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STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN OF PRISONERS IN EUROPE

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Abstract

Children of imprisoned parents have been identified as a particularly vulnerable group of children. Despite being an under-recognised and under-researched group, these children come into contact with a wide variety of professional groups and other stakeholders. From a wider study on the mental health, well-being and resilience of children of imprisoned parents, this paper presents findings from 122 stakeholder consultations in England,

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Germany, Romania, and Sweden. Despite significant differences in prison systems and service provision, common issues were raised across the four countries. Prominent themes included: restrictions on regular contact with the imprisoned parent posing a threat to even strong parent-child relationships; the adverse emotional and social impact and the potential long-term consequences; stigma and secrecy; a lack of information; and issues surrounding availability of support services (although examples of good practice emerged, particularly from NGOs). There is a need for a reduction in the stigma that often prevents children and their families from accessing available services, greater awareness of the vulnerabilities of children of prisoners at policy level, a more equitable distribution of service provision, development of good practice models and more professional training.

Key words: Children of prisoners, stakeholders, COPING Project.

Rezumat

Copiii părinților deținuți au fost identificați ca un grup de copii deosebit de vulnerabil. În ciuda faptului că au constituit un grup cărui i s-a acordat o slabă recunoaștere și a fost prea puțin studiat, acești copii intră în contact cu o gamă largă de grupuri profesionale și cu alți împuterniciți. Din perspectiva unui studiu mai amplu asupra sănătății mintale, bunăstării și duranței copiilor cu părinți în detenție, această lucrare prezintă descoperiri care rezultă din 122 de consultări în Anglia, Germania, România și Suedia. Deși există diferențe semnificative între sistemele penitenciare și ale furnizării de servicii, în cele patru țări au apărut probleme comune. Printre temele preponderente se numără: restricționări ale contactului regulat cu părintele deținut, care periclitează chiar și relațiile trainice între părinți și copii; impactul emoțional și social advers și eventualele consecințe pe termen lung; stigmatizare și camuflare; o lipsă de informare; și probleme legate de serviciile de susținere (deși au ieșit la iveală exemple de bune practici, mai cu seamă din partea ONG-urilor). Se resimte nevoia unei reduceri a stigmatului care de multe ori îi împiedică pe copii și familiile lor să aibă acces la servicii care le stau de altfel la dispoziție, o mai mare conștientizare a vulnerabilităților copiilor deținuților la nivel de politică, o distribuire mai echitabilă a furnizării de servicii, dezvoltarea modelelor de bune practici și programe de training mai profesionale.

Cuvinte cheie : Copiii prizonierilor, împuterniciți, proiectul COPING.

1. Introduction

Millions of children worldwide are affected by parental imprisonment, with an estimated 800,000 in the European Union alone (Scharff-Smith and Gampell 2011). Despite this, there are few published studies of the effects of parental imprisonment on children, and children of prisoners have been referred to as forgotten victims of society: the first substantive consideration of this group at the United Nations took place in late 2011.

What studies have been carried out show that children whose parents are imprisoned often experience:

complex health, social and welfare disadvantages, including the impact of poverty, family discord, substance abuse and mental health issues. The imprisonment of mothers, for example, has been described as having “wreaked havoc on family stability and children’s well-being” (Scharff-Smith and Gampell 2011:16).

From January 2009 to December 2012, a consortium of partners comprising research institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in six European countries conducted a project investigating the impact on mental health, well-being and resilience of children with imprisoned parents. Entitled ‘COPING: Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health’ and funded under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme, COPING was a distinctly *child-centred* project, meaning that it aimed to gather information from the perspectives of children themselves and used methods that facilitated the active engagement of children and young people. This approach reflects the growing recognition of children’s right to participate and be heard in matters affecting them. Children are increasingly involved as active participants in research and sharing their own insights rather than simply being regarded as objects of study (Jones 2004).

In a departure from this principle, this article is based on the one aspect of COPING that focused solely on the views of adult stakeholders and deliberately excluded children’s opinions. While children clearly are central stakeholders in this issue, this article is concerned with the perceptions of adults regarding the invisibility and marginality of children of prisoners, so involving children would have undermined this aspect of the analysis. Consulting stakeholders independently of children was also important to reveal issues that affected children might not themselves perceive. Furthermore, in order to mitigate the negative effects of parental imprisonment and better support affected children, we needed to know what assistance and information adults involved in the care and support of these children might require for themselves. The findings of this study indicate that these adults – as individuals and as stakeholder groups – express a range of views on the needs and issues facing children of imprisoned parents. Their perceptions of the needs of such children also vary by national context, with some similarities and some differences between the four observed countries of Germany, Romania, Sweden, and England.

2. Literature Review

It is estimated that 800,000 children in the European Union have a parent in prison (Scharff-Smith and Gampell 2011). The negative impact of parental imprisonment on children has been recorded by a number of authors (for example, Howard League 2011). The mental health problems faced by children in this situation include depression, withdrawal, confusion, anger and low mood. Children

with incarcerated parents can also experience flashbacks about the arrest of their parents with similar symptoms to post-traumatic stress disorder (Boswell 2002; Cunningham 2001; Hissel, Bijleveld and Kruttschnitt 2011). Other studies have suggested that some children who have a parent in prison are at increased risk of engaging in crime and anti-social behaviour (Besemer *et al.* 2011). Trice and Brewster (2004) have explored the impact on schooling of maternal imprisonment, with Philbrick (2002) emphasising that parental imprisonment can be related to a drop in school attendance and the quality of school work. Richards *et al.* (1994) and Noble (1995) have focussed on the financial disadvantage that can result for children in these circumstances. The impact of stigma has been noted by Philips and Gates (2011), among others, with Murray (2007) stressing that children who have a parent in prison may experience often long-lasting stigma, which can lead to children avoiding going to school at all as a result of bullying. This stigma in turn leads many families to keep the incarceration secret from friends, neighbours, work colleagues, and even their own children (Wildeman and Western 2010).

Children have a variety of support needs (Mulready-Jones 2011; Robertson 2012). If parental imprisonment remains secret then children do not have the opportunity to discuss their feelings of loss which adds to their trauma (Myers *et al.* 1999). Ayre and Reiss (2006) conclude that children need adequate explanations about what has happened to their imprisoned parent in order to assist them to cope. Likewise it has been suggested that well-managed prison visits have the potential to reassure children that their parent is well and still loves them, thereby reducing their anxiety (Myers *et al.* 1999). Meek identified the importance of good visiting facilities in her 2007 study of young fathers in prison, while Losel *et al.* (2012) stressed the importance of protective factors, such as strong family bonds strengthened through visits, that are crucial in helping children cope with parental imprisonment.

Conducting stakeholder consultations across four different European countries presents challenges, especially when the research is child-focussed. Montgomery, Burr and Woodhead (2003) stress the importance of recognising that the way we construct childhood and the experience of childhood varies across different cultures. Suhonen, Saarikoski and Leino-Kilpi (2009) highlight the benefits of cross-cultural research in terms of harmonising practice across different countries, while Im *et al.* emphasise the potential that arises from cross-cultural research in terms of identifying ‘transcultural concepts’ (2004:893). Cadogan (2010) cautions against generalising too much from comparative studies that only include a few countries (though he considers such studies have great value in providing case studies that can be built upon in future studies). Similarly, Harzing, Reiche and Pudenko (forthcoming) emphasise the importance of taking into account culturally specific meanings when analysing data from research involving a number of different countries. Billson (2006) emphasises the importance, when conducting focus groups across countries, of ensuring there is a consistent

facilitator's guide in place and a standard research design that applies to all the countries involved.

Stakeholders have been defined as 'individuals who have an interest in ... a project and can contribute to, or be impacted by, the outcomes' (Bourne and Walker 2006:6). Stakeholder consultations are regarded as a way for organisations and projects to be accountable to the communities they serve and their beneficiaries (Rasche and Esser 2006), while respectful stakeholder consultation can also strengthen community engagement (Parsons 2008). However, Doherty (2009:114) warns that the term 'stakeholder' is now used 'ubiquitously' to add legitimacy to a variety of different agendas and draws attention to the danger that stakeholders with unpalatable messages may be avoided. Similarly, Human and Davies (2010) warn against inconsistency and contradiction in stakeholder responses. In many instances, stakeholders have felt dissatisfied if they consider they are being asked only about practical issues and not fundamentals (Sliwka and Istance 2006). Finally, Curry, Stark and Summerhill (1999) emphasise the importance of involving stakeholders who represent both a service user and service provider perspective.

3. Methods

The aim of this study was to broaden the collection of evidence about the needs of children of prisoners and the extent to which the existing provision of interventions and support is aligned with these needs from the perspectives of a diverse group of stakeholders. This was a multi-country qualitative study of stakeholder perspectives in England, Germany, Romania and Sweden carried out as part of the larger EU-funded COPING Project (<http://www.coping-project.eu/>). A comprehensive ethics protocol was developed and ethical approval obtained from the European Commission and at country level from the respective government, organisation and university authorities in line with domestic and EU legislation. The study was thus carried out in strict compliance with research governance ethical principles; this applied to all aspects of the project including the study of stakeholder perspectives.

A multi-method strategy for data capture was used which included face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, email interviews, focus groups and an online survey. Country differences such as geographical spread of services and resource constraints meant that a flexible approach was needed with country partners using whichever methods were most appropriate for their context. Consistency was achieved through the use of standardised interview and focus group guides for each stakeholder group, the piloting of research tools and a common approach to data analysis.

Eight stakeholder groups were consulted: imprisoned parents, non-imprisoned parents/carers, prison staff, social workers (based in the community unless otherwise stated), staff within institutional homes for children, schools,

NGOs and government officials. Stakeholders were recruited through organisational networks, the use of a stakeholder analysis tool and through snowballing. The only criterion applied was that respondents should have a parental or professional involvement in the lives of children with an imprisoned parent. Not every country consulted all stakeholder groups: NGOs, prison staff, schools and social workers were consulted in all countries, while only England consulted imprisoned parents¹¹ and only Germany consulted government officials. The lowest number of individuals consulted in a stakeholder group was two (government officials); the next lowest was staff in institutional homes with nine and the highest was NGOs, with 50 individuals consulted across the four countries. Table 1 details the number and format for consulting each stakeholder group, disaggregated by country. Differences in numbers of individuals consulted in each stakeholder group may reflect the stakeholders to which researchers had easy access, which could mean that information is missing about, for example, children of prisoners in alternative care or government attitudes. However, low numbers may also indicate lack of knowledge about children of prisoners among particular stakeholders, meaning further efforts are needed to inform them about this group.

After conducting the consultations, researchers produced transcripts in English (the working language of the project) in Germany and England. In England, some consultations produced researcher summaries rather than verbatim transcripts and some consultations annexed researcher comments to the transcript. In Romania and Sweden, transcripts were produced in local languages and selected highlights were translated into English. The transcripts or summaries were analysed using the N-Vivo computer programme, utilising a shared set of categories to allow comparison.

4. Results and perspectives

Almost all issues mentioned by stakeholders in one country were also mentioned by stakeholders in the others – the overall *range* of issues was almost identical among countries. Different stakeholders in the same country did not cover the same range of issues, which is perhaps unsurprising given that they encounter children of prisoners in different situations. The *frequency* and *prominence* with which issues were raised differed both by country and by stakeholder type. This section will focus on the issues which appeared most prominently in each country.

The four COPING countries have different economic, social and cultural situations, including regarding criminal justice issues and children. Importantly, many relevant policies are delegated to regional/state level in both Germany and the UK: research was conducted in England in the UK and in Bavaria, Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany and findings may not be applicable elsewhere

¹¹ Imprisoned parents were consulted in other countries for COPING, but not for this section of the project.

in these countries.¹² Moreover, while relevant differences between countries will be highlighted below, we should also be aware that the individual perspectives of both consulted stakeholders and the authors will also affect findings.

Concern about contact between children and their imprisoned parents, whether direct or indirect, was a prominent issue for nearly all stakeholders. In all four countries, regular and stable contact with the imprisoned parent was seen as extremely important and a primary factor aiding the child's resilience and coping mechanisms.¹³ Especially where the parent played an important role in the child's life, children have an emotional need to maintain the relationship, with contact helping to ease the gap caused by imprisonment and minimising feelings of abandonment on the part of the child.¹⁴ Reduced or terminated contact can lead to withdrawal, loss of respect and the disintegration of the relationship, which may have negative implications for the child's mental health.¹⁵ However, some children may not feel a need to keep in touch and in some situations continued contact may be considered harmful, such as those involving parental abuse of the child.¹⁶

Indirect contact by letter is seen as a useful way to maintain contact, particularly for very low-income families or those living in rural areas far from the prison,¹⁷ but it is not seen as equivalent to face-to-face meetings.¹⁸ Telephone contact exists in prisons in Germany, though the frequency and restrictions vary by federal state and prison; in Romania parents have a right to a ten-minute phone call every two weeks.¹⁹ In both countries, only the parent can initiate the call, meaning that children 'can never contact their parents spontaneously, they can't discuss issues or make arrangements with them. The normal parent-child communication is interrupted. This affects their whole life'.²⁰ This information was supported by English data, where telephone contact was far more frequent (up to three calls daily) and played a key role in maintaining a relationship.²¹

¹² Bavaria, where the majority of interviews were conducted, has one of the strictest prison regimes in Germany, so restrictions highlighted in this paper may not apply in other German federal states.

¹³ Germany: institutional staff, NGOs and non-imprisoned parents/carers; Romania: NGOs; Sweden: NGOs and institutional staff; England: social workers and NGOs

¹⁴ Romania: schools and NGOs; Germany: NGOs, government officials, institutional staff, social workers, schools, prison staff and non-imprisoned parents/carers

¹⁵ Germany: NGOs, government officials, institutional staff, social workers, schools, prison staff and non-imprisoned parents/carers

¹⁶ Romania: NGOs; Sweden: prison staff and institutional staff

¹⁷ Romania: Social workers, NGOs and institutional staff

¹⁸ Germany: NGO staff

¹⁹ Romania: Institutional staff

²⁰ Germany: institutional staff

²¹ England: imprisoned parents

The linked issue of visits and visiting conditions was another prominent issue in Germany and Romania. Visits are often short and infrequent: the minimum visiting time in both countries is one hour per month.²² In Romania, more visits may be permitted for prisoners convicted of less serious offences.²³ In Germany, visits must either be booked in advance or take place within fixed visiting hours.

Prisons are not generally designed with children in mind and have been criticised for being too cold, noisy or crowded, without special areas for children.²⁴ Where the physical conditions, regulations and/or staff attitudes mean the children experience a hostile environment, the unpleasant experience can sometimes outweigh the comfort of seeing an imprisoned parent (Bruno 2006). This depends to some extent on the individual child's ability to cope with adversity. One NGO stakeholder from Romania advised: 'I wouldn't recommend the contact between the child and prison environment at least until the child is old enough to understand what happened and can make the decision to visit or not the parent'.²⁵

However, stakeholders report that relatively small changes, such as hanging pictures on the walls, painting the walls with bright colours and providing toys or magazines, can make a big difference to children's experience of visiting prison,²⁶ with children being calmer and more at ease, as well as more positive about returning for subsequent visits.²⁷ Having special visits shortly after imprisonment can help to allay children's fears, while allowing children to meet with parents in special family visiting rooms away from other prisoners, can make visits more pleasant.²⁸ Children can also be helped by being accompanied on prison visits by NGO staff or volunteers or, for children living in institutional settings, by institutional staff. All these accompaniers can provide emotional and practical support, particularly in relation to their fears and how to deal with the parent's imprisonment.²⁹

Financial concerns were a prominent issue in Romania, with particular issues such as school expenses (books, school supplies, clothes, shoes, and backpacks) highlighted by stakeholders.³⁰ As well as Romania having lower

²² In Germany each federal state may issue its own Prison Act; five states have done so. Ten others have produced a draft unified Prison Act, which is currently under consideration in their state parliaments. This Prison Act would double this minimum of one hour per month and allow an extra two hours visiting time where the offender has children.

²³ Romania: institutional staff

²⁴ Germany: prison staff, NGOs and schools

²⁵ Romania: NGOs

²⁶ Germany: prison staff

²⁷ Germany: NGOs

²⁸ Germany: prison staff

²⁹ Germany: NGOs and institutional staff

³⁰ Romania: social workers and NGOs

national and average household income than the other three countries,³¹ many families with an imprisoned parent come from rural areas, where there are fewer jobs, and many imprisoned parents and their spouses have low levels of education and training, making it harder to access paid employment. Moreover, a history of imprisonment and the associated stigma make it even more difficult for either the released parent or the spouse to find work.³²

The impact of imprisonment on children's emotions was a major issue for stakeholders in Romania, Sweden and England and was also noted by many stakeholders in Germany. Such impacts may be direct (the child's emotional response to the imprisonment) or indirect (the child's emotional response to how others, notably the child's day-to-day carer, respond to the imprisonment). It is common for children to experience a range of (sometimes conflicting) emotions: distress and anxiety at the often sudden separation from an attachment figure, but also confusion that their role model who has taught them moral standards has 'done wrong', as well as fear of peer rejection and confusion about the sudden changes in their situation.³³ According to social workers in England, these feelings often manifest in anger, aggression, anti-social behaviour and low-level offending.³⁴ This response may be because these stakeholders only tend to have contact with children displaying more extreme behaviour, but these feelings were emphasised over other effects documented in the literature such as withdrawal and physical and mental ill-health (e.g. Cunningham and Baker 2003 and Crawford 2003). In contrast, Swedish social workers and NGOs identified signs of depression such as sadness and a lack of interest in school. Anger and acting out were also common responses, especially among young children, but a problem among older children (particularly girls) was that they repressed their anger and blamed themselves. As a result, emotional support often focused on helping them to feel that it was okay to be angry.

The confusion children feel following parental imprisonment can be compounded by not receiving sufficient or accurate information about the imprisonment process, a prominent issue in Sweden (and a lesser issue for other countries). Children would often not believe false reasons given for a parent's absence (for example, that the parent is travelling or working). They could become confused and worried about the parent and tended to fantasise about possible

³¹\$270.6bn GDP compared to \$386.6bn minimum for other studied countries and a per capita income of \$12,600 compared to \$36,600 minimum for other studied countries (all numbers at purchasing power parity) (Source: CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>, accessed 7 August 2012)

³²Romania: social workers

³³England: imprisoned parents, NGOs, social workers and schools; Romania: NGOs and schools; Sweden: NGOs and institutional staff

³⁴England: social workers

scenarios, which were often ‘worse’ than reality.³⁵ They might either idealise the imprisoned parent and blame problems on the non-imprisoned parent,³⁶ or blame themselves.³⁷ Stakeholders felt that feelings of guilt could be reduced if children received a clearer picture of the course of events and were assured that they were not responsible for the imprisonment.³⁸ Knowing that the imprisoned parent was receiving help in prison could be reassuring for children,³⁹ as could receiving information such as where the prison is located, what happens in a prison, what it looks like and if you get food in prison.⁴⁰ Overall, stakeholders felt that parents should generally be honest with the child about what has happened (depending somewhat on the emotional maturity of the child and the nature of the crime).⁴¹ Swedish social workers and NGOs stated that the ideal was that all children, at the time of the arrest, should receive information about available support, including specialised services for children of prisoners.

In both Sweden and England, secrecy and stigma were major issues, with families facing problems if they were either ‘too secretive’ or ‘too open’.⁴² While reactions will vary by individual and situation, some children who were strongly encouraged to be open about the parent’s imprisonment received many bad reactions and regretted having told their peers,⁴³ while a group of imprisoned fathers described how their children had become vulnerable to bullying and in one case become a bully himself.⁴⁴ Conversely, children may be forbidden (for example by the non-imprisoned parent) to speak to anyone about the situation, even if they are clearly having problems.⁴⁵ On a personal level, children were felt to benefit from having an adult confidant whom they could trust, such as a school nurse or counsellor, and to participate in exercises on how to deal with confrontations and bullying.⁴⁶ On a social level, there needed to be less stigmatisation of families of prisoners and efforts to reduce such stigmatisation were requested, such as through the media.⁴⁷

³⁵ Sweden: social workers

³⁶ Germany: NGOs; Sweden: institutional staff

³⁷ Germany: prison staff and institutional staff; Sweden: social workers

³⁸ Sweden: social workers

³⁹ Sweden: social workers

⁴⁰ Sweden: prison staff

⁴¹ England: NGOs; Sweden: NGOs; Germany: prison staff, social workers and NGOs

⁴² Sweden: NGOs, schools and social workers; England: NGOs and schools

⁴³ England: social workers

⁴⁴ England: imprisoned parents

⁴⁵ England: schools

⁴⁶ England: schools

⁴⁷ Germany: prison staff; Sweden: NGOs and non-imprisoned parents/carers; Romania: institutional staff

Support services for children of prisoners were referred to in all four countries, but especially highlighted in Romania and England. In all countries available support sources could be divided into those working comprehensively across the country, notably statutory agencies such as social services and criminal justice professionals (police, court officials, prison staff and probation officers) and those working in a limited geographical area, such as most specialist NGOs. In Germany, Sweden and England specialised services for children of prisoners tended to operate in a single area or prison, rather than nationwide. In Romania there were no specialised services for children of prisoners and any non-specialist services they accessed made no specific provision for them.

There are many reasons why both NGO and government-run services can be difficult to access. In England, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services have a high volume of referrals and long waiting lists, while NGOs offering emotional support often operate (or are funded to operate) only in particular regions. Recent funding cuts have reduced the number of NGOs offering emotional support, making the task of finding suitable services increasingly difficult. Even where external support (specialised or non-specialised) is available, children and families may not access it: they may not receive information about the help available, or families may be reluctant to seek support from outside agencies for fear of drawing attention to their complicated family circumstances and asking awkward questions. Where children of prisoners do come to the attention of statutory agencies in England, it is typically a consequence of their family situation or behavioural issues as opposed to the imprisonment itself.⁴⁸

German, Sweden and England all have prison-based services involving imprisoned parent-child interaction. Stakeholders tended to view these positively,⁴⁹ although they usually exist only in certain prisons or regions. Within Germany, there are family workshops inside the prison, which are child-centred and aim to strengthen the father-child bond.⁵⁰ Father-child or mother-child groups operate in some German prisons, in cooperation with NGOs, which allow children to spend time with their imprisoned carer and strengthen their relationship, as well as teaching parenting skills to the imprisoned parent.⁵¹ Stakeholders reported that such family activities improved children's well-being, which helped them cope with parental imprisonment.⁵² In Sweden, each prison had special visiting rooms containing children's toys. Stakeholders described these as very popular for visits, though rooms in different prisons were of varied standards: in some rooms toys were incomplete or did not work. Activities for older children, such as DVDs and

⁴⁸England: NGOs

⁴⁹Germany: government officials, NGOs, prison staff, schools and social workers; England: imprisoned parents and NGOs; Sweden: prison staff

⁵⁰Germany: government officials and NGOs

⁵¹Germany: government officials, NGOs, prison staff, schools and social workers

⁵²Germany: government officials, NGOs and prison staff

video games, were less widely available.⁵³ Parenting courses for imprisoned parents helped them to understand about different stages in children's lives and in some prisons included opportunities to cook together with the children.⁵⁴ The majority of services for children of prisoners in England were prison-based, usually visitor centres (buildings located outside the main prison where families could wait until their visit time, meet other families and receive information) and family days (special extended visits with child-friendly activities).⁵⁵ Family days were especially appreciated, because the usual restrictions on physical contact, movement and available activities were lifted and children could interact with imprisoned parents 'as though ... it was their home'.⁵⁶ All three countries had initiatives where imprisoned parents could record bedtime stories for their children to listen to, which was appreciated by all involved.⁵⁷

Community-based services in England, Germany and Sweden included opportunities for children of prisoners to meet others in the same situation, either to talk together or take part in planned activities like cinema trips or holiday camps.⁵⁸ Some activities were free so that all children of prisoners could participate regardless of their financial situation.⁵⁹ Such groups were seen as allowing children to be open about parental imprisonment without fear of stigma. Series of group meetings were seen as enabling children to share coping strategies for dealing with the negative emotional impact of parental imprisonment, such as by listening to music.⁶⁰ Other services focus on the family, allowing them all (including the imprisoned parent) to spend several days together outside prison learning how to deal with various difficulties that may emerge after release. Support from staff during and after these 'family seminars' helps parents to deal with their own situation and to support the children.⁶¹ Another community-based support is counselling, either formally from professional counsellors or informally, from persons such as priests.⁶²

Practices for sharing information relating to parental imprisonment, was a prominent issue in England and Sweden. In England, Youth Offending Teams (specialist multi-agency teams responsible for working with young offenders and a

⁵³ Sweden: prison staff

⁵⁴ Sweden: prison staff

⁵⁵ This information came from another part of the COPING research, focused on in-depth interviews with children, imprisoned parents and non-imprisoned parents/carers

⁵⁶ England: non-imprisoned parents/carers

⁵⁷ Sweden: prison staff; England: NGOs; Germany: prison staff

⁵⁸ Sweden: NGOs; Germany: NGOs; England: NGOs. Many of these activities may be ones that children are unable to afford to do independently.

⁵⁹ Germany: NGOs

⁶⁰ Sweden: NGOs

⁶¹ Germany: government officials, NGOs and prison staff

⁶² Germany: NGOs and institutional staff

subset of the social worker stakeholders in this study) indicated that they were routinely alerted to parents' past or current custodial sentences, but this was with the intention of ensuring the workers' safety as opposed to identifying a potential area of need for the young person. In contrast, other social workers reported that there were no formal mechanisms for sharing this information, and that it was often discovered by chance during liaison with other agencies. Schools seemed least likely to receive this information from other agencies, often learning of the imprisonment by accident via gossip or the media.⁶³ In Sweden, specialist NGOs were often contacted by families with a variety of issues and would put them in contact with other relevant agencies, but other agencies, including social workers and schools, were sometimes unaware of the specialist NGO support available to children of prisoners and so did not refer the children on.⁶⁴

The role of schools was highlighted by stakeholders in England. Schools were seen as well placed to intervene quickly (due to their daily and close contact with the child) and families also tended to view schools more favourably than statutory agencies, creating a greater chance of disclosure.⁶⁵ School stakeholders highlighted that techniques to improve self-esteem (such as praise and recognition of achievements) have the potential to both empower the child to confide in the school and increase their resilience to adverse emotional outcomes. Schools can also play an important role in protecting children from stigmatisation or bullying, and in supporting them academically, for example through homework clubs or tutoring, which can also reduce the burden on non-imprisoned parent/carers.⁶⁶ Schools recognised that parents/carers often serve as the 'gatekeeper' to the family and thus the most successful attempts to encourage disclosure would incorporate them too. Suggested initiatives included urging parents to be honest about absences, which might include prison visiting; discouraging the insistence on secrecy by highlighting the detrimental impact on children; and reassuring parents that disclosure will not automatically prompt scrutiny from outside agencies.⁶⁷ Prison visitor centres, community centres and parent evenings may all be good opportunities for schools to promote their supportive role and assuage any concerns.

Some NGOs were concerned that schools did not provide the appropriate support and information and that teachers were not trained to deal with children of prisoners.⁶⁸ Schools and social workers themselves highlighted a desire for greater familiarity with the experiences of children of prisoners, such as prison visiting

⁶³ England: schools and NGOs

⁶⁴ Sweden: prison staff and NGOs

⁶⁵ England: NGOs and imprisoned parents

⁶⁶ England: NGOs and schools; Germany: schools

⁶⁷ England: NGOs

⁶⁸ England: NGOs; Germany: NGOs

procedures, to enable them better to provide support.⁶⁹ These stakeholders also indicated that they would welcome guidance, preferably in the format of a tool kit, on how to engage children in conversation around the subject of imprisonment. Particular areas of concern included how to broach the subject, suitable topics for discussion and appropriate terminology. NGOs have a crucial role to play in continuing to raise awareness of the impact of parental imprisonment and providing educational tools to enable professionals to support these children. There are a number of existing resources available, such as fact sheets and training about the impact of sentences on families, though need often outstrips supply. There is also a telephone helpline for prisoners' families in England, which professionals are encouraged to contact to seek advice and information.⁷⁰

5. Conclusion

Children of prisoners face many different issues as a result of parental imprisonment. These issues vary according to both the child's individual circumstances and the national context in which they are situated. Consulting a range of different stakeholders enables us to develop a more complete picture of the impacts of parental imprisonment on children. The combination of different stakeholders and different countries results in different issues being highlighted as especially important. All issues covered in this article were discussed in all the four studied countries, but the varied emphasis given to particular issues in each country is instructive.

Detailed understanding of why particular issues come to the fore requires in-depth knowledge both of individual country situations and of the differences between them. The lower statutory minimum levels of direct and indirect contact between children and imprisoned parents in Germany and Romania may explain why contact is more of a concern there than in Sweden and England. Similarly, the lack of specialised children of prisoners' services in Romania and the reduction of services in England following recent funding cuts could be a reason why problems related to access to support services were a greater concern in Romania and England. The issue of the emotional impact of parental imprisonment on children was notable for being universally regarded as a major issue, which indicates that regardless of the institutional, attitudinal or financial efforts made, children everywhere find parental imprisonment an emotionally disruptive experience.

Surface differences on some issues, such as the extent of information sharing between schools, NGOs and social services in England and Sweden, mask deeper similarities, such as the calls by stakeholders in both countries for more cooperation between the institutions. Repeated admissions of uncertainty by stakeholders about what does or should happen regarding children of prisoners

⁶⁹England: schools and social workers

⁷⁰ England: NGOs

reveals a need for far greater training of professionals in contact with this group. Such training needs to raise the profile of parental imprisonment as an issue among those unaware of it (for example, teachers who do not believe they have any children of prisoners in their school) and to give details of the risks and vulnerabilities that parental imprisonment entails and the sources of support available. Greater awareness may also help to reduce the stigma attached to having a parent in prison, which stakeholders identified as existing in all four COPING countries. Stigma can stop children and their families from accessing available services, meaning they do not come into contact with relevant professionals and become more invisible: at its worst, there can be a vicious feedback loop of increasing stigma and marginalisation, but it also raises the possibility of movement in the opposite direction and a virtuous circle of increased understanding, acceptance and engagement.

Some forms of support will require additional resources to resolve, such as the staff required to run additional prison visits. However, stakeholder perspectives indicate that many problems stem from negative attitudes or ignorance about this group, including among policymakers and criminal justice professionals whose decisions about parents affect their children so heavily. Awareness-raising and education could go a long way to ensuring proper consideration is given to children of prisoners by the many people who come into contact with them, and to ensure everyone is working towards the one goal of better supporting children in coping with a parent's imprisonment.

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