

Hidden Voices:

Andy's Story



Below is the 22nd in a series of blog posts created by adults who have lived experience of parental imprisonment. By sharing these hidden voices, we hope to raise awareness of the impacts of parental imprisonment to inspire immediate change for the children of today.

My first introduction to prison was going to visit my brother when I was a kid. He was in prison about a dozen times in total. My dad was also in prison before I was born, and then went back inside when I was 12. My dad getting sentenced at that time was the end of my relationship with him.

My mum's brother was also in and out of prison a lot since I was a teenager. It affected me differently in each instance. With my brother I felt a lot of sadness, as he was in the throes of a heroin addiction, and it was not what he needed. He needed a therapeutic environment. There was a lot of pain and anger about him being away.

When my dad went away I felt relief because he was violent. It was good that I was protected from him. However, my young mind also found the idea of imprisonment very dark and troubling.

I had this obscure feeling of inherited guilt, inherited shame. This kind of 'sins of the father' anxiety. Like I couldn't really claim any of my sadness or vulnerability I felt at the time, because I felt like I was implicated by association. I was so emotionally entangled in it all. Somehow the shame was carried over to me and I was haunted by feelings of dread or doom, as if some punishment was due my way.

It's been a long time in recovering from that. Either through philosophy and that kind of reflective practice or therapy. Just building an identity outside of that prison/crime type identity that was in my family has taken a while.

Lots of people, children and adults, have a very limited picture of what prison and prisoners are like. I remember as a teenager at school if there was like talk of prison there would be a lot of jokes about rape in the prison showers. It always left me feeling lonely, like there had been this aspect of my experience which wasn't imaginable to other people. It was just a bit of a joke or something off the telly. I felt alienated and disconnected from most of my peers.

I remember going to visit my brother in prison on Christmas Eve one year. I didn't know my brother was in prison at the time. I was six, and my mum was saying to me 'your brother's got a job in this factory, we're just going to go and visit him.' Which I remember at the time thinking was weird, because my brother had never had a job, and don't think he's had a job since.

Of course when I get there, it says HMP Gloucester. Then you go in and there's prison security and prison officers, and prisoners. I know trying to hide the truth from children visiting prison is very common, but I wasn't being given permission to my own reality. I was being invited to maintain a collective illusion.

I suppose what I heard with that message was 'this isn't a place for your eyes, this isn't a place you should see.' This is not going to be part of your reality. So even though there were people in my year at school who had also visited family in prison, I'd been forced to disavow that part of my own experience. I couldn't share that with them because I couldn't even own it myself.

I suppose there was some shame that was felt within the family, that they tried to mask with working class respectability. In a way I much preferred hanging out with my uncle, where he just came out with it all, and I got the undiluted truths.

As a child, mental health support would've been nice. The school day felt so impossible from a mental perspective, I was always in trouble. I was always in detention.

I teach in schools nowadays and I see kids whose heads are all over the place. Long division just isn't a priority. I don't think teachers were aware then, and I don't think they are aware now. That's not any shade on teachers, because the teaching load is already massive and a lot of them do an amazing job.

I'll be working in a school and a teacher or headteacher will pull me aside and say 'we've got a kid and his dad's just gone to prison, what do we do?' You've got me in your school so you've got someone to advise on that, but really it shouldn't come to that. There should be something in place already, whether it be the justice system, police or social workers. They should be in communication with you and offering you training and insight on how to support that child.

These experiences, growing up in a very punishing environment can harden you and make you cynical. It can close you down or it can open your heart. That's not easy and it doesn't come without sadness and challenges, but I'd like to think I'm more open-hearted because of it all.

Andy West teaches philosophy in prisons, schools and is also an author. His book, 'The Life Inside' offers a new insight into our stretched justice system, our failing prisons and the complex lives being lived inside. It is [available to purchase here](#).