

## Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) Principles

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### Introduction

Across Europe and beyond, COPE members support children with parents in prison. They operate in very different national contexts and landscapes. COPE members may have long experience in supporting children with parents in prison or may be relatively new to this work. Some members have staff or board members who were themselves directly affected by parental imprisonment, others do not. All COPE members can benefit from better listening to children affected, as well as their caregivers and parents in prison, and to ensuring people from groups disproportionately affected by parental imprisonment are represented within COPE. COPE members' work can be seen on a continuum: from awareness-raising advocacy that these children exist in our societies and on their rights, through partnerships with others to develop policy guidelines, to implementation of innovative processes and systems to support children affected from arrest through to reintegration after the end of a prison sentence.

COPE started out as a small five-member network in 2000, covering four countries, growing to **56** organisations with a wealth of expertise and experience by the end of 2022, covering **29** Council of Europe countries (**25** EU Member States), with some affiliate organisations and individual members from beyond Europe.

Given this growth, our learning over the last two decades, and the diverse nature of the COPE Network, the COPE Board proposes the adoption of 27 principles that can guide both the Network as a whole and the individual members.

By paying your membership fees or applying to join the Network, you are deemed to subscribe to these principles and to commit to help make them a reality, so that we achieve more for the children we work with and for. You are invited to sign the last page and return a scanned or paper version of the signed and dated copy to the COPE Secretariat in Paris **by 31 July 2023**.

## Who we are and our mission

1. [Children of Prisoners Europe \(COPE\)](#) is a pan-European network of organisations and individuals working with and for children with imprisoned parents. The network has a secretariat based in Paris. As of end 2022, [members](#) covered 29 Council of Europe member states and 25 EU Member States. Members and affiliate organisations are mostly grassroots NGOs or networks of NGOs offering supports to children with parents in prison and their families. Individual members and affiliates are experts who work or have worked in the field, including academics.
2. Our mission is to prevent and respond to violations of the rights of children with imprisoned parents, from arrest through to reintegration after the end of a prison sentence, to ensure their individual needs are met, and their best interests<sup>1</sup> are continuously assessed. We take a systems approach to improving the lives of children with imprisoned parents, namely ensure that the systems (welfare, social, justice, education, ...) children come into contact with are able to respect their rights and meet their needs, rather than expecting children to adapt to inadequate systems and supports.

## What we stand for

3. We recognise all children, without discrimination of any kind, as rights holders. COPE members work with children and their families to support fulfilment of their rights and needs. Parental imprisonment can be traumatic and children with imprisoned parents should have access to appropriate and tailored supports. The COPE Network as a whole works to address these issues, including with other sectors, e.g., the school system, the child protection system and the justice system.
4. We take a child rights approach to our work, seeking to develop the capacity of duty-bearers to meeting their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil rights and striving to further develop the capacity of children to claim their rights.<sup>2</sup>
5. We promote broader societal understanding of the life experiences of children with parents in prison and seek to address system gaps to mitigate damage resulting from parental imprisonment to ensure that children with parents in prison can claim their rights and fulfil their potential.
6. We support children (including child human rights defenders) with imprisoned parents and help them to understand, claim and exercise their rights, including to maintain direct and ongoing contact with their parents, in compliance with Article 9.3.<sup>3</sup>
7. Recognising the importance of positive child-parent relationships, we advocate for and help to address system gaps to support and develop the capacity of parents in prison to exercise their responsibilities for the upbringing and development of their children.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Noting that the concept is often subject to manipulative usage, misuse and abuse, in referring to the best interests of the child, which is a right, a principle and a rule of procedure, COPE underlines the importance of adhering to the comprehensive guidance set out in the UN Committee on the rights of the child's [General Comment No 14 \(2013\) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration \(Article 3, para 1\)](#). See also [Council of Europe – the best interests of the child – a dialogue between theory and practice \(2016\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/crc.c.gc.13\\_en.pdf](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/crc.c.gc.13_en.pdf) - see para 59 on a child rights approach

<sup>3</sup> [Article 9.3](#): States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests.

<sup>4</sup> As set out in [Article 18 of the UN Convention on the rights of the child](#)

8. We are committed to fully involving children with imprisoned parents, their parents – including imprisoned and previously imprisoned parents – and caregivers in our work. We will pay particular attention to involving people facing marginalisation or discrimination of any kind and who are disproportionately represented in the prison population.
9. We are committed to embedding child safeguarding within our network and encouraging others, such as prison services, to do the same, including child human rights defenders within the scope. Applicant organisations for COPE membership are required to adopt and implement a robust child safeguarding policy and sign the COPE code of conduct before their move to full membership can be approved. Individual applicants are required to abide by the COPE child safeguarding policy and to sign the COPE code of conduct<sup>5</sup>.
10. We are committed to fostering compassion, promoting social justice and tackling the causes of system failures<sup>6</sup> affecting children of imprisoned parents.
11. We are committed to increasing our influence and ability to get things done to support and develop the capacity and equitable opportunities of children with imprisoned parents and their families and to build the capacity of duty-bearers to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of children with imprisoned parents.<sup>7</sup>
12. Recognising that children with a parent in prison are not a homogenous group, we are committed to working with and advocating for children with imprisoned parents – and their imprisoned and previously imprisoned parents – in an accurate, principled and respectful way that upholds their rights and dignity.
13. We are committed to ensuring equity, inclusion and ethnic diversity within our leadership, staff, volunteers, partnerships, work with children and their families, and in our advocacy.<sup>8</sup>
14. We are committed to seeking and ensuring gender equality as a fundamental human right, and a necessary foundation for a just world. We are committed to examining issues through a gender lens, including with regard to gender disaggregated statistics.
15. We are committed to challenging, clarifying and dismantling unfounded claims, such as those on intergenerational patterns of criminality and imprisonment<sup>9</sup> that may stigmatise, dehumanise or harm children with imprisoned parents, and their imprisoned and previously imprisoned parents.
16. We are committed to continuously reviewing our messages and all our communication to ensure we put language to good use; to challenging assumptions, labels and stereotypes, and to eradicating

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<sup>5</sup> The COPE child safeguarding policy is currently under review and a code of conduct (setting out expected behaviours towards children) is being developed.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of system failures: exposing a child to violence during parental arrest, when a child's parent is imprisoned if there are no supports for the child; no UNCRC Article 9.3 assessment; no mechanisms to enable child-parent contacts in compliance with Article 9.3, no mechanisms to support parents in prison who have not been divested of parental responsibilities to fulfil them in compliance with UNCRC Article 18.

<sup>7</sup> <https://home.crin.org/readlistenwatch/stories/2020/5/6/pirates-permission>

<sup>8</sup> Stories are better when the storytellers represent the vast experiences of the people who will hear them.

<sup>9</sup> [Seven out of Ten? Not even close – a Review of research on the likelihood of children with incarcerated parents becoming justice-involved, James M Conway, Central Connecticut State University](#)

from our communications any language that disempowers, dehumanises, degrades, stigmatises, isolates or shames people.<sup>10 11</sup>

17. We are committed to respecting the privacy rights of children and their parents and caregivers, including, for those in the EU, under the [General Data Protection Regulation](#).
18. We are committed to advocating for, contributing to and using rights-based, scientifically robust and ethical research methods and results to further the realisation of the rights of children with imprisoned parents and to always transparently citing our original sources.<sup>12</sup> We pay particular attention to critically assessing research before we use it to ensure it is accurately cited and is not biased, reductionist or a contributor to the stigmatisation and dehumanisation of children with parents in prison and their families.

## How we work within our network

19. We **work together** within our network, and **develop partnerships** outside our network, across Europe and beyond, sharing expertise, experience and advocacy to fulfil our mission towards children with imprisoned parents.
20. We are committed to **being accountable (and being held accountable)** to children with imprisoned parents and their families, to each other within the network and to our investors and funders.
21. We are committed to a **respectful and welcoming working environment** for each individual, for each organisation, and to respect for cross-cultural learning and inclusiveness.
22. We are committed to **cooperative working methods**, working with partners inside and outside the network through dialogue, active participation and consensus-building to further the realisation of the rights of children with imprisoned parents.
23. We are committed to improving the **representation** of children with imprisoned parents, young people with experience as children with parents in prison, and their parents – including imprisoned and previously imprisoned parents – and caregivers **within our organisations (e.g., through advisory roles, focus groups, staff and management boards)**.
24. We are committed to **continuous learning and sharing of knowledge within and beyond our network** to further the realisation of the rights of children with imprisoned parents.
25. We are committed to **transparency in our goals and working methods** to fulfil our mission towards children with imprisoned parents.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://home.crin.org/readlistenwatch/stories/2020/5/6/the-power-of-language>

<sup>11</sup> See [Language as a Protective Factor: Making Conscious Word Choices to Support Children with Incarcerated Parents | SpringerLink](#)

<sup>12</sup> Lundy, L., & McEvoy, L. (2012). [Childhood, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and Research: What Constitutes a 'Rights-Based' Approach?](#) In M. Freeman (Ed.), *Law and Childhood Studies: Current Legal Issues Volume 14* (pp. 75-91). Oxford University Press.

26. We are committed to **think and act ethically and independently** from any religious or political party affiliation, always to the benefit of children with imprisoned parents, and to ensure that there is no proselytizing in activities and actions relating to children with imprisoned parents.

27. We will **review these principles** within two years of the date of adoption to ensure they **help us fulfil our mission to children with imprisoned parents**.

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### Signature of COPE Principles by members

**COPE members are invited to date and sign the last page of the principles and send a scanned or paper copy of the signed version to the COPE secretariat by 31 July 2023.**

On behalf of my organisation (or myself if I am an individual member), I agree to abide by the COPE principles. Furthermore, I take responsibility for ensuring that all persons working for/affiliated with my organisation are fully informed of these principles.

Organisation, where applicable:

Name:

Title/Role:

Date:

Signature:

### Countersignature by COPE President

As COPE President, on behalf of the COPE network, I acknowledge receipt of the signed version of the COPE Principles.

Name:

Date:

Signature: