

# NICCO: Assisting professionals to work with children and families of people convicted of sex offences



“When people find out it can be very distressing. Hatred is one reaction.”<sup>1</sup>

**15%** of prisoners have been convicted of a sexual offence<sup>2</sup>

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## Who are we?

The National Information Centre on Children of Offenders – NICCO (formerly i-HOP) is a service that supports professionals to work effectively with offenders' children and families. NICCO collates and promotes examples of services, interventions, resources, policy and research around this vulnerable group.

Barnardo's was originally commissioned by the **Department for Education** in 2013 to develop this service as an online information hub with a focus on England ([www.nicco.org.uk](http://www.nicco.org.uk)). The service is targeted at all professionals who come into contact with offenders' children and their families, from various sectors including education, health and social care as well as the criminal justice system.

1 CCPS <http://files.ccpas.co.uk/documents/Help-SomeoneMayBeOffender.pdf>

2 Allen G and Watson, C (2017) UK Prison Population Statistics, House of Commons Library

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**‘The family gets the sentence as well. He’s in his prison, and I’m in mine.’** – Partner of convicted sex offender

There are an estimated 200,000 children in England and Wales affected by parental imprisonment<sup>1</sup>. An increasing body of research highlights the negative impact of this on children and families, including social isolation and stigma, increased risk of poor mental and physical health, and financial instability<sup>2</sup>. A lack of robust recording and awareness of these families can mean that they are left unsupported.

## The families of sex offenders

**‘At first it just feels numb, thoughts can’t process properly and sleep is hard... You wonder what else they have done and whether you can trust them’<sup>3</sup>.**

– Partner of a convicted sex offender

In recent years convictions for sexual offences, usually committed by men, have increased<sup>4</sup> and due to increased historic sex offence convictions, many are older<sup>5</sup>. The children, grandchildren and other family members of the convicted person can experience a range of complex emotions including: grief, disbelief shock, relief, disgust, confusion, distrust and so on. It can be very frustrating for families who may have lots of questions that the person convicted of the crime may not be able to answer. This could be due to practical reasons such as not being allowed contact or psychological reasons such as being in denial.

These families may endure a lengthy court process throughout which their family member may deny charges brought against them. Even once convicted of a sex offence a large proportion maintain their innocence<sup>6</sup>. The offender may do this because they are ashamed, to protect their families from the realities of their crimes and/or to retain their support<sup>7</sup> and prevent their rejection. In some cases, offenders deny responsibility because they want to preserve the opportunity to offend. Regardless of the reason, those sentenced to prison who refuse to admit guilt are often deemed to not understand the severity of their crimes and therefore remain in a higher risk prisoner category. These individuals’ conditions may be less favourable and they may be entitled to fewer incentives and earned privileges which include visits in male prisons. Courses of treatment may be recommended for those given community based or prison sentences. Failure to attend these will have repercussions on the length and severity of the offender’s sentence.

The families of sex offenders may also be in denial. This may be because family members often present



differently to their loved ones making it incredibly difficult for children, partners and others to believe that they have committed a sexual offence. Furthermore, non offending partners may fear that they will be judged as a parent or held responsible for their partner’s sexual offence. Families who accept the conviction of their loved one experience physical loss if they are sentenced to prison and emotional loss of the person they thought they knew.

Due to the nature of sex crimes and how they are reported in local and national media, children and families of offenders are likely to experience stigma, isolation or harassment in their community. If other children in schools are aware of what has happened, children may be bullied or may act out and bully others. In cases where families stay together and relocate with the offender following release from prison, isolation or harassment may continue if there is inappropriate disclosure about the family member being on the sex offender’s register.

These implications are very likely to be exacerbated when the sexual offence involved children; this includes looking at indecent images online. 2016/15 saw an increase in police reported sexual offences involving children<sup>8</sup>. Further implications for the family may include children no longer being allowed to live or have contact with the offender again, especially in cases where they were the victim is a member of the family. Those convicted of sexual offences against children are usually denied the right to work with children and young people in the future. Those living in the same household as somebody with unspent sex offence convictions (this may include a period of time following a sentence) could also be prohibited from working with children especially when this work involves childcare responsibility for young children such as in school reception year and children’s centres<sup>9</sup>.

**‘Someone should just have asked me what was wrong (at school). You don’t need to know the details of the offence – you just need to be there to speak to.’** – Young person<sup>10</sup>

It is essential for professionals to show empathy to families of those convicted of sexual offences. Psychologists also advise keeping an open mind, refraining from using demonising language and believing that people can change<sup>11</sup>. Negative attitudes towards the offending family member can create a confrontational dynamic which may make families resistant to professionals' concerns. Despite personal opinions it is usually the family's choice as to whether the relationship they have with the convicted individual. In some cases, families find that relationships with the convicted family member improves as they may be more open and communicative as a result of treatment.

Crucially, professionals should allow families time to come to terms with what has happened and not offer too much information too soon. Once appropriate however, clear information can be central to families feeling supported. For children, it is generally accepted that it is better for them to have the necessary age appropriate information about their family members' offence and its implications rather than find out on the internet or at school.

It may be reassuring for families to know that each decision about whether and what type of contact a child can have with someone who has been convicted of sexual offence is made on a case by case basis by a risk assessment team under a Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangement (MAPPA) consisting of police, probation, social workers and other professionals. Contact is likely to be prevented or restricted if the child is the victim of the crime or is at risk of being a victim and/or will not have contact upon their family member's release from prison.

It is important for all professionals to hold children's rights central to their work. These include not being separated from parents unless it is in the child's best interests, staying in contact with parents unless this might hurt them, having a say in all matters affecting them and their views being taken seriously.

Professionals can support families to channel any conflicting and challenging thoughts by writing down questions, emotions or positive things they would like to share with or ask their family member at a later date.

Despite the above, those working or liaising with a family member who has been convicted should be mindful of the possibility of being groomed themselves. Signs that this is happening include the offender breaking professional boundaries or being extremely compliant. Contact Lucy Faithfull for more information around this.

## Visit NICCO

NICCO is Barnardo's national, one stop information service for all professionals working with children and families affected by offending. Visit [www.nicco.org.uk](http://www.nicco.org.uk) to discover resources for professionals and the children and families they support. Sign up to become a member to receive a free newsletter.

Note: Children and young people's quotes are taken from: NICCO 'Message for Professionals' blog ([www.nicco.org.uk](http://www.nicco.org.uk))

### References:

- 1 Williams, K., Papadopoulou, V., Booth, N. (2012) Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds – Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners. Ministry of Justice
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- 4 Ministry of Justice (2017) Prison Population 31st March 2017, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2016> (Accessed: 27 June 2017)
- 5 House of Commons (2013) Older prisoners, Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/justice/older-prisoners.pdf> (Accessed: 29 June 2017)
- 6 Burrowes, N. (2014) Why do some convicted sex offenders claim they are innocent? Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul5SkGG-ADg> (Accessed: 27 June 2017)
- 7 Burrowes, N. (2014) Why do some convicted sex offenders claim they are innocent? Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul5SkGG-ADg> (Accessed: 27 June 2017)
- 8 Bentley, H., O'Hagan, O., Brown, A., Vasco, N., Lynch, C., Peppiate, J., Webber, M., Ball, R., Miller, P., Byrne, A., Hafizi, M. and Letendrie, F. (2017) How safe are our children? NSPCC
- 9 Department for Children Schools and Families The Childcare (Disqualification) Regulations 2009 Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2009/1547/memorandum/contents> (Accessed: 25 July 2017)
- 10 Families Outside (2016) Picking up the pieces
- 11 Burrowes, N. (2014) Why do some convicted sex offenders claim they are innocent? Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul5SkGG-ADg> (Accessed: 27 June 2017)

## Examples of existing practice

**Lucy Faithfull Foundation** aim to protect children from risk of abuse. They also run training and support for families of sex offenders as well as professionals.

**Picking up the Pieces** from Scottish organisation **Families Outside** is a user friendly resource for families who have a loved one that has been convicted of a sexual offence.



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