relationships. As noted previously, twenty-five of the respondents (96.2%) stated that they found it difficult or very difficult to maintain a relationship with their children. Any breakdown or deterioration in the relationship between children and their parents necessarily has implications following the imprisoned parent's release. In informal discussions, several formerly imprisoned parents expressed to King (2002) that they had found it difficult to assume authority and resume responsibility for their children when they returned home. One issue that was repeatedly highlighted was the fact that children would question the parents' right to make any decisions about their lives. It was reported that the children tended to feel that the parent was not in a position to make decisions because they had not done so while they were in prison.

While many studies focus on the effects of imprisonment, only a few take into account pre-prison factors that may have a bearing on the outcomes. However, La Vigne et al. (2005) interviewed 233 males pre- and post-imprisonment to explore the effect of imprisonment on the quality of relationships between family members and prisoners after release examining the extent to which in-prison contact with the family mediated the negative effect of incarceration. Interestingly, their findings indicate that the level and type of family contact can mediate or ameliorate the effect of pre-prison relationship quality on both post-prison family relationship quality and support. Therefore, in some cases, family contact can improve otherwise strained relationships. However, they also found that in-prison contact can be a negative influence if intimate partner relationships, in particular, are already fragile or strained. This means that pre-prison relationship quality alone is not a positive predictor of post-release family relationship quality but is influenced by the *nature* of the relationship as well as the *level and type of in-prison contact*. La Vigne et al. (2005) reported that visits from partners predicted higher levels of post-release relational quality and support for respondents who reported high levels of family relationship quality *prior* to prison and predicted lower levels of family relationship quality for those with low levels of family

relationship quality prior to prison. This would imply that the *level* of family support and *quality* of family relationships in general are consistent over time and relatively immune to the separation and related strains caused by incarceration. Nonetheless, contact with family can help improve the quality of family relationships and support post-release. As the previously reviewed literature infers, La Vigne et al. (2005) noticed that contact with intimate partners is perhaps a bit more complex, with only strong relationships benefiting from in-prison contact. Although contact with children did not emerge as a predictor of family relationship quality or levels of post release support, it is a predictor of released prisoners' attachment to and involvement with children post-release. Partners and children are more greatly affected than, in the case of parental imprisonment, families of origin or extended family members from separation and indeed respondents' relationships with partners and children emerged in this study as more tenuous than those with other family members. This suggests that prisoners' relationships with their families, and particularly children, can be improved through increased contact during incarceration but that visits with intimate partners can have a positive or negative effect depending on the nature of family relationships prior to incarceration. Moreover the type of in-prison contact may also play a role in influencing post release relationships. Visits made in person, rather than indirect forms of contact (i.e. phone calls or letters) are more critical for relationships with children and partners. However, it would appear that phone calls or letters more important for relationships with other family members. La Vigne et al. (2005) reason that this may be because, in reference to their all male sample, their relationships with mothers, sisters and aunts are more stable, providing support regardless of their levels of in-person contact.

5. Families and Reintegration

From a youth and criminal justice perspective, the role of the family in reducing recidivism and supporting reintegration tends to be conceptualised through a somewhat instrumental lens (see also Codd 2007), as 'a resource, which is part of the solution' (Ministry of Justice, 2007: 17). Indeed, family contact during incarceration has been associated with lower rates of recidivism (Adams and Fischer 1976; Martinez and Christian 2009; Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2011; Petersilia 2003; Shanahan and Agudelo, 2012). Additionally commitment to family roles post release can help recently released prisoners to develop pro-social identities (Edin et al. 2004; Hairston 2002; Howard 2000, Jardine 2014; Sampson and Laub 1993; Uggen, Manza and Behrens 2004; La Vigne et al. 2005; Weaver 2015) and emotional attachments to family can influence the choices people make after release from prison (Bazemore and Stinchcomb 2004). As the Council on Crime and Justice (2006: 9) observe, this may be because 'families uniquely allow an offender to see themselves as a normally functioning individual, rather than merely an institutionalized criminal (Hairston 2002; Howard 2000)'.

There is, then, substantial evidence that family and friends are a critical source of resettlement support. Between 40 to 80 percent of newly released people rely on their families immediately after release to help them overcome obstacles, including unemployment, debt, and homelessness (Berg and Huebner 2010; Naser and Visher 2006; Nelson, Deess, and Allen 1999; Visher et al. 2004). For example, in a study that followed 205 men leaving prison, La Vigne et al. (2004) found that 59 percent of these men were receiving financial support from spouses, family members, or friends, and 88 percent were living with family members. 84 percent of the ex-prisoners in Visher et al.'s (2010) study were still living with family seven months after their release, and 92 percent

received financial assistance from their families. It is in the light of this kind of evidence that social support networks are considered to be an effective and cost-effective re-entry tool. As this review of the research has illustrated, however, such generalisations obscure the complexity and contingency of the experiences and effects of imprisonment for prisoners' families and on their relationships with the incarcerated family member – and, in that, their capacities to provide resettlement support. Mills and Codd (2007) caution against placing too high expectations on families; some families may engage in criminal behaviour; some may not wish to maintain links with the incarcerated person for a host of reasons; and some may feel responsible if rehabilitation does not occur.

Families of prisoners are a heterogeneous and diverse group (McEvoy 1999; Loucks 2004); prior to parental imprisonment, families have different needs, risks and resiliencies and different relationships to and with the imprisoned person. These, among myriad factors, shape the effects and experiences of imprisonment and, in turn, post-release resettlement processes.

'Despite the common experience of the incarceration of a family member, Black and Asian families (Light 1995), broken or nonnuclear families (Paylor and Smith 1994), families of female prisoners (Caddle and Crisp 1997), and families of older prisoners (Codd 1997) will all face different hardships during a family member's imprisonment' (Loucks 2004: 4-5).

Indeed, as Loucks (2004) observed, many prisoners and families will build up expectations for what life will be like upon a prisoner's return, expectations that do not reflect families adjustment to life in their absence (Gabel and Johnston 1995; Nurse 2002) or for the effects of prisoner's complex experiences of loss, psychological change, and post-release adjustment processes (Grounds and Jamieson 2003; Stewart 2003). While, then, family members may be critical to successful reintegration, their relationships may well have been complicated, if not fractured, by past experiences; by recent experiences and the effects of imprisonment; as well as by unrealistic expectations for and unanticipated hardships following release.

6. Concluding Discussion

This review of the literature has provided an overview of the effects and experiences of parental imprisonment on the children and families of prisoners; the impact of imprisonment on family relationships; and the role of families in supporting reintegration. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore the ensuing policy and practice implications, various factors warrant particular attention³. At a policy level, important steps to improve protection and services for Scotland's children have been made under Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government 2012) and the provisions contained within the [Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#). However as Fee (2015a: 3) has acknowledged, in spite of these measures children affected by parental imprisonment remain '....a group of children who are being let down....the services available to them are almost non-existent and they are more or less absent from policy and legislation'. Moreover these children often remain unidentified and invisible to services resulting in assessment, support and provisions under

³ A comprehensive guide to European perspectives on good practice with children of imprisoned parents by [Philbrick, Ayre and Lynn \(2014\)](#) can be downloaded here.

the above policy and legislation not being implemented, nor are their particular needs related to the experience of parental imprisonment recognised or any particular person responsible for their wellbeing (Fee 2015b; Loucks, as cited by Robinson 2015). While measures via the above policy and legislation including provision of a Named Person for every child in Scotland and processes regarding child's plans may go some way to addressing the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment, concerns remain regarding their sufficiency in addressing the above issues (Fee 2015b). We would therefore argue continued progression of the details of the [Support for Children \(Impact of Parental Imprisonment\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#) via the [Criminal Justice \(Scotland\) Bill](#) will be a fundamental step in improving the recognition, assessment and support of the children and families of prisoners, which should both support, be supported by and strengthen the above arrangements, and make a valuable contribution to ensuring the Scottish Government's (2015a: 2) 'vision of Scotland as the best place to grow up extends to all of our children and young people'. Furthermore, a reduction in the use of imprisonment, which the Scottish Government has stated they are committed to achieving (see for example Scottish Government 2015b), would inevitably reduce the number of family members affected by parental imprisonment (Family and Corrections Network, as cited by Loureiro 2010).

The implications for practice can be differentiated into the areas of identification and assessment; support; and the maintenance of significant relationships, all of which are required to mitigate or at least minimise the effects of parental imprisonment on children and families, although the focus devoted to each element may vary at different stages of the imprisonment process. At the outset it is imperative to recognise the necessity of a 'Whole Family' approach that takes seriously the views of the incarcerated parent, their child[ren] and their family and which identifies, assesses and builds on their needs and strengths, that focuses both on presenting issues and those that may arise in preparation for, and on, release (Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015). While it may be argued this and many of the recommendations contained within this paper are already considered good practice, the current experiences of children and families affected by parental imprisonment would suggest this is not consistently being implemented.

6.1. Identification and assessment

Identification, in a non-stigmatising manner, of the children and families of prisoners, and sharing this information, most notably with the Named Person, is crucial and a fundamental first step in ensuring the assessment and addressing the needs of this 'hidden population'. With regard to assessment, this review of the literature has highlighted that the impact of imprisonment on an individual child and their family may be emotional, social, psychological, financial, relational, physical and developmental. Moreover, the extent to which a child or family will be affected will be influenced by a myriad of factors particular to that child and their family, and the impact will vary according to the nature of the offence, pre-prison variables and other underlying difficulties, relational dynamics, care arrangements (before and during the period of incarceration), and the wider support systems and socio-structural context. Assessments must therefore be individualised, holistic and include factors at the level of the individual, wider family and the community (including for example, educational contexts, extended family and informal social networks) in order to acknowledge and address the complexities and contingencies of people's experiences and the effects imprisonment engenders. Children must be supported and enabled to fulfil their right to express their views and emotions throughout assessments, which may, at least, serve to ameliorate *some* of the feelings of exclusion that children encountering criminal justice

processes often experience (Fee 2015a; Philbrick, Ayre and Lynn 2014). Each of these components of assessment are considered good practice and align with GIRFEC principles (Scottish Government 2012). Shapiro and DiZerega (2010) suggest that eco-maps ('a family mapping tool') and social network analyses might assist practitioners in undertaking family focused assessments and developing related practices. It is only through a robust assessment process that the factors which positively and negatively impact on any child and family can inform the nature of the support provided and the impact of such interventions on broader outcomes.

6.2. Support

The literature reviewed here reinforces how essential it is to support the needs of children and families of imprisoned parents. It is, however, recognised that accessing such support can be problematic at an individual level (for example due to stigma, isolation, lack of trust particularly in statutory agencies, or lack of information or access to available services) and at an organisational level (due to difficulties in identifying families, failure to recognise their needs, lack of knowledge of available supports or indeed lack of available supports) (Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015). Therefore, support should include the proactive provision of timely information, practical advice, emotional support and involvement at all stages of an individuals' imprisonment (as appropriate) to promote understanding, inclusion, coping and the reduction of stress (Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015).

For children, support to understand their circumstances through the provision of clear, age and stage appropriate information and having someone they can talk to throughout the period of parental imprisonment is vital in reducing distress, anxiety and feelings of guilt and in promoting resilience (Loureiro 2010; Jones and Wainaina-Wozna 2013). Moreover given that these children are often 'disenfranchised grievers', support to help them to acknowledge, identify and label this loss, as well as what has not been lost, is important to reduce ambiguity, uncertainty and feelings of hopelessness (Vaswani 2015b). To achieve this it may be necessary to provide support to families about how to talk about imprisonment and loss, which may include the provision of age and stage appropriate resources (see [Families Outside](#); Barnardos 2013). Support for care-givers is critical given their pivotal role in promoting the child's wellbeing, as is enhancing the family support system. Given the significant financial effects of parental imprisonment, particular attention should also be paid to ensuring families are supported to access financial advice and assistance; financial problems that may be faced by the whole family post-release should be anticipated, acknowledged and addressed as far as possible pre-release (Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015).

For both children and their families, supports oriented to the development or reinforcement of resiliencies (see Loureiro 2009), that address social stigma and encourage the (re)emergence of positive personal identities, are crucial. One method of enabling such may be through the development and implementation of peer or mutual aid support groups which can provide opportunities to share experiences; meet, learn and gain encouragement from others in similar situations; and offer care-givers the opportunity to focus on their own needs (Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015; Loucks 2004; Barnardos 2013). Moreover, supports to address tensions within family dynamics and relationships that have emerged or have been aggravated may be appropriate and can include exploring changes to the roles fulfilled by the child, the care-giver, and the imprisoned parent. Recognising and responding

to the potential complexities in providing post-release resettlement support; preparation of all parties for the individual's release and the transitions and changes this may involve; and recognising and supporting families in their own right and for their own needs are also fundamental (Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015). Methods of providing such support may include, for example, undertaking problem solving family work, where appropriate (see Trotter 2010); developing mutual aid based group work interventions for families; and/or proactively referring such families to specialist services (for example, Families Outside, Barnardos, PACT) that can support them, and, in turn, support them to support each other (Shapiro and DiZerega 2010).

6.3. The maintenance of significant relationships

The maintenance of relationships with the imprisoned parent and the nature and frequency of contact can affect the nature and extent to which a child is affected by parental imprisonment and attachment to and involvement with children post-release. Frequent and positive contact can, for some people in certain contexts, improve familial relationships and, as such, can have an important role in reducing recidivism and supporting reintegration. In most cases, contact can positively impact on the child's capacity for resilience, mental health and wellbeing and on the imprisoned parent's mental health, social adjustment, and feelings of worth, security and identity (Jones and Wainaina-Wozna 2013; Hairston, as cited by De Claire and Dixon 2015). It should however be recognised there can be various barriers to face-to-face contact, such as costs, distance, and social stigma. Moreover, children may have little control over decisions about the nature and frequency of contact they have with their imprisoned parents and, indeed, different family members may have different perspectives on what is in the best interest of the child which can generate conflict and tension (Loucks 2004). In addition, for imprisoned mothers, family visits are less likely; not only are women's institutions smaller in number, and thus the distance from the family home often greater, but there is an increased likelihood that her child[ren] will be found alternative caring arrangements (Parke and Clark-Stewart, as cited by Loureiro 2009). Assessments should therefore adopt a rights-based perspective and include consideration of what contact is in the child's best interests, taking account of the child's views and age and stage of development, as well as factors such as the quality, quantity and type of contact and barriers to be addressed (Jones and Wainaina-Wozna 2013). Factors that can support contact include accessible age appropriate information regarding contact and available supports (such as the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme); provision of a range of opportunities for contact, including children's visits, and facilities that support good quality contact; developing a routine around contact with the imprisoned parent; and making support available to children and family members in respect of the mixed emotions that contact can evoke including before and after visits (see Scottish Prison Service 2013 a and b, 2015; Loureiro 2010; Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015).

6.4. A multi-disciplinary approach

Based upon the range of needs, complexities and contingencies identified here, a multi-disciplinary approach to assessment, support and contact is essential. This inevitably includes prison staff, both in supporting the imprisoned parent, for example to understand their ongoing role in their child's life and in developing the individual's coping strategies and parenting capacities including through parenting programmes, and in supporting their families, for example in signposting them to community organisations, providing contact development officers and prison visitors' centres, and by offering family inductions to the

prison and explaining the procedures and processes that affect them (see Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015; Families Outside 2010; Jones and Wainaina-Wozna 2013). Police and court-based staff, social workers, and universal services, including health and education staff, particularly where these organisations are responsible for the provision of the Named Person service, can also fulfil important functions in providing support and information (Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015; Loureiro 2010). Given the invaluable role of third sector organisations in providing specialised support, it is important that these services are well publicised and differing professional groups who come into contact with affected children and families are aware of these services and how they can be accessed (Jones and Wainaina-Wozna 2013). Integral to effective multi-disciplinary working is good communication, partnership working, and links between custody and community services (Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015). Moreover increased public and professional awareness of the prevalence of parental imprisonment and the needs and strengths of families of prisoners is crucial in addressing the social challenges, stigma, isolation, and lack of support experienced (Fee 2015a; Council on Crime and Justice 2006). This should be included in professional training for those in the above agencies and it is imperative that all agencies, including those who make decisions that will affect children, recognise their responsibilities for the children and families they come into contact with and the impact this contact may have (Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015; Philbrick, Ayre and Lynn 2014). It is hoped that this briefing paper might go some way to increasing awareness of the experiences and effects of imprisonment for prisoners' families and of the kinds of practices that might ameliorate some of the difficulties they face.

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