



CHILDREN OF PRISONERS EUROPE WEBINAR: MITIGATING UNCERTAINTY FOR CHILDREN

Dr Shona Minson

Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford

Twitter: @shonaminson



**AND THEN THERE WAS
COVID-19...**

THE IMPACT OF COVID - 19 PRISON LOCKDOWNS ON CHILDREN WITH A PARENT IN PRISON



The impact of COVID-19 prison lockdowns on children with a parent in prison

“There’s always a solution to a situation and I always try and find that solution but there’s nothing. It’s like drowning - there’s nothing to hold on to”

Dr Shona Minson
Centre for Criminology
University of Oxford
shona.minson@crim.ox.ac.uk

Published March 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thousands of children in the UK have not seen their parent in prison for a year.
- Face to face visits were stopped in prisons on or around 13th March 2020, and although some prisons reopened for restricted face to face visits over the summer months, several periods of national lockdown have effectively stopped visits for almost 12 months.
- The prison estate in England and Wales did not have video call facilities operational in all prisons until January 2021.
- Video calls have been limited and problematic for children.
- This amounts to an interference with children's right to family life. Many of these children enjoyed regular and positive contact with their parent prior to prison lockdown.
- This loss of contact has negatively impacted children's relationships with their imprisoned parents and their mental and physical health and wellbeing. Children may not understand why contact has stopped and may blame themselves.
- The effects of this loss of contact and disruption to family relationships are likely to be long term and will affect family reunification and resettlement after imprisonment.
- Other jurisdictions have managed the public health emergency in ways which have not removed children's meaningful relationships with their parent, through the use of more frequent and reliable video calls, face to face visits with physical contact for children, and early release schemes.

The pandemic is not yet over, and it is likely that prisons will continue to use restricted regimes to reduce the spread of Covid-19 within their populations. It is not too late for the UK to make changes to its management of prison visits and communication for prisoners with their families, in order to mitigate the harms which have been done to children in the past 12 months

INCREASED UNCERTAINTY



“There’s always a solution to a situation and I always try and find that solution but there’s nothing.

It’s like drowning - there’s nothing to hold on to”

AREAS OF UNCERTAINTY

Duration of lockdown

Wellbeing of their parent

Disrupted routines

Unpredictability of contact

Insecurity of relationship



RECOGNITION

Young people will forget their parents



'By the time we get back into the prison the 7 month old is not going to have a clue who her Dad is'

ATTACHMENT

Children have formed attachments to grandparent carers instead of their parent after such prolonged period without contact



'There is more distance than before. They're not communicating on the phone with their Dad like before. They need to see him.'

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR IMPRISONED PARENT

'He no longer wants to speak to Dad on the phone. He speaks about Dad less, he used to look forward to visits more than anything. Now he says he has nothing to look forward to.'

CONFUSION

Children believe that their parent doesn't want to see them, or doesn't love them anymore



'My son has never seen his daddy as he was asleep both times he visited and that was at 2 weeks old. He's now 3 months.'

NO CONTACT

Imprisoned parents are unable to continue with telephone contact as they cannot bear the sadness of their children. In response to this, children are distraught and the relationships are irreparably damaged.



RELATIONAL IMPACTS

Minson, S. 2021 'The Impact of Covid-19 prison lockdowns on children with a parent in prison'

BEHAVIOUR

Anger, aggression, quiet and withdrawn, nightmares, worry, verbal and physical abuse towards adults and children, destroying property, bedwetting, soiling, clingy



'He has had nightmares about his Dad catching 'the corona' in prison, he wakes up in tears and shaking. I have had to move him into my bed'

WORRIES AND ANXIETY

Will my Dad die? Do they have enough food? Why can't he FaceTime? Does he still love me? Did I do something wrong? When will we see each other?



'My 7 year old has lost a stone since this started'

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN

'It has made our daughter have attachment issues... when she has a breakdown over her Dad she does get physical with me.'

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Weight loss
Difficulty eating
Difficulty sleeping



'He's carrying a picture of Mum and Dad around, a picture on a wooden block. He sleeps with it.'

MENTAL HEALTH

Increased anxiety, depression, self harm, onset of eating disorders, almost all participants reported sadness and grief



IMPACTS ON THE CHILD'S WELLBEING

Minson, S. 2021 'The Impact of Covid-19 prison lockdowns on children with a parent in prison'



**HOW CAN WE APPLY LESSONS LEARNED
FROM COVID-19?**

CHILDREN, SENTENCING & UNCERTAINTY

Where is my parent going?

How long will they be in prison?

Who will I live with?

Where will I live?

Can I still go to my school?

Where will I live when they come out of prison?

Does anyone care about me?



DUTY TO MITIGATE HARM TO CHILDREN

Sentencers should know about children & should understand the impact of the sentence on them – change of home/carer/school

Avoid custodial sentences for primary carers

Understand that even short sentences leave a child with an uncertain future

