

Children Heard and Seen

Children with a Mother in Prison: Snapshot Report July 2021



1 Abstract

Children Heard and Seen is a UK registered charity that supports children and families with a parent in prison in their own communities. We have recently secured funding to introduce an innovative new support position to offer specialised therapeutic interventions to children, specifically with a mother in prison, for one year. This post seeks to respond to the distinct challenges often faced by children with this experience by focusing our support offerings, whilst also formalising our learning so that it may be cascaded to other organisations. This report seeks to provide a snapshot of the current experiences of children with a mother in prison who are receiving support from Children Heard and Seen. The paper will provide a baseline that we may refer back to at the end of the project's first year.

2 The Role of Children Heard and Seen

Children Heard and Seen is an Oxfordshire based charity established in 2014 to support children and families impacted by parental imprisonment. We are the largest UK charity dedicated to supporting this isolated and stigmatised group of young people in their communities, providing support for 225 children last year alone. We offer one to one support, individual mentors, group activities and more to children facing the stigma attached to having a parent in prison. Our tailored one to one support is unique to each young person's circumstances and experiences, and is delivered by a range of trained, experienced and qualified practitioners.

3 The Purpose of This report

Children Heard and Seen was recently successful in raising sufficient funds to launch an innovative new project in supporting children with a mother in prison. These funds were raised primarily through our success at The Funding Network Summer funder, at which we successfully raised over £28,000. In the days that followed, the generosity of the Sisters Trust and Mazars Charitable Trust, meant that we were able to fill this new role almost immediately.

At the time of publication, very little is known about the distinct needs of children with a mother in prison from a practitioner perspective. By introducing this post, we hope to devise a strong model of support that can be rolled out to other organisations, so that more children can receive the essential support that they need. This innovative new support position will allow us to respond to the needs of these families, whilst also consolidating our learning surrounding their experiences. The specialised case worker will be responsible for delivering specialised support to families from the point of identification onwards. This will be a ground-

breaking and innovative project that will create real social change and change the lives of the young people we support.

In order to adequately evaluate the impact of this project after twelve months, it will be beneficial to gain an insight into the children impacted by parental imprisonment that we currently support, so that we may have a framework for comparative analysis after one year of project delivery. This report seeks to assess the characteristics of children who have been supported by Children Heard and Seen who have experienced maternal imprisonment. This data has been collected primarily through our existing database of case studies of families, which includes the details of each of our tailored interventions.

4 The experience of children with a mother in prison

Current estimates suggest that 312,000 children are separated from a parent by a prison sentence every year in the UK (Crest, 2019). However, there are currently no statutory systems in place to support or even identify these children, leaving them completely “invisible in systems designed to protect them” (Beresford, 2018:16). In practice, this means that a parent may go to court, not expecting to receive a custodial sentence and having made no provision for their child, and be sent to prison. Due to a lack of adequate identification, the parent’s child may be left at home, unaware of the fact of imprisonment and without appropriate care. Children with a parent in prison face shame, stigma and isolation, as a result of a perceived “guilt by contagion” flowing from the offending parent (Condry, 2007). Stigmatisation is often felt even more strongly by a prisoner’s family than by the inmate themselves, as relatives are forced to share the physical space of the community that shames them (Condry, 2007).

Research has consistently shown that the social exclusion experienced by children impacted by parental imprisonment affects all elements of a young person’s life, including material welfare, family, school and leisure activities (Oldrup & Frederiksen, 2018). Parental imprisonment has been recognised as an Adverse Childhood Experience (COPE, 2019), and has been linked to a swathe of negative social and behavioural outcomes, including increased risk of poor mental health and a trend toward antisocial behaviour (Murray, 2005). Whilst much of the existing literature surrounding the experiences of children with a parent in prison has sought to understand these experiences collectively, steps have been taken in delineating the experiences of children whose mother goes to prison (Condry & Minson, 2020). By focusing our lens on these experiences, we are able to recognise the complexity and breadth of lived experiences and the distinct challenges faced by this demographic.

Recent estimates suggest that between 13-19% of women receiving immediate custodial sentences had child dependants (MoJ, 2015). As a result of the smaller number of women’s prisons and their geographical sparsity, women who go to prison are more likely to be resituated at further distance from their families than men (PRT, 2015). This creates an additional barrier to maintaining contact with children, increasing the time and financial commitments necessary for regular visitation. Where a mother is the primary caregiver to a child prior to the point of imprisonment, her removal from the family unit frequently compounds, rather than mitigates, pre-existing family problems for children (Beresford, 2018). It has been estimated that, when a mother is imprisoned, 95% of the children left behind have

to move out of the family home (Caddle and Crisp, 1997). This can result in children having to move area and school, losing friendships and existing networks of peer support that they may otherwise have relied on in the aftermath of separation. It is acknowledged that this particular statistic is not recent, so may not reflect the experiences of children today. The fact that this is the most recent estimation of the number of children removed from the family home after the imprisonment of their mother highlights the lack of existing and current data surrounding these hidden experiences. By introducing this new position, we hope to better understand the challenges currently being faced by children with a mother in prison so that they may receive appropriate support.

Much of the criticism of the courts handling of mothers in the criminal justice system lies in the rigid application of rules that do not appropriately respond to the harms that imprisonment will inevitably inflict upon their dependents. By pursuing overtly punitive penal policies against parents that cause distinct and severe harm to their children well beyond the period of imprisonment, the state has a “residual obligation” to respond to these harms and provide appropriate support (Bülow, 2014). It has convincingly been argued that the lack of statutory support offered to children with a mother in prison represents a breach of duty to protect children from discrimination under Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (Minson, 2019).

5 Findings

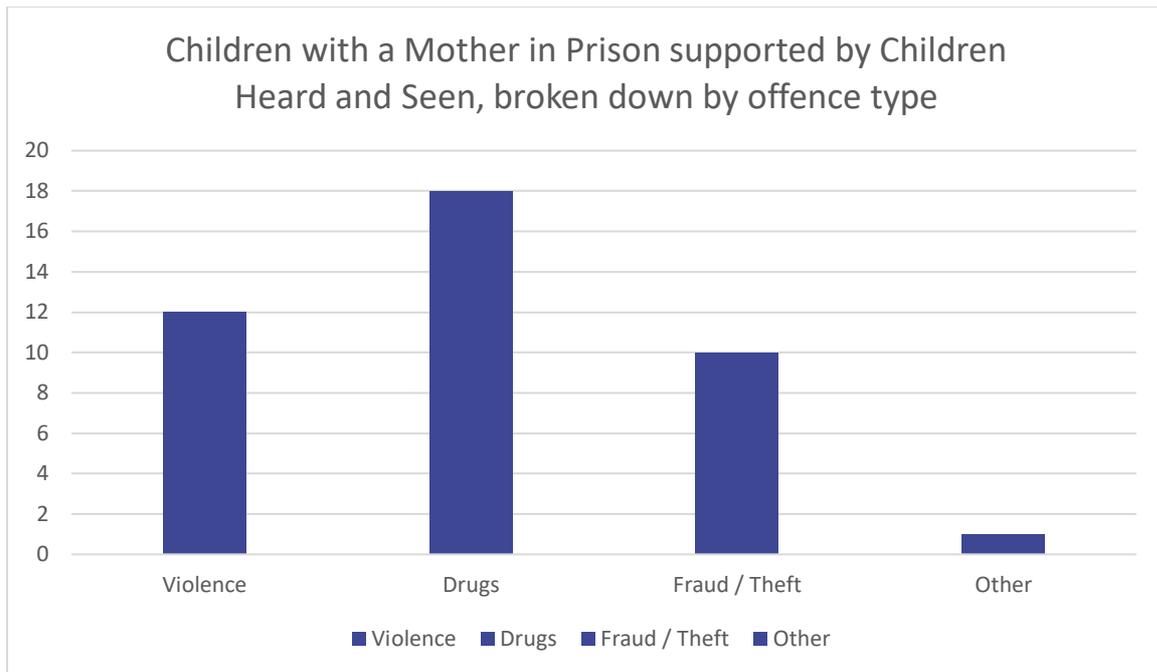
The number of children currently supported

At the time of publication, Children Heard and Seen is currently providing active support to 239 children with a parent in prison. Of these children, 25 children have an experience of maternal imprisonment. Of these 25 children with a mother in prison, 15 were boys, and 10 were girls. The 25 children currently being supported come from 14 different families.

Since charity registration in 2014, we have supported a total of 642 children impacted by parental imprisonment. To date, 41 of the children we have supported were separated from their mother by a prison sentence. The 41 children impacted by maternal imprisonment that we have supported come from 23 different families.

Offence type

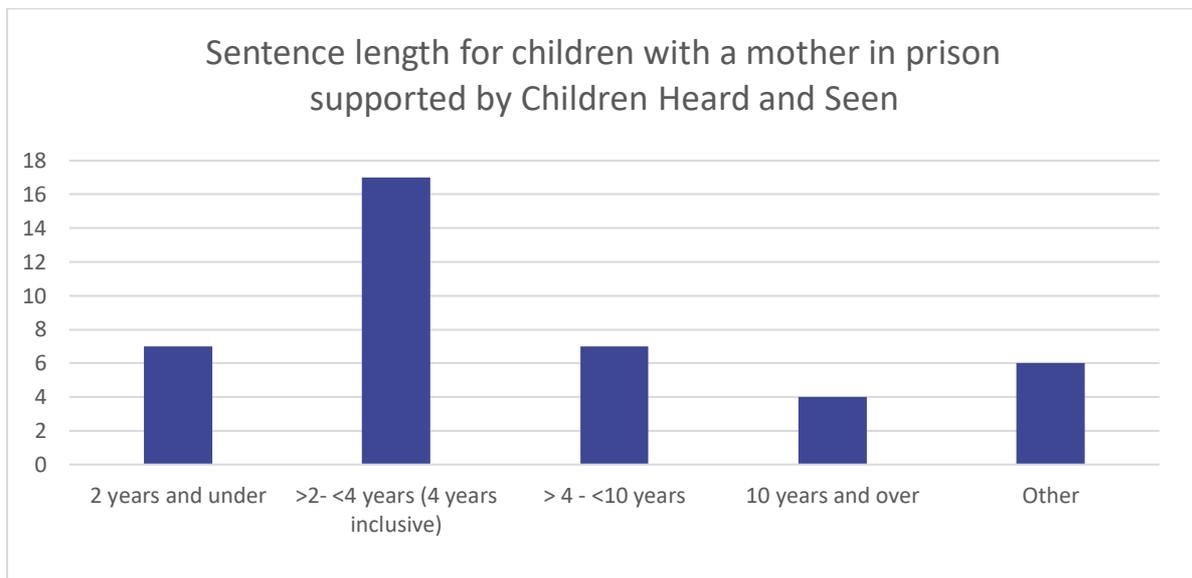
Through our database of families supported, the offence type of the convicted parent is categorised into one of several distinct categories. The breakdown of offence type for parents of these children can be seen below. Of the children we have supported, 10 had a mother in prison for non-violent property offences (theft/ fraud), 18 children had a mother in prison for drug related offences, and a further 12 had a mother in prison for violent offences. The experience of one child did not fit neatly into the offence categorization utilized below on account of its complexity. The offence in question was non- violent.



Over two thirds of children had been separated from their mothers as a result of non-violent offenses. The next section highlights that this also translated into generally shorter sentence lengths.

Sentence length

The vast majority of children supported had mothers serving sentences of under 10 years. 29 of the 41 children who have been supported had a mother serving a sentence of under 10 years. 22 of the children had a mother serving a sentence of less than 4 years, and 7 had a mother who was serving a prison sentence of less than 2 years. The mother with the shortest sentence lasted for just 8 weeks, whilst the longest sentence given to a mother of a child that we support was 16 years. Children whose mothers are awaiting trial or are on remand fall into the ‘Other’ categorisation below.



Who the children live with prior to, during and following the period of imprisonment

Of the 41 children that we have supported since inception, 23 lived with their mother before sentencing (56%). 18 of the children we have supported did not live with their mother prior to the point of imprisonment (44%).

A significant number of children separated from their mother by a prison sentence were being cared for by a grandparent during the period of imprisonment, 21 children who have received support were cared for by grandparents whilst their mother was in prison (51%).

13 of the children who have been supported lived with their father when their mother went to prison. These children came from eight families who have received support. The remainder of the children lived with extended family (4 children), or family friends (3 children) during the period of imprisonment.

The majority of families whose children had lived with their mother prior to imprisonment intended for their children to live with their mother on release. Of the 23 children who had lived with their mother prior to imprisonment, 17 were hoped to be returned to her upon release. The 6 children who did not plan to be returned to their mother came from three different families.

None of the children who had not lived with their mother prior to her imprisonment had plans to live with her upon release. The plans for two children awaiting their mothers release was undecided at the point of this report's publication.

Contact with the imprisoned mother

The majority of children with a mother in prison that we support have some form of contact with the imprisoned parent (27 out of 41 children). For families currently being supported, the means of contact available to children was heavily influenced by the pandemic. As physical visits to prisons have not resumed for many institutions, contact often takes the form of letter writing, online video calls and phone calls. Access to these means of contact varied significantly between families and was largely dependent on the prison at which their mother was serving her sentence.

Prison visits

It is currently difficult to gather useful data surrounding the number of children with a mother in prison who are visiting them in person at the prison. This is largely as a result of the pandemic and the fact that many prisons are still not offering in-person visits to families.

6 Conclusions

Children Heard and Seen seek to provide support to any family impacted by parental imprisonment in need of support. The introduction of this specialised position seeks to respond to the distinct and complex needs of families where a mother goes to prison. Through

responding the diversity of lived experiences, we hope to formalise learning from a practitioner led perspective and develop a robust framework of support that can be used to guide the practices of professionals working with children separated from their mother by a prison sentence. The findings of this report represent a brief snapshot of the key characteristics of children currently being supported. Throughout the implementation of this project, we hope to conduct more in-depth, longitudinal studies that centre the voices of children and families and seek to assess the distinct harms caused by maternal imprisonment whilst also measuring the impact of our support interventions.

7 References

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