

Children of offenders: how can schools approach this?

How many?

The Ministry of Justice estimates that there are [200,000 children](#) that experience the imprisonment of a parent every year in England and Wales. This is twice the number of children who are looked after. In *Every Child Matters*, (2003) the Department for Education estimates that [7%](#) of children in the UK will see a father go to prison during their school years.

These are figures conservative estimates. This is because there is no official quantification of how many children are affected by this issue. In actual fact there is no routine collection of information about which children have a parent in prison at a local or national level. With no identification of who these children are, they are at risk of remaining unsupported. Barnardo's are involved in lobbying government for a nationwide, strategic approach that ensures this information is recorded and collated when a parent is sentenced in court.

Negative outcomes

The sheer numbers of children affected by parental imprisonment combined with the lack of targeted support to meet their needs has led to a growing interest in their wellbeing. Research increasingly shows the negative effect that parental imprisonment, or the imprisonment of another close family member such as a [brother](#), can have on these children and how this can impact on their school experiences. For example an annual survey carried out by The Key this summer revealed that [67%](#) of school leaders have concerns for the mental health of children in their schools. The pan European study *COPING: Children of Prisoners, Interventions & Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health* (2013) revealed that children affected by the imprisonment of a family member are at a [25% higher risk of serious mental health](#) problems than their peers.

These children can also face isolation, bullying and [stigma](#) both in school and in their wider communities which, depending on the nature of the family member's offence, can be exacerbated by the local media's portrayal of their family and member's crimes. Often, the imprisonment of a family member will be hidden from the child as a way of protecting them. However, this often means that they are the last to know. For instance, some children find out about their parent's crime and imprisonment from their peers in the school playground. Practice based learning combined with a children's rights approach indicates that an [honest and age appropriate approach](#) to discussing parental imprisonment is more beneficial to children.

Children of prisoners are also likely to have their school time disrupted and risk poor attainment due to truancy. This may be because they are being taken out of school in order to visit a parent in prison. As fathers are held in custodial settings an average of [50 miles](#) away from the family home, the length of time spent attending prison visits can be significant. However, research shows the [positive effect of good quality visits](#) on the children of offenders. The long distances, with potential over-night stays, can also contribute to [financial difficulties for families](#) of offenders. This is

exacerbated given the potential loss of earnings in the household, and the costs of phone calls and sending money to the imprisoned parent for example.

As there are far fewer female prisons, children with mothers in prison are likely to be separated by much more than 50 miles. Although there are much less children with a mother than a father in prison ([17,240](#) in 2010) they are far more likely to experience poor [attachment relationships](#) and housing disruption with only [5%](#) staying in their family home and only [9%](#) living with their father. Children affected by maternal imprisonment are most likely to be cared for by a grandparent or other kinship carers. Sometimes however, older siblings take on some of the household and caring responsibilities of the absent parent thus impacting on their ability to concentrate at school and fulfil their potential.

The offender Journey

The impact of familial imprisonment on a child can be detrimental however the other stages of a family member's journey through the criminal justice system can have an equally negative impact. For example, the [search](#) and arrest process can be an intimidating and aggressive experience, especially when this takes place at night while the child is at home. On the other hand, if a parent is arrested while the child is at school, there are usually no protocols in place to ensure that child has appropriate care or that they or their school knows what has happened.

Court processes can also be a very uncertain time for children and their families. There is often no clarity around how long the process will take or when they have to attend court, meaning the child may miss significant periods of school time.

At the other end of the offender's journey through the criminal justice system, the family member is released from prison. The period of [resettlement](#) can cause huge disruption, especially if a parent is coming back into the family home which is often a place of stability and routine during the time of their imprisonment.

Schools role

With their universal and central position in the community, schools in Dudley and around the country can play an essential part in countering these negative outcomes and ensuring the wellbeing of these children and their families. There are several leadership level initiatives that can be taken in order to work towards this. For example, a [locality wide steering group](#) made up of senior multi agency professionals from schools, the local children's safeguarding board, voluntary organisations, police, probation and community health can contribute to implementing a strategic approach to information sharing which will ensure children affected by parental imprisonment are recorded and supported by appropriate services.

Another approach is to implement a cross learning community [champions model](#) whereby one member of staff per school has overall responsibility for children affected by familial offending. Champions must attend relevant training and display posters around the building which encourage

families to come forward as well as contribute to a de-stigmatisation of offenders families.

Some schools have committed to a [continued professional development](#) approach to raising awareness of children affected by parental imprisonment and how to meet their needs. Staff are required to attend twilight training sessions with opportunity to visit a prison, just as a family would.

Support from i-HOP

The strategic level practice examples above are all available via i-HOP, a one stop information service which supports professionals to work with the children and families of offenders. i-HOP is funded by the Department for Education and run by national children's charity Barnardo's in partnership with POPS (Partners of Prisoners Family Support Group).

i-HOP's online knowledge hub (www.i-hop.org.uk) lists all the local and national targeted services and interventions, useful resources for professional development and direct work with families (such as the [Barnardo's school's handbook](#) for developing good practice and [i-HOP's briefing for schools](#)), the latest and most relevant policy and research as well as many more practice models, case studies, guidelines and protocols for education settings (such as [Oxfordshire's](#) guidelines and [Gloucestershire's](#) guidance).

i-HOP also run a rolling programme of free 2 hour workshops and 45 minute webinars around understanding the needs of children and families affected by parental offending. These [workshops and webinars](#) are open to multi agency staff and are a great opportunity to learn alongside other professionals, how best to support this group.

For regular updates on any of the above please sign up to the free monthly [i-HOP newsletter](#).

Suzanne Perry (Research and Policy Officer) i-HOP

[i-HOP is a part of Barnardo's and is funded by DfE. The acronym stands, originally, for 'information hub on offenders families with children for professionals' but now the organization tends to use the tag line "Supporting all professionals to work with offenders children and their families". We are very pleased to receive this article since it opens our eyes to the extent to which young people are effected by parental offending, especially as very few schools are able to state with absolute certainty just which of their students come into this category. The 2003 estimate suggests that a secondary school with one thousand students might well, on average, contain 70 who have experienced or are likely to experience such trauma – a two-form entry primary school might well contain nearly 30. The figures are staggering.]