

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to input into the Irish Prison Service Families and Imprisonment Working Group and to recommend how the prison service could improve its facilities to ameliorate relationships between prisoners and their families. At a minimum imprisonment disrupts families' lives but the absence of facilities to encourage active and positive parent/ child relationships makes the experience all the harder on children.

Barnardos believes services and facilities should be developed and available to all parent prisoners regardless of whether the parent is serving time in an adult prison or a young offenders detention centre. Maintaining positive links between prisoners and their families, where it is in the best interests of the child to do so, is important not only for the child but also because it can reduce recidivism upon release<sup>1</sup>.

### **Impact of parental imprisonment on children**

It is estimated that approximately 5,500 children on any given day has a parent in prison and up to 18,000 children every year is affected by having a parent in prison<sup>2</sup>.

Parental imprisonment affects children in many ways but at an emotional level a variety of feelings is experienced. Generally, these include shame, confusion, anger and worry. Stigma and fear of stigma from being associated with having a close family member in prison can create anxiety and stress. Children often experience or fear bullying or exclusion because of their situation. They may also worry about who will take care of them, how their parent is coping in prison, will they have to move house or school, what if anything they should tell their friends and what will the future hold for them. These feelings are particularly acute after their parent has been arrested and detained as it is a new experience for them. Also confusion and stress are heightened among families who are visiting relatives in prisons for the first time.

The impact of imprisonment on children can be worse when it is their mother who is imprisoned<sup>3</sup>. Given the special emotional and practical role a mother has in a child's life, the experience of a mother in prison is usually fundamentally different to that of a father in prison. Frequently, the separation from their mother results in the child being relocated to live with other family members or even taken into care.

### **Current situation**

While there have been some developments, such as the creation of the mother and baby unit in Dóchas, overall the current facilities for family visits in prisons are very unchild-friendly, particularly in the male prisons. The visiting areas are often noisy, overcrowded, with no play space or toys available and at times physical contact between parents and children is restricted or impossible given the presence of glass partitions. Even accessing

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<sup>1</sup> Hudson, K (2006) *Supporting Family Ties: an evaluation of prisoners perceptions of family need*. Children and Families of Offenders Strategic Pathway National Probation Service, HM Prison Service and Cardiff University

<sup>2</sup> Irish Prison Service based on the formula 1.3 x prisoner, originating from a study of the French INSEE (French National Statistics Institute)

<sup>3</sup> Barnardos Northern Ireland (2007) *When a Parent Goes to Prison*, Policy and Practice Briefing N0.8

the prison by being exposed to rigorous search procedures and / or use of sniffer dogs can be very frightening and daunting for a child, often making them think they have done something wrong. While recognising the importance of security for all within the prison system, Barnardos believes some allowances and flexibility can be made in recognition of the needs of maintaining relationships between parents who are in prison and their children.

Barnardos would agree with many of the recommendations outlined in the Irish Penal Reform Trust (2013) *'Picking Up the Pieces': The Rights and Needs of Children and Families Affected by Imprisonment*.

Many of these are practical suggestions which could have a significant immediate impact on facilitating the maintenance and development of parent/ child relationships. Other recommendations are related to structural issues and could be phased in over time. These recommendations draw on national and international experience where many of the proposals are already successfully in operation.

### **Practical Recommendations:**

- Appoint a Children's Officer in all prisons who could offer information and emotional support to children and families visiting the prison and allay any anxieties they may have. Such a scheme is run in some prisons in Northern Ireland where Barnardo's staff work in the prisons facilitating and supporting children during child centred visits (where a child spends one to one time with their parent). These visits are less security focused in that parents can move around and play with their child. The Children's Officer could also engage in group work with children of prisoners to enable them to share and support each other and reduce any feelings of shame.
- General visits should be more family friendly including allowing some physical contact between the parent and child and having access to some games or toys to play together, even outdoor games such as a football should be allowed.
- There should be flexibility in the visiting hours for children and families particularly for those travelling long distances and for those families visiting remand prisoners.
- Increase in special family visits should be permitted in all prisons with clear criteria set out on how to qualify for these special visits.
- Other ways to maintain contact should be encouraged and facilitated such as audio or video recordings of a book by their parent to allow the child to hear their parents tell them a story or increases use of Skype.
- Supporting parenthood within prison through initiatives such as the Barnardo's Parenting Matters Project which has been working with parents in prison in Northern Ireland since 1996. The programme aims to help parents cope with the practical and emotional issues of being a parent in prison. The programme guides parents through the key stages of childhood and adolescence, assists parents to listen and respond to their children and importantly, prepares participants to cope with parenting on release. There are five distinct modules delivered in prisons –
  - Staying in Touch
  - Being a Parent in Prison
  - Preparing for Release
  - Partners Together
  - Talking to Your Child about Tough Issues.

Components of these modules are delivered to fathers housed in the young offenders unit. Participants who have completed the programme are awarded a

certificate and a family day is held to mark the occasion, with these certificates presented to prisoners in front of their families.

### **Structural Recommendations:**

- The number of children with a parent in prison should be recorded by the Irish Prison Service in order to plan services for children affected by imprisonment.
- Establish a Family Links programme similar to that run by the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders<sup>4</sup> (NIACRO). This programme has a Family Links staff member who contacts each family within 48 hours of someone entering prison or the Juvenile Justice Centre. Following this initial contact, if a family member wants to take up the offer they will be given an information pack and, depending on what they need, they can avail of:
  - One-to-one ongoing support for adults, children and young people.
  - Telephone support.
  - Home visits.
  - Information on other agencies which can help and how to access them.
  - Advice and information on benefits, housing, debt etc.
  - Transport to any of the three prisons or the Juvenile Justice Centre.
  - Help with childcare.
  - Links to visitor centre and prison visit staff.
- Establish a mother and baby unit in all female prisons in line with international best practice. Where it is deemed in the best interests of the child to remain with their mother, these units provide the space and opportunity for the mother to bond with their child. Qualified childcare staff work in these units as frequently these mothers already have multiple issues and might not be able to identify and respond to their baby's needs adequately<sup>5</sup>.
- When undertaking internal prison reviews on how to improve the service and its facilities, ensure consultation and effective engagement is had with a sample of families and children who visit the prison on what their recommendations would be.
- Greater use of child impact statements by the courts service when making decisions on imposing custodial sentences on parents.
- Greater awareness of the need to support children whose parents are in prison across service providers, for instance:
  - For teachers and principals, include this category of children when drafting anti-bullying strategies for schools and also include it into the SPHE module in schools to lessen the stigma for children affected.
  - For Gardaí, offer specific training to heighten their awareness of the impact of arrest on the family, particularly children.
  - For judges, provide additional training on the impact of imprisonment on children.

### **Conclusion**

Barnardos calls on the Irish Prison Service to take into account the impact imprisonment has on children and to learn from other jurisdictions on how services can be put in place to lessen this impact. Improving family ties can lead to less re-offending and possibly break the intergenerational cycle of prisoners being children of offenders.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.niacro.co.uk](http://www.niacro.co.uk)

<sup>5</sup> *The nursery in the prison*, Nursery World July 1992