



# COPING in Prison

*Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health*

## COPING What is it?

The COPING project was a child-centred research study conducted in four European countries: the UK, Germany, Romania and Sweden from 2010-12. The project aimed to identify children with imprisoned parents, their needs, their resilience, and their vulnerability to mental health problems. The project carried out over 1000 interviews with children aged 7-17 with an imprisoned parent, and parents/carers across the four countries. Smaller groups of children and parents took part in longer, more in-depth interviews to explore in greater detail the impact of parental imprisonment and the support services available to the family. Consultations were also held with other stakeholders within each country including prison staff, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social workers, care-givers and imprisoned parents. Healthcare and community based services already in existence were also identified and put into a database.

## COPING Recommendations

A number of recommendations were made based on COPING's research findings. They cover the following five topics:

1. Child-friendly Criminal Justice Systems
2. Maintaining Contact with the Parent in Prison
3. Advice and Support to Parents, Care Givers and Children
4. The Role of the School
5. Public Awareness and Policy Recognition

'Maintaining Contact with the Parent in Prison' focuses on how contact, both direct and indirect, can be better facilitated between the child and their incarcerated parent. The quality of the contact is also considered as well as potential obstacles.

'Advice and Support to Parents, Care Givers and Children' considers how the imprisoned parent can be involved in decisions affecting the child and it's up-bringing.

## COPING Maintaining Contact with the Parent in Prison

### Direct Contact

The effects of parental incarceration carry the risk of 'uncertain and discontinuous' relationships with siblings and carers, and the experience of 'strained or changed' extended family relationships for the child (Cúnamh, 2001; Philips et al. 2006; Poehlmann, 2005; Rosenberg 2009; Smith et al, 2003).

COPING's research suggests that for most children, regular contact with the imprisoned parent was crucial for their emotional well-being and capacity for resilience. Both direct and indirect contact is valued, but the importance of face-to-face visits with the imprisoned parent was found to be particularly key. This is supported by previous research which suggests a direct correlation between increased contact with an imprisoned parent and enhanced coping skills on the part of the child (Murray 2005). Visits can be enhanced by providing welcoming and comfortable visiting facilities, organising events such as family days and minimising restrictions on physical interaction between the imprisoned parent and the child.

The research also suggests that the first visit to prison is of crucial importance to children and families, providing reassurance that the imprisoned parent is safe and well. Children can be very concerned about their parent in the immediate aftermath of imprisonment often lacking information about what prison is like and how their parent is managing. Delays in arranging first visits because of prison administrative procedures can cause undue distress and anxiety. The COPING Project identified some examples of induction-type sessions for first-time visitors, introducing families to aspects of the prison regime and in doing so helping to dispel myths about prison that children have adopted arising from fiction or the media.

Searches on entering prison can be daunting for children at first although the findings from COPING indicate that children become accustomed to the procedures over time. In general, lower security prisons were less intimidating for child visitors and therefore were more conducive to quality interaction between the child and their imprisoned parent.

### **Age Appropriate Activities**

Family Days typically involve activities designed to encourage engagement between the imprisoned parent and child. Where provided, these were enjoyed and clearly supported attachments. When asked what could be done to improve visits, children often cited more freedom to interact and opportunities for physical closeness. The opportunity to focus on an activity together was particularly useful in assisting younger children, who struggle to engage in prolonged conversation, and helped promote engagement where bonds have become fragile.

### **Indirect Contact**

Evidence from COPING suggests regular telephone contact with an imprisoned parent is an important protective factor. A high frequency of telephone contact is attributed with:

- enabling the imprisoned parent to remain a part of the child's daily routine.
- enabling the child to update their parent on daily occurrences.
- providing children with reassurance that their imprisoned parent was safe and well.

Early telephone contact has also been demonstrated to support a child's adjustment to having a parent in prison. However, the frequency and duration of telephone contact in the UK is hindered by the cost of credit. Imprisoned parents often spent a significant proportion of their prison earnings on phone credit which in many cases was supplemented by money sent in from their family, adding to the financial pressures already experienced. This can have a disproportionate impact on children of prisoners with larger families who will incur greater costs.

In the majority of UK prisons, phones are available in association areas providing little of the privacy or quiet required to support constructive communication. The times when calls may be made are restricted and do not necessarily reflect or support family routines.

Advances in modern communications technology are not generally reflected within the prison environment. This includes tools such as Skype which, despite low associated costs, has yet to be embraced across the prison estate. In some prisons electronic portals, used for multiple purposes including booking visits, permit communication between prisoners and their family.

The COPING research has reinforced the view that children have the best chances if they have strong relationships with both their parents. Data has confirmed that maintaining contact with the imprisoned parent throughout their period in custody is crucial to promoting children's well-being. Some exceptions apply of course, but the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child stresses the right of children to stay in contact with both parents as long as this action does not harm them. Prisons across the UK have made some headway towards improving the visitor experience and available facilities but unfortunately at the current time the quantity and quality of contact with an incarcerated parent remains inextricably linked to prisoner behaviour rather than being approached from a child's rights perspective.

## **COPING Advice & Support to Parents, Care Givers & Children**

### **Role of the Imprisoned Parent**

COPING recognises the potential role of the imprisoned parent as an active agent in promoting children's welfare. However it is not always easy to carry out a parental role in prison, and imprisoned parents may need to be encouraged to play as full a role as possible, subject to this being in the child's best interest. Under the right circumstances there is no reason why an imprisoned parent should not be given the opportunity to share responsibility for decisions regarding their child's well-being, education and other aspects of their daily lives.

Imprisoned parents should be offered advice and support through the provision of parenting groups and classes. This will assist in increasing their awareness about the difficulties their children may face and the positive coping strategies that their family can develop.

Children should be given a chance to interact with their imprisoned parents wherever possible. Although most prisons in the UK provide play areas, imprisoned parents are typically prohibited from entering these, limiting the opportunity for interaction. Play areas are less attractive to older children who also need to be given an opportunity to engage with their imprisoned parent. Interviews for COPING suggest that where opportunities specifically designed to encourage engagement between the imprisoned parent and child are available (e.g. on Family Days) these have been highly thought of and have clearly fostered child-parent interactions.

### **Release and Resettlement**

UK data suggests that some families were very apprehensive about what to expect when the imprisoned parent is released, particularly after a long sentence during which many changes have taken place. There is a need for a form of mediation between the imprisoned and non-imprisoned parents to manage the transition from prison to release and to relieve any anxieties that there may be for either parent about the changed circumstances. This process would also require skill in consulting and involving children and young people in such discussions.

## **COPING Recommendations**

The recommendations below outline the progress that needs to be made in recognising and responding to the needs of children of prisoners in the UK.

### **Maintaining Contact with the Parent in Prison**

#### ***Recommendation UK4.1***

Families should be made aware of their entitlement to a reception visit within 24 hours of the prisoners' incarceration (including being held in police custody). Where families choose not to take advantage of this opportunity, the secure estate should ensure that administrative/security procedures operate as efficiently as possible so that the first visit is arranged as soon as practically feasible.

### **Recommendation UK4.2**

A child's right to regular direct contact with an imprisoned parent should be detached from a prisoner's behaviour and removed as a 'key earnable privilege' from the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme in the UK. Children should have access to weekly standard visits.

### **Recommendation UK4.3**

Regular, private and timely indirect contact between the child and the imprisoned parent should be supported and promoted by prisons. Steps should be taken to ensure that in all prisons:

- The cost of calls is reduced to an affordable level or a free allocation is provided to ensure, irrespective of earnings or status, that imprisoned parents can maintain suitable phone contact with all of their children.
- Prisoners are able to make outgoing calls and receive incoming calls from their family at any time of the day or night;
- Communal phone systems are phased out and replaced by individual in-cell phones to promote privacy and flexibility;
- Modern forms of technology that permit two-way communication (e.g. internet-based video calls) are piloted with a view to being made available.

### **Recommendation UK5**

All prisons should provide age-appropriate activities that both occupy children during visits and support interaction between children and their imprisoned parent.

## **Advice & Support to Parents, Care Givers & Children**

### **Recommendation UK7**

Imprisoned parents should be encouraged to play as full a role as possible as a parent whilst in prison subject to this being consistent with ensuring that children's welfare is promoted.

### **Recommendation UK8**

Nearing the release of an imprisoned parent, families should be offered services to help them communicate their concerns and anxieties about release and reach agreements that will relieve any tensions that arise. Where appropriate, this should form part of the Children and Families Resettlement Pathway. Older children could be invited to participate directly in these meetings if they wished or they could be consulted separately.

*COPING Briefings by POPS are based on **Hirschfield, A. (2012) Development of Recommendations Final Report: COPING Consortium, December 2012.***

## **More about POPS**

The **COPING** consortium consisted of 10 member organisations comprising of two from each country and two 'umbrella' (pan-European/International) organisations. Each country group consisted of a research institution and an NGO working with prisoners and their families. In the UK the University of Huddersfield partnered with POPS (Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group).

POPS was established in 1988 by family members experiencing the stigma and distress of supporting a relative through a custodial sentence. Since that time our remit has broadened as we have identified and responded to the needs of families. Today we provide support services at all stages of the criminal justice system, from the arrest of a loved one through to the first steps towards resettlement. We continue to be guided by need, involving users at every stage to direct service development and delivery. Based in Manchester, our work has expanded over time to include the national Offenders' Families Helpline and multiple projects across the North-West. We have Family Support Workers attached to a variety of prison, probation and youth offending initiatives as well as running ten prison visitor centres, all with the aim of empowering families through the provision of timely information and targeted support.

To find out more about POPS visit [www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk](http://www.partnersofprisoners.co.uk). Alternatively to find out more about the COPING project visit [www.coping-project.eu](http://www.coping-project.eu).