

Children Heard and Seen

Home Alone



As you enjoyed the bank holiday weekend, perhaps having overindulged on chocolate, today there are children waking up alone in the family home because their parent(s) have been imprisoned.

The assumption is: when a parent is sent to prison, some agency will be informed, the machinery of the state will sweep in, take care of any children who are left behind. This is not the case. A parent may be sent to prison and their child(ren) will return from school to the family home to look after themselves. There are several reasons why a parent will not disclose there are children at home when they enter prison: they may not be asked, or they may be fearful that their children will be removed and not returned.

What led to the parent being sent to prison is not the issue here, what kind of parent they were prior to being sent to prison is not the issue either. The issue is that children are being left at home, alone and there is no statutory mechanism to identify who or where they are. Children who are left, maybe with a bank card, to maintain a home, clothe and feed themselves, pay bills, rent or a mortgage or wait for an eviction or repossession notice or services to be cut off.

The situation may be discovered by an observant teacher who notices unwashed clothes, an issue with attendance or academic achievement, a caring prison officer or family worker who pays attention, builds a relationship and gains the trust of the parent who eventually discloses. It should not happen by chance, a random conversation or text message.

It is deeply concerning that there is no statutory mechanism for identifying any child impacted by parental imprisonment. In the last month alone, Children Heard and Seen have been made aware of four children who have been managing alone after their parent(s) was imprisoned. We have been able to put appropriate support in place for these children and, working with others, ensured that they were safe and cared for. These are four we know about. How many others are there?

There is a general belief, that is reinforced in reports and by the government, that the third sector has got this covered. That local provision is available in the community that is positioned, ready to scoop up children and provide them with protection and support. This is not the case. The support available to children impacted by parental imprisonment is extremely limited, even statutory services who have a role in protecting and supporting children have little knowledge or understanding of the needs of children with a parent in prison. If the state fails to identify the children how is any support offered or put in place?

The myth that the third sector is locally based and primed to support children impacted by parental imprisonment is a smokescreen to hide the fact the children are invisible to services.

We have spoken previously about the fact we know how many Labradors are registered in England each year, but we do not know how many children are impacted by parental imprisonment. If one of those Labradors were left in a house with nobody to care for them, nobody taking responsibility, to make sure they are fed, watered, looked after, there would be public outrage. We know this is happening to children and if your first thought is, what were the parents doing, you are missing the point. Your first thought should be, what are we going to do to safeguard the children and ensure that a child being left at home alone when a parent is sent to prison never happens again.

There has to be a cross departmental response to this issue, for too long governments have looked the other way, failed in its duty of care. A means of identifying children who are left alone when a parent is sent to prison that is not reliant on a terrified or traumatised parent must be designed and implemented. We cannot afford to wait. Right now, there are vulnerable children alone in a family home wondering how they are going to cope until their parent comes home. If that were your child or a child you care about, what would you want for them?

The fact that we know this is happening, yet there is not a single government department taking responsibility for the children, should shame us as a society. Yet it doesn't appear to. There is no government response.

The silence is deafening.