

# The impact of COVID-19 prison lockdowns on children with a parent in prison

“There’s always a solution to a situation and I always try and find that solution but there’s nothing. It’s like drowning - there’s nothing to hold on to”

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## 1. Executive Summary

This report, drawing on research undertaken during the first national lockdown in the UK in 2020, highlights the issues faced by children whose parent was in prison during this time.

- Thousands of children in the UK have not seen their parent in prison for a year.
- Face to face visits were stopped in prisons on or around 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020, and although some prisons reopened for restricted face to face visits over the summer months, several periods of national lockdown have effectively stopped visits for almost 12 months.
- The prison estate in England and Wales did not have video call facilities operational in all prisons until January 2021.
- Video calls have been limited and problematic for children.
- This amounts to an interference with children's right to family life. Many of these children enjoyed regular and positive contact with their parent prior to prison lockdown.
- This loss of contact has negatively impacted children's relationships with their imprisoned parents and their mental and physical health and wellbeing. Children may not understand why contact has stopped and may blame themselves.
- The effects of this loss of contact and disruption to family relationships are likely to be long term and will affect family reunification and resettlement after imprisonment.
- Other jurisdictions have managed the public health emergency in ways which have not removed children's meaningful relationships with their parent, through the use of more frequent and reliable video calls, face to face visits with physical contact for children, and early release schemes.
- The pandemic is not yet over, and it is likely that prisons will continue to use restricted regimes to reduce the spread of Covid-19 within their populations. It is not too late for the UK to make changes to its management of prison visits and communication for prisoners with their families, in order to mitigate the harms which have been done to children in the past 12 months.

## 2. Introduction

The World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Soon after, it provided guidance on preventing and responding to COVID-19 in prisons<sup>1</sup>. On or around 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020, prisons in the UK moved to restricted regimes which included a ban on all social visits. Prison lockdowns were widespread in 2020 and continue in 2021.

It is estimated that more than 300,000 children in England and Wales have a parent in prison each year<sup>2</sup>, and many of these children have not had any face-to-face contact with their parent since early March 2020. At this stage, our understanding of both the short and longer-term impact of these restrictions on children and families remains poor, particularly as in many cases such restrictions are ongoing, and there is as yet no certain end point. What we do know however, is that the rapid cessation of in-person contact did not allow adults to prepare children for the separation nor were children given the opportunity to say goodbye to their parent. There was a lack of relevant support or technology in place within the prison and no support for families on the outside to manage the changes.

This paper shares findings from a study exploring the experiences of more than 70 children whose parents were in prison across the UK during the first lockdown in 2020.

## 3. Participant Information

Between the 24<sup>th</sup> April and 13<sup>th</sup> June 2020, I conducted research with parents and carers of children whose parent was in prison during the lockdown in England, Wales and Scotland, and with staff working for services that provide support to the families of people in prison across the UK (including Northern Ireland). Data was gathered from answers to an online questionnaire, and from interviews conducted online with caregivers and service staff. This briefing paper focuses on the data collected from families.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization “Preventing COVID-19 outbreak in prisons: a challenging but essential task for authorities”, (2020) <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/pages/news/news/2020/03/preventing-covid-19-outbreak-in-prisons-a-challenging-but-essential-task-for-authorities>.

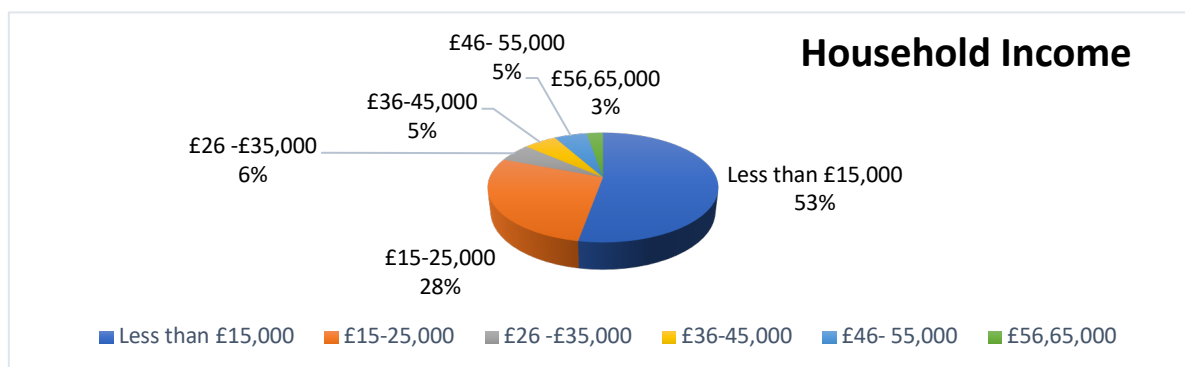
<sup>2</sup> Crest Advisory (2019) ‘Children of prisoners: fixing a broken system’ <https://www.crestadvisory.com/post/children-of-prisoners-fixing-a-broken-system>

### Parents and caregivers

36 adult caregivers completed surveys, and 6 caregivers took part in online interviews. They were aged between (categories) 18-25 and 65-70.

All of the caregivers were women. 27 were the mother of the child they were caring for, 7 were the grandmother of the child, and 2 were the stepmother.

In 53% of households the total gross income was less than £15,000. In 81% of households the total gross income was less than £25,000. The median UK household income in the year ending 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020 was £30,800,<sup>3</sup> and the poverty line is determined as 60% of the median income. Consequently, those living on less than an after-tax income of £18,480 are considered to be living in poverty. The over representation of families living below the poverty line aligns with the well-established links between poverty and imprisonment<sup>4</sup>.

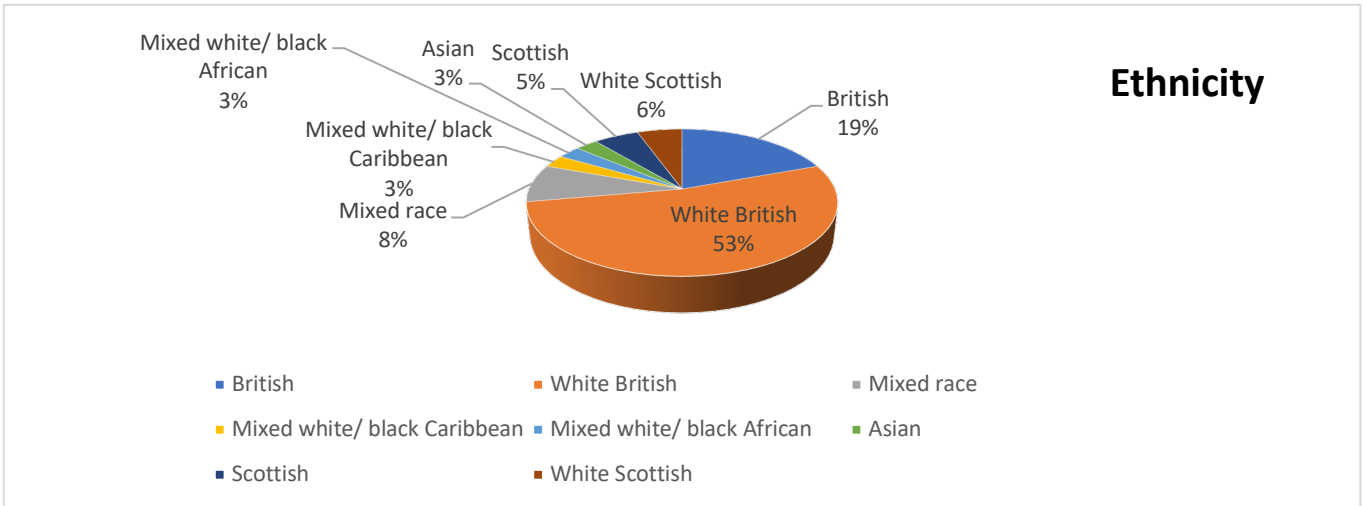


The participants came from across 21 counties in England, 5 counties in Scotland and 2 counties in Wales. Participants were asked to identify their ethnicity from pre-set categories with the option to add additional categories

<sup>3</sup> ONS 2020

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/householddisposableincomeandinequality/financialyearending2020provisional#:~:text=Main%20points,2019%2C%20after%20accounting%20for%20inflatio>

<sup>4</sup> Western, B., Pettit, B. Incarceration and social inequality *Daedalus*, (2010) Volume 139 | Issue 3 | p.8-19; Duque, M. , McKnight, A., *Understanding the relationship between inequalities and poverty: mechanisms associated with crime, the legal system and punitive sanctions* CASEpaper 215/LIPpaper 6 London: LSE/ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2019)



### Children

The adults were looking after 71 children, aged between 3 months and 18 years, who had a parent in prison. Three households had 19-year olds who were the children of the parent in prison, and there were an additional 6 children in the households who were not the child of the parent in prison. Eight of the children had a mother in prison; 46 had a father in prison, and five children had both parents in prison.

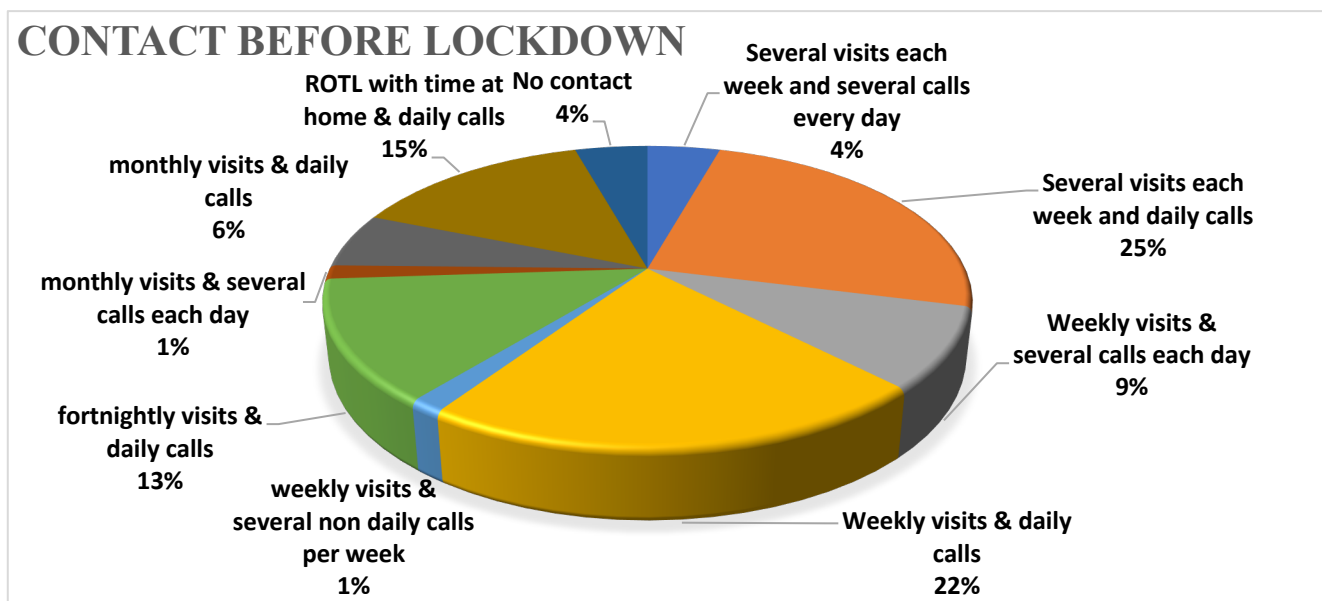
#### 4. Pre-lockdown contact

“All the children have a really strong relationship with their Dad. Their Dad’s a massive part of their life”

“Every 14 days she’d be home for five days”

Prior to the prison lockdown in March 2020, 96% of the children represented enjoyed regular and frequent contact with their imprisoned parent, with almost two thirds (61%) visiting their parent at least once each week. Of these, just under half saw their parent on more than one occasion each week, and all the children who visited their parent every week also spoke to their parent on the phone daily or almost daily. 13% of children saw their parent fortnightly,

alongside daily phone calls, and 7% of children saw their parent every month. 15% of the children had a parent who came out of prison and saw their children on ROTL or CRL (Release on Temporary Licence, Child Resettlement Leave), usually for 5 days each month which in most cases included staying at home with the children overnight. Only 4% of children had no contact with their parent – for some this was through choice, and for others it was because carers did not bring them to the prison for visits.



*Quality of contact*

“It was fantastic. When we’d go on visits everyone was totally amazed like ‘oh my God look how much she knows him’, considering she doesn’t see him that often. She loves her Dad and only sees him once a week. As soon as she sees him her face lights up and she’s so happy.”

“She’ll run up to him to be picked up hugs and kisses. Yes she absolutely adores him. Thinks the world of him.”

Prisons and charities such as PACT and Spurgeon’s have worked hard to improve the visiting facilities in prisons, in order that children’s visits with their parents are a positive experience for the children. According to the participants, the children they were looking after really enjoyed their contact with their parent in prison. This was the context within which the

children then moved to a period of lockdown with no face to face contact with their imprisoned parent.

## 5. Post-lockdown contact

“They think he doesn’t care about them because he can only ring for five minutes per day”

“Six days ago he cut off contact [with her] because it’s too hard for him”

12 months on from the first lockdown, and now on our third extended period of national lockdown, there is an abundance of evidence about the harms suffered by children in the general population due to the lockdown, loss of schooling, isolation, and anxiety about COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> Children who had a parent in prison when restrictions were imposed in March 2020 additionally experienced restrictions, losses and changes to daily life due to the cessation of contact with their parent in prison. We know that, in pre-pandemic times, children with a parent in prison experience ‘confounding grief’, significant disruption to home life and education, and increased poverty in the short term<sup>6</sup>, and are more likely to suffer from mental and physical illness and addiction in the long term<sup>7</sup>. Children whose parent has been imprisoned are less likely to be in education, employment or training as adults<sup>8</sup> and are more likely than their peers to die before the age of 65<sup>9</sup>. This is thought to be due to the disruption and trauma they experience due to parental imprisonment, and the difficulties with post-prison family reintegration.<sup>10</sup> Maintaining contact with a parent in prison is evidenced to be

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<sup>5</sup> OECD (2020) Combatting Covid-19’s effect on children <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/combating-covid-19-s-effect-on-children-2e1f3b2f/>; Mental Health Foundation (2020) Impacts of lockdown on the mental health of children and young people <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/impacts-lockdown-mental-health-children-and-young-people>

<sup>6</sup> Minson, S. (2019) *Maternal Sentencing and the Rights of the Child*, Palgrave

<sup>7</sup> Miller, K.M. (2014) Maternal criminal justice involvement and co-occurring mental health and substance abuse problems: Examining moderation of sex and race on children’s mental health’. *Children and Youth Services Review* 37:71-80; Fox, G.L, Benson, M.L., (2000) *Families, Crime and Criminal Justice*, Amsterdam, Oxford, JAI; Murray J. and Farrington, D., (2008) Effects of parental imprisonment on children. In Tonry, M.(Ed.) *Crime and Justice: A review of research* (vol37.)(pp.133-206) Chicago, IL., University of Chicago Press

<sup>8</sup> Mears, D.P., Siennick, S.E. (2016) Young Adult Outcomes and the Life-Course Penalties of Parental Incarceration. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 53(1), 3-35

<sup>9</sup> van de Weijer, S.G.A., Smallbone, H.S. & Bouwman, V. J Dev. (2018) Parental Imprisonment and premature mortality in adulthood *Journal of Life Course Criminology* pp 1-14

<sup>10</sup> Arditti, J.A., Smock, S.A. & Parkman, T.S., “‘It’s been hard to be a father’: a qualitative exploration of incarcerated fatherhood’, *Fathering*, 2005 vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 267-288.



beneficial for the majority of children,<sup>11</sup> and the sudden imposition of restrictions on prison visits due to the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have compounded the harmful impacts of imprisonment.

Not only was all face-to-face contact between children and parents stopped, but the restrictions also caused disruption to other forms of contact between children and their parents. Phone calls are often the main channel of communication between parents in prison and their children<sup>12</sup>, and the restricted regimes made it more difficult for people in prison to gain access to phones.

Difficulties with telephone calls since lockdown in prison

- Calls are less frequent than before
- Calls are too short
- Child unable to engage due to their age or disability
- Poor sound quality
- Cost of calls
- Timing of calls

In many establishments, prisoners were confined to their cells for up to 23 hours each day<sup>13</sup>, and as not all prisoners have access to in-cell telephony this created pressure on the shared phones available for use. Families reported that at times their loved one had to choose between using their time out of cell for a shower or a phone call. Although within the first few weeks of the lockdown period every person in prison in England and Wales was given £5 additional phone credit per week to enable them to retain contact with family, the cost of calls from prison remains high and some families still found it hard to pay for sufficient phone time. Prior to the lockdown, prisoners who left the prison for work had a mobile phone which they could use to stay in touch with their children, but once the locked down regime was in place they no longer had access to their phones. In addition, phone calls are of limited use with young or non-verbal children due to their lack of speech. Consequently, many families reported a reduction in, or difficulties with, phone contact during the lockdown period.

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<sup>11</sup> Cranmer, L., Goff, M., Peterson, B., Sandstrom, H. *Parent-Child visiting practices in prisons and Jails: A Synthesis of Research and Practice* Research Report: Washington D.C: Urban Institute: (2017)

<sup>12</sup> Minson, S. (2019) *Maternal sentencing and the Rights of the Child*, Palgrave

<sup>13</sup> HMIP, (2021) *What happens to prisoners in a pandemic?* <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/inspections/what-happens-to-prisoners-in-a-pandemic/>

“She’s two, she doesn’t like phone calls, she won’t go on phone calls, she’s not interested”

“What about when the kids just think ‘we just need to tell my Mum’ and they can’t, especially with all this uncertainty and the whole world in a pandemic”





“Since she’s not seen him she’s not that bothered to talk to him on the phone”

“They were having phone calls every night with their Dad. Unfortunately for [my son] he can’t communicate on the phone so now he has no contact whatsoever with his Dad”

The next section of the briefing considers the ways in which the cessation of face to face contact and the limited use of phone contact changed the relationships between parents and children, and the ensuing impact of those changed relationships on children’s mental and physical health.

## **6. Impacts of the pandemic and prison lockdown on children**

Children experienced confusing and complex emotions when face to face visits were stopped. Many children thought that their parent didn’t want to see them anymore, or maybe their parent no longer loved them. Children blamed themselves for this. This anxiety was compounded when, for the reasons set out in the section above, children also received fewer or shorter phone calls from their parent. Physical contact between parent and child is of great importance to the development of relationships and both younger and older children missed hugs, touch, and seeing their parent.

<p><b>RECOGNITION</b></p> <p>Young people will forget their parents</p> 	<p><b>'By the time we get back into the prison the 7 month old is not going to have a clue who her Dad is'</b></p>	<p><b>ATTACHMENT</b></p> <p>Children have formed attachments to grandparent carers instead of their parent after such prolonged period without contact</p> 
<p><b>'There is more distance than before. They're not communicating on the phone with their Dad like before. They need to see him.'</b></p>	<p><b>IMPACTS ON CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR IMPRISONED PARENT</b></p>	<p><b>'He no longer wants to speak to Dad on the phone. He speaks about Dad less, he used to look forward to visits more than anything. Now he says he has nothing to look forward to.'</b></p>
<p><b>CONFUSION</b></p> <p>Children believe that their parent doesn't want to see them, or doesn't love them anymore</p> 	<p><b>'My son has never seen his daddy as he was asleep both times he visited and that was at 2 weeks old. He's now 3 months.'</b></p>	<p><b>NO CONTACT</b></p> <p>Imprisoned parents are unable to continue with telephone contact as they cannot bear the sadness of their children. In response to this, children are distraught and the relationships are irreparably damaged.</p> 
<p>Minson, S. 2021 'The Impact of Covid-19 prison lockdowns on children with a parent in prison'</p>		

**"My child recently lost his first tooth. He wanted to show his Dad the gap in his mouth and cried knowing he can't, so I said I would send a photo to his Dad. And he said 'No Mummy, I want him to see it when I sit on his knee and then he can really see.'"**

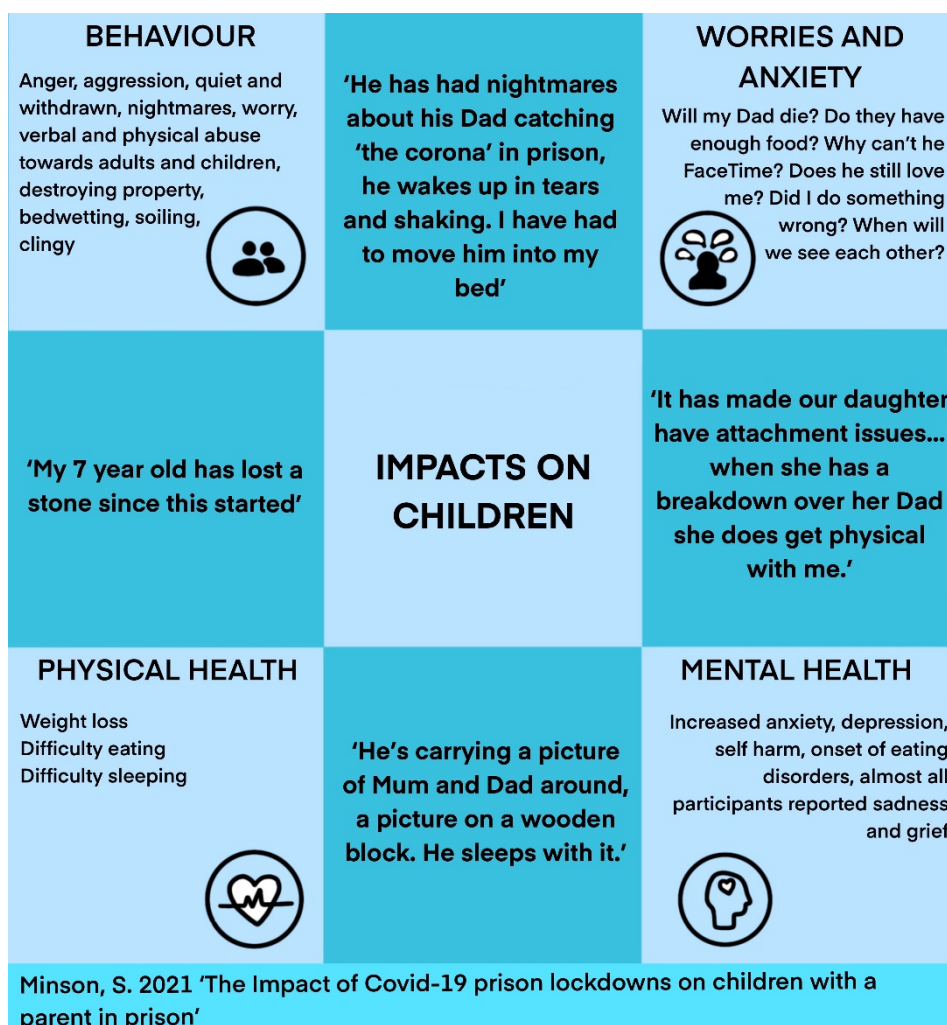
Without the re-enforcement of face to face visits, young children did not seem to recognise or know their parent's voice when they heard them speaking on the telephone. There was concern amongst all caregivers of babies and toddlers that the children were forgetting their parents and had lost any attachment they had formed with them. Without regular contact with their parents, babies and toddlers were forming strong attachments to their caregivers, which worried caregiver grandparents in particular.

Older children found phone contact difficult and many caregivers reported children becoming detached from their imprisoned parent. This in turn was difficult for the parent in prison to deal with. Many caregivers reported that the parent in prison was suffering from low mood, anxiety or depression, and they found their children’s distress almost too much to bear. In some instances, this caused parents to stop all contact with their children, which of course compounded and amplified the children’s distress.

*Physical and Mental Health*

“My 12 year old has just started to make herself sick after eating, and when you ask her why she’s doing it she says, ‘I miss my Dad and nobody understands’”.

The deterioration of the parent and child relationship led to a number of changes in children’s physical and mental health and well-being which were experienced across the study cohort.



Sleeplessness and nightmares were experienced by many children. Several caregivers reported that children would no longer sleep alone and slept with them instead. A number of children had taken to sleeping holding pictures of their imprisoned parents – including one child who slept with a wooden block which had a photo of his parents on it.

Almost all participants reported that the children were experiencing sadness and grief related to the loss of contact with their parent. Caregivers reported children experiencing loss of appetite and an inability to eat. It was reported that a 7-year-old child with multiple disabilities, who was unable to use the phone to speak with his Dad, had lost a stone in weight after contact stopped. Other pre-teen children were reported as developing new eating disorders. Caregivers reported the onset of self-harm in children as young as 12, and increased anxiety and depression in many children.

“They’re devastated and worried, extremely worried. They’re scared of the virus in prisons”

Children’s anxiety about their imprisoned parent was heightened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and caregivers reported children asking them questions such as: ‘Will my Dad die? Do they have enough food? What can’t he facetime? Does he still love me? Did I do something wrong? When will we see each other?’

### *Behaviour*

Children were described as displaying anger and aggression alongside verbal and physical abuse of other children and adults in their household. Some became quiet and withdrawn, and several were described as being uncharacteristically ‘clingy’ with their caregiver. Some had begun to suffer from enuresis and soiling. Others were destructive, damaging property.

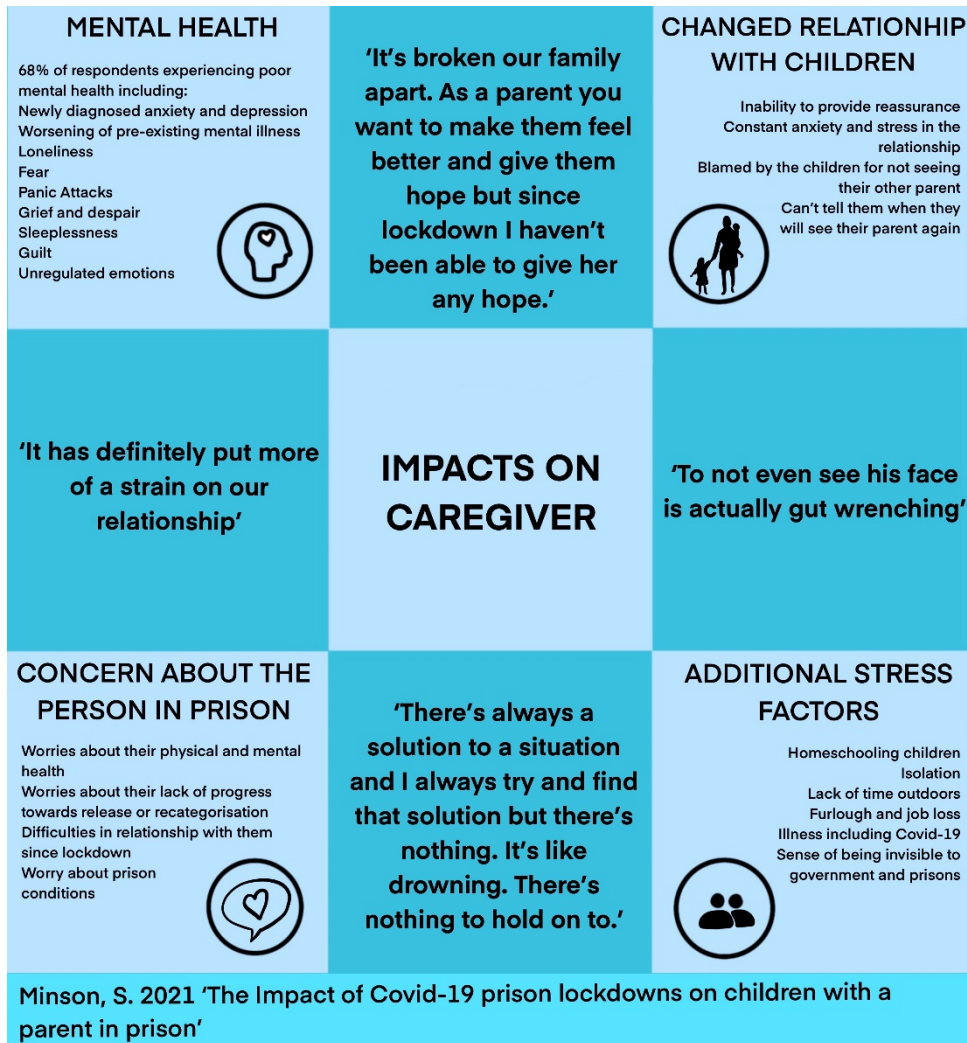
“My child has self-harmed, been very anxious, had nightmares about something bad to her Dad and constantly worrying about him”

“He’s upset that he can’t see his Mum. He is withdrawn and not very talkative”

## 7. The Caregiver Experience

“It seems to me that he is dead. I have had many panic attacks since our contact stopped. I feel sorry for my child because I am struggling myself”

We know from research that the relationship between the caregiver and the child whose parent is in prison can be a protective factor, but that is lessened when the caregiver experiences significant stress<sup>14</sup>. It is therefore of relevance, when thinking about impacts on children, to understand how the prison lockdown and subsequent lack of contact has affected the caregiver.



<sup>14</sup> Dallaire, D. (2007) ‘Incarcerated Mothers and Fathers: A comparison of risks for children and families’ *Family Relations*, 56 (5) p440-453

Caregivers and families who are forced to live alongside criminal justice structures tend to be resourceful, and are used to dealing with difficulties, but the pandemic removed their agency, including around keeping in contact with family members in prison. Such removal of agency undoubtedly compounded the challenges they faced.

68% of participant caregivers experienced deterioration in existing mental illness or received new diagnosis of mental illness, including anxiety and depression, since the prison lockdown commenced. They worried about their loved one in prison – in most cases a spouse, partner or child - and they worried about the children they were looking after. Their inability to provide reassurance to children caused them additional stress, and some children blamed their caregiver for the lack of contact with their parent in prison. Although some caregivers reported enjoying the additional time lockdown had given them with the children, in most cases the dominant concerns were about their relationships becoming more fraught, with both verbal and in some cases physical outbursts from the children towards the caregivers. Caregivers were also managing all the general strains and stresses of pandemic lockdown such as job insecurity, furlough, home schooling and lack of time outside the home. All the caregiver respondents were women, and their experiences highlight how the additional burdens of imprisonment during the pandemic compounded the gender inequalities of Covid-19<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> UN Women (2020) Whose time to care: Unpaid care and domestic work during COVID-19 <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/whose-time-care-unpaid-care-and-domestic-work-during-covid-19>

## 8. What would have helped?

“Children need communication and hope”

“The lack of physical contact from a parent is huge. A reassuring hug, or seeing a face, can make a world of difference for a child.”

“If I wasn't on twitter I don't think I'd know anything about what's going on in prison”

All participants were asked what would have helped them manage the situation better for the children they were caring for. Responses included:

- Better information from the prisons; not being reduced to finding out information from Twitter
- Children being in school
- Video calls
- Decisive government
- Face to face support for children
- More contact with the person in prison
- Restoration of ROTL and work
- Early release for those on ROTL and day release for work
- Help with childcare



## 9. The current situation

Some prisons re-opened for social visits in the summer and early autumn of 2020, but there continued to be restrictions, and whilst the pandemic continued, prisons did not return to pre-pandemic visiting regimes. Some prisons did not allow children to visit whilst others imposed an age limit, or maximum number of children who could attend. No physical contact was allowed between children and parents and in at least one instance when a one-year-old touched her father, both mother and child were told that they were banned from all further visits<sup>16</sup>. Many caregivers and parents took the decision not to bring children to visit as they believed that for a child to see their parent after several months of absence, and yet not to be allowed to touch them, would be an added stress for the child. It is relevant to note that the Scottish prisons allowed physical contact between children under 11 and their parents<sup>17</sup>. There have been two further periods of national lockdown in England (5<sup>th</sup> November – 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2020, 5<sup>th</sup> January 2021 – ongoing), in addition to several more localised lockdowns during which all prison visits were prohibited.

### Video Calls

Across the world, prisons have sought to provide prisoners with access to video calls in order to maintain contact with family during the pandemic. Such provision has been slow to come in parts of the UK; it wasn't until the 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021 that the Ministry of Justice announced that all prisons in England and Wales have the ability to provide video calls<sup>18</sup>. According to the MOJ statistics, 90,000 calls have been made since March 2020<sup>19</sup>, which with a prison population of approximately 78,700 in December 2020, equates to just over one call per person across a 10-month period. By contrast, in Northern Ireland, fortnightly video calls were made available to prisoners within weeks of the first lockdown being announced<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Shared with permission of the family involved

<sup>17</sup> Scottish Prison Service, Covid-19 Resumption of prison visits 'As within the community, children aged 0-11 (under 12) do not have to physically distance from adults'

<https://scottishprisoneradvocacy.com/covid-19-updates/> 6<sup>th</sup> August 2020

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Justice 18<sup>th</sup> January 2021, "Secure Video calls help all prisoners maintain essential family ties during pandemic"

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/secure-video-calls-help-all-prisoners-maintain-essential-family-ties-during-pandemic#:~:text=Secure%20video%20calls%20are%20now,rehabilitation%20during%20the%20Coronavirus%20pandemic>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid footnote 18 above

<sup>20</sup> Department of Justice, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020, "Long welcomes launch of virtual visits for prisoners" <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/long-welcomes-launch-virtual-visits-prisoners>

Although in the surveys and interviews conducted during the lockdown many caregivers thought that video calls would be very helpful for maintaining contact, making video calls to parents in prison has turned out to have some difficulties embedded in the system<sup>21</sup>.

Firstly, in order to make video calls families must have the appropriate digital equipment and the ability to use it. Many children with a parent in prison are living in low-income households without computers or tablets, WIFI or phones with adequate data, and without the financial means to purchase these devices. Charities such as Children Heard and Seen stepped in to try to provide families with laptops but for many families it is likely that digital access remained a barrier to contact. There was further financial cost to families as video call applicants are required to have government issued photo ID.

Secondly, the video calling software was not fit for purpose. The technology used is designed to work when all those taking part in the call sit still and do not move for the duration of the call. With young children this is impossible to achieve. The Prisons Minister is quoted as saying that the 'video calls had allowed prisoners to see their toddlers take their first steps<sup>22</sup>' but users reported calls stopping if any movement was detected.<sup>23</sup>

Thirdly, there has been very limited availability of video calls to people in prison. As has already been noted, not all prisons had video calling facilities until January 2021, but even in the prisons which had the facility available in 2020, most prisoners could make one call once a month for a total duration of 30 minutes. Reports from families suggested that often the movement to and from the call room was taken out of the 30 minutes, and very often there were technical difficulties which reduced the ability of users to hear each other. In addition, due to limits on how many people could be on a call, larger families had to choose which children would be allowed to see their parent. The children not 'chosen' had to wait another four weeks to see their mother or father.

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<sup>21</sup> Prison Reform Trust, 2020, CAPPTIVE How prisons are responding to Covid-19, Briefing #1 Families and Communications [http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/CAPPTIVE\\_families\\_webfinal.pdf](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/CAPPTIVE_families_webfinal.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> See footnote 18 above

<sup>23</sup> For further information from families who have experienced this see the 'Life in Lockdown' report by Children Heard and Seen who report that only 29% of their respondents had experienced a video call and 100% of those respondents had experienced difficulties with the calls. <https://www.childrenheardandseen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Life-In-Lockdown-Report-2020.pdf>

## 10. Concerns for the future: release and family reintegration

“I worry that their relationship will be damaged if we go anymore time without visits. My child is only 6 and any more time without his Dad will make him drift away from him.”

“We are back to square one building their relationship back up”

Family re-integration after imprisonment has not been considered properly in either policy or research, but the re-entry of a parent following a period of isolation from the family has the potential to destabilise family structures and place strain on relationships<sup>24</sup>. These difficulties of return can be mitigated by the ongoing contact which parents in prison can have with their children during their sentence, including time out of prison on Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), or at home on Child Resettlement Leave (CRL), towards the end of their sentence. Caregivers expressed concerns about resettlement. The lack of contact through prison visits, ROTL, and CRL, due to the pandemic, means that parents will return home from prison, more distant than before, and in some instances, they will literally be strangers to their youngest children who do not know them. All those caring for babies or toddlers were concerned that the children would not know their parent, and any bond that had existed would have been broken by the lack of contact. There were concerns that the imprisoned parent would have spent so much time in their cell alone during the prison lockdown that they would be dealing with the trauma of prolonged solitary confinement as well as having to readjust to living in a household with children. Many of the parents in prison were reported to have experienced deteriorating mental health due to the restricted regime, and caregivers worried about how that would impact on their family when they were released. Their concerns around the children focused on children’s separation anxiety relating to the imprisoned parent, and many wondered whether the child’s fear of losing contact with their parent would ever diminish.

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<sup>24</sup> Adalist-Estrin (1996) *Homecoming: Children’s Adjustment to Parent’s Parole* Child Welfare League of America Annual Conference; Brunton-Smith, I., McCarthy, D.J. (2017) The Effects of Prisoner Attachment to Family on Re-entry Outcomes: A Longitudinal Assessment *The British Journal of Criminology*, Volume 57, Issue 2, 1, 463–482; Garcia (2016) Understanding the Lives of Mothers after Incarceration: Moving Beyond Socially Constructed Definitions of Motherhood, *Sociology Compass*, 10(1), 3-11; Naser,R.L., Hart, P.D. (2006) Family Members’ Experiences with Incarceration and Reentry *Western Criminology Review* 7(2), 20–31; Richie, B.E. (2001) Challenges Incarcerated Women Face as they return to their communities: findings from life history interviews. *Crime & Delinquency* 47(3), 368-389

## 11. Conclusion and Recommendations

Since March 2020, children with parents in prison have experienced significant harms to their relationships, wellbeing, physical and mental health. The government, the Ministry of Justice, and all concerned with children's wellbeing, should now make every effort to reduce those harms and to avoid inflicting further harm on children. In 2017 and 2019 the Farmer Review of the men's prison estate and the women's prison estate, recognised that 'the importance of family ties is a golden thread' running through the prison system<sup>25</sup>. Despite the government accepting the recommendations of those reviews, the management of family contact over the past 12 months has not met the needs of children who have a parent in prison, nor properly upheld their right to family life or their right to contact with a parent from whom they have been separated <sup>26</sup>.

It is not too late for changes to be made and these can be informed by the experiences of families, many of whom have provided feedback in different ways over the past year.

### Recommendations from the families

- 1) Prisons should communicate directly with families about the situation within the prison and the options for contact with prisoners.
- 2) The Government should provide a clear and publicly communicated roadmap for the re-establishment of prison visits, and the lifting of restrictions within prisons at the same time as announcements are made about the rest of the community.

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<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Justice, 2017, 'The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime' by Lord Farmer [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/642244/farmer-review-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/642244/farmer-review-report.pdf)

Ministry of Justice, 2019, 'The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime' by Lord Farmer

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/809467/farmer-review-women.PDF](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/809467/farmer-review-women.PDF)

<sup>26</sup> Human Rights Act, 1998 Article 8 ; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 9

- 3) Restricted prison regimes are detrimental to prisoners and their families, both in the short term and as they move towards release and reintegration as a family. Prison regimes should work to be as open as possible for the specific benefit and wellbeing of prisoners and their children.
- 4) There should be proper consideration as to whether prisoners who are parents can be released early from prison to serve the remainder of their sentence on licence.
- 5) Increase the capacity for video calls to once a week for every prisoner with children.
- 6) Improve the functionality of video calls, including removing limits on the number of children who can be present on a call.
- 7) If there is another lockdown, children of prisoners should have the same status as looked after children, to ensure that they are able to attend school if appropriate.
- 8) In cell telephony/ secured mobile phones should be made available to every prisoner to enable frequent phone contact between children and parents.

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