



THE EUROPEAN ORGANISATION OF
PRISONS AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

May's Feature Article

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE)

Kate Philbrick



CHILDREN SEPARATED FROM A PARENT IN PRISON are not the ones convicted by the courts to serve a prison sentence, and yet their lives are affected in many ways by the imprisonment, both in the community and in their relationship with their prisoner-parent.

The estimated 800,000 children in the EU with a parent in prison [1] are vulnerable to instability; disruption of the parent-child bond; and violence (e.g., bullying, violence in home, witnessing a parent's violent arrest). Not all children of prisoners experience such extreme trauma or stigma, yet all must cope without their parent in daily life. How can children tell their parent about the prize they won at school if they cannot phone them? Often the phones prisoners can use are expensive. How can prisoner-parents parent their children appropriately when they have to stay seated at visits and only have visits once a fortnight? Across Europe visiting arrangements vary and the experience of children with parents in prison depends greatly on a country's criminal justice system and operation of its prisons; for all children, there are systemic hurdles to contact with an imprisoned parent which preclude the spontaneity of ordinary day-to-day child-parent relationships. Such hurdles include: lack of appropriate visit facilities; visiting hours that conflict with school hours; and limited modes of contact, including sometimes restrictions on physical contact.

The recent EU-funded study 'Children of Prisoners: Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health' (COPING), indicated that 25% of prisoners' children are at risk of increased mental health difficulties. Research has also suggested that regular, direct contact with an imprisoned parent helps promote resilience in children.

Although recognition of the best interests and right to family life of children with parents in prisons has advanced, particularly on the initiatives of enlightened prison personnel, the development of policy and meaningful action in the EU and Member States has not kept pace. Further awareness of child rights within prison and criminal justice systems is urgently needed: their right to maintain contact with their imprisoned parent, for example, grounded in UNCRC Article 9, is not compatible with visits being reduced as a disciplinary measure. Security concerns need to take their place alongside the paramountcy of children's well-being.

Despite UNCRC Article 3.1, children are seldom taken into account in decisions such as sentencing. A child's right to contact with an imprisoned parent could also be highlighted in determining eligibility for the transfer of prisoners to foster rehabilitation. Child-friendly prison design, regulations and schemes can also help children and parents reconnect. Facilities for visits can be sensitive to children's age and needs; IT can provide for spontaneous exchanges about meaningful events; and prisoner-parent support groups can help reaffirm a sense of parenthood and enable prisoners to help their



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children better. Prisoners' children would be treated more sensitively if training were available for everyone who interacts with them. Police forces can mitigate the trauma of arrest if their officers are trained, and school teachers can be sensitised to meet children's needs at school. Prison officers can learn how to buffer the violence of the harsh prison world for children, for example, bending down to talk to them, and making a game of the searching process, can make a huge difference to how the child feels about the prison visit. Such differences cost nothing and yet can contribute to improved visits, improved parent-child relationships and in the long-run, reduced offending by both parent and child.

These are just some of the ways in which the multiple needs of prisoners' children can be met. Each country has to define its own strategies and policies, given the complex array of criminal justice, police, prison, educational and welfare sectors involved. Few EU countries record data on prisoners' parental status; the actual number of affected children is unknown. Such obstacles hamper the development of strategies and policy for children with imprisoned parents.

To enhance visibility and the impact of support initiatives for these children, Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE, formerly the Eurochips network) has built strategic alliances, expanded and grounded the network, and deepened cohesion among network members over the past 15 years, spearheading the issue in countries with little awareness and forging a pan-European consensus on good practice. Successes include a body of recognized network expertise, a growing alliance of advocates, a radical increase in awareness across Europe of the existence /needs of these children, and a network that speaks with greater force (26 member organizations in 14 countries in Europe). Previously known as "invisible" and "forgotten" children, children with imprisoned parents now appear on EU and UNICEF lists of vulnerable children, due largely to COPE's advocacy. Further work is necessary, and a pan-European network is vital to carrying it out.

At a forthcoming international conference in Edinburgh May 16th *"No-one's ever asked me": Hearing the voices of children affected by parental incarceration*, these issues will be aired and the second edition of the Children of Prisoners Europe publication ***Children of Imprisoned Parents European Perspectives on Good Practice***, will be launched; featuring a range of initiatives, expertise and good practice, it is designed for professionals, volunteers and decision-makers whose work impacts children with imprisoned parents, either directly (e.g., prison officers) or indirectly (e.g., judges and sentencers) and revolves around seven broad themes:

- The legal framework: international and European conventions, national law, maintaining family ties and the best interests of the child
- The impact of parental imprisonment on children and young people's lives.
- Parenting from prison: support for the imprisoned parent and the child-parent relationship
- How children can maintain contact with an imprisoned parent
- Mothers and young children in prison
- Training, tools and methodologies to help reduce the adverse effects of imprisonment on children
- Advocacy for policy and practice change to support children with imprisoned parents

As a whole, the publication offers a child-centred guide for ideas and initiatives to help bolster the resilience of children whose parents are in prison, protect their emotional, psychological and social development and foster and reinforce family ties.



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Almost all those working within prison administration and operations have opportunities to affect the lives of the children whose parents are incarcerated. Prison is a difficult topic for the children and for society: this invisible community of young people needs greater attention to allow children to flourish as children.

Kate Philbrick O.B.E. OBE, former president of COPE

ⁱ Source: COPE network (extrapolation based on data from International Centre for Prison Studies and SPACE.