



Psychological perspectives on parental imprisonment: Adverse Childhood Experiences and chronic stress

Briefing paper

Key considerations

This briefing aims to raise awareness of the impacts of parental imprisonment on children's psychological health, and their long-term implications for health and well-being.



The experience of parental imprisonment can be one of extraordinary insecurity and uncertainty for a child, with potentially negative psychological and physiological effects, especially when children lack the presence of strong attachments and caregivers who can ensure their safety and well-being. Indeed, children separated from a parent in prison have been shown to be two and a half times more likely to experience a 'serious mental health problem' like anxiety or depression.¹ Another study revealed that children with imprisoned parents have a 25 to 50 per cent greater risk of mental health problems, with increased risk for children older than 11 years of age.²

The imprisonment of a parent is a stressful situation for a child for a number of reasons:

- **Children often find themselves abruptly separated from a caregiver** from the moment of a parent's arrest, and some children experience the arrest first-hand.
- **Children's living situations may change rapidly**, especially when a primary caregiver is detained during the pre-trial period. Some children may be forced to move house or are placed in state care.
- **Changes to family dynamics and family finances can create additional**

stress, as many families are thrust into precarious socioeconomic situations.

- **A parent's imprisonment may lead to stigmatisation and bullying in school settings and elsewhere**, which can be a source of psychological distress.

This briefing aims to raise awareness of the potential impact of parental imprisonment on children's health and well-being, with an eye to the link between parental imprisonment and the physiological stress response, as well as the importance of maintaining secure attachment relationships. Building on a [previous Children of Prisoners Europe \(COPE\) briefing from 2018](#), which focused on parental imprisonment as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), this briefing delves further into explanations of attachment theory, chronic stress and the physiological stress response.

A final aim of this briefing is to encourage key stakeholders in their work as caregivers, teachers and child advocates or police, prosecutors, judges, prison staff and lawmakers, to consider closely the lived experiences of children whose parent is in conflict with the law or sentenced to imprisonment. What is it like to witness a parent's arrest? How does it feel to be separated from such an important person?

Key takeaways

1. Parental imprisonment has been shown to be a risk factor for psychological distress symptoms in the short term and more significant and long-lasting mental and physical health impacts in the long term.
2. The chronic stress associated with Adverse Childhood Experiences, including parental imprisonment, can lead to fundamental biological changes as children develop, producing structural changes in children's brains, abnormal hormonal release and significant impacts on immune function.
3. Having strong attachments with safe caregivers is a foundational protective factor against the negative impacts of parental imprisonment.

Some things to keep in mind

- There is no universal experience of parental imprisonment.
- Having a parent in prison can have profound impacts on a child's life – but does not define it.
- Other contextual factors interact with the imprisonment of a parent that shape the impact on children, including family socio-economic level, home dynamics, residence in care settings (with foster families or care institutions) and the community environment.
- The stigma associated with having a parent in prison can lead to significant psychological distress for children, particularly through bullying and as children encounter stigmatising discourse from peers, adults, media and institutions.
- It is key to consider impacts on children at every stage of a parent's involvement with the criminal justice system, from the moment of arrest, through pre-trial detention, imprisonment and reintegration into family life.

What are Adverse Childhood Experiences?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) include stressors experienced during childhood shown to be linked to negative outcomes for well-being in the short term and the long term. The designation itself came out of a [1998 survey](#) of roughly 9,500 American adults that linked seven categories of adverse exposures during childhood (psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; violence against the mother; living with household members who were substance abusers, mentally ill or suicidal, or ever imprisoned) to increases in adult risk behaviour, health status and disease.

The more adverse experiences a child has, the greater number of negative outcomes they can experience as an adult. Compared to individuals with no ACE exposure, participants who had exposure to four or more ACEs were at a four- to twelve-fold increased risk for alcoholism, drug abuse, depression and suicidality, as well as cancer, obesity, and chronic heart, lung and liver disease.

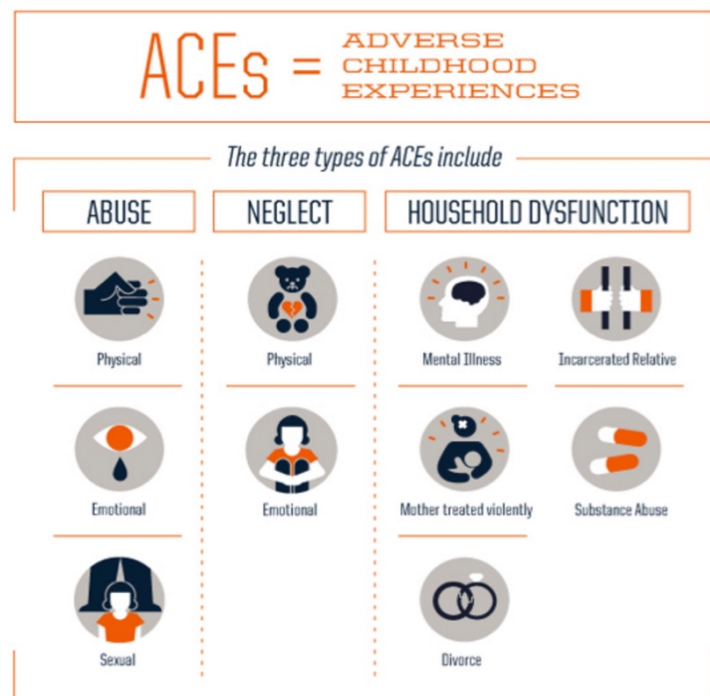


Figure 1. Source: NPR.org/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Credit: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

What is chronic stress?

The negative impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences on health and well-being are mediated by the body's physiological response to chronic stress. Also known as *allostasis*, this response to stress in the environment is a crucial part of the body's ability to maintain stability during environmental changes. The integrated nature of the nervous, endocrine and immune systems allows for a full-body response adapted to defend against danger and other environmental shifts, including social stressors.

Healthy functioning of this system in response to acute, short-term stressors works like this: the brain detects a threat, triggering a neurological response that a) makes the individual more alert and attentive to their environment and b) induces a 'fight or flight' response in the body by prompting the endocrine system to release stress-responsive hormones, which causes the heart to beat faster, shortness of breath and sweaty palms, etc. This physical response also triggers inflammation to protect against pathogens in case of physical harm.³

When exposure to stress is chronic or repeated, activation of these physiological responses can be prolonged, with detrimental consequences to the body (called *allostatic load* or, in extreme cases, *allostatic overload*):

- **In the nervous system**, stress-sensitive areas of the brain can develop abnormalities leading to cognitive difficulties and mental illnesses related to attention and memory impairments, outsized fear responses and difficulties with emotional regulation.
- Chronically stressed-out brains trigger **the endocrine system** to misfire stress

hormones, sometimes releasing drastically more or drastically less than necessary, with long-term impacts to individuals' circadian rhythms and causing long-term inflammatory responses in the immune system.

- As a result of both the abnormal release of hormones and prolonged inflammation, people who have been exposed to chronic stress are more likely to have compromised **immune systems** and are at greater risk of developing heart disease and diabetes, among other diseases.⁴

For children, exposure to chronic stress means the activation of physiological responses in nervous, endocrine and immune systems that are in the midst of profound developmental changes. In the short term, ACEs can have immediate impacts on children's sense of safety, challenge attachments, and lead to feelings of confusion, anger, irritability, discomfort and sadness, including internalising symptoms of anxiety and depression. Studies show even transient stressors, e.g., being separated from parents at the start of kindergarten, can have significant impacts on child immune function.⁵

In the long term, ACEs can produce biological changes that modify the development and responsiveness of the allostatic system. These physiological shifts underpin the negative outcomes discovered in the ACEs study – the increased probability of heart, lung and liver disease, cancer, skeletal fractures and risky behaviours and the onset of mental illnesses including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and chronic depression.

Why are secure attachments important?

Attachment relationships have been theorised as the setting for a child's development of a sense of self in relation to others.⁶ Strong attachments provide a sense of safety and a 'secure base'⁷ that allows a child to explore, learn, relax, work and play. Insecure or disorganised attachments, on the other hand, make healthy psychological development more difficult and can produce a more disorganised sense of self.

Children with insecure attachments are more likely to be prone to negative outcomes⁸ – in the short term, a lack of safety; in the long term, a more complicated and difficult internal working model of themselves as

unloved or unworthy of support and positive relationships.⁹

The need for attachment serves an adaptive purpose; as in nature, we cling to our attachment figures when confronted with danger – and the sense of safety that they provide once the danger has passed allows children to revert to a state of mind that facilitates exploration, learning, relaxation, work and play. Key to this paradigm is the child's ability to take for granted the presence of that secure attachment figure – they can revert to this state of mind more easily if they are sure their caregiver is there to provide that sense of security.



'Attachment is mediated by looking, hearing and holding...'¹⁰

The theory of attachment underscores two key elements concerning children coping with separation from their parent in prison:

1. Parental imprisonment can disrupt the stable formation of attachment relationships. This disturbance can affect a child emotionally and psychologically into adulthood, especially when a child's mother is incarcerated (given that mothers are more likely to be the primary caregiver/attachment figure). One study from 2005 found that 63 per cent of children had insecure attachments with their mother in prison, with a similar number shown to be insecurely attached to their current caregivers.¹¹ Given the security and sense of stability that strong attachments create, this insecurity can itself contribute to and exacerbate the impact of a number of other factors that

arise when a child is separated from a parent, including economic precarity, an altered living situation, social stigmatisation and bullying.

2. The presence of secure attachments is a key resiliency factor for children facing adversity. For children with a parent in prison in particular, one crucial support towards supporting strong attachments is promoting ongoing contact with their incarcerated parent, if in the best interest of the child. Indeed, the preservation of family relations through open communication with caregivers, support from extended family and especially through sustained relationships with imprisoned parents have been shown to be fundamental to mitigating risk and fostering resilience in children.¹²

What is the impact of having a parent in conflict with the law?

There is no universal experience of parental imprisonment for children. Yet without concerted support from key stakeholders, there is significant potential for short- and long-term harm present at numerous junctures during a parent's course in the criminal justice process:

- **Witnessing a parent's arrest is traumatic** and is associated with poorer initial health, internalising symptoms linked to anxiety and depression and developmental delays, especially in early academic skills.¹³
- **The pre-trial detention period is fraught with uncertainty** – uncertainty of duration and outcome, lack of information regarding the parent's whereabouts, and concern over the parent's safety and well-being. These prolonged periods of uncertainty exacerbate children's stress, worry, anxiety and depression, heightened by the fact that remand custody is frequently prolonged several times and often subject to being extended. Children of pre-trial detainees 'find themselves most in need of seeing and experiencing that their father or mother is doing well.'¹⁴
- **Separation from a parent in prison challenges crucial attachments** between children and their parents. Staying in touch can be difficult, prisons may be far away, and the prison environment can be a disturbing setting, both for a child to imagine and to experience.

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented its own challenges to children with a parent in conflict in the law, which Shona Minson detailed in her January 2021 report, 'The impact of Covid-19 prison lockdowns on children with a parent in prison.' The result of interviews with the parents and carers of children with a parent in prison in the UK, the study showed not only the significant harm done to child-parent relationships as a result of the sudden loss of face-to-face visits in March 2020, but also the numerous negative effects on child health and well-being as a result of separation from their parents. According to Minson, 'many children thought that their parent didn't want to see them anymore, or maybe their parent no longer loved them. Children blamed themselves for this.'

Contact with a parent via phone and video calls was a crucial, if problematic, stopgap measure during prison lockdowns, with numerous benefits and a greater number of problems. Lack of access to video-capable technology was prohibitive to families without the necessary technology, and unreliable video technology with connection issues and calls cut off was frustrating when a parent in prison had a time limit per call. According to Minson, carers reported that development and maintenance of child-parent relationships via screens was not feasible for infants and young children, which has significant implications for the healthy formation of human attachments reliant on sensorial markers during early developmental stages.¹⁵

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- ¹ Drika Weller Makariev & Phillip R. Shaver (2010) Attachment, parental incarceration and possibilities for intervention: An overview, *Attachment & Human Development*, 12:4, 311-331, DOI: [10.1080/14751790903416939](https://doi.org/10.1080/14751790903416939)
- ² Jones, A. D., & Wainaina-Woźna, A. E. (Eds.) (2013), *Children of Prisoners: Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health* [COPING Project], University of Huddersfield, UK.
- ³ Danese, A., & McEwen, B. S. (2012). Adverse childhood experiences, allostasis, allostatic load, and age-related disease. *Physiology & behavior*, 106(1), 29–39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physbeh.2011.08.019>
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- ⁵ Boyce WT, Adams S, Tschann JM, Cohen F, Wara D, Gunnar MR. Adrenocortical and behavioral predictors of immune responses to starting school. *Pediatr Res* 1995;38(6):1009–17.
- ⁶ Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 2. Separation: anxiety and anger*. New York: Basic Books.
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- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Poehlmann, J. (2005). Children's Family Environments and Intellectual Outcomes during Maternal Incarceration. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(5), 1275–1285. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600312>
- ¹² Jones, A. D., & Wainaina-Woźna, A. E. (Eds.) (2013), *Children of Prisoners: Interventions and mitigations to strengthen mental health* [COPING Project], University of Huddersfield, UK.
- ¹³ Poehlmann-Tynan, J., Muentner, L., Pritzl, K., Cuthrell, H., Hindt, L. A., Davis, L., & Schlafer, R. (2021). The Health and Development of Young Children Who Witnessed Their Parent's Arrest Prior to Parental Jail Incarceration. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 18(9), 4512. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18094512>.
- ¹⁴ Scharff Smith, P. "When the Innocent Are Punished: The Children of Imprisoned Parents." *Punishment & Society*, vol. 19, no. 4, Oct. 2017, pp. 505–507, doi:10.1177/1462474514564927.
- ¹⁵ This fact alone makes clear the primacy of in-person visits and physical contact for infants and toddlers most importantly. For this reason and many others, it is imperative that video calls not take the place of in-person visits, which are crucial for child-parent bonding and in upholding UNCRC article 9.3.



Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) is a pan-European network of non-profit organisations working with and on behalf of children separated from an imprisoned parent. The network encourages innovative perspectives and practices to ensure that children with an imprisoned parent fully enjoy their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and that action is taken to enable their well-being and development.

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With thanks to Noah Boden

Children of Prisoners Europe is a non-profit organisation registered in France under French Association law 1901.

SIRET: 437 527 013 00019



This document has been produced with the financial support of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union. The contents are the sole responsibility of Children of Prisoners Europe and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.
