

# How can we make prison spaces more child-friendly for children visiting a parent?

## CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO ONLINE CONSULTATION





— Girl, aged 7, France

# I. Background

Recognition of children's right to participation is growing in literature and public policy around the globe. Child participation is the first thematic area of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, in which it is stated that EU action should 'empower children to be active citizens and members of democratic societies.'

Children who have a parent in prison, like all children, are entitled to the right to participate in all matters affecting them and their views should be considered. However, recognition of this right is lagging amongst prison administrations and other key decision-makers and stakeholders who can effect real change.

While the topic of parental imprisonment is gaining more attention, exemplar practice on the ground that meaningfully meets children's needs is still sporadic and not systematised. For example, there remains

much progress to be made to ensure that children's rights are respected when visiting a parent in prison. Many children have experienced the trauma of having witnessed the parent's arrest at home, as well as trauma associated with being separated from their parent. This trauma can be exacerbated by harsh, tense or fear-inducing prison environments. Visiting a parent often means children endure invasive security measures; prison staff are often untrained on child-friendly procedures; teenagers may be 'adultified' i.e. treated as if they were

over the age of 18; infants are exposed to intimidating sounds and unpleasant smells. Visiting regulations are rarely conducive to quality contact – children may not be allowed to play with, or even touch, their parent, and visiting hours may interfere with children's schooling. Getting to prison can pose significant challenges for families, both logistical and financial.

Generally speaking, prisons are ill-equipped to meet the needs of children when visiting a detained parent.

A key step to ensuring that meaningful and sustainable change can take place to properly meet the needs of children visiting a parent in prison is to consult children. Asking children about their experiences visiting a parent in prison and what changes they wish to see not only can lead to better, more targeted policies but is of benefit to children themselves. Actively participating in the design and implementation of policy changes that affect their lives can boost children's sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Their skills of decision-making are enhanced and feelings of being respected and valued also increase (Chawla and Heft, 2002; Davies et al, 2006). Fundamentally, participation promotes agency of children; they are encouraged to become agents of change as opposed to passive objects or worse still, victims.

As strengthening child safeguarding policies and practices in prison facilities across Europe is one of its long-term goals, COPE launched a project to consult children on their experiences

and considerations regarding prison facilities.

An online survey was launched to ask children how they think prison spaces can become more child-friendly during visits to see their parents. Children's responses to this survey can directly inform efforts to develop or improve child safeguarding policies in prisons across Europe. COPE advocacy will strive to create meaningful changes to prison

practice, taking into consideration children's responses to this survey— a collective, cross-border call for change.

This report is a summary of the online survey results. The survey was translated into 15 languages and was designed with child safeguarding measures in place to ensure that children's participation was safe and meaningful.

## II. Who participated in the survey?

Between February and May 2024 **48 children from 10 countries (9 EU MS) responded to COPE's online child survey** (see Annex I for the complete list of countries). Although children's responses do not speak for the wishes of all children who have a parent in prison across Europe, the survey does give good insight into what children find important.

Of the respondents, 56% were girls and 42% were boys, with most aged somewhere between 8 and 15 (71%).

Seven respondents belonged to national minority groups, including ethnic or religious minorities (notably Roma), while 5 reported having special needs (physical needs, mental needs or other). The participation of this latter subset of children provided valuable insights on their unmet needs: prisons are almost always ill-equipped to meet the needs of children with neurodivergent conditions or physical disabilities visiting a parent.

To give an example, one 14-year-old boy from Sweden with Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) shared his anxiety about prison visits, describing the challenges of a prison environment. He reported feeling tense throughout the visit, which prevents him from enjoying the limited time with his dad.

***“Jag har adhd, ångest och depression. Det är jätte svårt för mig att sitta still i ett tomt rum. Jag älskar att träffa pappa. Men jag blir jätte trött under besöken. Jag är så spänd. Jag brukar somna. Och är orolig varje gång innan besök för att jag är orolig för att sitta still, inte ha något ljud omkring mig och att det känns som om jag är i fängelse.”***

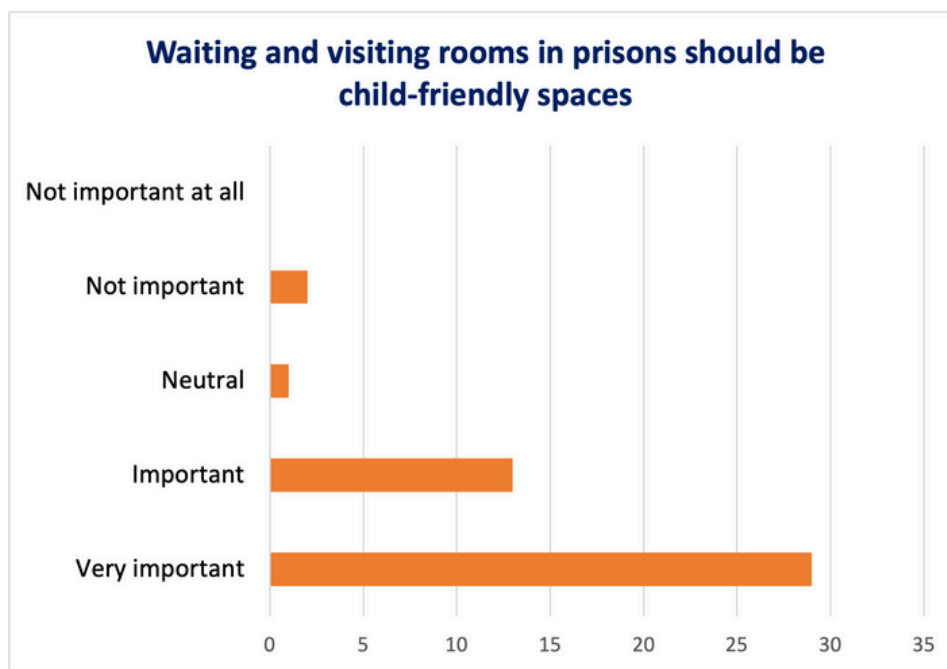
“I have ADHD, anxiety and depression. It is very difficult for me to sit still in an empty room. I love meeting dad. But I get very tired during the visits. I am so tense. I usually fall asleep. And I'm worried every time before a visit because I'm worried about sitting still, having no sound around me and feeling like I'm in prison”

- Boy, Sweden, age 14

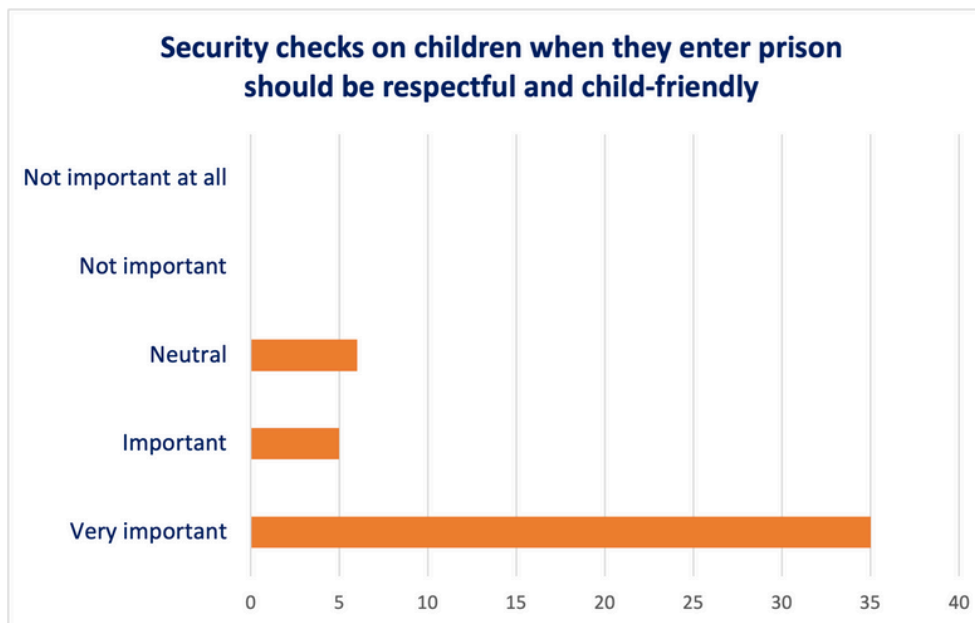
# III. Results

Children were asked to rate the importance of various aspects relating to prison visits on a scale ranging from 'not important at all' to 'very important.' They also had a space throughout the survey to delve deeper into these topics.

- 1. Prison waiting and visiting rooms must be child-friendly spaces:** 91% of children indicated that having child-friendly spaces in prison is very important or important. They provided detailed feedback on what hinders visiting rooms and prisons from being child-friendly. Examples included unfriendly behavior from prison staff, heavy security checks and the lack of adequate resources for children to enjoy time with their imprisoned parent (e.g., insufficient space, no toys and no physical contact allowed). Children emphasised that the atmosphere in visiting rooms is often intimidating and stressful, which can make the visit emotionally taxing rather than a positive experience. In line with Article 20 of Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)5, children expressed the need for a more welcoming environment that allows them to interact freely and comfortably with their parents.

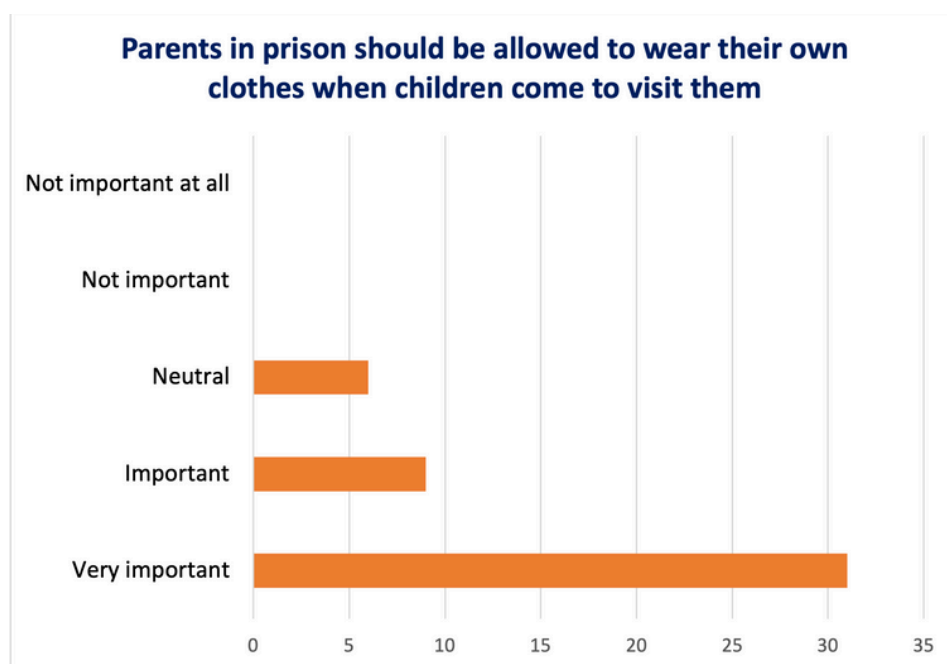


- 2. Security checks for children upon entering prison must be respectful and child-friendly:** 87% of children stated that having child-friendly security checks is very important or important. Their responses highlighted several issues with current practices. Many children reported feeling treated as if they had done something bad during security checks, with prison staff often displaying what they perceived as hostile and strict behaviour towards them. They described these experiences as intimidating and distressing, further adding to the emotional burden of visiting a parent in prison.



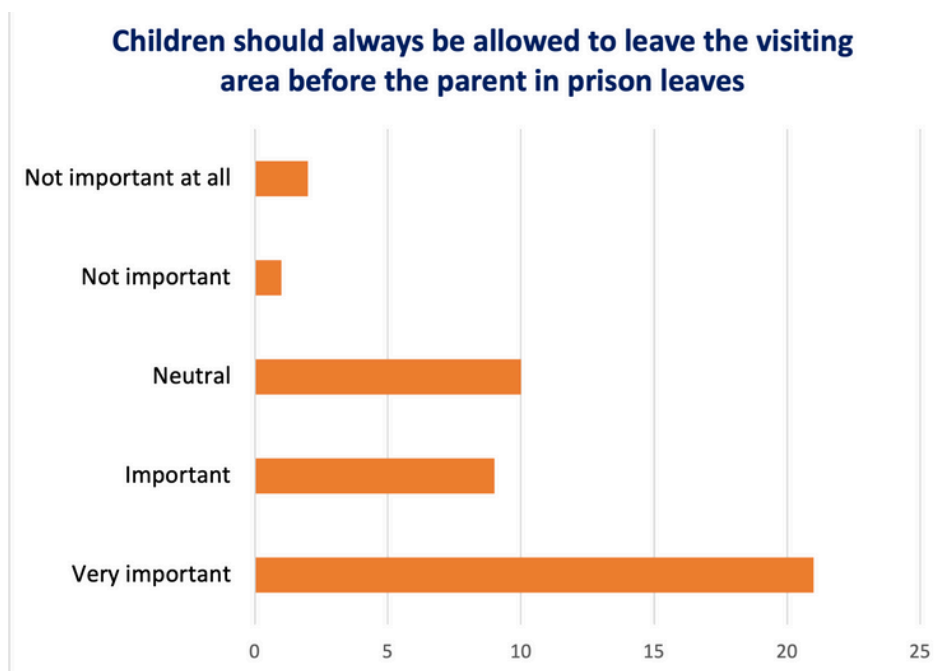
**3. Imprisoned parents should be able to wear their own clothes when their children visit them:** 87% of children affirmed that it is very important or important for the imprisoned parent to wear her or his own clothes when children visit them, while the remaining 13% were neutral on this matter.

Although no further comments were provided, this preference likely reflects a desire for a more normal and comforting visiting experience. Seeing their parent in familiar clothing can help reduce the emotional stress of the visit, making the interaction feel more natural and less institutionalised. This small change could significantly impact the child's comfort and emotional well-being during visits.

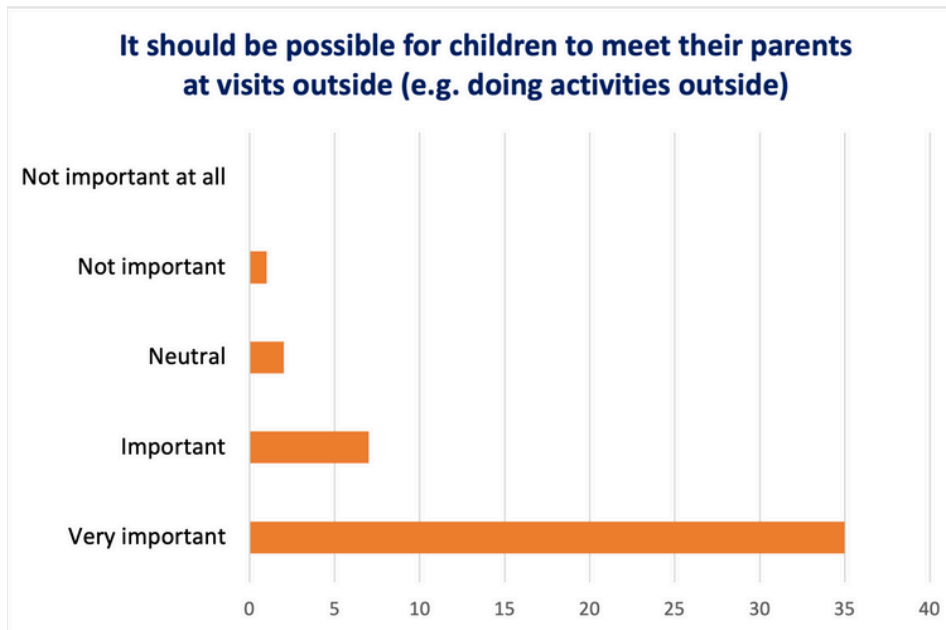


**4. Children should always be allowed to leave the visiting area before the imprisoned parent does:** some children did not regard this issue as being a critical one, with 30% of children being neutral or indifferent toward it, with the remaining 70% considering it important or very important. No additional comments were provided on this topic.

While this aspect might not be as critical as others, it is worth considering the potential benefits of allowing children to leave the visiting area before the imprisoned parent. For some children, leaving first could help ease the emotional difficulty of saying goodbye, making the transition smoother and less distressing. This practice could also help reduce the impact of seeing their parent escorted back to their cell, which might be a distressing experience for some. Although it wasn't highlighted as a major concern, implementing such a policy could still contribute to a more compassionate and child-friendly visiting process, helping to ensure that the emotional needs of all children are met during their visits.

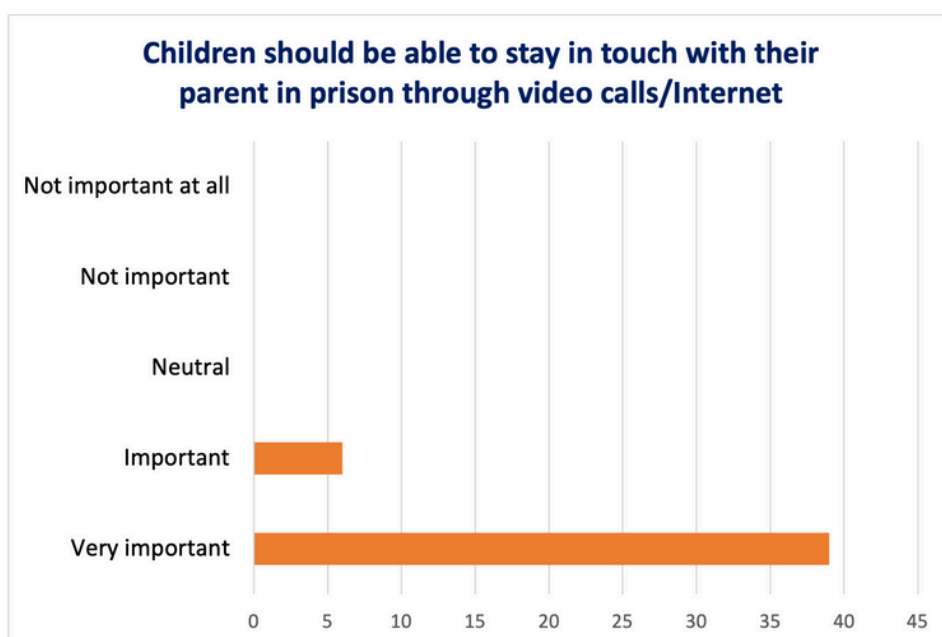


**5. It should be possible for children to join their parents on visits outside, for example during sports or outdoor activities:** 91% of children confirmed the importance of being able to join their parents for outdoor visits, such as during sports or other outdoor activities. This need was emphasised in their open-ended responses, where children expressed a strong desire to walk outside together, engage in crafting and sports activities with their imprisoned parents. Outdoor activities can provide a sense of normalcy and freedom that indoor visits cannot offer, they can contribute to strengthening the child-parent bond and to creating positive memories in a challenging environment.



**6. Children should be able to stay in touch with their imprisoned parent using technologies such as video calls, phone calls, the Internet, etc:** this point was deemed the most important by the children, with 98% stating it is very important or important. While phone or video calls should never replace physical visits, children express their need for options when keeping in contact with an imprisoned parent.

In their responses, children emphasised the need for longer phone calls with their imprisoned parent and mentioned issues with non-functional phone equipment. By ensuring a more frequent access to effective communication technologies, prisons can help mitigate the emotional strain of separation, providing children with a vital lifeline to their parents. This consistent contact can play a significant role in the child's emotional stability and overall well-being, helping to foster a sense of continuity and support despite the physical separation.





7. **Prison staff should wear less formal clothing:** this was the least important point for the respondents, with 62% being neutral or not considering it important. While the formality of staff attire was not a major concern, the behaviour and demeanor of the staff were seen as crucial elements that could enhance the overall atmosphere during visits.

They reported that prison staff are often strict and unkind towards children, and they expressed a desire for staff to treat them, as well as their parents, with greater respect and empathy. Children believe that a positive and supportive attitude from prison staff can significantly improve their visiting experience, making it less intimidating and more welcoming.



## IV. Children's key recommendations



*Prisons should be less scary, you make me feel like I have done something wrong and you do not like my dad or trust my grandmother when she takes me to visit my dad.*

-Boy, age 8, Ireland



In the online survey, children were asked to describe what adults should start and stop doing to make prisons more welcoming. The feedback is crucial for introducing meaningful and impactful changes in prisons, as part of our network's commitment to strengthening child safeguarding policies and ensuring the safety of children at all times.

Children's responses highlighted key areas for improvement. They provided insights on practices that are beneficial and should be continued, new initiatives that should be introduced, and behaviours that need to be eliminated. This participatory approach not only helps in creating a more child-friendly prison environment but also empowers children, by giving them a voice in the decision-making process regarding their well-being and rights.

Here is what emerged from their answers.

### Changes that children would like to see:

- **Change the configuration of visiting rooms.** Children suggested incorporating vibrant coloured walls, providing a variety of toys and offering materials for drawing and other creative activities. Such modifications would create a more child-friendly, welcoming and less intimidating environment for children, making their visits more pleasant and engaging.
- **Be more empathetic towards both children and their parents.** Children wish to be treated with greater respect and kindness by prison staff. To address this need, implementing specific training programmes for prison staff is essential. A 16-year-old girl from

Slovakia observed that **‘social workers often understand the child’s needs better than the prison’s educators do’**. This highlights the importance of specialised training for prison staff (ideally with involvement from cross-sectoral stakeholders such as social workers) to ensure they are equipped to handle the emotional and psychological needs of children whose parent is in prison

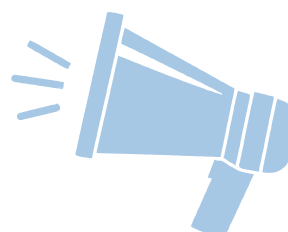
- **Allow more outdoor activities between children and their parent.** . By providing opportunities for outdoor interactions, prisons can significantly enhance the quality of interactions between children and their imprisoned parents, thus strengthening their bond.
- **Facilitate the course of the meeting between the child and the parent.** When meetings are sporadic, there is often tension and discomfort. On this note, children suggested the presence of a trained social workers to prepare both the parent and the child for the visit.
- **Clearly explain to children what is happening.** A 13-year-old boy from Norway expressed that he **‘never experienced the prison officers explaining anything to children’**. It is crucial for children to be informed and understand the circumstances and procedures during their visits. Providing clear and age-appropriate explanations can help reduce confusion and fear.

## **“ Miettikää asioita lapsen silmin ”**

“Think about things through the eyes of a child”

- Girl, Finland, age 12

- **Ensure that children have access to longer and more frequent prison visits.** This can facilitate deeper and more meaningful interactions and provide a stronger sense of continuity and stability in their relationships.
- **Making access to prison easier for children with physical needs or neurodivergent conditions.** Ensuring that prisons are accessible to everyone is essential. Barriers that hinder easy access not only make it physically challenging, but also add emotional stress and frustration. Efforts should be made to provide adequate facilities and support to accommodate all visitors, ensuring an inclusive and welcoming environment.



## Children want adults to stop:

- **Forbidding physical touch.** A significant number of children emphasised their need for physical contact with their parents, particularly the younger ones, who seek comfort and reassurance through touch. Physical affection, such as hugs or holding hands, plays a crucial role in nurturing the bond between children and their parent. Allowing such interactions can help maintain a sense of connection and emotional security, which is vital for the child's well-being. Therefore, policies should be adjusted to permit appropriate physical contact during visits.
- **Behaving in a strict and unfriendly way towards them.** This point was highlighted by the majority of children, indicating a strong need for prison staff to be trained in engaging with children and their parents kindly and respectfully. Such training would help create a more positive and emotionally supportive environment, reducing stress and fostering a sense of safety and understanding.
- **Using drug dogs during security checks.** The presence of drug dogs can be intimidating and frightening for children. The anxiety and fear caused by these dogs can overshadow the visit, turning what

*“Neodmietat’ odsúdenému kontakt s rodinou, hľadať spôsoby, ako uľahčiť priebeh stretnutia v rámci pravidiel, ktoré sú dieťaťu zrozumiteľné a vysvetlené, brať do úvahy názor a pocity dieťaťa.”*

“Do not deny the person in prison contact with the family, look for ways to facilitate the course of the meeting within the framework of rules that are understandable and explainable to the child, take into account the child's opinion and feelings.”

- Girl, Slovakia, age 17

should be a supportive and reassuring experience into a distressing one. Alternatives to such invasive security measures should be considered to help ensure that children feel safe and comfortable.

- **Mistreating the imprisoned parent when the child is present.** A 16-year-old girl from Slovakia asked to prison staff to ‘**allow prisoners who are ashamed in front of their children to protect their dignity**’. Treating the imprisoned parent with respect and care is a crucial step in safeguarding the emotional well-being of the child.

- **Threatening children with the prospect of imprisonment if they don't behave well.** This widely common threat can be incredibly damaging to a child's psyche, instilling unnecessary fear and anxiety. Children need encouragement and positive reinforcement rather than threats that can create long-lasting emotional scars and a sense of hopelessness.

## V. Concluding remarks

Children's responses to this survey mark a strong call for change amongst prison services to ensure their rights are upheld when a parent is in prison. The changes that children wish to see are mirrored in the 52 guidelines outlined in the [Council of Europe Recommendation \(2028\)<sup>5</sup> concerning children with imprisoned parents](#). While some progress is being made to implement this Recommendation and guarantee the rights of these children, there remains a great deal to be done to ensure this is not an aspiration of European states, but a reality.

The COPE network contains a wealth of expertise, good practice and perspectives that promote positive child-parent contact when a parent is in prison. For more information, [please get in touch](#) or [visit COPE's website](#).



# Annex I

Country	Respondents
Czechia	3
Estonia	9
Finland	3
Ireland	3
Netherlands	5
Norway	5
Poland	8
Slovakia	7
Sweden	2
United Kingdom	3

Age	Respondents
7 and younger	5
8 to 12 years	19
13 to 15 years	14
16 to 17 years	10

Gender	Respondents
Boy	20
Girl	27
I don't want to say	1

Minority group	Respondents
Irish catholic	1
Minority ethnic or religious group	3
Roma	2
Traveller	1

Parent/s in prison	Respondents
Dad	37
Mum	9
Mum and Dad	2



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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