



Open Research Online

Citation

Payler, Jane; Cooper, Victoria and Bennett, Stephanie (2024). Optimal development for the children of prisoners? How children with a parent in prison are supported and why it matters. *Children and Society* (early access).

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/101002/>

License

(CC-BY 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding



Optimal development for the children of prisoners? How children with a parent in prison are supported and why it matters

Jane Payler¹ | Victoria Cooper¹ | Stephanie Bennett²

¹The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

²University of Chichester, Chichester, UK

Correspondence

Jane Payler, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.

Email: jane.payler@open.ac.uk

Funding information

YSS

Abstract

This article examines the need and types of support for children with a parent in prison, the measures in place to know who they are and the consequences of associated policies for their development. These are discussed within a cultural-historical child development framework and, within that, questions are raised about optimal development and children's rights. The article is grounded in a mixed-methods study of a support service for children of prisoners in Worcestershire. Parental imprisonment can impact negatively on societal, institutional and personal aspects of children's development. However, when children are supported through family-centred, relationship-focused, strengths-based services, they can engage more fully in the institutions and social situations of their daily lives.

KEYWORDS

child development, children of prisoners, children's rights

INTRODUCTION

This article raises questions about how children with a parent in prison are supported and why it matters. Adopting a cultural-historical perspective, it approaches the questions from a children's development viewpoint, wherein children's rights influence their development potential.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2024 The Author(s). *Children & Society* published by National Children's Bureau and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

YSS (a charity supporting marginalised children, young people and families in Worcestershire, a UK county) commissioned the authors to undertake a two-year evaluation of the newly funded Families First (FF) project (2020–2022) aimed at supporting children and families of prisoners.

Children of prisoners are often among the most important yet forgotten survivors of crime even when the crime was not committed against them. In the context of increased incarceration globally and its effects on children (Condry & Minson, 2021; Healy et al., 2001; Minson, 2019; Peterson et al., 2019; Song et al., 2018), this article sets out the scale of the issue in the UK, the impact on children set within a cultural-historical holistic view of development, and explains how one charity funded by a local authority devised a support service for families. The potential for such services to contribute to children's development, particularly to children's rights as an aspect of developmental circumstance, is discussed.

CONTEXT

Prison populations across the world have grown, as have the number of children of prisoners. Estimates for the USA and Europe are 1 700 600 and 800 000 respectively (Clancy & Maguire, 2017, p.211). Estimates for the number of children of prisoners in England and Wales range from 200 000 within a year (MOJ, 2012) to 312 000 annual cumulative prevalence (the number with a parent in prison at some point in a year) (Kincaid et al., 2019). In England and Wales, most recent estimates show that between 1 October 2021 and 1 October 2022 there were 192 912 children with a parent in prison (Government UK, 2024). However, there is a dearth of accurate, up-to-date statistical information. Neither His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) nor the Scottish Prison service have a way of making this information accessible, requiring urgent review (Cooper et al., 2023). Changes in recording information about how many children are impacted by parental imprisonment in the UK are needed. Without information such as how many children of prisoners there are and where they are, these children miss out on the support they need. With no system to inform schools or local authorities when a parent is imprisoned, the responsibility falls to children and parents to share the information, which many resist (Kincaid et al., 2019).

Families of prisoners are more likely to be of black or minority ethnic backgrounds, to have lower socio-economic status, deal with related issues such as poverty, and be more likely to be female (Condry, 2018). Families 'left behind' often have heightened mental health problems, exacerbated during COVID-19 restrictions (Testa & Fahmy, 2021), with children trying to shoulder extra responsibilities (McGinley & Jones, 2018), and the parent at home trying to protect their children from adverse effects. Family imprisonment can alter family dynamics with children taking on board more caring responsibilities yet without the recognition of a formal carer's role (Leeson & Morgan, 2019). Research reveals the significant and far-reaching impact that maternal imprisonment has on children (Beresford et al., 2020; Minson, 2019) and the 'symbiotic harms' to individuals when a family member is imprisoned (Condry & Minson, 2021; Minson, 2019).

Families of prisoners suffer from stigma and shame (Condry, 2018; Luther, 2016). Secrecy often surrounds parental imprisonment, leading to further isolation for children as well as for their 'at-home' parent (Knudson, 2018; McGinley & Jones, 2018). Secrecy inhibits community caregivers from providing these children with targeted support (Knudson, 2018). Despite calls for enhanced support for children of prisoners in schools (Morgan & Gill, 2013), school support remains limited as children of prisoners are not recognised as a priority group for service provision (Leeson & Morgan, 2019). Parental imprisonment is a risk factor for adverse outcomes

for children, including three times the risk for anti-social behaviour, double the risk for mental health issues, future offending, drug abuse, unemployment, and poor educational attainment (Kincaid et al., 2019; Murray & Farrington, 2008). Children who witnessed parental arrest had higher cumulative stress hormone concentrations and, if they already had ongoing stress, suffered similar effects to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Muentner et al., 2021). In interviews, children of prisoners stated they found it challenging to be at school. They found changing schools hard, and those who did not change schools found people knowing their parent was in prison difficult (Minson, 2019).

Townhead (2015) sets out international standards relating to the rights of children of incarcerated parents, bringing together legal instruments, treaty body recommendations and other guidance to promote the rights of children of prisoners and to contribute to improving standards in their care. Existing services across the UK for families of prisoners often vary according to the age and status of the service user: child, young person or adult (Cooper et al., 2023). Services often require referrals or knowledge of the range of services available, and capacity to engage with online support. While there are organisations that offer guidance, practical and emotional support including Barnardo's, YSS, Children Affected by Parental Offending, Families Unite and Children Heard and Seen (CHAS) among others, these are often regionally specific and dependent upon formal referral.

THEORETICAL FRAMING: A CULTURAL-HISTORICAL VIEW OF DEVELOPMENT

Our theoretical framing draws on a cultural-historical understanding of children's development including societal, institutional and personal perspectives and influences. Within development, we draw attention to one aspect of the societal milieu, which appears to be poorly considered in policy surrounding children of prisoners: children's rights. Children's development is holistic in that all elements are interrelated, each acting on the other. Thus, while much of our research evidence presented here concerns children's social and emotional development, nonetheless we maintain that these aspects of development influence all others: physical, communicative and cognitive, as well as future economic well-being.

Cultural-historical understanding of children's development

To understand the impact of parental imprisonment on children and the potential for ameliorating that impact, we need to consider the wider societal context and influences on their situation, the institutions of their daily lives, and personal experiences. A cultural-historical approach to children's development (Hedegaard, 2009) necessitates an understanding of the social situation of children's development, employing concepts from research into children's everyday lives and from psychology. Attention is paid to the societal values and conditions within which children live, the practices of everyday life in the institutions in which children participate, and children's perspectives. Society, institutions and persons are seen as three different perspectives, each contributing to a cultural-historical theory of development (Hedegaard, 2009).

Society includes norms, discourses, values and traditions. In the case of children of prisoners, these comprise societal views on justice, criminality, deviant behaviour, 'troubled' families, and multiple deprivations—publicly regarded as both 'deserved' and 'undeserved'. Institutions

include the settings and their practices in which children engage and within which their lives are framed. Here, institutions comprise families, schools, neighbourhood institutions such as youth groups, social services, charitable organisations and justice systems. Support systems for children of prisoners, where they exist, form further institutions. A focus on persons, on children's perspectives, examines their needs, desires, agency, engagement and motivations as they participate in everyday life. Children are active participants in their families, classrooms, local communities and groups, contributing to and shaping the ethos and practices of each. Including children's perspectives enables an understanding of how children contribute to their own developmental conditions (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008, p.5).

Each of the three perspectives, society, institutions and persons, are influenced by and act upon each other.

'...persons are participating in and creating activities that realize and contribute to the institutional practices that society provides while also contributing to changes in society.' (Hedegaard, 2009: 65).

This theoretical approach pays attention to the differing values and practices of institutions and the society in which children participate, and the different ways in which children are expected to participate in each. Shifting between institutions can throw into relief changes in orientation that are required for children to navigate each one successfully. What a child has observed as usual practice in a family might clash with what society highlights as acceptable. How children with a parent in prison experience the negative social constructs of 'criminal' and how they likewise navigate their expected roles, for example, of friend, in social groups may clash. Such clashes are referred to as developmental crises (Hedegaard, 2009: 66) with potential for learning and growth. The potential conflicts between differing social expectations, institutional values and children's lived experiences can be opportunities for learning and growth—or can be sites of difficulty, leading towards limiting developmental pathways. We argue that with sensitive support and attention to children's rights, the potential conflicts can become more positive developmental experiences.

Societal milieu—children's rights

As part of the social milieu in the UK, children have rights. Yet in 2000, Freeman noted that children's rights '... themselves need rethinking, and so does the reporting and implementation process' (Freeman, 2000: 277). We have come a long way in the UK towards recognising and implementing processes for children's rights. Nonetheless some children under certain circumstances continue to have their rights undermined, ignored or inadequately addressed. Article 3, item 1 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 1991) states that the best interests of the child 'shall be a primary consideration'. (p.4). Further, article 3 item 2 states that parties should undertake 'to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being' (p.4). Where research evidence has shown that children of prisoners experience mental health problems, anxiety, educational and relationship difficulties (Condry, 2018), failing to identify and offer specialist support is to ignore their rights. Article 8 item 1 requires respect for the 'right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations' (p.4). Item 2 requires provision of 'appropriate assistance and protection' where elements of identity are legally deprived, such as is the case in a child's parent being removed to prison. Yet, without a statutory duty to know who children of prisoners are and to provide them with support, this too is currently being failed.

UNCRC is necessarily a work in progress rather than a finished product (Freeman, 2000: 290). Freeman takes exception to the phrase in article 3, that the best interests of the child shall be 'a primary consideration' rather than the primary consideration, an important point. Categories of children who have been inadequately served by UNCRC's implementation are highlighted; in addition to those referred to by Freeman, gay children, girls, street children, refugees and indigenous children, we add prisoners' children. How are their rights for protection, care, identity and to family relationships being implemented?

Currently, children of prisoners do not automatically receive support at times of arrest or sentencing of parents, even though research convincingly shows that children's well-being is adversely affected surrounding such traumatic and uncertain events (Kincaid et al., 2019; Muentner et al., 2021; Murray & Farrington, 2008). Likewise, while children are allowed to visit parents in prison and imprisoned parents can sometimes telephone home, we know that visits can be stopped as they were for example during COVID-19, can be unsettling and unnerving for children, and that home telephone calls may often happen during the daytime when children are at school (Cooper et al., 2023). Further, the time of parental release from prison can be anxiety-inducing and disruptive to relationships. Without targeted support, children's right to maintain family relations are therefore undermined or inadequately addressed.

While many children with a parent in prison are not victims of their parents' crimes, they are nonetheless often profoundly affected by the trauma, changes in familial circumstances and social stigma that ensue. We argue that children of prisoners should have their needs attended to in the structures and processes of justice. Supporting children's agency in voicing the impact their parental imprisonment has upon them could contribute to shifting the societal milieu in which children develop, learn and participate.

There is a mismatch between children's rights in society in the UK and the lack of rights for children with a parent in prison, all of which threaten to undermine the optimal development of children with imprisoned parents.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the YSS FF programme against its stated aims and objectives (YSS FF Business Case, March 2020). These included identifying families affected, acting as a single point of contact and support, and providing practical help to support health and well-being. Long term aims included reduction in school exclusions, maintenance of housing, job and social connections for the family, and reduction in adult reoffending.

For this article, we focus on the question: how do children's experiences of having a parent in prison contribute to the societal, institutional and personal aspects of their development, including children's rights and restorative practices within societal perspectives?

The mixed-methods study incorporated quantitative and qualitative data collection methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Quantitative elements included an online survey ($N=65$ completed) and exploring existing local and national data. The aim of these was to contribute to understanding the societal milieu of children's development. The online survey was designed for UK parents with a partner or ex-partner in prison. The survey was promoted through social media using snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019) and shared via X, Facebook, LinkedIn, the YSS and Open University websites.

Qualitative elements included documentary analysis ($N=16$ documents) of records during the set-up and operation of the YSS FF programme, interviews with stakeholders and YSS FF

practitioners, and multi-method interviews/activities with families and children of prisoners. All interviews ($N=22$) were audio-recorded and transcribed. Stakeholder interviewees ($n=7$) were from police, housing, schools, early help and charities with experience of families with a parent/carer in prison. Interviews ($n=4$) were carried out with FF practitioners who were supporting the families. Parent/carer participants included five mothers and one grandmother. For the children, YSS FF practitioners advised as to the most appropriate approaches for each child from a suite designed by the research team. Methods included drawing, talking and discussing examples of activities they had carried out with YSS FF practitioners such as posters, drawings, or games (see [Figure 1](#)). Six children were interviewed (aged 6–15 years). Of the families interviewed, five involved a father in prison and one involved a mother in prison. All families were white, reflecting the local population served by FF at that time.

Ethical approval was provided by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. All interviewees were recruited through FF, important given the sensitive nature of the study and the reluctance of families to share their circumstances. Participants agreed to take part in the study after receiving Project Information Sheets and completing consent forms. The right to withdraw from the study was explained to all participants; YSS FF practitioners most familiar with the families spent time describing to all the children how they could stop an interview or withdraw from the study at any time. All data were anonymised, and any names are pseudonyms. Family interviews were carried out by one of two members of the research team in relaxed settings (home, school community room usually used for FF support sessions). Children were given choice about being interviewed individually or together within families. All children chose to be interviewed individually but with their FF practitioner present, who could act as an advocate if, for example, the child showed signs of becoming upset. Interviews were recorded using a small digital audio recorder placed on the table,

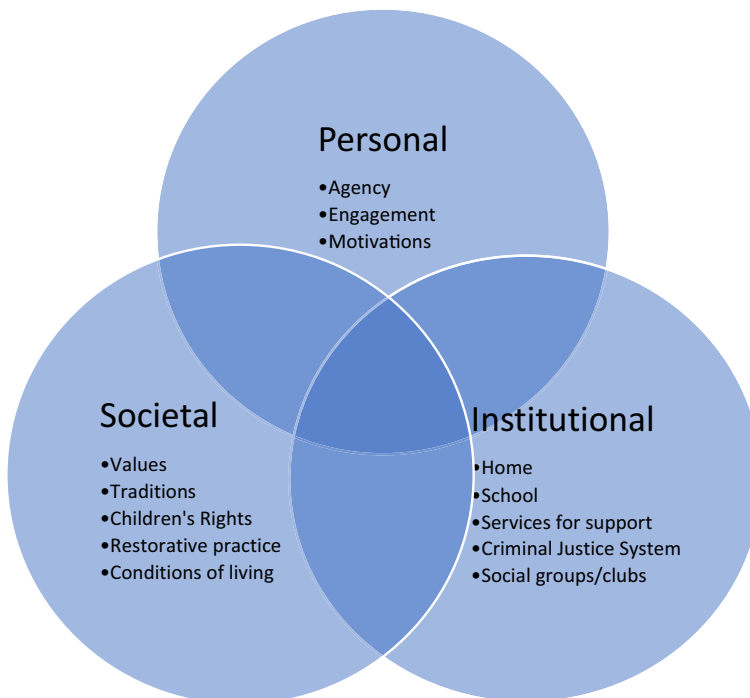


FIGURE 1 Perspectives influencing children's development. Adapted from Hedegaard & Flear, 2008, p. 10.

smaller than a mobile phone. Children and adults appeared unperturbed by the recorder, although explicit permission was sought before turning it on.

The analysis was multi-layered. The parent survey was distributed online using Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2020) and analysed using SPSS v28. Analyses of qualitative data involved two main methods: (1) thematic grouping of common issues using a coding framework guided by the research questions and involving research team co-analysis; (2) thematic analysis using NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software (NVivo, 2018).

FINDINGS: SOCIETAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

We now present our findings on how the societal, institutional and personal aspects of the experiences of children of prisoners influence their development.

Societal—composition of families and children of prisoners and how society views and supports them

Who are the families and children?

The societal environment in which children of prisoners live, develop and participate is one of a substantial number of families and children in similar circumstances, estimated to be 312 000 annual cumulative total (Kincaid et al., 2019), but hidden from view, stigmatised, ashamed and unable to access support readily (Condry, 2018). Our survey ($N=65$) of at-home parents with an imprisoned partner revealed that of 90% of respondents had between 1 and 3 children. Children's ages ranged from under 6 months to 19 years old.

Most survey respondents were white females, with a male family member in prison. For just over half of those prisoners, it was their first time in prison, with 48% having been in prison before. Families in the survey had a parent in prison on a short to medium-length sentence. A picture emerges, therefore, of substantial numbers of children across the age range having a parent in prison for short to medium term sentences, often as repeat offenders. However, no one can be sure about the numbers of children affected. Our findings confirmed that when an adult is sentenced, they are not necessarily asked to disclose if they have children, although many prisons do record this data.

So, a family member goes into prison because they've broken the law and they're waiting to be sentenced ... At that point, there isn't really any screening done or questions asked about the family. And often some of the offenders want to protect their family so they're not volunteering.

(FF Practitioner)

Our interviews also suggested that practitioners believed that some prisoners choose not to provide this information for a variety of reasons, including fear of social service interventions, or making the children more vulnerable.

I think another reason why the families are not self-referring into us is the fear of, if I do appear on your radar, are my children going to be taken away from me. And the

same in prison, they often don't say because they're either worried that their children might be taken away or if they let on they've got children in prison it almost makes them vulnerable.

(FF Practitioner)

Consequences of the societal environment for childhood and development

For some children, having a parent in prison is a defining feature of their childhoods. For many families, a parent may go in and out of prison on several occasions spanning many years. Consequently, for some children being separated from a parent and visiting a parent in prison can shape many aspects of their childhood and, although highly traumatic, may feel quite normal.

That's life and they're quite used to coming in and being searched and they really enjoy that time that they get to spend with dad.

(YSS Practitioner)

Nonetheless, each time a parent goes in or comes out of prison, there can be a difficult period of adjustment. While each family experience is different, our research revealed consistent themes reflecting how children of prisoners typically feel when separated from a parent. Feeling 'isolated', 'sad and angry', that there is 'no one to help' and 'like you're not being listened to' can create a sense in which everyday life is influenced by a parent's imprisonment. The age of the children and the extent to which they understand what is going on affects how their behaviours are impacted, influencing their physical and communicative development.

The children as well, if they're younger it can come out behaviourally. So they start wetting or they won't sleep. We've had one just recently and the little girl stopped talking and she became a selective mute...

(Stakeholder)

Children have disrupted childhoods, facing significant social, emotional and often financial challenges when a family member is in custody, as well as the trauma of being separated from a parent and often not being fully aware of why this has happened, affecting social and emotional development.

The school had concerns because the child was displaying quite unusual behaviour within the classroom and they weren't sure what it was about, but they thought it might be connected to the fact that her dad was in prison...And as it turned out she hadn't been told at that point, she knew her dad was in prison but she didn't know what he'd done, so she'd actually been looking up information online ... She was 11.

(Stakeholder)

There can also be a safeguarding risk for children of prisoners. Children whose parents are involved in organised crime may be targeted and many may experience or witness violence within the home. Similarly, in the case of an older brother going to prison, the younger sibling was in a vulnerable position and his safety was at risk.

The concern was the younger brother shared a bedroom with the older brother. He'd witnessed lots of the criminal work that was going on because the older brother was exploited... And there were drugs and weapons.

(Stakeholder)

The vulnerabilities of children with a parent in prison are apparent, but the support available is limited.

Limited support offered by society

In our survey, while most parents told their close family (96%) and close friends (94%) about the imprisonment, fewer (72%) told their children's school or other professionals such as GPs (43%) or social workers (40%). Further, families needing and seeking help were typically not aware of how and where to access support. As our interviews revealed, 'One mum just turned up at the prison... she was desperate for help and didn't know where to go...' (Stakeholder).

Limited access to support was exacerbated by long waiting lists with a significant impact upon children's capacity to process and deal with the emotional trauma of parental separation.

With most of our services the issue you've got is waiting lists. It's all well and good a dad being incarcerated and the kids going on a waiting list, but 6 months down the line you wonder if that window of opportunity has missed, where you could have prevented this stuff because you're getting in early. Early intervention ... Often it's too late. The damage and the stigma and the scarring of it all is embedded already.

(Stakeholder)

Support hampered by shame and multiple difficulties

For families, attempts to access support were often thwarted by feelings of stigma and shame hampering their pursuit of help.

I felt massively judged by everybody I reached out to for help. I fully explained that he was my ex-partner, we'd not been together for four or 5 years at this point, I still felt looked down at... the ones that are looked down on in society...

(Parent)

Furthermore, imprisonment was often one of many difficulties families faced, each exacerbated by the impact of imprisonment. Families had intersecting problems (Carbado et al., 2013). Families with a parent or close family member in prison were often dealing with poverty, earlier emotional traumas, drug or alcohol dependence, serious physical or mental family illness, and housing difficulties.

When you work with the families that we work with, nine times out of ten imprisonment is not the only issue. It might be the issue that we specialise in, but there's

sometimes other things going on, whether there's been domestic abuse or drug abuse in the past or mental health issues, so there's multiple things going on.

(Stakeholder)

For many families, imprisonment is part of the patchwork of long-standing challenges in their lives, affecting how they experience and deal with parental imprisonment, all of which influence children's development.

Institutional—how parental imprisonment affects the institutional aspects of children's development and their participation in institutions

Institutional support locally and nationally

Institutional support is not automatically available for children of prisoners, so families are left to manage alone or to seek their own support at the personal level for their children and themselves. We asked survey respondents to consider the usefulness of support offered by local organisations. In answer, 74% said that they had been offered no support. Most families had not been directly offered support: 'It's been horrendous. Nothing has been useful'. Some respondents noted that they were seeking alternative support, for example unofficial Facebook peer support groups.

Many families told us that they had not been offered any support by national organisations. 'No one has ever contacted me to offer support. I am not offered any assistance at visits and have never been approached to be offered any help.'

With anything else, with any sort of disability or loss or any big occasion, there is a procedure or a guideline for teachers, GPs and health visitors to follow, whereas with this there's nothing. You're just left to your own devices and to figure it out yourself.

(Parent)

However, nine survey respondents talked about the support offered by Children Heard and Seen (CHAS) and had found it extremely helpful.

Impact on participation in education

Parents, practitioners, and children explained the impact that parental imprisonment had on children's education. A young person aged 15 at the time of interview described the emotional impact of father's imprisonment on his ability to concentrate and cope with school life.

I wouldn't speak to anyone about anything, only my mum. At school I wouldn't ask a teacher if I needed anything. If I didn't know what to do, I'd just stay quiet.

Many parents described how their children were finding it 'hard to cope' at school, particularly when they were aware that their children were 'really emotional'. For many practitioners

already working with families, they were trying to stem a cycle of decline. They identified emotional overwhelm, withdrawal and possible criminality as consequences of the lack of targeted support.

However, targeted institutional support where offered could mean that children felt able to participate more fully at other institutional levels. Support from FF was transferred to more participation in school. As one young person interviewed explained, he could see that his confidence outside the family had grown since working closely with the YSS FF practitioner for several months. 'It's helped with my confidence. Say now if the teachers ask a question, I can put my hand up. I never used to put my hand up, even if I knew the answer'.

Institutional arrangements of visiting prison

All the parents interviewed described the enduring emotional impact that came with family imprisonment. For many children, this reflected the emotional ordeal of being separated from a loved one, while for other children this connected to the complex and often distressing experience of visiting a family member in prison.

The kids. They're the ones that suffer. Charlotte's seven now. It's been four long years and she's still suffering and will probably always, there will always be that time in her life where she was traumatised by what went on ... If we didn't have that whole traumatic experience of being patted down, being sniffed by a dog, her nappy being checked, she'd have been alright, I think.

(Parent)

Personal—children's agency, engagement and motivations as they participate in everyday life

Having discussed the impact of parental imprisonment on the societal and institutional aspects of children's development, we turn now to personal perspectives on development: how children's agency, engagement and motivations are impacted by parental imprisonment.

Shame and stigma reducing friendships

Difficulties at home and a lack of support made it hard to maintain a social life for children for a variety of reasons. Friendships could be difficult to navigate as children as well as adults carried the shame and stigma of family imprisonment. They described not feeling able to share this with others and feeling very much alone. It means some people might not want their friends to know. I just wouldn't tell my friends. (13-year-old). When interviewed, a 15-year-old described how hard he found it just to be himself with other people, and his tendency to 'worry too much what people think'.

Parents also described their difficulties in talking to friends and family about their circumstances, often preferring to shoulder this alone and avoiding situations where they would feel judged by others, thus further isolating the family and social relations available to the children.

Maintaining parental relationships

The emotional challenge of being separated from a parent while in prison is a significant area that requires support. Survey respondents described the impact on themselves and their children of a lack of information and support, particularly around the process of arranging visits; 'To be more informed about prison visits, I still have not been able to get a visit to see my partner and he has only met his 8-month-old son twice.' Many respondents also spoke of the significant financial impact of having a partner/ex-partner in prison: 'Right now I can't afford paying my bills and feeding my kids. I receive universal credit and it is not enough even for paying the bills. I have two small kids that need clothes, shoes, food. It is very difficult when you are alone and have no family around and no one to help'.

Having a parent in prison can be a lonely, isolating and challenging experience for families and is particularly stressful for children who often do not fully understand where their family member is and why they are no longer at home. As a YSS FF practitioner describes,

Where the children don't quite understand what has happened, they're filling in the gaps. Some children may think that mum or dad's gone to prison and it's their fault, they did something, or they didn't love them anymore and that's why they'd disappeared. So, a lot of children are really struggling with that kind of understanding of what's happened to them, when their parent is going to come back.

This lack of understanding can manifest in different ways with children displaying emotions and behaviours that are very similar to grief.

We'll see changes in sleeping behaviours, sort of separation anxiety where that child maybe is scared to be left alone or go to sleep for fear that another family member might disappear... and that comes out in forms of anxiety, behavioural changes at school, struggling to manage their emotions, outbursts of anger and meltdowns, very similar to a trauma response.

(YSS FF Practitioner)

One boy described how the time before his father went back into prison had been difficult, arousing feelings he needed help to adjust to.

The last time I saw him, it was quite...quite rough ... I dunno, he wasn't in the best state of mind I don't think. I don't think he was thinking well. Hopefully when he comes out, he's not going to go onto that stuff [drugs] again...I wasn't here when he got arrested so I didn't even get to say goodbye...so that was...

(15-year-old)

By drawing and articulating his worries with his YSS FF practitioner about his dad and his imminent release from prison, Oscar (aged 6) described his concerns, 'This was my worry hand about dad. Going to prison again, might argue again, everyone will steal dad from me, because everyone just steals dad from me... Yeah, I miss him. Yeah, I miss him a lot.'

The impact of separation can be exacerbated by parental gender, with children of imprisoned mothers experiencing significant and enduring isolation and grief. As a YSS FF practitioner described, 'Another family that I'm working with, mum has gone to prison, and they are living, the

two boys live with their grandparents ... I helped the grandparents tell the kids where mum is, but they don't understand why she's gone to prison. They just know she's unwell and she's gone to prison to get better.'

This can be exacerbated further where other familial relationships are associated with trauma and loss. 'Their dad died of alcoholism quite a few years ago. So, mum going to prison has brought up a lot of that grief again that they had with dad.' (YSS FF Practitioner).

Trauma and loss

Relationships are further complicated where the children have been direct victims of the parental crime.

One of the young people was a victim of the crime that his dad was put away for. His dad and his uncle were abusive to the family, violent ... So he is experiencing and going through some very challenging times, particularly now that he's a teenager, very distrusting of authority, seriously struggles at school, gets angry, gets frustrated.
(Practitioner)

One parent talked about the challenges her eldest son faced when his dad was in prison, and he 'would refuse to do anything, clubs, after school, anything like that'. Preferring to 'hide himself away at lunchtime.' She describes the acute anxiety he experienced, manifesting in physical symptoms:

He will get physically ill with his anxiety, like he'll get bellyache, he'll get headaches, he gets sick...He thinks he has to worry about if daddy's going to not do things ... I think when you've been in a situation where you have things like this go on, you grow up too quick because you've seen too much, things that you shouldn't have seen, or he's seen me cry thousands of times, when you don't want your kid to see you cry a thousand times.

(Parent)

However, accessing a supportive relationship provided by professional help could ameliorate the difficulties.

YSS FF: Supporting children's agency, emotional resilience and confidence

YSS FF worked with families in a strengths-based approach, helping them to think about what they could do to cope with their situation and looking at practical solutions to strengthen resilience. Thus, FF helped to build children's agency and coping mechanisms, bolstering their engagement in their own developmental trajectories. Referring to the activities she had done with the YSS FF practitioner during their time together, 13-year-old Susan said that they had helped her to talk about things she found difficult to express.

I don't know how to say...I don't really like to talk about it [the situation with dad], but I have talked about it.

These opportunities had led her, for example, to devise a life chances board game to play with her father on his release from prison, seeking to help him confront the good and bad choices he was making in life (Figure 2).

Parents described the significant impact that YSS FF support had in enabling their children to express their feelings and develop strategies to manage their emotions.

We've seen the difference in Charlotte. She talks to us now about how she's feeling. Before, she couldn't tell you if she was happy, sad, hungry, angry, there was no recognition of feelings before this... it's made a big change, but not just that, when it came to her dad, she kept us very separate, even though we've tried to, we've been on days out with her together, we've tried to make it so that we are a family unit to her, but she wouldn't speak about her visits, she wouldn't speak about how she felt, whereas now she will.

(Parent)

The children reflected on the impact that YSS FF had in supporting their growing confidence.

We got on to the topic of outside socialising and she found a group. I would never have just gone ... If when I first met her she'd been like, let's go here, I probably would have been like [face of refusal]. But I think it's because I've known her for nearly a year ... I wouldn't just go with someone I've just met. (Matt, 15 years)

When asked how important the YSS FF service had been and how it could help others in similar circumstances, Susan aged 13 explained,

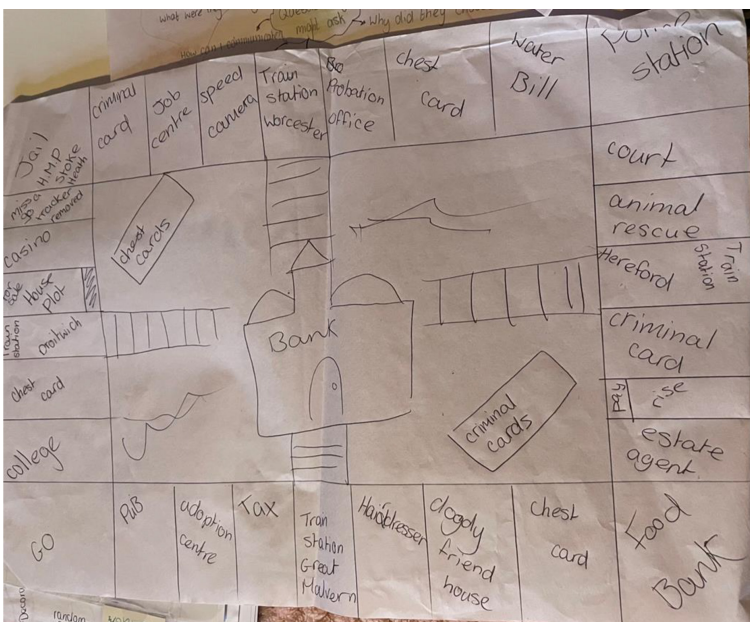


FIGURE 2 'Life choices' Board game created by a 13-year-old girl to play with her father on release from prison.

It's helped me control my emotions. People don't always like to tell their parents how they're feeling. It's a good thing to talk to [Families First practitioner] about it. Some people don't have anyone to talk to about stuff.

Through skilled practitioner intervention, children of prisoners can be supported to express and manage their emotions during periods of significant emotional strain. Our research indicates that the type and quality of support that families accessed from YSS FF made a positive difference to their lives.

DISCUSSION—OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENT AND RIGHTS FOR CHILDREN OF PRISONERS: WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Having a parent in prison undeniably impacts the children left behind. This article contributes to understanding the impact of parental imprisonment on societal, institutional and personal aspects of children's development. Physical, social, emotional, communicative and cognitive development are all affected, as are financial well-being and security.

Societal aspects of children's development

The societal values and conditions within which children of prisoners live shape their engagement with the world and contribute to their developmental opportunities or developmental pathways.

The environment ...must not be conceived of as something outside the child, as an aggregate of objective conditions, without reference to the child and how they are affecting him or her....The societal environment is the source for the appearance of all specific human properties that have gradually been acquired by the child. (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008, p.14).

Thus, such children are surrounded by an environment of stigma and shame, low socio-economic status and poverty (Condry, 2018; Luther, 2016), together with expectations of being at greater risk of anti-social behaviour, substance abuse, low educational attainment and future offending (Kincaid et al., 2019). Our study evidences the nature of such children's disrupted childhoods, exacerbated by repeated parental imprisonment and by the secrecy often surrounding it. So too the limited statutory recording of who the children of prisoners are and what their needs are, meaning that very limited support is available, contributes to societal conditions that threaten children's optimal development.

Children's rights are part of the societal milieu of development. Yet, it can be seen from this and previous studies that the rights of children of prisoners are not fully met. Acknowledging that while prisoners' rights have seen progress over time, Smith and Villman (2021) note that the rights of children of prisoners have not progressed so clearly and currently do not protect their best interests (Article 3 (1), UNCRC) or allow their voices to be heard (Article 12, UNCRC). Indeed, such children have been seen more as a means to maintaining order in prisons through the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme (Hutton, 2021), than seeing their needs for appropriate protection and assistance in preserving their identity including family relations when legally deprived (Article 8 (1) and (2); Article 9, UNCRC). Unless society takes responsibility for

engaging with and upholding the rights of children of prisoners, their full developmental needs will not be fully met.

Institutional aspects of children's development

Many of the societal-level aspects of development are beyond the reach of influence and intervention by organisations such as YSS FF. However, institutional support can enhance children's agency to seek out and engage with other institutions, which can then enhance their enactment of their rights such as engaging more effectively with education and voicing their views.

Children develop through participating in institutional practices that are characterised by communication and shared activities. These forms of practice not only initiate but also restrict children's activities and thereby become conditions for their development.

(Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008, p.16).

Providing support is thus a means of changing or contributing to the 'institutions' part of children's development, giving children a means of reflecting on how they participate in each institution and offering them new ways to participate. With skilled facilitation such as that provided by YSS FF, children can be supported to see how they can participate across the boundaries of institutions—the justice system, education, child, youth and leisure services—with knock-on effects for their relationships with family and friends. Their agency and engagement can be enhanced. In the study, we saw, for example, how children began to participate more successfully at school and in a social group following support from YSS FF. Access to such interventions or services aligned to children's needs helps to strengthen resilience and reduces the risk of inter-generational criminality (Jones & Wainaina-Woźna, 2013, p. 63).

Through such support, as children of prisoners become more visible to society, their difficulties more recognised and their needs met, the societal environment of development for children of prisoners could be improved through understanding and responsiveness. As Article 4 of UNCRC states, governments must create systems and pass laws to make sure that every child can enjoy their rights. Yet, policy changes are currently needed in the UK to reflect the importance of knowing who these children and families are, and of providing comprehensive support from the earliest stages from arrest, through imprisonment, and beyond to during and after release.

Personal aspects of children's development

While societal and institutional aspects of development set the parameters for children's growth, so too do children's individual situations and personalities and how they engage with the world contribute to their development. What is also important is 'children's intentional activities and the interactions in which they take part in their everyday social situations—and how other participants contribute to these situations through their interactions' (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008, p.5).

In the study, we saw children's individual responses to facing parental imprisonment. We saw, too, how involvement with YSS FF enabled them to reflect on their feelings and begin to take actions to engage more, exercising their agency and enhancing resilience as they tried to influence their own worlds. Factors important in building resilience in children of prisoners

include prior relationships with parents; life goals; involvement in activities; maintaining contact with parent; and support systems (Gordon, 2018). Here we can see the interplay between societal, institutional and personal aspects of development and the role that programmes such as YSS FF can have in helping children of prisoners to enjoy better developmental opportunities.

Children's rights must be met even when—or more importantly when—they have a parent in prison. Currently, children of prisoners do not receive the sufficient protection and care necessary to ensure their well-being (UNCRC Article 3). They do not all receive appropriate assistance and protection regarding preserving their identity and family relations (Article 8 item 1). Their rights need to be fully addressed in policy and service delivery.

Children of prisoners are survivors of the crimes leading to imprisonment, regardless of whether they were direct targets for those crimes, as in the case of domestic abuse. Drawing on and adapting the words of Van Camp and Wemmers (2016), p.434, we favour an outreach-oriented approach, early information, and informed choice. Support services would contact families with children as soon as a parent is arrested, offering information about the different services available to them.

When children are supported through family-centred, relationship-focused, strengths-based, practical services such as YSS FF, they can engage more fully in the institutions and social situations of their daily lives. Enhancing their participation, agency and resilience has positive implications for their all-round development. This reflects what children and their families explained to be the most helpful kinds of support in earlier research, often non-statutory, independent and Third Sector support (Long et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

At present, children with a parent in prison in the UK are not all afforded the opportunity for optimal development. Aspects of their rights under UNCRC are compromised. Despite the number of children affected increasing across the world, in the UK we do not know who these children are. Support services are not automatically provided, and families are left to navigate confusing systems alone at a time of great stress with known consequences for their health, well-being and development.

To give children of prisoners a better chance of healthy development, we argue that children of prisoners in the UK should be accorded firm rights. A review and revision of national and local policies, including education, health and social care, for service provision for families of prisoners, is urgently needed and would provide a route through which family needs can be identified and support mobilised. Funded policy intervention is crucial to combine needs-based face-to-face support as well as access to support through different media such as online or mobile access. Building relationships to provide strength-based support can enable children to process the trauma of family imprisonment and afford them the skills and strategies to nurture resilience.

Raising public, stakeholder and government awareness as to the extent and scale of need across the UK of children and families impacted by family imprisonment is fundamental to implementing support and challenging stigma. Ensuring that national data are collected on a regular basis on the number of children who are affected by family imprisonment and sharing information with specialist support agencies can provide avenues to better meet family needs. Furthermore, education authorities should move to treat children of prisoners as 'vulnerable' and ensure that school staff have sufficient training and support to prioritise these children's needs.

Children of prisoners are survivors of crime. They need support to ensure their optimal development and positive futures. With support, they can contribute to a more positive future not only for themselves, but for society.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The research was funded by YSS, a charity. <https://www.yss.org.uk/>.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research was approved by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee Ref: HREC/4004/Cooper.

ORCID

Jane Payler  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4826-1440>

REFERENCES

- Beresford, S., Earle, J., Loucks, N., & Pinkman, A. (2020). What about me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system. In K. Lockwood (Ed.), *Mothering from the inside: Research on motherhood and imprisonment* (pp. 67–83). Bingley.
- Carbado, D. W., Crenshaw, K. W., Mays, V. M., & Tomlinson, B. (2013). Intersectionality: Mapping the movements of a Theory. *Du Bois Rev*, *10*(2), 303–312.
- Clancy, A., & Maguire, M. (2017). Prisoners and their children: An innovative model of whole family support. *European Journal of Probation*, *9*(3), 210–230.
- Condry, R. (2018). Prisoners' families and the problem of social justice. In R. Condry & P. Scharff Smith (Eds.), *Prisons, punishment, and the family: Towards a new sociology of punishment?* (1st ed., pp. 27–40). Oxford University Press.
- Condry, R., & Minson, S. (2021). Conceptualizing the effects of imprisonment on families: Collateral consequences, secondary punishment, or symbiotic harms? *Theor Criminol*, *25*(4), 540–558.
- Cooper, V., Payler, J., Bennett, S., & Taylor, L. (2023). *From arrest to release, helping families feel less alone: An evaluation of a Worcestershire pilot support project for families affected by parental imprisonment*. The Open University. <https://doi.org/10.21954/ou.ro.000159bf>
- Freeman, M. (2000). The future of children's rights. *Child Soc*, *14*(4), 277–293.
- Gordon, L. (Ed.). (2018). *Contemporary research and analysis on the children of prisoners: Invisible children*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Government, UK. (2024). Official Statistics in Development: Estimates of children with a parent in prison. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/estimates-of-children-with-a-parent-in-prison/official-statistics-in-development-estimates-of-children-with-a-parent-in-prison>
- Healy, K., Foley, D., & Walsh, K. (2001). Families affected by the imprisonment of a parent: Towards restorative practices. *Child Aust*, *26*(1), 12–19.
- Hedegaard, M. (2009). Children's development from a cultural–historical approach: Children's activity in everyday local settings as foundation for their development. *Mind Cult Act*, *16*(1), 64–82.
- Hedegaard, M., & Fleer, M. (2008). *Studying children: A cultural-historical approach: A cultural-historical approach*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Hutton, M. (2021). Children first: Putting the rights of children visiting prisons at the heart of policy and practice. In *Parental imprisonment and Children's rights* (pp. 69–86). Routledge.
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educ Res*, *33*(7), 14–26.
- Jones, A. D., & Wainaina-Woźna, A. E. (2013). Children of prisoners. In *Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health*. University of Huddersfield.

- Kincaid, S., Roberts, M., & Kane, E. (2019). *Children of prisoners: Fixing a broken system*. Crest.
- Knudson, E. M. (2018). The systemic invisibility of children of prisoners. In R. Condry & P. Scharff Smith (Eds.), *Prisons, punishment, and the family: Towards a new sociology of punishment?* (1st ed., pp. 288–303). Oxford University Press.
- Leeson, C., & Morgan, J. (2019). Children with a parent in prison England and Wales: A hidden population of young carers. *Child Care Pract*, 28(2), 196–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2019.1680531>
- Long, T., Lockwood, K., Raikes, B., Sharratt, K., Loukes, N., & Nugent, B. (2019). Constructive Connections: building resilience of families affected by the criminal justice system, A research project for NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. <https://www.stor.scot.nhs.uk/bitstream/handle/11289/580265/Constructive%20Connections%20Final%20Report%202020.pdf?sequence=1>
- Luther, K. (2016). Stigma management among children of incarcerated parents. *Deviant Behav*, 37(11), 1264–1275.
- McGinley, M., & Jones, C. (2018). Growing up with parental imprisonment: Children's experiences of managing stigma, secrecy and shame. *Practice*, 30(5), 341–537. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2018.145049>
- Minson, S. (2019). Direct harms and social consequences: An analysis of the impact of maternal imprisonment on dependent children in England and Wales. *Criminol Crim Just*, 19(5), 519–536.
- MOJ. (2012). Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/278837/prisoners-childhood-family-backgrounds
- Morgan, J., & Gill, O. (2013). *Children affected by the imprisonment of a family member. A handbook for schools developing good practice*. Barnardo's.
- Muentner, L., Kapoor, A., Weymouth, L., & Poehlmann-Tynan, J. (2021). Getting under the skin: Physiological stress and witnessing paternal arrest in young children with incarcerated fathers. *Dev Psychobiol*, 63(5), 1568–1582.
- Murray, J., & Farrington, D. P. (2008). The effects of parental imprisonment on children. *Crime Justice*, 37(1), 133–206. <https://doi.org/10.1086/520070>
- NVivo. (2018). QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 12.
- Parker, C., Scott, S., & Geddes, A. (2019). Snowball sampling. *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*. <https://methods.sagepub.com/foundations/snowball-sampling>
- Peterson, B., Cramer, L., & Fontaine, J. (2019). Policies and practices for children of incarcerated parents: Summarizing what we know and do not know. *Handbook on Children with Incarcerated Parents: Research, Policy, and Practice*, 331–343.
- Qualtrics. (2020). Provo UT. www.qualtrics.com
- Smith, P. S., & Villman, E. (2021). Prisons, families and human rights: From prisoners' rights to the rights of prisoners' children. In *Parental imprisonment and Children's rights* (pp. 135–157). Routledge.
- Song, H., Woo, Y., Lee, H. D., & Cochran, J. K. (2018). The dynamics of intra-family relationships during incarceration and the implications for children of incarcerated parents. *Int J Offender Ther Comp Criminol*, 62(12), 3775–3796.
- Testa, A., & Fahmy, C. (2021). Family member IMPRISONMENT and coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Health and Justice*, 9(16), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-021-00142-w>
- Townhead, L. (2015). Briefing paper: Children of incarcerated parents international standards and guidance. *Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva*. <https://www.quono.org/sites/default/files/resources/QUNO%20-%20Children%20of%20Incarcerated%20Parents%20International%20Standards.pdf>
- UNICEF. (1991). *The Convention: Child Rights and UNICEF Experience at the Country Level*.
- Van Camp, T., & Wemmers, J. A. (2016). Victims' reflections on the protective and proactive approaches to the offer of restorative justice: The importance of information. *Can J Criminol Crim Justice*, 58(3), 415–442.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Jane Payler is Emeritus Professor of Education (Early Years) at the Open University and former co-director of the Children's Research Centre. Jane has worked, taught, researched and published in education and health for 30 years with a focus on interprofessional practice, children's perspectives and EY professional development.

Victoria Cooper is Professor of Childhood and Youth Studies at the Open University and former co-director of the Children's Research Centre. Victoria has worked and researched in higher education for 28 years. She has published articles, books and book chapters on a wide range of topics, with a specific focus on issues of identity, research methods and marginalised children's experiences.

Stephanie Jane Bennett is Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Forensic Psychology at the University of Chichester, where she is programme coordinator for the BSc (Hons) Criminology. Stephanie is also a chartered research psychologist, with a focus on childhood and wellbeing within the criminal justice system.

How to cite this article: Payler, J., Cooper, V., & Bennett, S. (2024). Optimal development for the children of prisoners? How children with a parent in prison are supported and why it matters. *Children & Society*, 00, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12925>