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Children's Experiences of Contact with Imprisoned Parents: A Comparison between Four European Countries

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(Version accepted for publication)

Abstract

Across the European Union an increasing number of children are experiencing parental imprisonment and the adverse emotional, behavioural and social outcomes that it entails. Separation due to imprisonment also places strain on parent-child relationships, with children reporting feelings of abandonment and alienation, and difficulties communicating with their imprisoned parent. This paper presents findings from interviews with a total of 135 families in the UK, Germany, Romania and Sweden. There were noticeable country differences in the practical and financial barriers to maintaining contact and the suitability of prison visiting environments. This had important implications for children's emotional health and the extent to which contact was conducive to supporting parent-child relationships.

Keywords: parental imprisonment; prison; contact; visits; children

Introduction

The exact number of children affected by parental imprisonment in the European Union is unknown because in most countries these data are not systematically collected by relevant authorities such as prisons, criminal justice departments or welfare agencies (Scharff-Smith and Gampell, 2011: 8). Given that the number of people detained in custody in the EU has increased dramatically in recent years (Tavares, Thomas and Bulut, 2012), it would be fair to assume that the number of children separated from their parent due to imprisonment has also increased. High rates of re-offending in some EU countries¹ also mean that for many children parental imprisonment is likely to be a repeat occurrence.

Taking these two factors into consideration, Gampell and Ayre (2011) predict that on any given day in the EU, approximately 800,000 children have a parent in prison. This figure is far from insignificant and highlights the extent of the problem of parental imprisonment for children.

Existing literature highlights that parental imprisonment has detrimental consequences for children's mental health and the strength of parent-child relationships. Opportunities for frequent contact with the imprisoned parent have the potential to protect against these adverse outcomes, but the link is not straightforward and instead is mediated by practical and financial obstacles that restrict opportunities for contact and the suitability of prison visiting environments.

Most of the research concerning contact between children and imprisoned parents has focused on just one continent at a time, most often North America, and has concentrated predominantly on visiting. Far too little is known about children's experiences of visiting prison in other countries and how experiences compare between countries. Also, comparatively little is known about contact via telephone and letter.

This paper presents findings from in-depth interviews with families affected by parental imprisonment in four European countries (the UK, Germany, Romania, and Sweden). The aims of the paper are:

- to explore whether the practical and financial barriers to contact in Europe are similar to those identified in North America;
- to expand upon existing knowledge about children's experiences of visiting prison by offering comparisons between European countries;
- to consider the extent to which arrangements for contact in Europe are sympathetic to children's emotional wellbeing and conducive to sustaining parent-child relationships.
- and to offer new insights into children's experiences of contact via telephone and letter.

Previous Literature

An examination of the literature revealed that parental imprisonment has a variety of adverse emotional and behavioural outcomes for children (e.g. Murray, Farrington and Sekol, 2012; Hissel, Bijleveld and Kruttschnitt, 2011; King, 2002; Boswell and Wedge, 2002). The severity of the emotional

impact varies between studies, but in some instances is as profound as children experiencing the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Bocknek, Sanderson and Britner, 2009). Studies have also revealed that children and families often experience secondary stigma, bullying, victimisation and social isolation as a result of their association with the prisoner (Murray, 2007; Cunningham, 2001). In comparison to their counterparts, children of prisoners have been shown to have poorer school attainment and attendance, and greater conduct problems requiring disciplinary measures (Trice and Brewster, 2004; Cho, 2009). Perhaps it is not surprising then, that Phillips et al (2002) found children of prisoners to constitute a significant proportion (43%) of those accessing mental health services.

Research has also demonstrated that parental imprisonment presents profound challenges for the quality of parent-child relationships. This is perhaps with the exception of parent-child relationships that were damaged even before imprisonment (e.g. as a result of domestic violence, childhood abuse or parental substance misuse) when the removal of a parent due to imprisonment may present a welcome reprieve for children (Murray, 2005). Immediately after parental imprisonment, children can suffer a sense of abandonment and uncertainty regarding the future of their relationship with their parent (Phillips and Zhao, 2010; Comfort, 2007). Once the initial shock of separation subsides, children have been found to experience a mixture of sadness and loss at their parent's absence but also shame and embarrassment with regards to their parent's involvement in criminal activity (Tudball, 2000). Schlafer and Poehlmann (2010) observed that children tend to distance themselves from their imprisoned parent to avoid the difficult and conflicting emotions that the situation elicits. Studies that have explored separation from the perspective of the imprisoned parent have highlighted their diminished capacity to contribute to their child's upbringing and associated feelings of helplessness and disempowerment (e.g. Clarke et al, 2005). As a consequence of the pressures placed on the parent-child relationship during the course of imprisonment, both parties have reported feelings of alienation from each other and difficulties communicating (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008; Arditti and Few, 2006; Clarke et al, 2005).

Importantly, research evidence indicates that sustaining *frequent* contact with the imprisoned parent is associated with more satisfying parent-child relationships both during imprisonment and upon release (Lösel et al, 2012; Poehlmann, 2005) and also better emotional adjustment and more effective coping

skills on behalf of the child (Murray, 2005). Unfortunately practical and financial barriers have been found to severely affect the extent to which frequent contact is feasible. The child's non-imprisoned parent/carer has often been described as the primary "gatekeeper" to contact, accompanying the child to visits and facilitating telephone calls and letter writing (e.g. Poehlmann, 2005; Clarke et al, 2005). The quality of the relationship between the two parents was observed to be a major determinant of the frequency of contact for the child. Other common obstacles to visiting have been found to include the distance to the prison and the associated travel costs, inconvenient visiting hours, and inefficient administrative systems that make booking visits difficult (Arditti and Few, 2006; Arditti, Lambert-Schute and Joest, 2003). Barriers that exist to other forms of contact include imprisoned parents experiencing difficulties accessing telephones within the prison and being unable to afford telephone credit, and literacy problems that inhibit letter-writing (Chui, 2010; Kazura, 2001).

Research has also demonstrated that the potential for protecting parent-child relationships and children's emotional health is mediated by the suitability of the prison visiting environment. In a comprehensive literature review by Poehlmann et al (2010), just half of the studies revealed a positive association between prison visiting, attachment security² and positive emotional outcomes for the child (e.g. self-esteem). Importantly, these studies were conducted in child-friendly visiting environments or in the context interventions designed to make contact more enjoyable. The remaining studies which revealed negative associations were characterised by unfriendly visiting environments and an absence of interventions. The degree to which prison visiting policies are family-orientated has also been offered as a possible explanation for country variations in the offending behaviour of children affected by parental imprisonment (Besemer et al, 2011; Murray, Janson and Farrington, 2007).

Qualitative studies that offer further insights into children's experiences of visiting their parent in prison typically reveal that they have mixed feelings about the situation (Chui, 2010; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008; Brown et al, 2001; Tudball, 2000). Children value the opportunity to catch-up on news, engage in direct interaction such as physical displays of affection, and demonstrate their continuing support for the imprisoned parent. Visiting also helps to rectify misconceptions about prison conditions and the treatment of inmates, and alleviates children's concerns for their parent's safety and wellbeing. However, these studies also revealed that there are numerous aspects of the prison environment that

make children feel frightened and uncomfortable, including physical security measures (e.g. barbed wire), intrusive search procedures, unfriendly prison staff, strict rules and regulations, and noisy and crowded visiting halls. A general consensus that emerged from the research is that such environments are harmful to children's emotional wellbeing and are not conducive to quality parent-child interaction, thus restricting the chance of maintaining positive relationships.

Methodology

Participants

Interviews were conducted with 135 families affected by the imprisonment of a parent or carer in four European countries: the UK; Germany; Romania; and Sweden. As shown in table 1, interviewees comprised of children (n=161), their non-imprisoned parent/carer (n=123) and their imprisoned parent/carer (n=65). Out of recognition that siblings could react differently to parental imprisonment, in some families more than one child was interviewed. This was most apparent in the UK where 67 children from 47 different families participated.

[Table 1 about here]

Staff from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) established contact with families as part of their normal work at counselling centres and prison visitor centres. Families who agreed to participate in the research initially completed a questionnaire, and those who indicated that they would be willing to progress to in-depth interviews were subsequently contacted by telephone to arrange a convenient time.

All of the children in the sample had just one parent/carer in prison, and this was most often their biological father, step-father or mother's partner. In the UK a slightly higher proportion of children with a biological mother in prison were recruited. The majority of children were looked after by their biological mother, but the number of children in the UK that were cared for by their grandmother was also of some note.

There was little difference in the mean age children across the four countries. Although slightly more boys than girls were interviewed in Romania and the UK, this pattern was reversed in Germany and Sweden, resulting in a similar number of boys and girls in the sample overall.

Interview Procedure and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the impact of parental imprisonment on the child and included questions about family relationships, physical and emotional wellbeing, school, social life, and involvement with support services. Of particular relevance to this paper were questions relating to the child's experiences of contact with the imprisoned parent (including visiting, telephone calls and letter-writing), for example *"Please can you say how you have found visiting the prison?"* and *"How important are these ways of keeping in contact for you?"*.

In the UK and Romania most interviews were conducted by university researchers, whereas in Sweden and Germany they were mostly conducted by NGO staff. Interviews with children and non-imprisoned parents were conducted at the family home, with the exception of those in Sweden that were conducted at the NGO's counselling centre. Children were given the option of being accompanied during their interview, either by their non-imprisoned parent, another adult or an older sibling, but most declined (n=140). Where more than one sibling participated, they were often interviewed together and invariably provided support to each other.

Regrettably it was not always possible to gain access to prisons in order to speak to the imprisoned parent. Nine imprisoned parents were interviewed at home immediately after release (UK=5; Germany=3; Romania=1), and one in Germany was interviewed at home during day release.

All except two interviews were recorded and fully transcribed; in one case the prison refused permission to take recording equipment into the establishment and in the other, the imprisoned parent did not consent to the interview being recorded. Instead contemporaneous notes were taken.

A thematic analysis was carried out with the help of the qualitative software analysis tool NVivo (QSR International, 2013). Coding was carried out case by case, where a case was an individual interview.

Partner countries agreed on an initial coding framework, and this was predominantly an “a priori” coding frame based on the topics included in the interview schedule. The coding framework was modified in an inductive fashion during the analysis process. In just a few cases it emerged that new codes were required, and previously coded transcripts were revisited to assign text to the new code where appropriate.

Findings

A number of distinct themes emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. Prominent amongst them were the influence of pre-existing parent-child relationships on the motivation to maintain contact, practical and financial obstacles to sustaining contact, and children’s experiences of visiting prison and indirect forms of contact (telephone and letters).

Pre-Existing Relationships

The quality of the parent-child relationship prior to the parent’s imprisonment significantly affected children’s (and families’) motivation to maintain contact. Three distinct types of parent-child relationship were identified and each was associated with a different pattern of contact. The first and largest group of children had a positive and nurturing relationship with their parent prior to imprisonment, and found separation very difficult. These children tended to take advantage of every available opportunity for contact with their imprisoned parent, and the absence of contact was found to be emotionally detrimental, including but not limited to, feelings of despair and anxiety. There were just a few children who, despite good relationships, found visiting distressing and so it was in their best interests to visit less frequently. In these cases phone calls (where available) and letters provided an alternative and important source of communication.

A second small group of children had experienced fragmented relationships with their parent prior to imprisonment. They often held a combination of good and bad memories about their imprisoned parent, for example one child recalled positive interaction with her mother when she was “clean” from drugs but little or no contact when she was misusing drugs. These children usually had infrequent or sporadic contact, or only utilised some of the available methods of communication (prison visits,

telephone calls, letter-writing). Interestingly, these children appeared somewhat indifferent as to whether contact was more regular or not.

Lastly, an even smaller proportion of children experienced harmful relationships with their parent prior to imprisonment. These were characterised by multiple periods of separation due to imprisonment, substance misuse, domestic violence, or in a small number of cases sexual abuse. These children tended to have no contact with their imprisoned parent and this was usually found to be in their best interests; attempts to promote contact caused undue distress to the child.

Obstacles to Contact

For children who previously had a positive relationship with their imprisoned parent and were highly motivated to maintain contact, barriers to contact were a source of much frustration and distress. Although there was no direct evidence to suggest this, it seems likely that in cases of fragmented relationships where children were less motivated to maintain contact with their imprisoned parents, the presence of obstacles would further discourage contact, and so relationships would remain fragile or deteriorate further.

There were two factors that presented an obstacle to children maintaining contact with their imprisoned parent: prison regulations that determined the availability of the various forms of contact; and the financial cost associated with contact which affected its frequency. Prison regulations presented a significant barrier to telephone contact in Germany, and to a slightly lesser degree in Romania. In both countries, prisoners were required to submit an application in advance to make telephone calls. As can be seen in table 2, permission was often granted in Romania but not in Germany³. This was a major source of dissatisfaction for children and families in Germany. In the UK and Sweden, rules regarding telephone contact were far less prohibitive, and most children had been able to speak to their parent on the phone.

Prison regulations posed comparatively fewer barriers to visiting, and in all four countries most children were able to access visits. The slightly lower percentage of children attending visits in Sweden was linked to more of the imprisoned parents being entitled to “furlough”⁴ and so there was

less need to visit the prison. Communication via letter was least affected by prison regulations; the lower percentage of children utilising this form of communication is discussed later.

[Table 2 about here]

The extent to which families were financially able to maintain frequent contact with the imprisoned parent varied considerably between countries. Despite this, in all countries interviewees perceived the cost associated with contact to be high and an unwelcome burden on top of their already precarious financial position.

In the UK and Germany, the distance to the prison and the associated travel costs were not so excessive to restrict the frequency of visits, and in both countries children tended to visit as often as permitted by the prison regime; usually weekly or fortnightly. Distance presented more of a problem in Sweden, especially when the imprisoned parent/carer transferred to a less secure establishment as this was often associated with moving further from home. Consequently children in Sweden visited slightly less often; usually around once or twice a month.

Telephone calls in the UK and Sweden were very frequent, and many children reported speaking to their parent on a daily basis. In Sweden, prisoners with children were entitled to some free telephone calls but if they wished to make additional calls they had to purchase their own credit. In the UK imprisoned parents were required to purchase all of their own telephone credit and often spent a significant proportion of their prison earnings on this. It was not uncommon for this to be supplemented by money sent in from relatives, thus adding to the pressures on family finances. Despite calls in the UK being amongst the most frequent, interviewees were deeply aggrieved by the cost of credit, perceiving it to be extortionate.

Contact was least frequent in Romania where it emerged that families were most economically disadvantaged. Imprisoned parents in Romania also tended to be located furthest from home, resulting in the most expensive journeys to attend visits. It was not uncommon for families in Romania to choose between visiting prison or meeting basic needs (food, clothing, school equipment). In some

families, siblings took turns to visit their imprisoned parent to reduce travel costs. Although imprisoned parents in Romania often struggled to afford telephone credit, low incomes meant that there was little families could do to assist. Children typically reported visiting their imprisoned parent just a few times a year and speaking on the phone just once a month.

“The youngest two came with my wife when she was visiting me, but I have not seen my other children for over a year and a half. It might still take another half a year, depending on their financial situation” (Romania, imprisoned father).

The Visiting Experience

In all four countries, prison visits provided an invaluable opportunity for children to have face-to-face contact with their imprisoned parent and reassurance that their imprisoned parent was safe and well. However, there were noticeable country differences in children’s emotional state when visiting and the degree to which visits supported parent-child relationships; either in terms of sustaining positive relationships or strengthening fragmented relationships. This was evident in the extent to which children expressed enjoyment at visiting their imprisoned parent and described their interaction as satisfactory. Influencing factors included the physical environment, search procedures, restrictions on physical interaction, and provision of meaningful activities.

Upon arrival at the prison, the physical environment and search procedures created an initial impression for children. This set the tone for the remainder of the visit and influenced children’s emotional capacity to interact with their imprisoned parent. In the UK, children tended to report very few problems with the availability and general upkeep of facilities. The quality of visiting environments in Sweden were more variable; some were reported to be pleasant and well equipped whilst others were poorly maintained and in need of renovation. In comparison, children in Germany and Romania felt that there was a lack of amenities for visitors and that visiting rooms were “cold” and “drab”.

Children in the UK and Sweden admitted that on their first few prison visits they were daunted by the physical security measures (e.g. barbed wire) and search procedures, but over the course of subsequent visits became accustomed to them. The demeanour of prison officers upon entry to the

prison and during searches was found to contribute significantly to children's feelings of ease. Children were also observed to be well informed about the purpose of security measures and were able to acknowledge them as a necessity.

"In the beginning it was very hard...the first time I went there were dogs...and I thought it was really unpleasant, but that was something that I got used to" (Sweden, girl aged 17).

In Germany and Romania however, children perceived the physical security measures to be comparatively more frightening, and described the search procedures as intrusive, degrading and physically rough. Children's anxieties did not seem to diminish over the course of subsequent visits. There was less evidence to suggest that prison procedures had been explained to children, and comments about interaction with prison officers tended to be less favourable.

"...the barbed wire around the prison scared my children away, it was not often that they wanted to go back to see Daddy, this hurt my husband of course, but the children were so relieved when we got home" (Germany, non-imprisoned mother).

Once the visit had begun, prison regulations governed the degree of physical interaction that was permitted between prisoners and their children (e.g. rough and tumble play and physical displays of affection). It was apparent from the interviews that regulations varied between countries, between prisons and as a consequence of the imprisoned parent's offence and perceived level of risk. Interaction appeared to be most restricted in Romania, less so in Germany and the UK, and least restricted in Sweden. Where restrictions on physical contact were employed, this was one of the main causes of dissatisfaction for children and contributed to artificial interaction with their imprisoned parent. Natural tendencies to hug the parent following a period of separation and to engage in physical play were prohibited. Restrictions were also clearly difficult for younger children to comprehend, especially where they were only applied to some family members. This caused children to wrongly assume that they were being punished for bad behaviour or that certain family members were in conflict, instilling feelings of worry and anxiety.

The provision of child-friendly activities during visits was similarly varied. Families in Sweden indicated that toys and games were commonly provided for them to use together, and where they were in good condition, clearly contributed to children's enjoyment of visits. Families in the UK and Germany typically reported that visiting halls incorporated children's play areas, but in most instances these were not attractive to older children and the imprisoned parent was not allowed to enter the play area, further restricting the opportunity for fulfilling parent-child interaction. In Romania, toys and games were rarely provided for children during visits and those which were tended to be old and damaged. In the absence of suitable activities for children, they often became increasingly bored or agitated throughout the duration of visits, or they struggled to engage in conversation with their imprisoned parent for prolonged periods. This was particularly true for younger children and those with fragmented relationships who were less accustomed to long conversations with their parent.

Some families indicated that they had participated in visiting interventions specifically to promote relationships between imprisoned parents and their children. In the UK and Sweden these were called "Family Days" and in Germany "Father-Child Visits". These were often delivered in partnership with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) specialising in the support of children and families of prisoners. These extended visits were characterised by fewer security restrictions (e.g. uninhibited physical contact) and the provision of activities (e.g. craft activities) specifically to encourage interaction between the imprisoned parents and their children. The level of service provision in Romania was considerably less, with few specialised NGOs and very few interventions being delivered.

Where available, these events were clearly appreciated by children and families. The extended duration made long journeys to the prison more worthwhile, and the reduction in restrictions enabled them to feel more at ease and promoted more natural engagement. Although these events were enjoyed by all children, they were particularly beneficial to children who previously had fragmented relationships with their imprisoned parent and struggled to interact under normal visiting conditions.

Indirect Contact

Telephone calls (where available) and the exchange of letters provided an important source of communication with the imprisoned parent between visits. The relative value placed on these varied between countries in accordance with the availability and frequency of other forms of contact. There was comparatively little discussion of telephone contact in Germany and Romania, presumably because in Germany telephone contact was rarely permitted and in Romania the cost meant that it was infrequent and therefore not regarded as a main source of communication.

In Sweden and the UK, for children who had a positive relationship with their parent prior to imprisonment, telephone contact was highly valued. This was evident in the enjoyment that children derived from conversations but also the distress displayed when they inadvertently missed a telephone call from their parent. Telephone contact seemed to serve three main purposes, all of which were dependent on a reasonably high frequency of calls: to maintain normal interactions as part of the daily routine; to update on daily occurrences; and to provide reassurance that the imprisoned parent was safe and well. Children reported that when telephone calls were not received at the anticipated times, they would worry for the imprisoned parent's safety.

"We'd worry about why he's not rang and everything so I think the phone contact, even for a minute or less than a minute is vital..." (UK, boy aged 17).

For children who experienced fragmented relationships with their parent prior to imprisonment, telephone contact tended to be more strained, and was characterised by a reluctance to pick up the phone, difficulties maintaining a conversation, superficial conversations and calls ending abruptly. In these cases, visits which permitted physical interaction or supplied activities were comparatively more effective at supporting engagement since they were less dependent on conversation to interact.

"I would pass the phone to try and get my son speaking but he would just run out the door"
(UK, non-imprisoned mother).

Some of the potential benefits associated with telephone contact were inhibited by prison regulations that governed the arrangements for calls. Virtually all families across the four countries indicated that only the imprisoned parent could make outgoing calls to their family (the family could not call into the prison). The timing of calls was typically determined by the prison, either as a consequence of free-time within the prison regime or a time slot allocated in response to an application. The timing of calls was not necessarily convenient for the child's routine. Also, if the child wished to speak to their parent urgently to share some exciting news or seek comfort in times of distress, this was generally not possible, and by the time they were able to discuss the matter some of the initial emotion had dissipated. Children in the UK, Sweden and Romania also complained that the duration of telephone calls was often limited as a consequence of the cost of credit, limited minutes allowance or a security restriction imposed by some prisons. In these cases, children reported that they were very conscious of time passing and that conversations were rushed and unsatisfactory. This was exacerbated in larger families where several people wished to speak to the parent.

Letters held greater significance for children in Germany as it was usually the only available source of communication between visits, and in Romania where it was more affordable than telephone contact and provided a precious source of communication in the absence of regular visits. There was some disparity between the importance bestowed on letter writing in Romania and the actual proportion of children who indicated that they were communicating with their imprisoned parent via letter (see table 2 above), which might be indicative of more prevalent literacy problems in Romania.

In the UK and Sweden, letters were an important source of communication for some children, allowing them to express emotions that they felt unable to show during visits or telephone conversations. They could also prove useful in larger families, where as mentioned above, telephone conversations could be brief. However, for most children they were not regarded as a main source of communication and were superseded by more regular telephone contact that permitted an instantaneous response. Nevertheless the exchange of cards at special occasions, drawing and poems was significant for many children.

Discussion

Previous research has demonstrated that in the context of positive family backgrounds, parental imprisonment has detrimental consequences for children's emotional health and the strength of parent-child relationships (e.g. Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008; Boswell and Wedge, 2002; Tudball, 2000). In families troubled by domestic violence, childhood abuse and parental substance misuse problems, the imprisonment of a parent can provide a welcome relief for children (Murray, 2005). The present study revealed similar findings with the emergence of three types of pre-existing parent-child relationships: positive; fragmented; and harmful. Consistent with past research (e.g. Lösel et al, 2012; Murray, 2005), in the case of positive relationships, regular opportunities for contact with the imprisoned parent were crucial to protecting the child's emotional wellbeing and the strength of parent-child relationships. Since most children in the sample had positive relationships with their parent prior to parental imprisonment and were highly motivated to maintain contact with them, and families were also recruited via non-governmental organisations that facilitate contact, it is likely that this study represents an over-estimate of the prevalence and frequency of contact between children and their imprisoned parent in European countries.

Children who previously had fragmented relationships often found contact with their imprisoned parent awkward, but under the right conditions, quality engagement could be achieved and relationships reinforced. Children who were struggling to come to terms with the nature of their parent's offence experienced similar difficulties communicating with their imprisoned parent; the task of discussing the offence with children and the role that contact plays within this is a complex matter and warrants detailed consideration in a separate paper. Where pre-existing parent-child relationships were harmful, it was generally in the child's best interests not to have contact with their imprisoned parent.

Based on past research it was anticipated that opportunities for contact would be hindered by the willingness of non-imprisoned parents/carers to facilitate contact, prison regulations and the financial cost associated with contact (e.g. Naser and Visser, 2006; Clarke et al, 2005). Non-imprisoned parents/carers willingness to facilitate contact rarely presented an issue for the present sample, but then most families had experienced positive relationships prior to parental imprisonment. In cases where the relationship between the non-imprisoned and imprisoned parent/carer was fraught or they

had separated, the non-imprisoned parent/carer still prioritised the child's need for contact and other relatives helped out where they could by accompanying children to visits. There was little evidence to suggest that prison regulations presented a barrier to visiting, but the cost associated with the journey and families' financial circumstances did exert an influence on the frequency of visits. Perhaps this is indicative of the current period of financial austerity across Europe; otherwise prison regimes might have featured more heavily as a barrier to visiting. In all countries the cost of visiting exacerbated families' already precarious financial situation and was a cause of much stress, but it was in the most economically disadvantaged countries such as Romania that families were least able to afford visits. It is suggested that in all countries imprisoned parents are located as close to home as feasibly possible in order to reduce the cost associated with visiting. The UK's Assisted Prison Visits Scheme (APVS) and Sweden's local municipality scheme provide financial support to enable families to visit prison and offer potential models that might be adopted elsewhere. However, some issues did emerge with the accessibility of these schemes and the extent to which they covered the full cost of visiting.

As anticipated, telephone contact was impaired by a mixture of prison regulations and families' financial circumstances. Prisons that prohibit or severely regulate opportunities for telephone contact, such as those in Germany and Romania, deny an incredibly valuable source of communication between prisoners and their children. Families in the comparatively more wealthy countries (e.g. the UK) were in a better position to send money to the imprisoned parent to enable them to purchase telephone credit than in the poorest of countries in the study (e.g. Romania), but this only served to add to their existing financial burden. The provision of a free telephone call allowance in Sweden is one example of an initiative to support telephone contact between imprisoned parents and their children.

As in previous research (e.g. Poehlmann et al, 2010), child-friendly visiting environments were more effective at protecting children's emotional wellbeing and existing positive parent-child relationships. Child-friendly visiting environments were also found to be more conducive to strengthening fragmented parent-child relationships. Factors that influenced children's visiting experience in Europe were not dissimilar to elsewhere (e.g. Arditti, Lambert-Schute and Joest, 2003) and included the provision and quality of facilities, harshness of physical security measures, manner in which visitors

are searched, demeanour of prison officers', severity of regulations governing physical interaction, and the provision of meaningful activities. Prisons that have comparatively less child-friendly visiting environments (such as in Romania and Germany) are advised that prisons in the UK and Sweden offer examples of good practice.

In comparison to standard visits, visiting interventions such as Family Days in the UK and Sweden and Father-Child Visits in Germany were found to be more effective in sustaining good parent-child relationships and reinforcing those which were fragmented. Understandably such interventions are limited in frequency and the number of places. It is suggested that ways of incorporating aspects of these interventions into standard visits are explored, and also further research is conducted into how to best identify children who are most likely to benefit from these interventions.

This study offered new evidence of the importance of telephone contact in maintaining communication between prison visits. Although telephone calls were incredibly valuable to children who had a good relationship with their imprisoned parent, those with more fragmented relationships struggled to engage in conversations and tended to benefit more from visits that provided activities to stimulate parent-child engagement. In most cases, families reported that only the imprisoned parent was able to make outgoing calls to their family and at times that was convenient for the prison's regime. This demonstrates a lack of consideration for children's routines and the need for spontaneous conversation at times of need. Prisons in the UK are increasingly recognising the importance of two-way communication and freedom concerning the timing of contact and have begun to pilot a number of interventions. For example Lowdham Grange Prison installed in-cell phones to reduce restrictions on the timing of calls.

Letters were most significant in Germany where they often provided the only source of communication between visits, and in Romania where they were cheaper than telephone calls. However, it was not clear from the present study how children with positive and fragmented relationships differed in their use of letters. Although letters were very important to some children in the UK and Sweden, they were usually superseded by more regular telephone contact that permitted an instant response. It is suggested that prisons pilot modern forms of technology that permit two-way communication and

facilitate quick response times. In the UK, “emailprisoner” is now available at most prisons but only permits correspondence from families to prisoners (and not back again), and Manchester Prison has installed portals around the establishment that permit two-way emails. All of these new initiatives will eventually require evaluation to assess the benefits to children’s emotional health and the strength of parent-child relationships.

This paper has offered a broad overview of the arrangements for contact with parents imprisoned across Europe, and the implications for children’s emotional health and the strength of parent-child relationships. It was beyond the scope of this paper to explore the complex variations that exist within European countries, and this should be the focus of further research, especially in countries where there is a general paucity of studies concerning parental imprisonment (e.g. Romania). Due to the lower rates of imprisonment of women in the four countries (approximately 5%; Aebi and Delgrande, 2013) it was comparatively more difficult to recruit children with a mother in prison, and further research is required to explore the differential experiences of contact with imprisoned mothers and fathers.

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Notes

¹ In England and Wales for example, approximately half of offenders are reconvicted within one year of their release from prison (Ministry of Justice, 2012).

² Secure attachments have been demonstrated to be important for positive child development and mental health, and are less common amongst children of prisoners (Schlafer and Poehlman, 2010).

³ Germany has 16 provinces or states which have variable policies about telephone contact. The state of Bavaria has some of the strictest policies and this was where most families were recruited.

⁴ Temporary release from the prison with the aim of facilitating resettlement.

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Table 1: Number of interviews conducted, characteristics of children, and children's relationship with imprisoned and non-imprisoned parent/carer

	UK	Romania	Germany	Sweden	Overall
<i>Number of interviewees</i>					
Families	47	35	26	27	135
Children	67	38	27	29	161
Non-imprisoned p/c	46	33	25	19	123
Imprisoned p/c	26	20	7	12	65
<i>Characteristics of children</i>					
Gender (% male)	58.2	60.5	37.0	37.9	51.5
Mean Age in Years (SD)	11.6 (2.9)	10.6 (2.8)	11.7 (2.9)	11.8 (3.4)	11.4 (2.9)
<i>Relationship to imprisoned p/c (%)</i>					
Biological father	65.7	78.9	44.5	82.1	68.1
Biological mother	23.9	7.9	11.1	7.2	15.0
Stepfather/male partner	8.9	13.2	40.7	10.7	15.6
Male other	1.5	0.0	3.7	0.0	1.3
<i>Relationship to non-imprisoned p/c (%)</i>					
Biological mother	71.6	79.0	85.2	89.8	78.8
Grandmother	14.9	10.5	7.4	3.4	9.3
Biological father	6.0	0.0	0.0	3.4	3.1
Female other	4.5	2.6	7.4	3.4	4.4
Male other	3.0	7.9	0.0	0.0	4.4

Table 2: Children who had maintained at least some contact with their imprisoned parent/carer; the proportion accessing prison visits, telephone calls and letter-writing

	UK (n=64)	Germany (n=25)	Romania (n=33)	Sweden (n=29)	Overall (n=151)
Prison visits (%)	92.2	80.0	87.9	75.9	86.1
Telephone calls (%)	95.3	32.0	63.6	89.7	76.8
Letters (%)	87.5	84.0	54.5	67.9	76.2