

Allowing families impacted by parental imprisonment voices to be heard: my response to public preconceptions about prisoners



My name is Vix, I have 4 children. We have been living this life for 4 years now. The whole of our youngest son's life. We did not have a visit for 9 months last year up until release in October. My partner was instructed to reside at a Hostel. We then were fortunate to have 4 weeks of building memories and doing normal family things that we had longed for many years. A protocol referral to CS was made and restrictions were put in place immediately. All contact was stopped and we were not supported with ways to progress the process of him coming home, which was the original plan. He was not able to complete any risk reduction programmes while serving the sentence due to covid so this slowed down the process too. This lack of support from probation and the looming homelessness ended up with him being recalled back to prison at the beginning of January 2021, when he should have been moved on from the Hostel.

They have not seen their Dad since the beginning of November 2020. This process has reignited another sense of grief and loss, also uncertainty as we do not know what the future holds right now. He has now been moved to a prison nearly 3 hours away and awaiting a parole hearing as there's a huge backlog and we will be looking at August before we know anything. This is harder than the original sentence, as we have no date to look forward to and countdown. The children get sad as they just want to see their Dad, they don't understand as they are too little and feel like they are being punished.

We have been supported by children heard and seen for nearly 2 years now. They have been a massive support to both me and the children. I have managed to meet other parents/carers in the same situation. There has been no judgement. We have formed peer support groups where we all express the same concerns. After doing a group radio interview last week, I was approached again and asked to talk on behalf of families impacted by imprisonment during covid.

I discussed on two radio interviews how I am a Mother looking after children with a parent in prison and how COVID-19 has affected prisons. I talked about topics such as the lack of communication from HMPPS, MOJ and MP's, how prison visits were stopped and the impact this had on the children. Also about the conditions inside right now and the effects of being locked up at least 23.5 hours a day, having to choose between a phone call with a family or having a shower which then impacts prisoners' physical and mental health. There are no educational programmes running or risk reduction courses so there is a huge lack of support.

The interview went well, and it was positive that prisons were being mentioned as it has been a topic that has been left out of the roadmap, which means families once again are left in the dark and have no idea of when life can return to some sort of normality.

Following the interview, people were allowed to text and call in to give their opinions and I was left disheartened at the comments that followed and I had no opportunity to respond.

While explaining a difficult and upsetting situation, the comments have been deeply upsetting and frustrating and have led to me having a sleepless night thinking about what happened yesterday. I would like to share some of the comments people had and what effects this had on me. Despite being extremely resilient, these comments have really stuck with me and I'm in disbelief of how people could hold so much contempt for children, simply for loving someone in prison. People are also blinkered by the reasons people may be there, and stripping the children of contact is very unjust. These children are being left with lifelong mental health issues due to this situation, and there is no basic support organisation to assist the families.

Here are some of the comments...

'Do you really expect us to feel sorry for these people? Shouldn't even be given the airtime. Don't break the law and you won't be sent to prison'

This comment frustrates me as my family hasn't committed any crime so why should my children's feelings be disregarded?

It's important to be given airtime as families with a parent in prison is not a subject that is often talked about, especially the detrimental effects on the disregarded and forgotten children. The mass media and newspapers sensationalise crimes and are happy to publish these types of stories but not talk about how that affects the family and how prisoners are suffering too during these covid times.

'No sympathy for Vix's family, if their Dad hadn't committed a crime and wasn't in prison, he'd be able to see his kids every day through the pandemic'

I absolutely have never wished for sympathy, I am requesting an acknowledgement from the government and establishments for what should be right for all children. We have been ignored for over a year now and we just want to have our voices heard.

This comment is not looking at the situation from a child's perspective. They haven't committed the crime so why should they be punished? It's taking away their basic human rights to deny access to their Dad and this is parent alienation. If I as a mother had implemented the same restrictions of contact that the MOJ and HMPPS has, then I would have been taken through the family courts which shows there are double standards.

Ministry of Justice response: 'We've steps like shielding and mass testing in order to save lives.....and secure video calls have been provided to protect prisoners' mental wellbeing and maintain vital family contact'

Prison staff are more likely to pass on the virus due to lack of PPE and they are unable to socially distance, yet they have not been given priority for the vaccine. It is distressing that 100 prisoners have died in England and Wales so far, and 10,000 have tested positive. If the prison staff were given the vaccine then this would limit the spread and reduce the number of people contracting the virus.

Purple visits have started (a way to video call), but the rollout was very slow. The security of the video call often means it cuts the video calls out just for slight movement which is extremely hard for small children who find it hard to sit still. The connection can be poor too so children end up getting distressed and it causes more harm than good due to problems with it cutting out and only being available for 20-30 mins a month. It is limited to 4 people max so larger families have to choose which children can take part. It has to be verified by an adult so they are counted as a person and takes up a place of a child which makes the process even tougher. Some prisoners still have no access to purple visits, some have a call twice a month, some once a month; the level of support and contact the child has with their parent shouldn't depend on where the parent is in prison.

My overall thoughts...

I was left so saddened by the comments made, I had to ignore the rest of them as it was really unbelievable that in the current world that we all live in, that society feels it's acceptable to disregard a child's feelings and mental wellbeing. There are many reasons as to why someone ends up in prison, but the reason for the person being in prison is irrelevant and we should focus on the children and not reject them from society just because of something their parents have done. The people with these comments forget that these people in prison will one day be their neighbour or colleague. How are people supposed to reform and make a change when there is a stigma attached to them?

What action I would like to be taken...

In cell phones and purple visits should be made available in all establishments. These video calls should be made available weekly if visits are not being reinstated with contact. You cannot expect a small child to sit opposite their parent and not want human contact like a hug or a kiss. To deny them of this is extremely upsetting and affects their emotional wellbeing.

Requiring negative covid tests and enduring isolation before and after a prison visit, similar to the procedure at hospitals, would help stop the spread of the virus and enable families to maintain that vital contact.

The government needs to recognise the volume of children impacted yearly by parental imprisonment, and if there was a database to capture the amounts of children suffering from this, then they would be able to receive support from the moment of sentencing. This support should come in the form of a system that does not tear families apart, but encourages and motivates them to have a better future.