

NICCO: Assisting professionals who work with young offenders' children and families



“I want to be a good dad, but I don't know what to do or how.”

Young Father¹

25% of 17-21 year olds in custody have or are expecting a child*

Find out how to support offenders' children and their families

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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). 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.

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'When I was sentenced that's all I could think about... I knew I would not be there for her or ... bring her up the way I should.' Young father¹

It is estimated that there are 200,000 children a year that experience the imprisonment of a parent in England and Wales² and even more that suffer the impact of other aspects of the criminal justice system (CJS). Research shows the impact that this can have on these children and families – isolation, financial difficulties and poor health outcomes. However there is still no systematic collection of data about these children or rigorous identification of who they are or how to ensure their needs are met.

Young offenders, their children and families

'...all the time she was pregnant I felt dodgy knowing I was going to be sentenced...I kept thinking...Would I be a proper dad – how can I be?' Young Father³

Information about the numbers of young offenders who have children is not recorded or collated by the Youth Justice Board. However it is estimated that around a quarter of 17-21 year olds in custody have or are expecting a child, a rate much higher than for this age group in the general population.^{4,5,6} As young parents, they and their partners on the outside are more likely to have children under 5 and/or be entering parent-hood for the first time. There are only 17 dedicated custodial settings for offenders aged under 18 including Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), Secure Training Centres (STCs) and Secure Children's Homes (SCH)⁷ resulting in 38% of 15-17 year olds being detained more than 50 miles from home. This is also true for 35% of 18-21 year olds detained in YOIs which are attached to adult prisons.⁸ Such long journeys to visit young offenders in custody can put great emotional, practical and financial strain on families, especially those with young children. These pressures can make meaningful contact between families much more difficult.

Research shows that many young offenders have poor parental attachment and are children of prisoners themselves. For example 65% of boys whose fathers went to prison go on to offend.⁹ Serious persistent young offenders are also more likely than other young people to have weak family links, and to have spent less time with their parents.¹⁰ This cycle of intergenerational offending and poor attachment can lead to the children of those in custody suffering poor physical and mental health outcomes, poverty and low educational attainment.¹¹ Research shows that these negative outcomes can also be associated with older sibling's offending behaviour.¹²

'I want to be a good dad, but I don't know what to do or how.' Young Father¹³



It is important that YOTs in the community are aware whether those they are working with have or are expecting children. Many aspects and consequences of the young person's offending behaviour may have negative impacts on their children and families which other agencies are not aware of. YOT teams are well placed to share information appropriately with other agencies so that whole family wellbeing is considered. When young offenders receive custodial sentences, it is essential that secure estate staff are aware if they are parents. Young offenders are likely to be new to parent-hood and may benefit from someone to talk to or from parenting-related courses. Research shows that young offenders' children and parenting responsibilities are key drivers for desistance. This is particularly true for women.^{14,15}

The families and children of young offenders may be anxious about visiting a loved one in the secure estate and are likely to have travelled long distances, often with very young children, to do so. It is essential to the wellbeing of children and families that secure estate staff make visits as welcoming and family friendly as possible. YOTs are well placed to work with the secure estate and families to support positive visit experiences and contact between young offenders and their children. This can make resettlement more successful.

How can NICCO support professionals to work with the children of young offenders and their families?

'When I did the course we talked about babies, which were useful to me...I did learn a few things...' Young Father¹⁶

The new AssetPlus recording system requires youth offending staff to further contextualise young offenders' family lives by asking specific questions about significant life events such as whether the young person is a parent, for example. AssetPlus will focus on routes to desistance for young offenders¹⁷ of

which children and families are generally accepted as a vital part (as substantiated by research and in the government's Transforming Rehabilitation policy agenda).¹⁸

'Easy to access, read and understand information which informs staff of the practices in place.' NICCO user

NICCO is a national one stop information and advice service for all professionals working with children and families of offenders. It brings together information that can support professionals to consider and work effectively with the children and families of young offenders:

- details of local and national **services** that work specifically with offenders' children and families
- multi-agency **training** for professionals
- **research** into the impact of the CJS on young offenders' children and families
- **resources** for professionals to help develop knowledge of the impact and practicalities of the CJS for Young Offenders
- existing multiagency **strategies** being used by local authorities
- **guidelines** to support staff to incorporate children's rights based policy in their practice

NICCO recognises that professionals work in busy environments with demands on their time. NICCO puts all the resources in one place so help and information is there when it's needed. Sign up to become a member for FREE to receive our regular e-newsletter.

References:

- 1 Sherlock (2004) *Young Parents from custody to community*, Prison reform trust
- 2 Williams et al (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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- 6 Macmillan (2005) *Public health initiative at a young offenders institute*, 78 (11) pp. 397-399, Community Practitioner
- 7 Youth Justice board (2015) <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/youth-justice-board-for-england-and-wales>
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- 14 Ministry Of Justice, (2013) *Transforming Rehabilitation*
- 15 Sarah K. Set al (2013) *Juvenile Offenders as Fathers: Perceptions of Fatherhood, Crime and Becoming of an Adult*, Families in Society
- 15 Sherlock (2004) *Young Parents from custody to community*, Prison reform trust
- 17 Youth Justice Board, (2014) *Asset Plus: Assessment and planning in the youth justice system*
- 18 Ministry of Justice, (2013) *Transforming Rehabilitation: a summary of evidence reducing reoffending*

Examples of existing practice

The innovative **Fatherhood programme at Secure Training Centre Oakhill** contributes to offender rehabilitation by offering a short nurse-led course for current, expectant or potential young fathers. There is an option to care for an artificial baby overnight.

A **Public Health Initiative at Aylesbury Young Offenders Institution** brings together Health Visitors, prisons staff and parenting course trainers to encourage young dads to understand and take an active role in parenting their children.

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