

# **Twofold Adversity: Incarcerated Mothers and Child Protection**



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# A Challenge



**“No-one routinely monitors the parental status of prisoners in the UK or systematically identifies children of prisoners, where they live or which services they are accessing; where this information is collected, it is patchy and not always shared.”**

*Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, December 2011, p. 28.*

# Why This Population Concerns Us



**“The literature suggests that the contextual and incarcerated-related risks ... may be more problematic in families impacted by maternal incarceration than in families dealing with paternal incarceration” (Dallaire, 2007).**

# Systemic Dilemma



- **“Women offenders ‘afterthought’ in rehabilitation plans”** (BBC headline: 15<sup>th</sup> July 2013)
  - Linkages with family during imprisonment remain haphazard
  - Non-custodial sentences for non-violent crime remain the exception for women
  - Aftercare remains inadequate
    - ✦ Housing, resettlement for women need prioritisation
    - ✦ Support and desistance to avoid recidivism require coordinated, ongoing efforts
      - Small custodial units within reach of families are recommended (Clinks 2012)

# Children with Incarcerated Mothers, Compared to Those with Incarcerated Fathers



- **More likely to have witnessed parental substance use**
- **Have higher risks of school failure**
- **Have higher risks of aggressive and delinquent outcomes**
- **Are at greater risk of non-familial care**

# Another Risk Factor for Children of Incarcerated Mothers



**“21% of incarcerated mothers with adult children reported that their adult child was incarcerated compared to 8.5% of incarcerated fathers of adult children who reported that their adult child was incarcerated. This makes adult children with incarcerated mothers at 2.5 times the risk of incarceration compared to adult children with incarcerated fathers.” (Dallaire, 2007)**

# The UK Population



- **66% of women prisoners & 59% of men have children <18.**
- **>1/5 of imprisoned mothers were previously lone parents.**
- **>200,000 children in the UK and Northern Ireland experience parental imprisonment annually.**
  - This is > 2x the number of children in care.
  - This is > 6x the number of children on the child protection register.

# Other Background Factors of UK Prisoners



- 25% of adults in prison were in local authority care as children.
- Over half imprisoned women report having suffered domestic violence and one in three has experienced sexual abuse.
- In a 2002 study:
  - 70% of prisoners were diagnosed with 2 or more mental disorders (v. 5% of men and 2% of women in the general population)
  - 55% of female sentenced prisoners admitted drug use in the previous year (v. 13% of men and 8% of women in the general population)
  - 15% of female sentenced prisoners admitted hazardous drinking in the previous year (v. 38% of men and 15% of women in the general population)

(n.b. These statistics are for all prisoners, not just parents.)

# The Population: UK and NI Children



- **Over 200,000 children in the UK and Northern Ireland experience parental imprisonment annually.**
  - This is > 2x the number of children in care.
  - This is > 6x the number of children on the child protection register.

# Where Are the Children (UK)?



- **Upon imprisonment of their mothers:**
  - 25% of children are looked after by their fathers or their mothers' new spouses or partners
  - 25% are looked after by their grandparents
  - 29% are looked after by other friends or family members
  - 12% are adopted or fostered
  - Only 5% of children stay in their own homes once their mothers have been imprisoned.
  - 4% not known

# Prevalence-US



- Over 2 million US children have an incarcerated parent
- Nearly 10 million US children have a parent who is under some form of criminal justice supervision
- 1 in 43 US children has an incarcerated parent
  - 1 in 15 black children
  - 1 in 42 Latino children
  - 1 in 111 white children
- Half of children with incarcerated parents are <10 years old

# Maternal Incarceration-US



- ✦ **Over 10% of mothers are known to have children in foster care (\*this is an undercount—it does not include children in kinship care)**
- ✦ **2/3 of incarcerated women have children <18**

# Impact on Children



**“Children of prisoners have about three times the risk of mental health problems and/or anti-social/delinquent behaviour compared to other children.”**

*Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, December 2011, p. 29.*

# Impact on Children



**“The main social cost incurred by the children of imprisoned mothers – and by the state in relation to these children – results from the increased likelihood of their becoming NEET.”**

*Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, December 2011, p. 29.*

# Impact on Children



- It is important to remember that these impacts are correlations between parental imprisonment and lowered outcomes for children. Therefore, we consider parental imprisonment to be a risk factor not a cause of lowered outcomes.

# Impact of Maternal Separation



Is affected by the:

- Child's history of maltreatment
- Child's age/developmental stage
- Child's other experiences with loss
- Child's cognitive and mental health status
- Child's support system
- Child's attachment to his/her caregivers
- Changes in caregivers

# Common Barriers to Contact with Imprisoned Mothers



- Distance to the prison
- Expense (phone calls, postage, etc.)
- Lack of transportation
- Unwillingness of caregiver to facilitate
- Lack of information about institutional rules
- Lockdowns, etc.
- Visitation hours are limited
- Stigma of imprisonment—not a sanctioned parental separation

# Supporting Imprisoned Parents and Their Children



Frequency of contact—it's not just about “quality,” it's also about “quantity.”  
Children's sense of time is different from that of adults.

- Visits—contact, non-contact
- Calls
- Letters—including sending school reports, drawings, etc. (recall the video)
- Gifts—rules must be closely followed

# Facilitating Meaningful Contact



- **Clarification about the imprisonment can be a helpful strategy. Typical questions from children about their parents:**
  - Where are you?
  - Why are you there?
  - When will you be home?
  - Are you OK?

# Northern Ireland Programs (cont.)



- **The Barnardo's Parenting Matters Project began working with imprisoned fathers in 1996 and now delivers parenting programmes in all three prison establishments in Northern Ireland. Participating in the project are male prisoners, female prisoners, and young offenders. Program goals are:**
  - Guide parents to understand their children's development
  - Assist parents in listening and responding to their children
  - Prepare participants to cope with parenting on release.

# Improving outcomes for children and their families



## To improve children's outcomes

**Aim:** Use parental entry into prison to trigger a process enabling secure information sharing between agencies and systematic assessment and support of the child.

- Explore legal and resource implications and feasibility in establishing secure information sharing to identify the children of prisoners
- Systematically assess children's vulnerabilities and needs
- Enable service providers to better meet these needs through guidance, information, and awareness raising

[http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social\\_exclusion\\_task\\_force/assets/think\\_families/offenders\\_review\\_080110.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social_exclusion_task_force/assets/think_families/offenders_review_080110.pdf)

## "Think Family"

**Aim:** Refocus the system so adults' and children's services collaborate through a 'whole family' approach that maximises the impact of individual interventions on the whole family's outcomes.

- The criminal justice system needs to see families as a resource and ascertain how it can use its efforts to best effect change with families.
- NOMS needs to develop a robust vision for families of offenders and set clear, achievable expectations of offender managers and local partners to ensure improved access to mainstream services.
- Work with Social Exclusion Task Force to take forward the Families at Risk work and incentivise a joined up family-focused approach across all government levels.

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