



In brief...

No Longer a Child but Not Yet an Adult: Young people's experiences of a family member's imprisonment

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Key Points

- Young people are a group distinct from children more generally and need to be recognised and treated as such.
- Young people with a family member in prison can feel forgotten and ignored – they need to be provided with support where it is needed.
- Sibling imprisonment can impact children and young people but is often neglected in research, policy, and service provision.
- Young people can be both a prisoner and the family member of a prisoner at the same time. This group does not feature in familial imprisonment research, policy, or practice but needs to.

Introduction

An estimated 20-27,000 children experience the imprisonment of a parent each year in Scotland (McGillivray 2016), although no official data is collected on this population. Estimates of the proportion of this figure who are teenagers comes from US research, which places it at 15-40% (Hairston 2007; Mumola 2000). No estimates exist for the numbers of children who experience a sibling's imprisonment. This group also rarely features in familial imprisonment research, policy, or practice. Another forgotten group is young people who are serving a prison sentence at the same time as a family member, whether in the same prison or in different establishments. This briefing paper looks at all of these experiences.

Background

This briefing paper is based on research from a PhD entitled Families – Inside Prison and Out: Young people's experiences of having a family member in prison. It draws on interviews with seven young people aged 16 - 25 who were part of an arts collective known as KIN (a joint project between Vox Liminis and Families Outside for young people with experience of a family member's imprisonment) and ten young men aged 17 - 21 who, as well as having experience of a family member's imprisonment, were currently serving a sentence in a Young Offenders Institution (YOI).

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Findings

Young People

There is no agreed upon definition of young people, however there is an acknowledgement that this group is distinct from children and adults. The UN defines 'youth' as those aged 13 - 24, while the World Health Organisation defines young people as those aged 10 - 24 years of age. This briefing defines young people as being between 11 - 25 years old due to the age of those whose voices feature in it and the fact they reflected on their experiences as younger teenagers and identified the times of going to high school and puberty as important.

Prison services and support providers tend to focus on younger children, leaving teenagers and young people feeling forgotten:

...I feel like when you're around the late teens people kind of assume that, 'Oh she doesn't need any help because she's like 17,' and actually I think you need just as much help when you're older and that kind of hurt me quite a lot because I was like, I know I'm, like, 17 but also I, like, I'm a daddy's girl, like, I miss my dad and stuff and people didn't really give you, give me that support I don't think." (Natalia)

Although young people can feel the same as younger children when a family member is imprisoned (e.g. feelings of loss, sadness, confusion), they can also have different experiences due to their age and developmental stage. With a growing understanding of where their family member is and the meaning society attaches to prison, there can be a greater fear of stigma (something which does not necessarily end on the person's release):

I reckon if somebody, like, if I was to confide in somebody and for them to shut me down and go, 'Oh my god,' that would, I don't know how I could cope with that. Like, even now, you know what I mean." (Kev)

Along with a growing understanding can come changed feelings towards the family member, including anger as it is felt the person chooses to offend, causing the separation:

I think when I was younger I would, kind of, I would, like, miss him when he was gone because I didn't know what was going on and whatever and, like, I would want to see him obviously a lot more, but then when I was older I did, it got to the point where it started to make me a bit angry and I was, like, 'Why does he keep doing these things?' and, yeah, so it was just, I think it was just different when I was older." (Dylan)

There can be a greater expectation on older children to care for younger siblings when a parent is imprisoned. This expectation of assuming a more adult role within the family can come from the young person themselves:

On being told by her father that his trial was not going well, Natalia stated that she "...almost kind of took that, like, 'Right, okay, I'm going to have to fill my dad's boots,' not in a bad way but just in, like, a, right, I almost prepared myself..."

While the restrictions around telephone calls and visits can be difficult for any family member, the lives of young people compared to younger children can mean these are felt more keenly. Young people are at a point in their lives where they are becoming more independent, have more draws on their time, and spend less time in the family home than younger children. They must choose whether to wait in for a phone call (if it is being made to a landline – calling a mobile will be more expensive so may result in less time being spent on the call) or whether to miss social activities or time with friends to visit. Where they choose not to stay at home or not to visit, they can then face judgement from others, never mind the disappointment of their family member:

"... when you reach, [...] like, fourteen you do start to kinda go out [...] just hanging about with people and, like, staying over at their houses, going to parties and things like that. [...] I didn't feel like I should have to put that on hold, because my brother made one, or three, bad decisions, but, it's, like, but then people were kinda, like, kinda a bit judgey, they were, like, 'Well you should devote more time to him.' I'm, like, 'But I'm still a teenager. I'm still trying to have this whole teenage experience and not, not be held back by somebody being in prison.' I'm, like, 'I'm still just a normal person.'" (Morven)

When they do visit, even in special children's visits, often these are aimed at younger children – with a soft play area provided or toys only suitable for younger children.

¹ Participants from KIN were able to choose whether to use their own name or a pseudonym within this research. Participants from the YOI are all referred to by a pseudonym.

Sibling Imprisonment

Most familial imprisonment research, policy, and practice around children focuses on parental imprisonment. While the impact of a sibling's imprisonment may be different to that of a parent, that does not mean that there is no impact. For young people, their relationship with a sibling may be closer than to a parent during this period in their life – their sibling is the person they choose to confide in, who they turn to with their problems. To go from this close relationship where they see the person every day to only once a week for 45 minutes can be extremely difficult:

“...I dinnae even know how to explain it, it was just, seeing him once a week, going from seeing him every day to seeing him once a week it was quite a big difference for me. I felt quite, like, lost, I didnae ken what to dae with myself, didnae ken what to dae wae the spare time or anything like that...” (Liam)

While special children's visits are provided by prisons to help facilitate better contact, these are often provided only where children are under the age of eighteen and visiting a parent/caregiver. Children who are visiting siblings are not always considered:

“...I went to [the prison] and they were, like, ‘Oh, how old are you?’ I was, like, ‘Right, I’m 14,’ and they were, like, ‘Oh that’s perfect. So are you visiting your dad?’ and I was, like, ‘No, I’m visiting my brother,’ and they were, like, ‘Never mind, we can’t help you.’” (Morven)

Instead, they are left to visit in ordinary visits where they cannot interact with their sibling as they would have done in any way previously.

Family Relationships in Prison

When we speak about families of prisoners, the assumption is often that they will be located outside the prison. This is not always true. With high levels of intergenerational offending and the prison population tending to be drawn more heavily from particular areas, there are likely to be a number of young people who experience imprisonment at the same time as a family member – whether that be in the same or different prisons. Three of the young people in this research had experienced concurrent imprisonment with a parent and five with a sibling – four where they were in the same YOI.

There were conflicting experiences of the simultaneous imprisonment within the same YOI:

“It’s a bit, like, the first time he came in obviously my stomach dropped, but you just, every time he comes out, just drops basically.” (John)

“...It made, it made me feel mair homely, see when I seen him I was, like, that, know what I mean...” (Chris)

Both show, however, that while prison can impact on families, families can also impact on the prison.

This simultaneous imprisonment can be seen by the prison as a risk, a threat to security, and something to be managed. But it can also be an opportunity for a young person to be supported or cared for in an environment which can be predominantly experienced as dangerous or frightening with a lack of anyone you can trust.

“It was kinda like a homely feeling when I seen him, know what I mean, ‘cause I know I’ve got somebody in here that I kin trust, you know what I mean. ‘Cause there’s no many people in here you can trust...” (Chris)

How young people deal with their own imprisonment can be affected by having a sibling in the same environment for whom they feel a familial responsibility towards – though this caring tends to be done in different ways to how it would have been expressed outside.

The restrictions on communication with an imprisoned family member are compounded where both of those in the relationship are serving a prison sentence. Even where the young person in the YOI is a child, with contact with a parent being seen as the right of the child not a privilege of the prisoner by the Scottish Prison Service, there is no set provision for contact. The young people spoke of a range of experiences of inter-prison telephone calls and visits:

“...you get a phone call, well you can put in for one every two week but sometimes when you put in for one you don’t get it [...] they can say, you’ve had it too much and that, know what I mean...” (Darren)

“...my last one was when I first come in, three months ago. So then it’s, like, it’s, it’s time wise, say it’s, cos if, if I phoned him [his brother] today and then wanted another phone call with him in, like, two days’ time they’d be wondering why, know what I mean. (Scott)

“I tried to get them the noo but-, his [his step-father] wee boy’s in doon the stair fae me-, so he’s got them wae him so I don’t know if they’re gonna accept two fae [the same prison], you know what I mean...” (Grant)

There is no clarity around this provision.

Conclusion

While awareness and understanding of the impacts of imprisonment on prisoners' families is growing, some groups are still marginalised or ignored completely. Steps have been made over the last decade in recognising and attempting to mitigate the harm caused to children through a parent's imprisonment, but the focus is often on younger children. Young people can experience the same negative impacts but can also experience a family member's imprisonment in unique ways due to their age and developmental stage. They can feel ignored and unsupported.

Sibling imprisonment experiences are largely absent from research, and where they do appear, they are rarely the sole focus of the work. While a different experience to parental imprisonment, the loss of a sibling in this way still impacts on children and young people. For young people in particular, this may be a point in their lives where they are closer to their siblings than their parents, meaning their loss is felt even more keenly. A recognition of this by policy and service providers is needed.

Young people serving a prison sentence at the same time as a family member, whether in the same or different prisons, are absent from familial imprisonment discussions. Having to rely on inter-prison telephone calls and/or visits to maintain a family relationship can compound the difficulties around communication with someone in prison. Co-location of siblings in the same YOI is often viewed in terms of risk but can be experienced in both positive and negative ways by the young person. We know little about these experiences, and given the levels of intergenerational offending and the fact that prisons tend to draw their population more heavily from certain geographic areas, this is something we must consider.

Ultimately the only way to truly reduce harm for children and young people who experience the imprisonment of a parent or sibling is to reduce the prison population; while this is not occurring, we must also consider how to at least mitigate some of this harm.

Recommendations

- Provide support specifically tailored for and aimed at young people.
- Prison visits, and particularly children's visits, need to cater for all ages – ask young people what they would like provided in visits and visitor centres.
- Recognise young people experiencing sibling imprisonment and ensure they also receive support and are provided for within children's prison visits.
- Conduct further research to examine where family relationships are carried out entirely within the prison estate.

References

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Families Outside is the only national charity that works solely to support the families of people affected by imprisonment in Scotland. Our purpose is to improve outcomes for children and families affected by imprisonment so they can live healthy, active lives free from stigma and disadvantage.

For information and support:

Freephone 0800 254 0088

Text FAMOUT followed by your message to 60777

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