



# Scottish Attachment In Action

An investigation into the interplay between parental incarceration and attachment theory in families experiencing poverty and inequality



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<sup>1</sup> Drawings from children of prisoners across Europe, Children of Prisoners Europe Available at: <https://childrenofprisoners.eu/resources/kids-corner/childrens-drawings/>

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## **Introduction**

Attachment theory, introduced by British psychologist John Bowlby, has long been recognized as a fundamental framework for understanding the emotional bonds that form between children and their caregivers. The quality of these early attachment relationships plays a pivotal role in shaping a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development, laying the foundation for their future well-being. However, in the context of families struggling with multi-generational poverty and inequality, attachment dynamics can be profoundly affected by external circumstances like parental incarceration.

Parental incarceration can represent a significant challenge to the stability of family units, particularly for young children who are in their formative years of attachment formation. The impact of parental imprisonment reaches beyond the incarcerated individual and reverberates throughout the lives of their children and families. This essay aims to delve into the intricate interplay between attachment theory and parental incarceration, focusing on families navigating the complexities of multi-generational poverty and inequality.

Understanding the implications of parental incarceration on attachment is vital as it sheds light on the unique challenges faced by vulnerable children growing up in marginalized communities. These families often confront a multitude of stressors, including limited access to resources, adverse living conditions, and unequal distribution of social opportunities. As such, the nurturing caregiving environment is essential for fostering secure attachment bonds. Imprisonment of a parent means that these bonds may be compromised, affecting children's emotional and cognitive development.

Through an exploration of existing research, this essay seeks to highlight the various ways in which parental incarceration can disrupt attachment patterns in young children. It will investigate the emotional consequences of separation from a primary caregiver, examine the strain experienced by remaining caregivers, and analyse the behavioural and psychological challenges faced by children growing up in these circumstances. This essay will also utilise the voices of various interviewees who work closely with families affected by parental imprisonment to supplement the main body of the essay and shed some light on the experience of families, prisoners and people who work within and around the Scottish prison system.

Ultimately, the research presented here will contribute to a more nuanced comprehension of attachment theory within the context of families facing multi-generational poverty and inequality. It is hoped that this knowledge will foster empathy and informed decision-making among policymakers, practitioners, and society, to create a more supportive and inclusive environment for these vulnerable children and their families. Only through a collective effort to address the underlying issues at hand can we work towards breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and ensuring a brighter future for the youngest members of society.

## **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory is a seminal psychological framework that sheds light on the fundamental dynamics of early emotional relationships between infants and their caregivers. Inspired by his observations of children separated from their parents during World War II, Bowlby proposed that these early interactions play a central role in shaping a child's emotional development and future interpersonal relationships.

The core tenets of attachment theory revolve around the innate and adaptive nature of the attachment system. Bowlby posited that infants are biologically predisposed to seek proximity and contact with their primary caregivers when experiencing distress, anxiety, or fear. This proximity-seeking behaviour serves a crucial evolutionary function, as it ensures the child's protection, safety, and emotional well-being during their most vulnerable stages of life.

### Some Key Concepts of Attachment Theory:

**Attachment Behavioural System:** The attachment behavioural system is an inherent and instinctual mechanism that drives infants to seek comfort and support from their caregivers. Through behaviours like crying, clinging, and proximity-seeking, infants express their needs for care and protection, eliciting responsive caregiving from their primary attachment figures.

**Attachment Styles:** Based on observations and research by Mary Ainsworth, Bowlby's collaborator, attachment theorists identified distinct attachment styles that emerge during infancy. These styles reflect the quality of the emotional bond between the child and caregiver. The primary attachment styles are:

- **Secure Attachment:** Characterized by a strong bond, the child feels secure, trusts their caregiver, and uses them as a secure base to explore the world.
- **Insecure-Avoidant Attachment:** Occurs when caregivers are consistently unresponsive, leading the child to suppress emotional expression and cope independently.
- **Insecure-Ambivalent/Resistant Attachment:** Arises when caregivers are inconsistently responsive, resulting in the child becoming anxious and uncertain about receiving care.

**Internal Working Models:** Attachment experiences during infancy create internal working models, cognitive representations that shape how individuals perceive themselves and others in relationships. These models can influence emotional regulation, expectations, and behaviour in future relationships.

**Critical Period and Continuity Hypothesis:** Bowlby proposed that the attachment system is most active and malleable during the early years of life, suggesting a critical period for attachment formation. Additionally, the continuity hypothesis posits that early attachment patterns tend to persist and influence later relationship dynamics.

## **Parental Incarceration in Scotland**

### Some facts and figures

- In Scotland, the average daily prison population in 2021-2022 was 7,504, an increase of 2% from the previous year.
- The population of women in prison on an average day in 2021-22 fell by 5% from 298 in 2020-21 to 282, while the average daily population of men increased by 3% from 7,037 in 2020-21 to 7,220.<sup>2</sup>
- The number of individuals who spent any time in prison remained at a similar level in 2021-22 compared to 2020-21, increasing by only 1% from 14,241 to 14,411.
- The average age of individuals spending time in prison in 2021-22 was 36.9.
- The Scottish Government estimates that there are around 20,000 children in Scotland who are affected by parental imprisonment<sup>3</sup>, and 7% of Scottish children live through the imprisonment of a parent during their school years<sup>4</sup>. Other studies have estimated the number of children experiencing parental imprisonment to be as high as 27,000 – more than those whose parents are divorced.<sup>5</sup>
- 63% of prisoners have children, and 60% of all women in prison have children.
- 61% of parents in prison had their children when they were under the age of 18<sup>6</sup>
- In Scotland, only 17% of fathers looked after their children while the mother was in custody.<sup>7</sup>
- The average length of custodial sentences for all crimes, in 2020-21 was 329 days, 14% longer than in 2011-12, confirming a long-term increase in average sentence length.<sup>8</sup>
- Scotland has 17 prisons in total, 15 of which are managed by the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) and two which are privately managed under contract with the SPS<sup>9</sup>
- 45% of prisoners lose contact with their family whilst in prison<sup>10</sup>
- 95% of the prison population is made up of men, and 1 out of 3 come from the 10% most deprived areas in Scotland<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Scottish Government (2022a) Scottish prison population statistics 2021-22, Scottish Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-prison-population-statistics-2021-22/pages/1/>

<sup>3</sup> The Scottish Government (2022b) The vision for justice in Scotland, Scottish Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/vision-justice-scotland/pages/9/#:~:text=There%20are%20an%20estimated%20%2C000,difficult%20to%20maintain%20familial%20relationships.>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.parentingacrossscotland.org/info-for-practitioners/facts-about-families/children-with-parents-in-prison/>

<sup>5</sup> C Jardine (2019) *Families, Imprisonment and Legitimacy: The Cost of Custodial Penalties*. Oxford: Routledge

<sup>6</sup> J Carnie & R Broderick (2020) Scottish Prison Survey 2019

<sup>7</sup> Parenting across Scotland (no date) Info for practitioners | Parenting across Scotland. Available at: <https://www.parentingacrossscotland.org/info-for-practitioners/facts-about-families/children-with-parents-in-prison/>

<sup>8</sup> The Scottish Government (2023) Criminal proceedings in Scotland: 2020-2021, Scottish Government. Available at: [https://www.gov.scot/publications/criminal-proceedings-scotland-2020-21/pages/13/#:~:text=Average%20custodial%20sentence&text=The%20average%20length%20of%20custodial,%2D12%20\(289%20days\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/criminal-proceedings-scotland-2020-21/pages/13/#:~:text=Average%20custodial%20sentence&text=The%20average%20length%20of%20custodial,%2D12%20(289%20days))

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Prisons/Prisons.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Kincaid, Manon Roberts & Eddie Kane, (2019) *Children of prisoners: Fixing a Broken System*

<sup>11</sup> Scottish Government (2022) Scottish Prison Population 2020-21



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### Impact of Parental Incarceration

This section will focus on the various effects that the incarceration of a parent may have on children, drawing from various studies carried out by different researchers and organisations. The effects and consequences of parental incarceration, and the extent to which these negatively impact a child's life, will be mediated by a range of factors. These factors will be explored later, but for now, we will explore the impact of incarceration of a parent on children generally, before looking into how various factors may impact this.

#### Attachment

There are many ways to assess children's attachment to their parents and caregivers during parental incarceration, and various studies from both the UK and the US have sought to explore representations of attachment using these methods. Some approaches include:

#### Attachment Story Completion Task

- In this task, children are presented with a series of incomplete stories or scenarios related to attachment experiences. The child is then asked to complete the story by filling in the missing parts. The stories typically involve separation, loss, or reunion situations with significant attachment figures, including the incarcerated parent.
- The responses provided by the child during this task can offer valuable insights into their emotional understanding and representation of the incarcerated parent. It allows researchers and clinicians to assess the child's feelings, perceptions, and coping

<sup>12</sup> Drawings from children of prisoners across Europe, Children of Prisoners Europe Available at: <https://childrenofprisoners.eu/resources/kids-corner/childrens-drawings/>

mechanisms related to the parent's absence. The Attachment Story Completion Task can also shed light on any potential emotional distress or unresolved feelings the child may be experiencing due to the parent's incarceration.

#### Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment

- The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) is a self-report questionnaire designed to assess the quality of children's attachment relationships with their parents and peers. The IPPA consists of two separate scales: one for assessing attachment to parents and the other for assessing attachment to peers. It is often used with children and adolescents to measure the strength of their emotional bonds with their incarcerated parent.
- The IPPA includes items that gauge the child's perceptions of trust, communication, and emotional closeness with their parents. By administering the IPPA, researchers and practitioners can gain insights into how the parent's incarceration has affected the child's feelings of attachment, trust, and security within the parent-child relationship. The questionnaire can also help identify any potential disruptions or changes in the child's attachment patterns as a result of the parent's absence.

#### The Strange Situation

- The Strange Situation is a standardised procedure commonly used to assess the quality of attachment between infants or young children and their primary caregivers. It was originally developed by Mary Ainsworth to measure the attachment behaviour of infants to their mothers.
- During the Strange Situation, the child is exposed to a series of brief separations and reunions with the caregiver in a controlled laboratory setting. The child's responses to these separations and reunions, as well as their exploration of the new environment, are observed and categorized into different attachment styles.

#### Attachment Q-sort

- The Q-sort method involves a set of descriptive statements or items that capture various behaviors, attitudes, and emotional expressions relevant to attachment. These statements cover a wide range of attachment-related behaviors and emotions, such as seeking comfort, exploring the environment, and responding to the caregiver's presence and absence. The statements are carefully constructed to represent different attachment patterns and are usually derived from attachment theory.

In terms of how parental imprisonment impacts attachment patterns, multiple studies have shown varying effects on a child's viewpoint of their parent once imprisoned. One study found that 41% of participating children reported having positive feelings towards their imprisoned parent or feelings of missing/wanting to be with them, while 31% reported negative feelings such as anger and resentment, and 28% reported mixed feelings of both positive and negative<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rebecca J. Shlafer & Julie Poehlmann (2010) *Attachment and caregiving relationships in families affected by parental incarceration*, *Attachment & Human Development*, 12:4, 5

Imprisonment causes a physical separation between a parent and child which can in turn lead to emotional distancing resulting in insecure attachments. Young children are unable to maintain meaningful attachments without regular ongoing contact with them. Imprisonment disrupts this contact for long periods of time, making it more challenging to retain that attachment. As children get older, they are increasingly able to sustain attachments, even in the absence of regular contact, as they are more able to keep that parent in mind.<sup>14</sup> However, studies have also shown that having limited or no contact with an imprisoned parent is associated with more feelings of alienation towards that parent<sup>15</sup>. With regards to attachment patterns, a study found that 63% of children with incarcerated mothers had insecure attachment representations of their mothers<sup>16</sup>

### Adverse childhood experiences

Stressful or traumatic incidents during childhood which can have negative effects which individuals and carry into adulthood can be classified as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and include a variety of circumstances including domestic violence, parental abandonment through divorce or separation, neglect, abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), parental abuse of drugs or alcohol, and having a parent with a mental health condition<sup>17</sup>. Parental incarceration is also recognised as an ACE, and children of imprisoned parents are five times more likely to be exposed to other ACEs. The link between parental incarceration and likelihood of experiencing other ACEs increases the younger the children are<sup>18</sup>. Children with a higher exposure to ACEs are also more likely to go on to engage in behaviours which negatively affect their health and can also be considered antisocial behaviour, such as binge drinking, smoking and drug use<sup>19</sup>.

### Mental and physical health

A review of multiple studies concluded that children of imprisoned parents are more than twice as likely to experience mental health problems compared to the general population<sup>20</sup>. As mentioned, children who experience parental imprisonment are at higher risk to partaking in dangerous activities such as smoking, binge drinking and using drugs. This not only can impact them socially but also leaves them vulnerable to a range of health issues such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. A study even found that children of imprisoned parents are significantly more likely to have a premature death.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Anna T. Smyke, Letia O. Bailey, Charles H. Zeanah, *Mental Health Implications For Children Of Incarcerated Parents*, Loyola Law Review Vol. 63 2017

<sup>15</sup> Rebecca J. Shlafer & Julie Poehlmann (2010) *Attachment and caregiving relationships in families affected by parental incarceration*, Attachment & Human Development, 12:4

<sup>16</sup> J Poehlmann (2005) *Representations of attachment relationships in children of incarcerated mothers*, Child Development, 76, 679–696

<sup>17</sup> Public Health Scotland, *Overview of aces*. Available at: <https://www.healthscotland.scot/population-groups/children/adverse-childhood-experiences-aces/overview-of-aces>

<sup>18</sup> K Turney (2018) *Adverse childhood experiences among children of incarcerated parents*, Children and Youth Services Review, 89, pp. 218–225

<sup>19</sup> Health Scotland (2017) *Tackling the attainment gap by preventing and responding to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)* NHS Health Scotland 2017

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Murray & David P. Farrington, *The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children*, The University of Chicago Press, Crime and Justice, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2008), pp. 133-206

<sup>21</sup> Steve G. A. van de Weijer, Holly S. Smallbone & Valery Bouwman, (2018) *Parental Imprisonment and Premature Mortality in Adulthood*, Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology 4, 148-161



### Academic and behavioural challenges

The COPING project found that 12.9% of UK children participating in the study who had a parent in prison had been excluded from school<sup>22</sup> (including temporarily or permanently), a significantly higher proportion than the UK average – 1.2% in Scotland<sup>23</sup> and 7% in England. However, Scottish statistics show that pupils with additional support needs are five times more likely to be excluded than those without, and children in the most deprived areas are four and a half times more likely to be excluded than those in the least deprived areas. While it is unclear whether the higher rate of exclusion is linked directly to parental incarceration, or if it is more closely tied to other factors such as poverty, there are undoubtedly several unique challenges which children of prisoners must face. Children with a parent in prison may have to take time off school to visit said parent, leading not only to time missed in class but also potential stigma from teachers and other students. One study found that half of the children who participated had to change schools when their mother was sent to prison.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, many children are hesitant to inform teachers about the incarcerated status of their parent, leading to unauthorised school absences which can further contribute to exclusions. A review of multiple studies found that, on average, children affected by parental imprisonment are 3.4 times more likely to participate in antisocial delinquent behaviour compared to the general population<sup>25</sup>. Another study found that 26% of children with incarcerated mothers who participated in the study went on to be convicted of a crime in adulthood.<sup>26</sup>

### Secrecy and trust

Many children are not told the truth about where their parent is and are given excuses for their absence such as that their parent is working away from home or is in hospital. This can cause feelings of confusion and emotional distress, as they can often sense that something is not right and that they are not being told the whole truth. This can also be particularly straining on the remaining caregiver and/or other family members, who must toil with the decision of whether to tell the child something that may cause them even more distress.

### Loss

It is clear that separation from a parent for any prolonged period of time can cause emotional distress and trauma to a child, whether it be that a parent is hospitalised, moves away, or dies. However, in contrast to other types of separation, parental incarceration can be a particularly ambiguous type of separation which leads to a confusing sense of loss for a young child. Should a parent die, a period of mourning and grief, while undeniably distressing, can lead to acceptance and a sense of closure. However, parental incarceration does not allow this level of certainty and natural grief response, leading to feelings of confusion and uncertainty over the status of the incarcerated parent.

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<sup>22</sup> Adele D. Jones et al, *COPING: Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health*, University of Huddersfield, p263

<sup>23</sup> The Scottish Government (2022) Summary statistics for schools in Scotland 2021, Scottish Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland/pages/8/>

<sup>24</sup> Women's Breakout, *Children on the edge: Children affected by maternal imprisonment* (2016)

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Murray and David P. Farrington (2008) *The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children*, The University of Chicago Press, Crime and Justice, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 133-206

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Murray & Lynne Murray (2010) *Parental incarceration, attachment and child psychopathology*, Attachment & Human Development, 12:4

### Social stigma

Another factor which contributes to the distress caused by parental incarceration is the social stigma surrounding imprisonment. While separations previously mentioned such as death or hospitalization usually elicit sympathy and support from others, the negative and stigmatising associations with having a parent in prison can lead to feelings of isolation and fear of judgement from others. Children and families often experience a response from others that leaves them feeling guilty by association, and children in this situation are frequently bullied at school.

### Financial Impact

#### Welfare/Benefits

Many families dealing with the issue of parental incarceration rely on welfare to get by, and these services can be the difference between merely surviving or having a chance at thriving. While there can often be direct removal of a flow of job income due to incarceration, there may also be effects on the types of benefits families can receive, putting further strain on an already difficult financial situation. Below are some of the main changes to welfare and benefits that families may experience when their family member goes to prison:

- Child benefit: Parents can get child benefits while they are a prisoner as long as they continue to be responsible for the child and the money is being used to support the child. However, if the child is taken into care by the local authority and placed with foster carers or kinship carers for 8 weeks or more, the incarcerated parent cannot continue to receive child benefits.
- Universal credit: Parents cannot get universal credit while they are detained in custody pending trial or sentence, or convicted under a sentence, except for the housing costs element for rent, which can continue to be paid for up to six months, but only if it was paid immediately before they went into prison and they are not expected to be in custody for more than six months.
- Tax credits: While their partner is in prison, remaining caregivers may become eligible for working tax credit and help with childcare costs if they are working at least 16 hours a week.
- Child tax credit: Parents can continue to get child tax credit while they are in prison but only if it is considered a temporary absence and the child still normally lives with them. There is no set period of time that is considered temporary, but it depends on the circumstances. If they are in prison and the child is normally living with someone else, such as an older sibling aged at least 16, or another relative who has taken on responsibility for their children, that person may be able to claim child tax credit or universal credit for the child instead. If their child is taken into care by the local authority and placed with foster carers or kinship carers, they cannot continue to receive child tax credit.

#### Cost of supporting imprisoned family member

A study by Families Outside found that respondents spent an average of £300 per month providing support to their family member in custody when they are on remand, which

equates to around half their average monthly income<sup>27</sup>. They also found that families spent on average £180 a month (a third of the disposable monthly family income) and one and a half days per week of their time supporting a family member during their prison sentence.<sup>28</sup>

### Loss of income

Another obvious impact of having a family member in prison is loss of income from that person, which in many cases is the only source of reliable income the family has. Due to the suddenness of this change, families often struggle to get by, as the remaining caregiver may also have to leave their job to take on more parental responsibility, or even take on more work to support the family and rely on childcare while they are working, which can be extremely expensive.

### Maternal And Parental Incarceration

While both maternal and paternal imprisonment can create a variety of disruptions for children, studies have suggested that maternal incarceration can be more damaging for a child's later outcomes than incarceration of their father<sup>29</sup>. This can be for several reasons, namely that mothers are more likely to be a primary caregiver to their children and are also more likely to be single parents compared to fathers. This means that when mother's go to prison, children are much more likely to have to leave their family home and be placed with a new caregiver. Just 5% of children get to stay in their family home when their mother goes to prison – which can also lead to other disruptions such as changing schools and leaving their current social circles. When father's go to prison, children are likely to stay with their mothers, but just 9% of children in the UK are cared for by their father after experiencing maternal imprisonment.<sup>30</sup> Therefore a large portion (40%) of children whose mother go to prison are cared for by grandparents, and foster care is also more prevalent in children affected by maternal imprisonment<sup>31</sup>. The emotional and behavioural impact of maternal vs paternal imprisonment is varied: the COPING project's study found that, despite previous research suggestion otherwise, children of imprisoned parents missed their fathers equally as much as their mothers when they were incarcerated.<sup>32</sup> Another study showed that imprisoned mothers reported more deterioration in their child's behaviour after being imprisoned than imprisoned fathers<sup>33</sup>

## Contributing Factors

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<sup>27</sup> Families Outside, *Paying the Price: A Project on the Financial Impact on Families of Imprisonment and Release*, Financial Impact Report 2023

<sup>28</sup> Families Outside, *Paying the Price: A Project on the Financial Impact on Families of Imprisonment and Release*, Financial Impact Report 2023

<sup>29</sup> C Kruttschnitt (2010). *The Paradox of Women's Imprisonment*. *Daedalus*, 139(3), 32-42.

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Beresford (2018) *What about me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system*, Prison Reform Trust.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Kincaid, Manon Roberts & Eddie Kane, (2019) *Children of prisoners: Fixing a Broken*

<sup>32</sup> Adele D. Jones et al, *COPING: Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health*, University of Huddersfield, p302 and 303

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Murray & Lynne Murray (2010) *Parental incarceration, attachment and child psychopathology*, *Attachment & Human Development*, 12:4

Research has shown that children and families of incarcerated individuals have often experienced multiple disadvantages which existed even before the incarceration of a family member, including poverty, domestic violence, substance misuse, physical and mental ill-health, abuse, and historic involvement in the justice system.

Research into the causal effect of parental incarceration and insecure attachment/negative outcomes for children is scarce, as it is difficult to ascertain whether negative outcomes for children are directly linked to the parents' imprisonment, or whether it is caused by other factors. This is because most studies only begin after the parent is imprisoned, making it harder to identify what the effects of imprisonment are without surveying the child beforehand.

One consensus from various studies, however, is that – while parental incarceration may not be the *only* cause of these negative outcomes, it is certainly likely to increase the chances of these negative outcomes or exacerbate existing problems. Overall, parental imprisonment very rarely has any positive effects on children. Based on the COPING project's research, around half (51.3%) of UK children that participated in the study reported that they believed parental imprisonment had a bad effect on them with only 9.8% reporting good effects<sup>34</sup>.

#### Remaining Caregiver

The ability of younger children to keep in contact with their parent is often controlled by whoever is looking after them in the absence of their parent. One study found that a recurring theme that appeared when interviewing children was the idea of the caregiver as a 'gatekeeper' to children's contact with their parent, where the caregiver would limit contact by blocking calls and not allowing visits<sup>35</sup>. Caregivers may worry about the effects of a child having contact with someone who has committed a crime and is therefore in prison, despite that that person being their parent. This can lead to a breakdown in communication between the child and their imprisoned parent that is completely out of their control.

### Protective factors

The interplay between attachment theory and parental incarceration in families living in generational poverty creates a complex web of challenges and vulnerabilities for both parents and children. Parental incarceration can have profound and lasting impacts on the emotional, social, and economic well-being of the entire family. However, amidst these adversities, certain protective factors emerge that can act as buffers, promoting resilience and positive outcomes for children and parents alike. This section will explore some of the key protective factors that play a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of parental incarceration in families facing these challenges.

#### Supportive and Stable Caregivers

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<sup>34</sup> Adele D. Jones et al, *COPING: Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health*, University of Huddersfield, p264

<sup>35</sup> Rebecca J. Shlafer & Julie Poehlmann (2010) *Attachment and caregiving relationships in families affected by parental incarceration*, *Attachment & Human Development*, 12:4

One of the most significant protective factors for children whose parents are incarcerated is the presence of supportive and stable caregivers in their lives. These caregivers can be extended family members, grandparents, other close relatives, or even close family friends. When children have access to consistent and nurturing caregivers who can provide love, guidance, and emotional support, they are more likely to experience a sense of security and stability during their parents' absence. These caregivers serve as important attachment figures and can help children develop healthy coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges they face.

#### Access to Education and Community Resources

Education and access to community resources are vital protective factors that can mitigate the impact of parental incarceration in families living in generational poverty. Quality education equips children with essential skills and knowledge, improving their chances of breaking the cycle of poverty. Schools that recognize the unique needs of children affected by parental incarceration and offer counselling services, mentorship programs, and support groups can significantly contribute to their emotional well-being and academic success. Furthermore, community-based organizations and government programs can provide additional support, such as counselling, vocational training, and housing assistance, which help families stabilize and overcome financial hardships.

#### Strong Social Support Networks

Social support networks play a crucial role in fostering resilience among families grappling with the challenges of parental incarceration and generational poverty. Having individuals or groups that offer emotional, practical, and financial support can reduce feelings of isolation and vulnerability. These networks might include neighbours, religious communities, or community organizations. In such networks, families can find empathetic listeners, guidance, and even financial aid when needed. These supportive relationships contribute to maintaining positive family dynamics and facilitating healthy parent-child attachments despite the hardships faced.

#### Parental Involvement and Reintegration Support

For incarcerated parents, maintaining meaningful contact with their children through letters, phone calls, and visitation can be vital in preserving the parent-child bond. Parental involvement, even during incarceration, can foster a sense of connection and security for children. Moreover, providing incarcerated parents with access to parenting programs and reintegration support upon their release can help them develop positive parenting skills and successfully transition back into family life. These programs can also address the trauma experienced by both parents and children during the period of separation.

In families affected by parental incarceration and generational poverty, protective factors serve as critical elements that can counteract the negative effects of adversity and promote resilience. By recognizing and reinforcing these protective factors, policymakers, practitioners, and communities can play a pivotal role in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and supporting families in overcoming the impact of parental incarceration.

## Intervention And Support Available In Scotland

### Families Outside

Families Outside<sup>36</sup> is a Scottish charity that provides support and assistance to families dealing with parental incarceration. The organization aims to address the unique challenges faced by families affected by imprisonment and offers a range of services and support to improve their well-being and resilience such as information and advice, a helpline, advocacy services, training and workshops, and visitor centres.

### Sacro

Sacro<sup>37</sup> is a voluntary organisation that provides free transport to some prisons for people who live in Glasgow or Edinburgh and the Lothians to access this. Sacro runs a Transport Service for people in a long-term relationship with those detained in Scottish prisons and patients detained at the State Hospital. Transport Volunteers receive training and are compensated for the use of their car with a mileage rate, and paid an amount to cover something to eat and a coffee while on a task.

### The Assisted Prison Visits Scheme

The Assisted Prison Visits Unit<sup>38</sup> can help with the travel costs of visiting a family member in prison. Assistance is normally given towards one visit every two weeks and up to 26 visits in a 12-month period. If family members cannot travel to the prison and back home in one day, a contribution to the costs of an overnight stay will be considered. To get reimbursed, visitors must keep tickets and apply within 28 days of the visit. Visitors can also get help with the costs of childcare if they have to pay a registered childcare provider to look after their child while visiting the prisoner.

### Crossreach

Crossreach<sup>39</sup> provides support for prison visitors in Perth and Polmont by managing visitors centres where families can access a safe space to visit their family member in prison which includes free refreshments before and after their visit, informal play, emotional support, information on wellbeing and financial support for necessities. They aim to facilitate the maintenance of contact between the prisoner and their families, improve the well-being of children, improve the quality of prison visits and thereby increase self-esteem and reduce social isolation for both families and prisoners.

### Children Heard and Seen

Children Heard and Seen<sup>40</sup> is a charity which provides support and interventions for children with a parent in prison, with a focus on reducing intergenerational offending, and mitigating the impacts of parental imprisonment for children and young people. Whilst primarily based in Oxfordshire, they accept referrals to support families across the country.

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.sacro.org.uk>

<sup>38</sup> <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81d61ae5274a2e8ab56170/APVU-guidance-for-visitors-GOVUK.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.crossreach.org.uk>

<sup>40</sup> <https://childrenheardandseen.co.uk/what-we-offer/>

## Prison Visits

Prison visits play a crucial role in maintaining contact and fostering a bond between an incarcerated parent and their child. These visits can have both benefits and disadvantages for children, and families may face various challenges when attempting to visit prisons. In any case, the impact of prison visits on attachment bonds between incarcerated parents and their children can be significant.

### Importance of Prison Visits for Maintaining Contact and Bond:

- Emotional Connection: Prison visits allow children to see and interact with their incarcerated parent face-to-face, fostering an emotional connection that is difficult to achieve through other means of communication.
- Sense of Security: Regular visits can provide children with a sense of security and reassurance, knowing that their parent is physically present, even in challenging circumstances.
- Positive Memories: Visiting a parent in prison offers opportunities for shared experiences and positive memories, which can be meaningful and comforting for both the child and the incarcerated parent.
- Maintaining Parent-Child Relationship: Prison visits help preserve the parent-child relationship and can mitigate the sense of loss and separation experienced by the child.

### Potential negative effects of prison visits for children:

- Emotional Distress: Visiting a parent in prison can be emotionally distressing for children, particularly if the prison environment is intimidating or unfamiliar.
- Stigma: Children may experience social stigma or judgment from others due to their parent's incarceration, which can affect their self-esteem.
- Disruptions in Routine: Prison visits can disrupt a child's regular schedule and may require long travels, making it challenging for families to maintain consistency.

### Boundaries and Challenges for Families During Prison Visits:

- Distance and Travel: Families living far from the prison face logistical challenges, including long distances and transportation costs, making frequent visits difficult. In the UK, male prisoners are detained an average of 50 miles from their home, and females an average of 64 miles away. For females held in HMP Eastwood Park, the average distance from home for female offenders rises to over 150 miles, because there are no female prisons in Wales and many Welsh female offenders must be detained at the closest prison in England<sup>41</sup>. This not only puts a greater physical barrier between offenders and their families, but also a financial barrier as visits can be costly and remaining family members cannot guarantee time away from other responsibilities to make these journeys. Travelling for multiple hours can also create an uncomfortable experience for children and perpetuate a negative association of visiting their parent and a feeling of discomfort.

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<sup>41</sup> Prison Reform Trust (2017) *Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment?*

- Strict Visitation Rules: Prisons often have strict visitation rules, including limited visiting hours, security protocols, and background checks, which can be burdensome for families.
- Emotional Strain: Visiting a parent in prison can be emotionally taxing for both the child and the caregiver, especially when faced with a restrictive prison environment.



Overall, while prison visits can be essential in maintaining contact and a bond between incarcerated parents and their children, the experience can be complex and multifaceted, requiring a thoughtful approach to ensure the child's well-being and emotional needs are prioritised.

While there is little research available on children's experiences visiting prisons – with most research focussing on visits as a tool to reduce reoffending and much of the existing research from the UK focussing on England and Wales – a recent Scottish project has attempted to address the gaps in knowledge in this area by drawing from a study commissioned by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to explore the impact on children of having a parent involved in the criminal justice system, specifically focussing on their experience of visiting a parent in prison.<sup>43</sup>

#### Experience of the incarcerated parent

One family with a father of three in prison reported that the father's long-term mental health issues were acting as a barrier for visitation, as the incarcerated father struggled to cope with the high number of people in the visitation rooms and the resulting noise and busyness

<sup>42</sup> Drawings from children of prisoners across Europe, Children of Prisoners Europe. Available at: <https://childrenofprisoners.eu/resources/kids-corner/childrens-drawings/>

<sup>43</sup> Kelly Lockwood et al (2022) *A double-edged sword: Children's experiences of visiting a parent in prison in Scotland*, Probation Journal, Vol. 69(2) 159–176

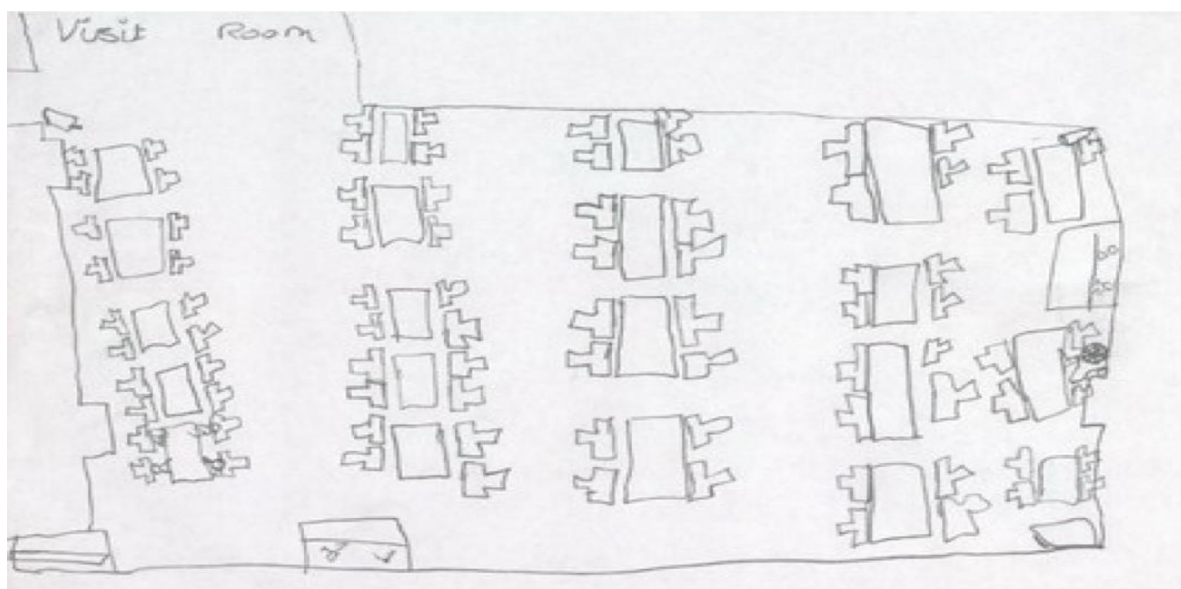


causing stress and anxiety for him, leading him to cancel visits with his family. This highlights the often stressful environment of prison visitation rooms, not only for children but also for the incarcerated parent. Another parent, a mother who previously served time in prison, similarly reported that the environment of visits, including loud noises and the presence of uniformed officers, exacerbated her PTSD and caused visits to become a negative experience.

### Experience of children

Children in these studies described visiting rooms as depressing and intimidating, and that the supposedly meaningful interactions with their incarcerated parent felt unnatural and even monotonous. Potential improvements were suggested by children in the study, including having a visiting space outside and activities that are less forced and more natural. Another reason why children reported having negative experiences was the sense of hostility from prison staff, leading to children feeling unwelcome and stigmatised. The lack of privacy and intimacy was also an area of concern, as children are often unable to play with or make physical contact with a parent. Visitors are also in close proximity to other prisoners, visitors and guards, making it difficult to have any kind of private conversation without fear of eavesdropping. Overall, children in the study described visits generally as tense, awkward, and artificial.

In another study, when asked about their experiences of visiting a parent in prison, not a single child reported a positive experience<sup>44</sup>. From these accounts of both children and parents, it is clear that creating a welcoming and child-friendly environment in visiting spaces is an important factor when considering the benefits of prison visits for both children and parents. Many prisons in Scotland could be doing more to facilitate visits from children so as not to discourage visits and further perpetuate a loss of contact. Creating a space where families can have meaningful and positive interactions would increase the likelihood of children maintaining contact and emotional bonds with their incarcerated parent.



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<sup>44</sup> Rebecca J. Shlafer & Julie Poehlmann (2010) *Attachment and caregiving relationships in families affected by parental incarceration*, *Attachment & Human Development*, 12:4

<sup>45</sup> Drawings from children of prisoners across Europe, Children of Prisoners Europe. Available at: <https://childrenofprisoners.eu/resources/kids-corner/childrens-drawings/>

## Qualitative Research

Hearing the lived experiences of people who deal with these issues is extremely important, not only for a deeper understanding of the issues themselves and the people affected but also to get a better idea of what could be done to improve the experience and outcomes of families in these situations.

Due to time constraints, I was, unfortunately, unable to speak with families affected by parental incarceration directly. However, I was able to speak with three individuals who work very closely with these families, who were able to provide some valuable insight from their experiences working in visitors' centres and prisons in Scotland. These communications took the form of semi-structured interviews and written responses.

Below is an outline of the main points covered in these interviews, which have been summarised and grouped based on subject matter. While answers and comments have been reworded, every effort has been made to ensure that no comments are taken out of context so as not to misinterpret the intentions of the interviewees.

### ***What is the process/experience like for families/children visiting a loved one in prison?***

- **Security and Check-In Process:** Visitors are required to go through a thorough security check. They need to present identification, have their picture taken, and pass through a body scanner. Additionally, they may be asked to remove any metal items and sometimes even their shoes. This process is akin to airport security measures, aimed at ensuring the safety and security of the prison environment.
- **Visitor's Centre:** After passing through the initial security checks, visitors enter a visitor's centre. This centre is designed to be welcoming and family-friendly. There is a Kid's Play Area with bright and colourful features, aimed at creating a child-friendly environment. The centre has a mascot whose presence and playful materials, like stickers and cuddly toys, provide comfort and familiarity to children.
- **Types of Visits:** There are two types of prison visits described: children's visits and normal visit sessions. Children's visits are designed for kids who have a parent in prison, and they offer a more relaxed and interactive experience. Families can engage in various activities, including crafts, painting, and games. In contrast, normal visit sessions have stricter rules and less interactivity, with visitors expected to remain in their seats. During children's visits, parents can cuddle their children and have more contact, while normal visits involve limited physical contact.
- **Emotional and Practical Support:** Visitors are offered emotional and practical support within the visitor's centre. The staff are trained to be trauma-aware, and they provide free food, refreshments, and assistance to visitors.
- **Challenges and Emotional Impact:** The experience of visiting a prison can be emotionally challenging, particularly for small children who may not fully understand the context or the reason for their visit. The structured and sometimes noisy nature of the visit room can be overwhelming. Additionally, if the families are not accustomed to the structured visit schedule, it can be emotionally draining due to the limited time and contact available during the visit.

### ***What challenges do families face when trying to visit someone in prison?***

- **Financial Challenges:** The primary challenge faced by families visiting their loved ones in prison is financial. Visiting the prison can be expensive, particularly when it comes to transportation costs. Traveling to the prison, whether by train or car, can be financially burdensome. The cost of travel is further exacerbated for families traveling long distances, which may require lengthy journeys. Additionally, the financial strain extends to expenses within the prison, such as using vending machines.
- **Supporting Prisoners:** Families are also often expected to financially support the incarcerated parent by putting money into the Prisoner Personal Cash (PPC) account. This adds to the overall financial burden on families.
- **Barriers to Regular Visits:** Bringing children up regularly for visits can be challenging for families. Not all families are willing or able to do so, and various family dynamics can further complicate this. The financial pressure and logistical difficulties of travelling with young children, particularly for long distances, are significant barriers to regular visitation.
- **Debt and Economic Impact:** The financial strain associated with prison visits can lead to mounting debt for families. They may find themselves in a situation where they need to rely on food banks or other charities to support them with basic household items. Many individuals who were previously debt-free can quickly accumulate substantial debt due to the financial demands of supporting their incarcerated loved ones.
- **Access to Help with Visits:** There is a scheme in place to provide financial assistance to families with the cost of visits. However, the eligibility criteria for this scheme are limited to those on specific benefits or with incomes below a certain threshold. Applying for this assistance can be challenging, as it is often done online, which some individuals may lack access to or confidence in using. Additionally, the requirement to get a form stamped in the prison as evidence for the visit can carry stigma. The process of receiving reimbursement for visit-related expenses can be slow, with wait times of several weeks or more.
- **Support from Prison Workers:** Prison workers are actively involved in helping families apply for financial assistance with visits and providing encouragement to overcome the barriers, such as the stigma and practical challenges associated with applying for help.

### ***How important is the remaining caregiver with regards to whether children maintain contact with their parent in prison?***

- **Crucial Role:** The remaining caregiver, often the non-incarcerated parent or grandparent, plays a crucial role in facilitating and maintaining the connection between the imprisoned parent and their child.
- **Challenges Due to Relationship Dynamics:** The maintenance of contact can be challenging when there are changes in relationship dynamics. For instance, if the incarcerated parent and the other parent have split up, this can create barriers to

visitation. In some cases, the remaining caregiver may be uncomfortable with other family members facilitating the visits, which can limit the imprisoned parent's access to their child.

- **Impact on the Child:** These challenges have a direct impact on the child's ability to maintain contact with their parent in prison. The child's access to the imprisoned parent may be limited if the remaining caregiver is not supportive of visitation or if there are conflicts within the family.
- **Family Dynamics:** The level of support from the remaining caregiver is highly dependent on the specific family dynamics. In some cases, grandparents may step in to facilitate visits if the parents are no longer together. The ability of the imprisoned parent to maintain contact with their child is intricately linked to how these family dynamics play out.

### ***Is visiting a parent in prison a positive or negative experience for children?***

- **Mixed Feelings Depending on Age:** The experience of visiting a parent in prison can be a mix of positive and negative emotions, and this often depends on the age of the child. For younger children, particularly those below school age, they may not fully comprehend the situation and might have a more positive, albeit limited, experience during the visit.
- **Emotional Challenges for Older Children:** Older children, especially adolescents, may find the experience more emotionally challenging. One interviewee gives an example of a 13-year-old boy who had a difficult time leaving his mother after a visit. His tears and distress were apparent, indicating the emotional toll of the visit's end.
- **Quality Time Offered During Visits:** Some prison visits, particularly children's visits, provide an opportunity for quality time and interaction between the child and the incarcerated parent. In some cases, this might be even more than what the child receives at home.
- **Mixed Reactions:** While many children seem to love the visit and participate in activities like arts and crafts or play with toys, they may become tearful when leaving, especially if there are security issues that prevent entry to the prison. The staff is dedicated to helping resolve such issues to ensure a positive experience.
- **Importance of Maintaining Connection:** It is emphasized that maintaining a connection between the child and the incarcerated parent, either through physical visits or virtual means, is crucial. Some children may develop anxiety or misconceptions about the parent's well-being if the connection is not maintained.
- **Support Materials:** Support materials provided by organizations like Families Outside, along with informational videos, can help caregivers in the community make informed choices about maintaining the connection between the child and the parent in custody.

### ***Does the age of the child affect whether it is a positive or negative experience for them?***

- **Younger Children:** For younger children the experience tends to be more positive. These children may not fully understand the reasons for their parent's incarceration,

and they have great visits filled with fun and play. They may even believe that their parent is simply "going to work" after the visit ends.

- **Adolescents and Older Children:** In contrast, as children grow older and become adolescents, the experience becomes more negative. Older children are more aware of the reasons for their parent's imprisonment, and they often face challenges outside of the prison environment. Adolescents may experience teasing and bullying at school due to their parent's situation, and they are dealing with the emotional and social complexities of adolescence. This additional burden makes the experience more challenging for them.

### ***What is the emotional impact of parental incarceration?***

- **Children's Emotional Impact:** When children leave after visiting their incarcerated parent, they often experience a range of intense emotions. Some children become inconsolable, having emotional breakdowns and tantrums. They may resist leaving because they know they are parting from their parent. The emotional turmoil can be particularly distressing for young children who may not fully understand the reasons behind the separation.
- **Parents' Emotional Impact:** Parents who are incarcerated also face emotional challenges during and after visits. While they hold themselves together while their children are present, they often experience emotional difficulties after their children leave. The emotional strain on imprisoned parents can be immense, especially when they have to say goodbye to their children.
- **Positive Perspective on Visits:** Despite the emotional difficulties associated with visits, there is a positive perspective that maintaining contact between incarcerated parents and their children is crucial. The prison workers suggest that having contact, even if it leads to emotional distress at the time of separation, is still better for the children's well-being. This contact can positively influence children's sleep patterns, school performance, play, and confidence.
- **Home Environment:** The impact of parental incarceration on children's emotional well-being also depends on the home environment. Children who have regular connections with their incarcerated parent tend to fare better, but the overall family context plays a role.

### ***What role does communication play in maintaining the parent-child relationship when a parent is in prison, and how do prisons facilitate this?***

- **Attachment Building:** While the incarcerated parent may miss out on day-to-day moments, maintaining a connection with the child is crucial. In many cases, the baby or toddler stays with the other parent (usually the mother). For attachment building, it's important that the incarcerated parent remains a positive figure in the child's life. This helps ensure the child has one consistent and supportive adult, typically the mother. The role of prison workers includes supporting the mother in maintaining this role emotionally and financially.

- **Prison Programs:** some prisons facilitate communication through various programs. The "Storybook Dad/Storybook Families" program allows incarcerated parents to record themselves reading a story, which the child can listen to at home. This not only enables the child to hear the parent's voice but also encourages the child to engage with reading and stories. The child receives a recording of the story, complete with sound effects, and a copy of the book to follow along.
- **Phone Communication:** In modern times, phone communication is another valuable tool for maintaining the parent-child relationship. Incarcerated parents can speak to their children every day at bedtime, offering a way to keep a high level of contact and involvement, even if they cannot be physically present.
- **Family Contact Officers:** Within the prison system, family contact officers play a crucial role. They are responsible for organizing and booking visits and activities. These officers, along with visitor centre staff, are responsible for creating a supportive environment for parent-child interactions during visits.
- **Parenting Classes:** Some prisons offer parenting classes, especially for new or soon-to-be parents among the incarcerated population. These classes cover attachment basics, including concepts like "five to thrive," nursery rhymes, eye contact, and communication strategies. The knowledge gained in these classes can be applied during visits and other interactions with their children.
- **Children's Visits:** Children's visits in prisons are designed to support informal play and interaction between parents and their children. The atmosphere is relaxed and fun, with activities designed to encourage natural interaction. The presence of a Children's Worker helps facilitate these interactions and provides parents with opportunities to learn by observing positive behaviour with children.

***How do you see generational poverty intersecting with the effects of parental incarceration on children's development?***

- **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs):** Generational poverty, combined with parental incarceration, contributes to an accumulation of adverse childhood experiences. The impact on child development is profound. The children in these situations face multiple challenges, from economic instability to emotional distress, and exposure to ACEs. All these factors intertwine to shape their development.
- **Economic Strain:** The financial burden of parental incarceration can exacerbate generational poverty. Families may struggle to afford basic necessities, including transportation to visit the incarcerated parent. This economic strain can lead to increased stress for the remaining caregiver, often the mother. In turn, her mental health and emotional well-being can be affected.
- **Coping Mechanisms:** In response to the stress and emotional challenges, caregivers may resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse (drugs or alcohol). This, too, can further negatively impact the child's development and well-being.
- **Educational and Nutritional Disparities:** The interplay of generational poverty and parental incarceration can lead to disparities in education and nutrition. Children may have fewer opportunities for quality education and may struggle academically.

Additionally, limited resources can affect their access to nutritious food, impacting their physical growth and health.

- **Lack of Support and Opportunities:** Children from families dealing with generational poverty and parental incarceration often lack the same opportunities as their peers. They may face societal pressures and experience isolation, further affecting their emotional and social development.

***Is there anything that could be improved to help facilitate a more child-friendly environment for children when they visit their parents in prison?***

- **Awareness and Understanding:** There is a need for more awareness and understanding among prison staff regarding the specific challenges faced by children and families during visits. While security procedures are essential, staff should be more supportive, understanding, and child-friendly in their approach. The delicate balance between security and child-friendly environments needs to be managed.
- **Prison Staff Training:** Prison staff, especially those not directly involved in family contact roles, could benefit from additional training to better support and interact with visitors, including children. Understanding the emotional challenges faced by visitors, particularly children, and showing empathy and respect is crucial.
- **Family Strategy Meetings:** The Family Strategy meetings within the Scottish Prison Service offer a platform for discussing improvements in family contact and communication. These meetings should be used to address issues and find ways to make the visitation process more welcoming and less stigmatizing.
- **Respect and Dignity:** It is vital that visitors, especially children, are treated with respect and dignity. Visitors should not be held responsible for the incarcerated family member's actions, and they should not be made to feel guilty. Prison staff should focus on facilitating a more welcoming and less stigmatizing experience for visitors.

***What challenges are there to improving prison visits for children in Scottish prisons?***

- **Awareness and Understanding:** There is a need for the prison service to fully grasp the importance of child-friendly visits for both the child and the incarcerated parent. Awareness and understanding of the value of maintaining these relationships can be a significant hurdle, as it impacts the prioritisation of resources.
- **Resource Limitations:** Challenges arise due to resource constraints, such as staffing and physical space. Prisons often face shortages of staff, which can limit their capacity to accommodate child-friendly activities and support. The lack of resources can hinder the development of child-friendly programs within prisons.
- **Adaptation of Prison Policies:** Adapting prison policies to facilitate child-friendly visits while maintaining necessary security measures can be difficult. Striking the right balance between security and a welcoming environment for children poses a challenge.
- **Parental Involvement:** The level of parental involvement in informing children about prison visits can vary. Some parents may choose not to disclose the nature of their

visit to their children, which can limit the extent to which prisons can implement child-friendly initiatives. Respecting parental decisions while aiming to provide child-friendly support is a complex issue.

***Are there things that need to be changed at a more institutional or governmental level?***

- **Travel Expenses:** The current travel expenses system needs reform. The reimbursement rate for travel, at 13p per mile, is completely inadequate. It is essential to make travel support more accessible and to address the high qualification threshold, as many families who are financially struggling may not qualify for assistance. Revising and improving the travel expenses system is crucial and requires governmental intervention.
- **Family Strategy:** While there is discussion around family strategy and supporting families in prison, it's essential to translate these discussions into concrete actions and cultural changes. This entails changing the ethos around the importance of family contact within the prison system. The training and education of prison staff, particularly prison officers, need to include a focus on supporting visitors and families, alongside the primary security focus.
- **Prison Culture:** The culture within prisons needs to shift to be more pro-family. While there may be theoretical support for family contact, the practical implementation can vary significantly from one institution to another. It is crucial to ensure that prisons across the board prioritize family support and create an environment where families feel welcomed and valued.
- **Community-Based Support:** To address long-term outcomes for children living in generational poverty linked to parental imprisonment, there should be community-based support systems. This includes smaller class sizes, regular meals, positive interaction from community workers, and accessible drop-in clinics providing food, emotional support, and tutoring assistance. These community hubs should offer personalized and comprehensive support to families impacted by parental imprisonment and children at risk.
- **Education and Awareness:** Community services need to be educated about the impact of imprisonment on children and how to identify and address concerns at the earliest opportunity. Raising awareness and providing training can contribute to more effective support systems for families and children in need.

***Is there enough awareness of these issues?***

- **Community Stigma:** Families of incarcerated individuals often face social stigma within their local communities. Others may gossip or treat them differently, creating an environment of isolation and discomfort. This stigma extends to the children, who can be subjected to cruelty from their peers at school.
- **Anonymity:** Some families go to great lengths to maintain anonymity, such as driving long distances to avoid local shops where they may encounter judgment or gossip. This highlights the isolation and fear of being stigmatized within their communities.



- **Single Parenthood:** Many mothers become lone parents when their partners are incarcerated, which adds a significant challenge to their lives. They may lose access to childcare and find themselves completely on their own, struggling with the responsibilities of single parenthood.
- **Lack of Support:** The lack of awareness and understanding of these issues contributes to a dearth of support for affected families. There is often nowhere for them to turn for assistance or emotional support, which can exacerbate the emotional toll of having a loved one in prison.

### Conclusion

The financial and logistical acrobatics required by prisons, government, and community services to implement strategies which combat the negative effects of parental imprisonment on children are beyond the remit of this essay. However, while this essay will not comment on the specifics of how to practically implement these practices, there are several aims which may be useful as a starting point with which to work towards a prison system and community which fosters a more secure relationship between imprisoned parents and their children :

- Help to maintain communication between imprisoned parents and their children
  - Make prison visits more accessible to children and families
    - help families with the financial burden of visiting by providing grants for the use of public transport or create specialist transport specifically for prison visits to remote areas where public transport is unavailable or unreasonably onerous on visitors
    - make prison visits more child-friendly by implementing more Children's Visits which include opportunities for physical interaction, play, fun activities etc
    - provide training to prison staff which focuses on ensuring a welcoming, warm and friendly approach to visitors, ensuring respect for visiting families and children is consistently maintained
  - Implement strategies which allow contact between parent and child out with prison visits
    - allow for more frequent utilisation of phone/video calls, letters, etc
    - implement strategies (such as those found at the visitor centre at Perth and Polmont) which allow the child to feel connected to their parent e.g. recorded bedtime stories, video diaries
- Reduce the stigma surrounding parental imprisonment and spread awareness of the subject
  - Professional training: Provide training to professionals who are likely to interact with children affected by parental imprisonment (teachers, healthcare workers, social workers, childcare workers, etc)
  - Sharing experiences: Give families and prisoners the opportunity and platform to share their experiences with the public

- Promoting research: Facilitate further research on the topic of parental imprisonment and make said research widely accessible
- Reduce the number of parents going to prison
  - Sentencing considerations: take into account parental status in sentencing and consider non-custodial sentences for primary caregivers
  - Offender rehabilitation programmes: develop and implement programmes and services which aim to reduce offending/reoffending - focusing on parents/expectant parents
  - Support and promote advocacy groups and initiatives working to change policies related to parental incarceration
- Mitigate negative mental health impacts of parental imprisonment
  - Peer support: Create more opportunities for children with imprisoned parents to meet each other and share experiences to help negate the isolating effect of parental imprisonment
  - Counselling: provide access to counselling services for children affected by parental imprisonment

Many organizations and charities in Scotland are already doing an incredible job at implementing strategies like this, but it should not fall only on the shoulders of voluntary organizations to maintain these practices which are vital for families and prisoners to maintain positive relationships. While the financial cost of implementing and maintaining these changes can be high, the benefits for families, prisoners and communities can be immeasurable. Whatever one's opinion is on the status of prisoners and whether more resources and research should be allocated towards this cause when so many other community services are struggling, the fact is that the children of these prisons are blameless, yet they are often the ones who are impacted the most. This impact goes beyond simply missing their family member or the immediate financial cost – it can extend well into adulthood and create a situation where children grow up to face far more mental, physical, financial, and social challenges than their peers. Situations like this are preventable. Not every child whose parent is imprisoned will have an extremely difficult life, but the likelihood of this happening increases exponentially when they are subject to a system which does not support them in their attempt to maintain a relationship with their caregiver.

Just as prisoners are completely reliant on the state for their basic needs when incarcerated, children are similarly reliant on the adults in their lives to provide them with not only their basic physical needs such as food and shelter, but also the emotional needs that are essential to give them a chance at thriving as they grow. At the most vulnerable stage of their lives, children are in desperate need of care and attention from their parents. Something as simple as being read a bedtime story, or telling their parent how their day at school was, is often incredibly meaningful and formative. The ability to receive care and communication from a parent should not be a privilege, but a right. Prisoners have some of their rights removed and are prohibited from doing certain as a consequence of their actions, but children of these prisoners are often prohibited from having a meaningful relationship with their parent through no fault of their own. The unfortunate reality is that some children will be born to

parents who end up entangled within the criminal justice system, and this will inevitably have some impact on that child's upbringing and relationship with their parent. But this impact can be mitigated greatly by something as simple as being able to play with their parent for an hour a week without it causing serious financial and emotional distress to everyone involved. The importance of creating and maintaining strong attachment bonds for children in their earliest years cannot be overstated, and as such, it should be a priority for everyone involved in decision making processes which impact this disadvantaged, vulnerable and blameless demographic.