

The Role of Schools in Supporting Families Affected by Imprisonment

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With its roots in direct work with three children in an Edinburgh high school who were struggling at school as a result of their mother's long-term prison sentence, this article addresses the following questions:

Why are schools generally unaware of which children are affected by imprisonment?

How can staff actively support children and their carers through the school system?

In what ways can imprisoned parents continue to engage in their children's education?

This article provides an overview of the main issues relating to schools and parental imprisonment, gives an account of best practice from research in Australia and the United States, and concludes with a set of proposals for further development work in this field. It also places the work in context of wider initiatives to support children and families affected by imprisonment in Scotland and how support in schools is helping to take this work forward.

The article highlights the need for a coordinated approach between education, criminal justice, social work, and NGOs so that some of society's most vulnerable children are recognised and appropriately, and sensitively, supported. Underpinned by the guiding principle that 'schools provide a major opportunity to support children of incarcerated parents and to help meet their needs' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Day of General Discussion 2011), the Report's key findings include:

Training for teachers around issues of imprisonment, and its effects on children, is essential;

Information and support for children affected should be available in all schools; and

An imprisoned parent can still play a key role in their child's education, even from behind bars.

I BACKGROUND

For several years I (Sarah) was Principal Teacher Support for Pupils in an Edinburgh secondary school. During my general teacher training, and subsequent training on specific issues pertaining to children and adolescents, I had at no point considered, nor been made aware of, children with a parent in prison. It was only in supporting three siblings whose mother was serving a long-term sentence that I began to engage with what I came to understand to be a largely overlooked and highly vulnerable population

of young people.¹ In my case it was visiting their mothers regularly in prison, and involving them in their children's education, that prompted further questions:

- Why are schools generally unaware of which children are affected by imprisonment?²
- How can staff actively support children and their carers through the school system?
- In what ways can imprisoned parents continue to engage in their children's education?

In order to begin to develop answers to these questions, I undertook an 8-week Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship in early 2012, to investigate specifically the role of schools in supporting families affected by imprisonment. This paper is underpinned by the guiding principle that 'schools provide a major opportunity to support children of incarcerated parents and to help meet their needs'.³ It provides an overview of the main issues identified in the literature relating to schools and parental imprisonment, gives a thematic account of core areas of intervention of the programmes visited in Australia and the United States, and concludes with a set of proposals for further development work in this field.

II METHODS

This article describes the findings of a small piece of exploratory research made possible through a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship. The Fellowship enabled scoping visits to a range of charities and NGOs in Australia and the United States over a period of eight weeks.⁴ After research published by the Social Care Institute for Excellence reported examples of positive practice in these countries,⁵ the researcher conducted an internet-based search to identify expert informants, defined as the main organisations working with children of prisoners through the school system, and arranged visits accordingly.

Data gathering in this exploratory research included interviews with practitioners and managers from these organisations, followed by 'snowball' sampling,⁶ whereby these practitioners identified others in their

1 See N Loucks, 'Prisons: Where DOESN'T the Community Come in?' (2012) 204 *Prison Service Journal*, 42-50); K Marshall, *Not Seen. Not Heard. Not Guilty. The Rights and Status of the Children of Prisoners in Scotland* (Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCCYP), 2008).

2 See Department for Children, Schools and Families and Ministry of Justice, *Children of Offenders Review* (London: DCSF and Ministry of Justice, 2007); S Lewis, S Bates and J Murray, *Children's and Families' Services SCIE Guide 22: Children of Prisoners – Maintaining Family Ties* (London: Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2008).

3 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Day of General Discussion 2011.

4 See Appendix.

5 S Lewis, S Bates, and J Murray, above n 2.

6 P Liamputtong, *Qualitative Research Methods* (Oxford University Press, 3rd ed, 2009).

network likely to have an interest in support for children of prisoners through schools. The final sample included teachers, judges, and government officials, as well as carers, imprisoned parents, and their children. The research used semi-structured interviews to ensure attention to core concerns, while allowing new topics and avenues of inquiry to emerge.⁷ The core questions included the following:

- For professionals:
 - How do you identify children affected by imprisonment?
 - How do you support children affected?
 - What are the barriers to information sharing about these children?
- For prisoners and carers:
 - What does your current interaction with your child's school involve?
 - What is this like for you?
- For children:
 - How do/would you feel about your school knowing that your mum/dad is in prison?
 - What support are you receiving from your school? What do you think of this?

The purpose of the project was not to produce academically robust, empirical research, but rather to conduct a descriptive, practice-focused exploration of the experiences of children with a family member in prison and the potential role of schools in supporting them. Sample sizes are too small to draw definitive conclusions about matters such as, for instance, effectiveness or gender influences, but they nevertheless highlight important examples of practice that inform learning and implementation elsewhere. The findings of this research, supported by a review of the literature, are outlined below.

A Two Scenarios

1 Scenario 1: Savannah

Savannah is 15 years old and lives with her mother and younger brother. Her father is serving a 10-year sentence and has been in prison since Savannah was 11. She and her brother were at home when the police came to arrest their dad, and they watched as he was handcuffed and taken away. Ashamed and afraid of stigmatisation, Savannah's mother told her children not to talk to anyone about what had happened and, above all, they were not to mention it at school. Traumatized from witnessing the arrest, and full of anxiety about what would happen to her dad, Savannah changed from being a girl who performed well and was happy at school, to someone who was either withdrawn and quiet, or on occasion prone to angry outbursts. Over time her grades slipped, she rarely completed homework, and her attendance became patchy. A concerned teacher tried

⁷ M Alston and W Bowles, *Research for Social Workers* (Allen & Unwin, 2012).

to engage Savannah about this change in behaviour, but she was reluctant to open up. When she moved to high school the bullying started; whispers at first, followed by blatant comments: ‘Stay away from her, her dad’s in jail’. The day that one of her teachers announced across the classroom, ‘You’re going to end up just like your father’ was the last time Savannah attended school. She has a deep mistrust of authority and has disengaged from any formal system of support, putting her at high risk of harmful behaviour patterns, future unemployment and ultimately of entering the criminal justice system herself.

2 Scenario 2: Kendon

Kendon is 14 and, like Savannah, he also has a parent in prison: his mother is three years into an 8-year sentence. Kendon lives with his grandmother and 3 younger siblings and they too were at home when their mother was arrested. Unlike Savannah, however, Kendon’s grandmother felt able to contact the school the next day, explaining what had happened and informing them that she was now caring for the children. Every member of staff at Kendon’s school, teaching and non-teaching, has undergone specific training on supporting children affected by imprisonment, and there is information available for pupils and carers on how to access relevant agencies. Kendon’s Guidance Counsellor meets regularly with him to check how he is doing, especially after visits to his mother (which if they fall on a school day are authorised absences), and he is monitored through the school’s support group. Kendon accesses the school counselling service and has recently been invited to take part in an in-school support group with seven other children facing similar issues. The Guidance Counsellor sends copies of Kendon’s school reports to his mother via the prison and is able to call her once a term to discuss his progress, which means that when Kendon visits his mother they can talk meaningfully about his schooling. Kendon has also experienced stigma and shame, but the school has actively tried to reduce this by ensuring that issues around crime and prison are addressed through the curriculum and by dealing with bullying incidents head-on. He enjoys school, is performing well and hopes to go to college next year.

3 Savannah and Kendon

Savannah and Kendon are a combination of the stories of several children met during the research across Australia and the United States. They could each be any one of the estimated 27,000 children in Scotland⁸ and 200,000 in England and Wales⁹ who every year experience the imprisonment of

8 Scottish Government Justice Analytical Services, Freedom of Information request from Dr Chris Holligan, 26 January 2012, extrapolated from the results of the *Scottish Prisoner Survey 2011* (Edinburgh: Scottish Prison Service, 2011).

9 Action for Prisoners’ Families (2012) <http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/About_us/About_us.aspx>.

a parent.¹⁰ Their stories demonstrate the key role that schools have in supporting children affected by imprisonment. It is through the school system that children are tracked and monitored, and it is within this community that stigma and trauma can be exacerbated or indeed reduced, thus helping children affected to succeed and fulfil their potential.

III OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A report by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young people¹¹ acknowledges that the role of schools in supporting children affected by imprisonment has received little attention and is significantly under-researched and under-funded. Furthermore, the Social Care Institute for Excellence¹² acknowledges that, while there are examples of good practice, with schools playing an active role in supporting families affected by imprisonment, this is patchy at best, and there is an absence of a 'systematic and cohesive multi-agency approach', meaning that children affected are more likely to withdraw and disengage.¹³

Children affected by imprisonment experience a range of emotions similar to those associated with bereavement.¹⁴ But compared to the death of a child's family member, for which schools are often well equipped and resourced to put support in place, and empathy and help are readily on offer, imprisonment can be perceived as 'unacceptable' within communities (including schools), leading to what Doka¹⁵ refers to as 'disenfranchised grief'. This can be psychologically damaging for children, turning what is already a difficult situation into something that they feel must not be talked about – a 'forced silencing' of children¹⁶ – or worse, that they are somehow guilty by association. Traumatized children cannot learn to their full potential,¹⁷ and it is this trauma, in addition to a sense of shame and stigma, which makes children of prisoners extremely vulnerable and in need of specific attention.

10 These figures are estimates because as yet there is no formal, universal process within the UK to record the children of prisoners.

11 K Marshall, above n 1.

12 Lewis et al, above n 2.

13 J Murray and D Farrington, 'Parental Imprisonment: Effects on Boys' Antisocial Behaviour and Delinquency Through the Life-course' (2005) 12 *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 46.

14 N Loucks, above n 1; N Vaswani, 'Ripples of Death: Exploring the Bereavement Experiences and Mental Health of Young Men in Custody' (2014) *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/hojo.12064/full>>.

15 K Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (Lexington Books/D C Heath and Com, xvi, 1989).

16 BJ Myers, TM Smarsh, K Amlund-Hagen and S Kennon, 'Children of Incarcerated Mothers' (1999) 8(1) *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 11.

17 J Heckman, R Grunewald, and A Reynolds, 'The Dollars and Cents of Investing Early: Cost-Benefit Analysis in Early Care and Education' (2006) 26(6) *Zero to Three*; SF Fisher, *Neurofeedback in the Treatment of Developmental Trauma: Calming the Fear-driven Brain* (WW Norton & Company, 2014).

While it is clear that the experience of children may differ when mothers rather than fathers are imprisoned, due to increased likelihood of changes in care/accommodation and then school,¹⁸ this paper recognises the impact on all children – the loss, disruption, instability, reduction in income, stigma etc – even if they remain in the family home. The focus of this paper is therefore on the school experiences more broadly of children whose parents are imprisoned. Experiencing problems at school is much cited as an issue for children of prisoners,¹⁹ and it is essential that teachers understand the reason for lack of engagement or acting-out behaviour if they are to offer appropriate support.²⁰ Furthermore, if children are not told the truth about a parent's imprisonment or feel that they have to 'keep it secret' from friends and teachers, this can exacerbate an already devastating and difficult situation.²¹

Pugh and Lansky²² demonstrated that many families affected by imprisonment are reluctant to access support from outside agencies: in their research, almost three-quarters of families visiting prisons were accessing no formal support of any kind. This may be due to shame and stigma, a lack of knowledge of what support is available, or a mistrust of statutory services. Schools, however, should be communities where families already have an established relationship with members of staff who can provide information and support on how to access other agencies.²³ In this way, schools can be a gateway to further support and are less 'threatening' for families than contacting, for example, social services directly.

It is important to note here that families, and indeed children, affected by imprisonment are entitled to confidentiality, and careful consideration must be given to the passing on of information to schools, especially if this is done without families' knowledge and permission. These are families who, as well as experiencing grief and shock, also may fear

18 D Johnston, *Children of Incarcerated Parents* (Lexington Books, 1995).

19 N Loucks, *Prison Without Bars: Needs, Support, and Good Practice for Work with Prisoners' Families* (Tayside Criminal Justice Partnership and Families Outside, 2004); J Murray and D Farrington, above n 13; RA Woldoff and HM Washington, 'Arrested Contact. The Criminal Justice System, Race, and Father Engagement' (2007) 2 *The Prison Journal* 88.

20 J Horton, 'Prison Link Prompts Call to Ban Exclusions' (2014) *TESS* <<http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6426544>>.

21 ME De Masi and C Tueten Bohn, *Children with Incarcerated Parents: A Journey of Children, Caregivers and Parents in New York State* (Council on Children and Families, 2010).

22 G Pugh and C Lansky, 'Dads Inside and Out: Study of Risk and Protective Factors in the Resettlement of Imprisoned Fathers with their Families' (Paper presented at *What's New in Research and Evaluation? Informing Our Work with Prisoners and Offenders and their Families*, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, 19 May 2011).

23 D Bottrell and S Goodwin, 'Contextualising Schools and Communities', in D Bottrell and S Goodwin (eds), *Schools, Communities and Social Inclusion* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) 22-37.

further stigmatisation,²⁴ and it is understandable that they may often avoid telling the school directly, particularly if they are unsure how that information might be used. Carers and imprisoned parents may have had very negative experiences of school themselves, many of them experiencing failure and shame,²⁵ and it is extremely important that families are able to trust the school before divulging sensitive information. The writers' observations indicate that school communities must ensure that all staff members have an understanding of the trauma and stigma experienced by these children so that families are supported in an appropriate way and so that carers have a fundamental trust in the school which enables them to share the information in the first place.

It is important for children who have experienced the trauma of parental imprisonment to be able to talk about their experiences with a trusted adult.²⁶ Teachers can offer a unique role in this, supporting them in their sense of grief and loss as well as reassuring children affected that they need not feel ashamed. One of the key findings in a study by Loureiro²⁷ was that children of prisoners do not have enough support and often do not speak about what they have experienced with anyone at all, which may explain why they are more likely to experience mental health problems than other children.²⁸ Parke and Clark-Stewart²⁹ suggest that in-school support groups for children affected by imprisonment can be beneficial in terms of emotional support and that group work of this kind can allay children's fears that they are the only ones affected,³⁰ thus helping them to open up and talk about their feelings.

It is increasingly recognised that schools have a duty of care to children extending far beyond their academic performance. In Scotland, the Government's *Getting it Right for Every Child* approach (GIRFEC)³¹ recognises that children and young people need full and integrated support in overcoming difficulties, whether temporary or, as often in the case of parental imprisonment, more complex and longer-term. GIRFEC

24 D Braman, *Doing Time on the Outside: Incarceration and Family Life in Urban America* (University of Michigan Press, 2004).

25 C Bracken, *Bars to Learning: Practical Challenges for the 'Working Prison'* (CIVITAS: Institute for the study of civil society, 2011).

26 Z Snyder-Joy and T Carlo, 'Parenting Through Prison Walls: Incarcerated Mothers and Child Visitation' in S Miller (ed), *Crime Control and Women* (Sage Publications, Inc, 1998).

27 T Loureiro, *Perspectives of Children and Young People with a Parent in Prison* (Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People and Families Outside, 2010).

28 J Murray and D Farrington, 'The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children' in M Tonry, (ed), *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research, Volume 37* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

29 R Parke and K A Clark-Stewart, *Effects of Parental Incarceration on Young Children* (Unpublished manuscript, 2002) <<http://www.urban.org/publications/410627.html>>.

30 S Karp, 'Collateral Damage to Kids' (2007) 7 *Catalyst Chicago*, XVIII.

31 Scottish Government, *Getting it Right for Every Child* (Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2008) <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk>>.

is underpinned by a set of values which take a ‘whole child approach’ – that is, ‘recognising that what is going on in one part of a child or young person’s life can affect many other areas of his or her life.’ This is particularly true in the case of children affected by imprisonment given that, in addition to the separation from a parent, there may also be a change of care-giver, a move of address, and a change of school. Moreover, the Scottish Government’s *Curriculum for Excellence* recognises that strong home/school links are crucial to children attending regularly and reaching their potential.³² Children do better at school and are more likely to reach their potential when parents and school staff cooperate and work closely in partnership with one another. GIRFEC has recently been enshrined in legislation through the *Children & Young People’s (Scotland) Act 2014*, entitling all children to support for any issue that potentially impacts upon their wellbeing.

Schools also have a vital role to play in terms of breaking the cycle of intergenerational crime. A number of studies suggest that children of offenders are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system as adults³³ or be involved in anti-social behaviour.³⁴ It is crucial to understand, however, that these intergenerational trends do not mean that an offender is more likely to give birth to another offender, as if somehow crime is an infection that can be passed on. Even though some recent work has examined genetic connections, there is a clear understanding that this occurs in interaction with the environment.³⁵ It is ‘disenfranchised grief’, compounded by trauma and stigma, that may lead to disengagement from the school system and a mistrust of authority, which in turn increases the potential to be involved in at-risk behaviour. In other words, it is not the imprisonment of the parent in and of itself, but the response to the imprisonment (social isolation and a sense of shame, in addition to trauma) as well as the context (with links to poverty of particular note)³⁶ that increases the risk. In the current research, several children of prisoners said that if they could say one thing to their teachers it would be: ‘Don’t assume that I will end up in prison like my mum or dad.’ This research

32 See *Building the Curriculum 3: A Framework for Learning and Teaching*, 17 <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk>>.

33 E Kandel, SA Mednick, L Kirkegaard-Sorensen, B Hutchings, J Knop, R Rosenberg, F Schulsinger, ‘IQ as a Protective Factor for Subjects at High Risk for Antisocial Behavior’ (1998) *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 56; F Butterfield, ‘Parents in Prison: A Special Report: As Inmate Population Grows, So Does a Focus on Children’, *The New York Times*, 7 April 1999.

34 Murray and Farrington, above n 13.

35 C Flynn, ‘Understanding the Risk of Offending for the Children of Imprisoned Parents: A Review of the Evidence’ (2013) *Children and Youth Services Review* 35, 213-217.

36 R Smith, R Grimshaw, R Romeo, and M Knapp, *Poverty and Disadvantage among Prisoners’ Families* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007); Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Education, *A New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families’ Lives* (Home Office, 2011), Cm 8061; S Abramsky, ‘Toxic Persons’, *Slate* (2010) <http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2010/10/toxic_persons.html>.

found that hearing that they are significantly more likely to enter the criminal justice system³⁷ can be devastating for children; they can feel that the script of their life has been written for them, and they quickly lose motivation to remain engaged in their education, particularly if this attitude is conveyed by the very people who are teaching them.

In addition to supporting children and carers affected by imprisonment, schools are also able to play their part in reducing recidivism. A parent in prison is still a parent³⁸ and can play an important role in supporting their child's education, even from behind bars. Meaningful family ties are known to be a key factor in reducing re-offending,³⁹ and for any relationship with a child to be truly meaningful, it must include his or her school life. Children's endeavours in school are so much a part of who they are and who they might be in future.⁴⁰ School is where friendships can be formed, hobbies and interests developed, strengths identified and encouraged, and future plans discussed. In short, a relationship to a child or young person that has no connection to his or her schooling is far from meaningful.

Involving an imprisoned parent in his or her child's education need not be burdensome for schools. It is not unusual for schools to send out multiple copies of school reports (in cases of separated or divorced parents, for example), and this could easily be extended to a parent in prison. The researchers' observation of professional practice suggests that newsletters, school photographs, and examples of good work can all help the parent in prison connect meaningfully with their child's life at school. Projects such as the Melbourne City Mission, described in the findings below, note that this can in turn help increase the parent's overall sense of wellbeing and motivation as well as help to improve their own literacy skills. Healthy attachments are important in the social and emotional development of children.⁴¹ Former Chief Medical Officer for Scotland, Sir Harry Burns, takes this even further in maintaining that functioning family relationships and healthy attachments are instrumental in improving society's physical and mental health outcomes. Conversely, even temporary separation between a parent and child can be damaging.⁴² What is important to recognise with

37 In the US, it is often quoted that children with a parent in prison are six times more likely to enter the criminal justice system, though this remains un-evidenced: J Murray, 'Effects of Imprisonment on Families and Children of Prisoners', in A Liebling and S Maruna (eds), *The Effects of Imprisonment* (Willan, 2005), 442-492.

38 N Bernstein, *All Alone in the World. Children of the Incarcerated* (The New Press, 2005).

39 N Loucks, above n 19; Ministry of Justice and Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Reducing Re-offending: Supporting Families, Creating Better Futures. A Framework for Improving the Local Delivery of Support for the Families of Offenders* (London: Ministry of Justice and Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010).

40 D Bottrell and S Goodwin, above n 23.

41 J Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Vol 2, Separation: Anxiety and Anger* (Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1973).

42 AF Lee and K Kreisher, 'Parents in Prison' (2002) 1 *ASCA School Counselor* 40.

children of prisoners – and arguably with boys in particular⁴³ – is that this kind of separation from a parent is particularly traumatic, often leading to a mistrust of authority and feelings of anger that can make engaging in education challenging. If schools can help foster the parent/child relationship, thereby strengthening family ties, this can go a long way to restoring a child's trust in authorities, as well as reinforcing their belief that their parent can still have important input into their life. Moreover, a relationship which continues and develops during imprisonment is far more likely to be sustained post-release, giving the imprisoned parent a powerful incentive to re-engage positively in society.⁴⁴

IV OVERVIEW OF PROGRAMMES

As noted above, the Travelling Fellowship enabled visits to a range of charities and NGOs, all of which were selected because of their focus on support for families affected by imprisonment that included involvement with schools. Their remits reached far beyond their work with schools, but this article focuses solely on this aspect of their roles. What follows is a reflection on practice with interventions grouped thematically.

A Teacher Training

Each organisation identified staff training as the single most important thing that schools can do in relation to children affected by imprisonment; indeed, they emphasised that training should underpin every other intervention and programme. Without adequate understanding of the main issues, they noted that teachers may inadvertently add to a child's distress through casual comments, or worse, openly and directly undermine his or her potential. They also noted that this training needed to be broader than direct teaching staff: administrative and support staff all have their role to play in creating a non-judgemental and caring community for children and young people.

The Osborne Association, based in New York, has developed a training programme which is delivered to teachers and other staff working with children and young people (social workers, psychologists etc). It aims to:

- give an understanding of the impact of parental imprisonment on children and how this affects their education;
- help staff to talk sensitively with children about the issue;

43 J Murray, R Loeber and D Pardini, 'Parental Involvement in the Criminal Justice System and the Development of Youth Theft, Depression, Marijuana Use, and Poor Academic Performance' (2012) 50(1) *Criminology* 255.

44 N Holt and D Miller, 'Explorations in Inmate-Family Relationships' (1972) California Department of Corrections Research Report 46; CF Hairston, 'Family Ties During Imprisonment: Important to Whom and for What?' (1991) 1 *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 18.

- provide staff with tools to navigate the criminal justice system so that they can communicate with and involve imprisoned parents in their children's education; and
- inform staff about available resources.

The training provides participants with facts and statistics as well as an overview of the criminal justice system, and allows them to enter into the stories of children affected by imprisonment through discussion of a set of case studies.

Ann Adeliste-Estrin, Director of the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated based in Pennsylvania, recognises that different layers of training are needed. She noted that, ideally, this would include an overview of the general issues for all staff, followed by information relevant to classroom teachers and lastly, specific training offered to members of staff who deal with the pastoral care of children in the school, particularly those who are primarily responsible for home/school liaison and interaction with partner agencies.

B Specific Educational Support

A particularly memorable programme was the SHINE for Kids Education Programme in Bathurst, New South Wales, Australia. Part of the SHINE for Kids Breaking the Cycle initiative, the Education Programme seeks to help reduce recidivism as well as address the problem of intergenerational offending through:

- improving engagement with education and learning;
- enhancing academic performance;
- building confidence and self-esteem;
- establishing bonds between families and schools; and
- assisting pupils with homework and assignments.

The SHINE for Kids Education Support Worker was linked with primary schools that have a high concentration of children affected by imprisonment. In addition to supporting children's literacy and numeracy skills through one-to-one or small group work in school, the education support worker also monitors school attendance and ensures that information is passed on to the school with permission from the carer. The support worker's role was to build relationships with teachers, as well as partner agencies, and the worker was invited to regular case conferences at the school. The SHINE for Kids Education Programme appeared to be an excellent example of specific and designated support for families affected by imprisonment. Not only did the work mean that academic skills were supported, but so too was the relationship between home and school – a crucial factor in children's learning. Implementing an Education Support Worker role in schools provided advocates for children, helped to reduce stigma and anxiety. The ESWS could also liaise with other agency workers and seemed to have a key role in case conferences and planning meetings, providing what appeared to be invaluable support for children and families.

C *In-School Counselling/Mentoring*

In recognising that children who experience stigma and trauma cannot learn to their full potential, VACRO in Victoria, Australia, offers in-school counselling specifically to children affected by imprisonment. Referrals come either from the school, if a child has been identified by staff, or in some cases has self-identified, or directly from the family, who then gives permission for the school to be informed. VACRO's Children's Counsellor liaises with outside carers and also tries to meet every parent in prison at least once. School welfare officers (responsible for the pastoral care of pupils in Australian schools) are the main point of contact for the counsellor within the school. In cases where families prefer that the school is not informed, counselling takes place in the VACRO offices. In addition, counselling is offered to carers who are looking after a child with a parent in prison, with the aim of helping to support healthy family dynamics.

Mentoring is widely recognised as helpful for vulnerable children, providing them with an adult role model outside the family unit.⁴⁵ SHINE for Kids has an extensive mentoring programme for the children of prisoners and provides intensive training and ongoing support to mentors, mentees and carers. Most referrals for mentoring come directly from family contact with SHINE for Kids, but schools could have an important role in identifying children who would benefit and proactively referring children to the mentoring programme. This underlines the need for staff awareness of which children are affected as well as the need for sensitivity, compassion, and concern. SHINE reported that such referrals and support improved children's attendance at schools and, consequently, their educational outcomes.

D *In-School Support Groups*

Several organisations ran in-school support groups specifically for children affected by imprisonment. In every case, these groups took place in areas known to have a higher number of families affected and were run at the cost of the charity, not the school.

SHINE for Kids runs school groups over an eight-week period with an average of 10 children in a group. It is made clear to children that everyone in the group has been affected by imprisonment. The facilitators viewed this as one of the main strengths of the programme, assuring children that they are not the only ones affected and helping to reduce stigma. SHINE for Kids invites a teacher to assist with group work, which appears to be another key strength, as children are able to identify support within the school and to build a rapport with staff. Topics are age-appropriate and include developing resilience and coping skills, identifying strengths, and building confidence. Older children might also work on anger management

45 See, for example, R Gilligan, 'Adversity, Resilience and Young People: The Protective Value of Positive School and Spare Time Experiences' (2000) 14(1) *Children & Society*, 37-47.

and look at issues around depression and healthy ways of managing stress. Group attendance is excellent, and sessions are interactive and creative using drama, art, and poetry. A group trip rounds off the sessions, giving children who often miss out on excursions a chance to have fun with each other and with other adults who have become positive role models. Where possible, home visits are made before the group starting which can also provide an opportunity to encourage carers to seek further support for themselves or for the children.

PB&J in Albuquerque, New Mexico, runs KidPACT educational groups with up to 15 children for one hour a week over 12 weeks. Centred around snacks and art, each week there is a discussion topic, such as how to tell friends that your mother/father is in prison. In theory, and reportedly in practice, this then becomes a support group for children where they can talk to each other and express their feelings. Support from KidPACT beyond 12 weeks is possible but did not appear to be necessary in most cases, anecdotally due to the peer relationships that had developed in that time.

PB&J group facilitators explained that they call schools at the beginning of the school year and send out referral forms to school counsellors as they tend to know the children best, particularly those whose behaviour suggests that something is wrong (though they recognise that others might not act out but are nevertheless affected). As with SHINE for Kids, carers must sign a consent form prior to participation in KidPACT. It can also be a way of referring children to other services such as early intervention programmes. At the end of a KidPACT programme, qualitative feedback is gathered from school counsellors, children, teachers, and carers. Reports are overwhelmingly positive, with the most important thing for children being the realisation that they are not alone in being affected by imprisonment.

Community Works, based in San Francisco, California, has developed the high school programme, ROOTS. A credited elective run alongside the standard curriculum, ROOTS aims to educate and support young people affected by imprisonment through creative expression and critical thinking. Participants learn to engage with issues of social justice and develop the resources to become agents of change in their own communities. An intense programme incorporating in- and after-school activities, a social justice and arts curriculum, as well as support coordinated by several professionals, ROOTS is expensive to run, and its wider impact, although excellent for individual group participants, is limited. More sustainable in terms of cost, according to Community Works, is their Project WHAT! programme, which aims to help children affected by imprisonment become advocates for change by developing the skills to give presentations to teachers, judges, social workers etc. The aim for participants is to discover a support network and be able to process their own story, thereby feeding in to and potentially affecting change in government policy and sentencing laws. It is a paid programme (\$25 to speak at a teacher training event,

for example) and therefore gives employment experience as well as an opportunity to develop job-related skills.

In each of the group programmes, facilitators acknowledged that identifying appropriate participants was a challenge. In most cases it was the school that identified the children after the charity had contacted the relevant member of staff with the offer of a specific group or programme. This highlights the need for schools to be not only informed, but also ‘communities of compassion’ where young people can seek help, safe in the knowledge that they will not be judged or further stigmatised and where carers feel able to share sensitive information. In one school in San Francisco,⁴⁶ children are given an opportunity every term to sign up anonymously to any support groups that might be helpful (around themes such as family break-up, bereavement, stress, eating disorders, etc), and teachers there were considering adding imprisonment to that list.

E Parent/Teacher Contact

In principle, engaging an imprisoned parent in his or her child’s education can be achieved through telephone calls, video conferencing, sending copies of school reports and, where possible, face-to-face meetings. Contact between the imprisoned parent and the school arguably supports the child/parent relationship,⁴⁷ goes a long way towards reducing stigma for children, and increases motivation for the parent to engage in in-prison parenting classes, thus decreasing the likelihood of reoffending through improved family ties.⁴⁸

Melbourne City Mission (MCM) runs the Family Support Service, helping women in custody make and maintain contact with agencies involved with their children, including schools. Providing support, advocacy, education, and training, MCM staff work with social workers to help women in prison establish contact with their children’s teachers. MCM reports that the majority of imprisoned women are keen to be in touch with their children’s schools, but that they often don’t know how to do this. MCM staff can play a mediation role between the imprisoned parent and the school which can help to break down barriers and to establish trust and understanding; once schools have an understanding of the situation, they are reportedly ‘more than happy’ to cooperate in sending copies of reports and arranging parent/teacher interviews by phone. Crucial to this service, according to MCM, is each child having a named person within the school when it comes to support structures, particularly in the secondary school context. They also note an important link with carers, as carers must give their consent before the school can be contacted. MCM believed that this in itself can lead to useful mediation work between carers and imprisoned parents. MCM staff noted that not all carers are positive

46 AP Giannini Middle School.

47 This may not always be the case, such as where the child has been the victim of the offence, and individual circumstances must be taken into account.

48 N Holt and D Miller, above n 44; CF Hairston, above n 44.

about encouraging this kind of contact, and they believed that resistance can stem from a breakdown in relationship with the imprisoned mother, resentment about the fact that they as carers are in effect bringing up someone else's children, or a general mistrust of the schools and a fear of how information about the mother's imprisonment might be used. MCM found that working with carers and advocating on behalf of the women in prison can help establish a healthier working relationship, which in turn benefits the children they are all trying to support.

Ongoing support is given to imprisoned mothers making calls to schools to help them engage appropriately and constructively with teachers. Mothers are accompanied by an MCM worker during calls, which are on speakerphone so that intervention or support is easily on hand if necessary. These calls aim to build confidence and self-esteem, often lacking in the women. Crucially, they also help establish relationships that can be continued post-release. MCM encourages school welfare officers to come to the prison where possible, for general parent/teacher meetings or for case planning meetings. For the latter, if a representative from the school cannot be there in person, efforts will be made for them to have telephone input to the meeting. Both prison and school staff seemed to appreciate this coordinated approach and welcomed the role of MCM in taking the initiative.

The Community Works 'One Family' programme also works with parents and care-givers on ways in which to communicate with schools. One Family is a comprehensive parent education and contact visiting programme which aims to provide meaningful and consistent opportunities for children to remain connected to their imprisoned parent throughout the sentence. The One Family Parenting Inside Out programme recognises that imprisoned parents and the carers of their children often need help and support in establishing positive contact with schools. The programme therefore offers advice on how to make phone calls to teachers as well as support in writing letters to request information or copies of school reports.

Reported clearly from all of the organisations about telephone contact between prisoners and teachers is that training and support within schools, and the support of the justice system, are essential in ensuring that this is beneficial. They found that, if contact to teachers and schools can be linked to in-prison parenting classes, this might give a natural context for such work, though this should not prevent parents from having this kind of contact if, for example, places in parenting classes are limited.

An extension of phone calls to teachers is the use of video conferencing, which PB&J introduced in several Albuquerque schools following the success of a phone call programme similar to MCM's. Although no longer used due to funding issues, video conferencing was reportedly beneficial to both parents and teachers and provided a unique opportunity to foster relationships. The organisations believed it gave teachers an opportunity to see the human being beyond the prisoner and, as a result, to challenge their preconceptions and diminish their judgements as they engaged

with ‘just another parent’ interested in their child. Furthermore, they believed it was an excellent way of engaging the imprisoned parent in their child’s education, allowing them to inquire about their children’s progress, celebrate success, and share concerns.

Many creative ways of encouraging parents in prison to engage with schools were evident. In Western Australia, Neerigen Brook Primary School has developed the Justice School Link Program, which offers points to parents in prison for participating in educational or rehabilitation programmes as well as for engaging positively with their children (writing letters, reading schools reports etc). These points can then be transferred into Monopoly™ money to be used for things like school excursions, uniforms, and school equipment. Children at school can also earn points (such as reaching targets, good behaviour and attendance), thus giving the parent and child an opportunity to work together. These types of initiatives seem to encourage positive engagement between parent, carer and child as well as between imprisoned parents and the school. A further benefit seems to be that it requires good liaison between prison staff and the school and gives a sense to families that agencies are working together to support them. The school reported increased positive interaction both with children of prisoners and their parents.

F *In-Prison Homework Clubs*

Supporting homework is an excellent way of parents engaging in their children’s education,⁴⁹ and for the parent in prison this can still be possible despite obvious challenges.⁵⁰ As part of its Parenting Inside Out programme, Community Works offers the opportunity for children and parents in prison to do homework together on a weekly basis. Consistency in terms of attendance is not always good, and it relies on carers being proactive in encouraging children to bring work to the prison, but it is something that parents in prison were reported to appreciate very much. Having teachers who are supportive and engaged in homework clubs also appears to be helpful, though again, this can reportedly be a challenge mainly due to time constraints rather than a lack of will and understanding.

G *School Curriculum Input*

Addressing issues of crime and punishment through the school curriculum may be helpful in breaking down barriers and challenging stereotypes if

49 JMT Walker, KV Hoover-Dempsey, DR Whetsel, and CL Green, ‘Parental Involvement in Homework: A Review of Current Research and Its Implications for Teachers, After School Program Staff, and Parent Leaders’ (2004) *Harvard Family Research Project*. <<http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/parental-involvement-in-homework-a-review-of-current-research-and-its-implications-for-teachers-after-school-program-staff-and-parent-leaders>>.

50 See ‘My Dad in Prison’ (2011) *My Life* series 1 (CBBC).

it is done sensitively and non-judgementally. It may, for example, give children courage to speak to a teacher about their own situation or to help them have a greater understanding of what their friends might be experiencing. Outcare, based in Perth, Western Australia, runs Keeping Kids Out Of Crime, an early intervention programme which involves former prisoners giving talks and presentations at schools, highlighting to young people the importance of talking about issues they face and emphasising to teachers the role they have in supporting vulnerable young people. Keeping Kids Out Of Crime aims to reduce bullying through addressing topics such as self-respect, respect for others, and respect for the community.

Other organisations acknowledged a need for schools to include issues around imprisonment in the curriculum, and the Osborne Association has produced a fact sheet for teachers which includes practical advice on how to do this sensitively. It advises, for example, not using terms such as 'offender', and 'convict' and helping children to understand that a person's crime does not put them beyond redemption. Challenging judgmental attitudes is likely to go a long way to helping children of prisoners feel that they can talk about their experience without being condemned by the crime of their parent.

H *Providing Information and Advocacy Support to Carers*

Given that families affected by imprisonment are less likely to access available support and can sometimes be reluctant to engage with institutions such as schools,⁵¹ Outcare works to ensure that information about the school system is available to carers in all of its prison-based family support centres. This means that not only were leaflets and information booklets about school available, but support centre staff also had increased opportunities to encourage carers to have positive engagement with schools and to offer help and support to do this if necessary.

Ann Edenfield Sweet, founder of Wings Ministry in Albuquerque, New Mexico, said she believes educational stability is so important that she includes schools regularly in the Wings for LIFE⁵² programme. Wings for LIFE is a support group for families affected by imprisonment and centres around meal-time discussions on various topics. In the case of education, teachers attend and explain the education system to carers and newly released prisoners,⁵³ encouraging them to build a relationship with the school. They believe that eating together is a real strength of this programme and helps to break down barriers and preconceptions.

Several of the organisations consider advocacy to be one of the most important services for carers. PB&J offers to walk carers through the process of changing schools, and a worker will attend school meetings with

51 G Pugh and C Lanskey, above n 22.

52 Life-skills Imparted to Families through Education.

53 Ann Edenfield Sweet uses the term 'returning citizen' for people released from prison.

carers if necessary. The ImPACT⁵⁴ programme uses a case management approach, involving all the relevant agencies and creating a ‘memorandum of understanding’ between prisons, schools, and NGOs.

Hour Children, based in New York, also uses a case management style of support. Case managers work to facilitate contact between the family and the school, which can apparently help schools have a greater understanding of the issues as well as giving carers the confidence to engage with teachers. In addition, a case management approach can help determine if it is not in the best interests of children to have ongoing contact with a parent.⁵⁵ SHINE for Kids appears to be so established in the community that staff routinely receive copies of behaviour plans and are invited to go to meetings and case conferences at the school. A case management approach seems to give credibility to voluntary sector organisations and makes it easier for them to mediate between all the relevant stakeholders.

I *Providing Information to Children Affected*

In addition to talking about imprisonment generally in the curriculum, providers also reported a need for specific information for children affected. Having this available in schools can arguably help them access it easily and without shame or embarrassment. This research noted an excellent example of a resource guide written by a group of teenagers in San Francisco who have all been affected by imprisonment themselves. Part of the Project WHAT! programme, the teenagers have compiled a comprehensive guide for children of prisoners based around questions they themselves struggled with and also include their own stories. Most of the organisations had booklets or information guides and leaflets for children, and getting these into schools alongside information on a wide range of topics affecting young people seemed to help de-stigmatise imprisonment and might encourage children to seek further help.

V CONCLUSION AND PROPOSALS FOR DEVELOPMENT

In conclusion, literature and practice identified that children of prisoners are an overlooked and much neglected group – innocent victims who, if not recognised and supported, remain highly vulnerable and at risk of further difficulties. The findings in this article show that schools have a significant role to play in supporting these children and their care-givers, as well as contributing to the rehabilitation of their imprisoned parents. What seemed clear, however, is that it cannot fall on the shoulders of teachers and schools alone to address this. Collaboration is needed between the departments of education and justice, and the research findings highlighted the considerable role that the voluntary sector plays in terms of advocacy and mediation with what are often extremely vulnerable

54 Importance of Parents and Children Together.

55 In cases of an offence against the child, for example.

families. What was interesting to note during the research in Australia and the United States was that, just as in the UK, examples of schools identifying and actively supporting children affected by imprisonment, and initiating contact with their imprisoned parents, are few and far between. However, all the teachers contacted for the research seemed more than willing to play their part with the support of the charities and NGOs, and all spoke highly of those organisations, feeling that their input aided the school's support of the young person rather than added to their workload.

The worlds of education and criminal justice tend to operate as two separate entities, but when it comes to the children of prisoners, the need for a coordinated approach is evident. In working together, so much more is likely to be achieved and a far greater impact on society likely to be made, including an increase in public safety, lower rates of recidivism, greater family stability, significant progress towards breaking the cycle of intergenerational offending and, as highlighted in the literature, an increase in the overall wellbeing, and therefore educational outcomes, of individual children. With adequate training and support from voluntary sector organisations advocating on behalf of families affected, as well as cooperation from the criminal justice system, schools can implement programmes such as those highlighted here.

The findings from this research suggest that in-depth development work could usefully be conducted as a matter of urgency so that schools can:

- ensure that all staff are aware and trained in how to deal with issues around imprisonment;
- be a community that is aware and supportive of children affected by imprisonment – a 'safe space' where children and their carers can share what is going on;
- actively build positive relationships with families affected by imprisonment and help carers to access additional forms of support;
- provide information for children and families affected (posters, leaflets, helpline numbers);
- liaise with partner agencies (sharing information appropriately and sensitively whilst bearing in mind the family's right to confidentiality);
- as appropriate, keep the parent in prison informed (copies of school reports, newsletters, phone calls, visits if possible etc) in liaison with outside carers and prison staff;
- actively seek to reduce bullying by incorporating issues around prison, crime, blame and punishment into the school curriculum;
- authorise visits to prison on school days if necessary and offer support to children following these visits;
- encourage ongoing contact (copies of work, pictures, photos from trips etc) between the child and the parent in prison;
- provide work for in-prison homework groups where available; and
- consider in-school support groups in areas where there are concentrated numbers of affected families.

Because the children of prisoners are so vulnerable, and because schools play such an integral role in supporting them and their families, programmes such as the ones outlined here could usefully be sustainably funded and imbedded into both the education and criminal justice systems. The findings here suggest that a lack of coordinated service delivery quite simply puts children's futures in jeopardy. Furthermore, most of the organisations acknowledged that evaluating the impact of their programmes remains a challenge, largely due to funding but also because of time pressures and the prioritising of service delivery. Independent evaluation of interventions is therefore needed to demonstrate the impact, in terms of preventative spend, on reducing intergenerational crime and recidivism. Therefore, government departments could usefully:

- consider the development of a specific post looking at implementing strategies which support families affected by imprisonment through the school system; and
- provide funding for research into the short- and long-term effects of specific programmes.

A Postscript

The recommendations in this paper were presented to a Cross-Party Group of the Scottish Parliament in September 2012. The national Scottish charity Families Outside has since appointed a designated Child & Family Support Manager, whose remit includes developing and implementing some of the programmes described in this paper for the Scottish context. This has included production of a booklet for teachers entitled *Supporting Prisoners' Families – What Can Schools Do?*, which is distributed to schools through local education authorities. Working in close partnership with the Scottish Prison Service and education authorities, Families Outside has also developed a programme of in-prison teacher training, which has enabled teachers to engage with the issues and learn how they can best support families affected by imprisonment. To date, such training has been delivered in partnership with 12 of Scotland's 16 prisons, and demand continues to exceed capacity.

Appendix to ‘The Role of Schools in Supporting Families Affected by Imprisonment’

ORGANISATIONAL CONTACTS

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| Community Works | < www.communityworkswest.org > |
| Families Outside | < www.familiesoutside.org.uk > |
| Hour Children | < www.hourchildren.org > |
| Melbourne City Mission | < www.melbournecitymission.org.au > |
| National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated | < www.fcnetwork.org > |
| Outcare | < www.outcare.com.au > |
| PB&J Family Services | < www.pbjfamilyservices.org > |
| SHINE for Kids, New South Wales | < www.shineforkids.org.au > |
| SHINE for Kids, Victoria | < www.shineforkids.org.au > |
| The Osborne Association | < www.osborneny.org > |
| VACRO | < www.vacro.org.au > |
| Wings Ministry | < www.wingsministry.org > |

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