

Hidden Voices: '1 in 50'



Below is the 21st in a series of blog posts created by adults who have lived experience of parental imprisonment. By sharing these hidden voices, we hope to show how the impacts of parental imprisonment can stay with people well into adulthood.

My dad was arrested on the 9th of November 2019. My mum and I found out that this had happened by about 7 police officers knocking on the doors and windows to come in and search my house. Mum was in the bath, my little sister was at the childminders.

That's how it all started so I figured that that was the best way to start this post. Because it's really hard to know where to start. I'm now comfortable talking about it but I still struggle with where to start. I often find myself starting with the hardest thing to say which, for me, is "my dad was in prison." Or while he was still inside it was "my dad is in prison." People didn't know how to respond, it was really awkward. My dad and I didn't have a particularly good relationship before he went away, so people didn't know if they should say sorry or congratulations.

At the time of my dad's arrest I was 17 years old. So I was too old for "Dad's gone on holiday" and I was supposedly too young for the truth. This was really hard for me as people were asking me questions about what had happened, and I didn't know how to answer them. For the 4 years that my dad was in prison, I didn't speak to anyone in my family about it, and never got the true story. This was until I spoke to my brother a few days before his release. The conversation we had gave me so much closure and I wish I could have had it sooner.

My family had no support from anywhere when my dad was first arrested or throughout his sentence. The only support we had was when we were allowed back into our home and we had a panic button fitted. A button that if we pushed it, police would be deployed to our house straight away. But I didn't have any explanation as to why we had this, or as to why our letterbox was covered. I was already struggling with anxiety and depression and all of this didn't help. My mind ran wild with why these things were fitted in our house. When the police came to search our house, it felt like their main aim was to scare us. They told us that they had been following my dad and all of us, looking at our bank accounts, watching our house. They knew we had a dog, they knew my sister was still at her childminders. They knew everything about the house and family they were walking into.

At visits, you are treated like cattle, like you are the criminal. Frisk searched on a podium in front of all the other visitors. Queuing to go through an airport style scanner. Made to sit on a rock-hard chair that to this day I still don't know what it was for. When my dad's case was made public, the police named my dad in full and named the street where we lived. My family didn't know this was going to be posted but we found out when we saw on our local community social media group that people were wishing death upon my dad, saying that the whole family should be punished, we should all be killed. These are just a few things that my family and I went through, without any support.

Teachers and other people in education are given all sorts of specialist training, on a range of different conditions, situations and pastoral issues. But not parental or familial imprisonment. In 2020 there was an estimated 320,000 children who were affected by parental imprisonment. Currently there are an estimated 14 million under 18 year olds in the UK. That's 2.3%. 1 in 50. And educators don't know how to deal with these young people's needs. If the educators that my sister and I were surrounded by were informed about the needs and issues facing children dealing with parental imprisonment, then maybe the 4 years he was in custody would have been slightly easier.

There are so many things that I wanted to talk about in this post but I didn't know what order to do it in. I just want to give as many tips or bits of advice as I can to any young people going through a similar thing. It is one of my main goals in life to have an impact on the justice system in this country and the support that it offers to the family of prisoners. I hope that in some way, some of what I have written will help maybe just one person.

I want to finish by saying that if you want to make change, you can. Keep shouting and eventually someone will hear you. 4 years after I came up with the concept, I am finally working on a support group for children of prisoners that uses creative arts as a way for young people to express their emotions. I'm engaging with other people who have been affected by parental imprisonment for research purposes. And finally I'm here, writing this, sharing my story, making people listen to us.