

# “Keeping in Touch”

## Young People’s Experiences of Having a Family Member in Prison

### Research Briefing 1

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#### Introduction

It is estimated that around 20-27,000 children experience the imprisonment of a parent each year in Scotland. No official data is collected on this group however – something which can result in them being overlooked in policy and practice. This figure only includes those with a parent in prison not those who are impacted by wider family members’ imprisonment – including that of siblings.

This research briefing outlines the experiences of young people who have a parent or a sibling in prison – specifically around keeping in touch with this family member. While children experiencing parental imprisonment are increasingly being considered in academic research and in policy and practice, the specific impact on, and experiences of, young people as a particular subset of children overall has escaped attention. The experiences of children and young people with a sibling in prison have been overlooked completely. This briefing paper fills this gap in two ways:

- It details the experiences of young people in particular (defined here as aged 11-25) with a family member in prison.
- It explores the impact of the imprisonment of siblings and/or parents, with a specific focus on keeping in touch with the imprisoned family member.

#### KEY FINDINGS

Young people’s experiences of a parent or sibling’s imprisonment can be different to those of children more generally.

The restricted access to digital technology within prisons impacts on communication.

Young people’s experiences of the restrictions around telephone communication are exacerbated by their specific position as young people.

Children’s visits focus on younger children and those with a parent, rather than a sibling, in prison.

There can be a focus on quantity rather than also quality of prison visits.

#### Defining “Young People”

The young people whose voices feature in this briefing were aged between 17 and 25 at the time of their interview, however they also reflected on their experiences as teenagers or secondary school age children. There is no single fixed definition of what or who a ‘young person’ is. The United Nations defines ‘youth’ as people aged between 15 and 24, distinguishing between teenagers (13 – 19), and young adults (20 – 24). The World Health Organisation defines adolescents as aged 10 to 19 and young people as aged 10 to 24 years of age. In this briefing paper, I use the term ‘young people’ to refer to those of secondary school age (eleven and above). However, age is not purely biological and is

also a social experience, therefore there is no strict definitional boundary to when someone becomes, or is no longer, a young person.

Young people within the criminal justice system themselves are treated as distinct from adults until the age of 21 (e.g. held within Young Offenders Institutions not adult prisons). Ongoing discussions around the raising of this age, as adolescence is seen as carrying on to the mid-twenties, may also be relevant where we are looking at family members of those in prison.

### Background to the Research

This report is based on research carried out as part of a PhD looking at young people's experiences of having a family member in prison. The research questions were:

- What does family mean to this group of young people?
- How does this group of young people experience family – before, during and after their family member is in prison?
- How do these young people deal with the imprisonment of a family member?

This research involved two different groups of participants. The first were young people who were part of an arts collective known as KIN. This is a joint project between Vox Liminis and Families Outside for young people who are experiencing, or have experienced, a family member's imprisonment. I spent around 22 months as part of this group and the information this report is based on comes from participant observation at day and weekend residential sessions spent with the group, as well as interviews with seven of the young people. The second group were ten young men aged between seventeen and twenty-one, who as well as having experienced the

imprisonment of a family member were also currently serving a prison sentence themselves within a Young Offenders Institution (YOI). Interviews were carried out with this group.

### Findings

This report looks at three methods of communication used by young people to maintain a relationship with their imprisoned family member: letter writing, telephone calls and prison visits. Although there is an email-a-prisoner scheme in Scotland this was rarely mentioned by the young people. The report looks at young people's experiences specifically of keeping in contact with an imprisoned family member.

Some of the young people emphasised how they felt the same as younger children: they were upset, they missed their family member and spoke of being lost without them. However, they also felt they were not given the same support and understanding.

*"...I feel like when you're around the late teens people kind of assume that, 'Oh she doesn't need any help because she's like 17,' and actually I think you need just as much help when you're older and that kind of hurt me quite a lot because I was like, I know I'm, like, 17 but also I, like, I'm a daddy's girl, like, I miss my dad and stuff and people didn't really give you, give me that support I don't think." (Natalia<sup>1</sup>)*

In other cases the experiences of the young people differed to those of younger children: due to their greater understanding of the situation and the corresponding awareness of the potential for stigma and need for

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<sup>1</sup> Participants in KIN were able to choose whether to use their own name or a pseudonym within this research and its outputs. Participants from the YOI are all referred to by a pseudonym.

secrecy; the greater responsibility placed on them where a parent was absent from the family home; or where added stresses or strains of puberty or moving to high school meant that their experience at this time was different. This highlights the need for young people to be seen as a separate group to 'children' more generally and recognised in research, as well as policy and practice, as such.

### Letters

*"...the only time I've ever wrote letters was going to [prison]" (Kev)*

*"...what twelve-year old wants to sit and write a letter?" (Morven)*

Letter writing is rarely used to communicate today, by children, young people or adults. Within the prison estate however, it is still one of the main methods those in prison use to communicate with their friends and family outside. The latest Scottish Prison Service Prisoner Survey showed the most common forms of contact with family were by telephone (71%), letter (62%) and visits (50%).

As well as being an unusual form of communication to use, it is also markedly different to the way that we communicate today in the world of text and other messaging apps.

*"...it's, like, weird, cos you can't break down your conversation you just have to have this full one-sided conversation for them to write back to. Whereas you're used to just, like, texting, be like, 'Hi. How are you?' and then they'd be, like, 'Oh yeah, I'm good. How are you?' and take it from there, like, step by step, like a normal conversation instead of just a list of everything you've done this week, kinda feels a bit weird..." (Morven)*

Our lives today are much more instant, whether that is through binge watching a TV series, downloading or streaming music instantly, or through the way we communicate; life moves at a very different speed to that of the letter. Writing elongates conversations and removes the instantaneous, almost 'face-to-face' like communication which can be achieved through text messaging or other communication apps such as WhatsApp or Snapchat, which are unavailable to those communicating with a family member in prison.

Arguments have been made that a lack of access to digital technology for prisoners can be termed a new 'pain of imprisonment', where they are unable to fully take part in a modern technology-based society. The lack of opportunity for young people to communicate with their family members in the 'usual' ways that they would use with family outside of prison could also be seen to represent a 'familial pain of imprisonment'.

#### KEY ISSUES

Lack of access to digital technology within prisons.

### Telephone Calls

While the restrictions around telephone contact with someone in prison will impact on all family members it can have a specific impact on young people. Telephone calls can only be made *from* the person in prison; they are unable to receive incoming telephone calls. Telephones are available in the communal areas of residential halls not within individual cells. While, in theory, telephones may be available at times throughout the day the young people spoke of really only being able to either use the telephones (from those within the YOI), or to receive calls from them, during recreation

period (45 minutes on weekday evenings) or during the day on a weekend (prisoners tend to be locked in their cell during evenings at the weekend).

*“The fact that I can speak to him and call him whenever I want is, like, I can’t even explain to you how big of a deal that is, because it was so, when you, when you, when you have someone in prison and they then call you from the prison, and you miss that phone call, I can’t explain to you how it feels [...] it’s just the most horrible feeling.” (Natalia – speaking about her Dad moving to a Category D prison (similar to the open prison in Scotland))*

The period of time in someone’s life as a teenager or young person is a time when they are gaining their independence, moving towards adulthood, and will tend to spend more time outside the family home with their peers than younger children, or perhaps even partners would tend to do. Therefore, the impact of the restrictions on when telephone calls can be received is exacerbated for this group.

*“...talking about the, what was it, aye, like the phone calls, that becoming a barrier for your outside life, you know, cos you’re having to then adjust your plans that maybe you’ve got with your pals and things like that, I was daein’ that constantly, you know what I mean, to try and catch these phone calls...” (Kev)*

This time in a young person’s life is also the time when they may need the support of a parent as much as younger children do, but in different ways. They may have issues at

school, are experiencing puberty, be facing what every teenager faces, but are unable to simply contact their parent or sibling in prison when they need to talk to them. Instead, they have to wait until their family member is able to place a call to them, and they are able to take it.

While it is possible for the person in prison to call a mobile telephone, meaning that the recipient of the call can be available anywhere and at any time there are two main issues with this. Firstly, to answer your mobile phone while in the presence of others you risk having to explain why you need to take this call, something which young people may not wish to do where they have not disclosed their family member’s imprisonment. Secondly, the cost of calls to mobile telephones is prohibitive (calls to a mobile cost 13p/min, with average prison wages £5-12/week). Where calls do take place in this way it can result in a decision then being made about how long the young person is able to speak to their family member, a duration that is reduced where the cost per minute is increasing.

Linked to these cost issues is a growing awareness by young people of these costs, of telephone calls and of travel to visits, which sets this group apart from younger children. This group take on a growing responsibility and may make decisions on how often they ask for a family member to phone them where they know that the person in prison, or the family members outside who fund them, are unable to afford these calls.

### KEY ISSUES

Lack of access to in-cell telephones (these are already within some prisons in England and Wales and are being rolled out in others this year –

<http://howardleague.scot/news/2018/july/phones-prisons-reconnect-or-rehabilitate>).

The prohibitive costs of telephone calls – to landlines and mobile telephones – made from prisons.

Lack of access to Prison Voicemail across the prison estate (currently available in HMPs Addiewell and Kilmarnock) <https://prisonvoicemail.com/>.

### Visits

Problems around prison visits for young people can be related to issues which everyone visiting a prison will face. For example, the length of time and costs involved in visiting, or the process which must be gone through to enter a prison visit. They can also relate specifically to the fact that the visitor is a young person, and not a partner or a younger child.

Where we think about who ‘children’s’ visits are actually for, these can be implicitly or explicitly designed for younger children only.

For example, the National Performance Framework for Prison Visitors’ Centres<sup>2</sup> lists the provision of “a designated space for children’s play with toys and books” as essential but that “books/reading materials are provided for adults and young people” and “play areas are inviting, safe and offer an exciting range of toys and activities

<sup>2</sup><https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2018/06/FINAL-National-Performance-Framework-for-Prison-Visitor-Centres-in-Scotland-Review.pdf>

appropriate for children of different ages” only as desirable.

Bonding visits are also only available for children under the age of five – due to their being held during school hours.

*Liam: ...I was too, I was too old to get bonding visits.*

*Kirsty: Right, okay.*

*Liam: But the younger ones did [...] they got bonding visits.*

*Kirsty: Oh right, okay. How old, how old were they at the time?*

*Liam: My youngest one [sibling] was two and the other one was three mibbe, four.*

There also tends to be a focus on children who have a parent in prison rather than those who are experiencing sibling imprisonment.

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

The term ‘child’ can be an age-graded term, referring to those under the age of eighteen, as well as a relational term, so in respect to a parent or caregiver. To access children’s visits in prisons it is often treated as if both criteria must be met, rather than simply the age-related aspect of being a child with a family member in prison. This may be particularly pertinent within the Young Offenders Institution population where there is likely to be a higher level of young people within the prison who have siblings outside who are under the age of eighteen and coming in to visit.

Quality as well as quantity of visits matters, not just for young people. While prison visits may bring family members physically closer together by allowing them to be in the same space together, this does not automatically result in an emotional closeness. This can be thought of in terms of the ability to experience intimacy in a relationship within these settings. If we think about family as what they 'do' rather than what families 'are'<sup>3</sup>, the ability to attain, or maintain, intimacy in a relationship can be inhibited in different ways due to the fact family is now 'being done' in a prison environment. This could be in respect of what is termed embodied intimacy (e.g. physical contact) or emotional intimacy (a closeness coming from the ability to share and disclose to each other, producing a shared understanding)<sup>4</sup>.

For example, Morven spoke about being unable to "mess about" with her brother at a visit as they did at home, Liam talked about the lack of physical contact allowed with his dad in ordinary visits, and Natalia spoke about the difficulties of having a conversation with her dad in the midst of all the noise when children are playing at the visits (something she is unable to avoid as she was also attending school so generally had to visit at the weekend).

#### KEY ISSUES

The lack of recognition of, and provision for, children who are experiencing sibling as well as parental imprisonment.

The focus on younger children and failure to provide for older children and young people within visits.

A focus on quantity rather than also quality of contact within visits.

#### Importance of Context

It is at this point that I would sound a note of caution where we are talking about encouraging and maintaining contact between a young person and their family member in prison. Firstly, there may be child protection or safety issues which mean this contact should not take place (though the numbers of these cases are small). Secondly, it is important to also take into account the context of the family relationship prior to the imprisonment. The dominant narrative is that prison disrupts families and worsens relationships, but this is not always the case. Young people who have had limited contact with their family member prior to the period of imprisonment may find that while someone is in prison they are in a place where regular contact is more able to take place, and within a safe and stable environment. On release, however, this relationship may not be able to continue in this way, resulting in the breakdown of a relationship which was promoted and encouraged while someone was in prison but is unable to be supported on their release.

*"He came out and disappeared again. So it was just like we were a rebound for when he was in prison and then when he got out he just disappeared again..."*  
(Liam)

Where young people, or families more generally, are constructed as assets or resources in a prisoner's journey towards stopping reoffending then there can be a failure to recognise issues such as this which may arise on someone's release, and which could be as harmful for a young person as the loss of their family member through imprisonment in the first place.

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, D. H. J. (2011) *Rethinking Family Practices*

<sup>4</sup> Gabb, J. (2008) *Researching Intimacy in Families*

## Conclusion

While only a reduction in the level of the prison population within Scotland will result in a real reduction in the harm caused to children and young people by a parent or sibling's imprisonment, small changes around the aspects of this experience as outlined above may at least mitigate some of this harm.

There is a growing recognition of the impact of parental imprisonment on children and young people. The result of this is that policies and practice are being put in place to attempt to mitigate this unintentional harm caused by the imposition of a prison sentence on a child's parent. These policies and practice fail to consider those with a sibling in prison. There is also a lack of recognition of the impact of a family member's imprisonment on young people as a specific subset of children overall. This Briefing Paper deals with these experiences specifically in relation to young people keeping in touch with their imprisoned family member.

Young people are affected differently to children as an overall group when a family member is sentenced to a period of imprisonment due to their age and developmental stage. Their greater understanding of what it means to have a family member in prison, of the potential stigma arising from this, the greater likelihood of them having to take on more responsibility in the family and the fact this is occurring at a time when added stresses of puberty and transitioning to high school are present can all impact on their experiences of a family member's imprisonment. Specifically in respect of keeping in touch with someone in prison, their age and stage in life sees them struggle to balance a growing need for independence and increasing draws on their free time with having to fit in with a restrictive prison service schedule necessary to receive telephone calls or attend visits. Their needs are often not recognised through family visits where the focus is on younger children and certainly not on supporting contact with siblings. They are subject to a level of control and loss of autonomy which is also experienced by their imprisoned relatives. This can result in lost opportunities for them to connect with their family member when *they* need to and to enable them to maintain their relationship during a period of imprisonment. The lack of access to digital technology within a prison, to in-cell telephones which could allow more private and regular communication with family, the prohibitive cost of calls, and the focus on younger children within prison visits, or on "special" events for older children which do not allow a consistent level of meaningful contact to take place, can all exacerbate the impact felt by these young people.

### What next.....

- How can the Scottish Prison Service take account of young people's unique experiences and needs in respect of keeping in contact with both parents and siblings who are in prison?
- How can visitor centres cater for the needs of young people who visit their family in prison?
- Does further support require to be provided to young people experiencing a family member's imprisonment and what form could this take?
- How do we think about the quality as well as the quantity of prison visits?
- What do young people who have experienced the imprisonment of a parent or sibling feel needs to be done to improve their ability to maintain these relationships?