

Children Heard and Seen Lived Experience Parental Imprisonment Focus Groups: Executive Summary

On Monday the 28th of April 2025 Children Heard and Seen held three separate focus groups for individuals impacted by parental imprisonment.

These were:

- Adults who have had a parent in prison as a child
- Adults caring for children who have/have had a parent in prison
- For Over 8s – Under 18s who have /have had a parent in prison

In attendance were officials from the Ministry of Justice and Department for Education, as the focus groups fed into their ongoing work on the government's manifesto commitment – to establish a national mechanism to identify and support children with a parent in prison.

Focus Group 1: Adults who have had a parent in prison as a child

There were 18 adults attending our Lived Experience Focus Group for adults who had a parent in prison as a child. The professions of the 18 attendees are; Teacher, Head Teacher, Detective Superintendent, Prison Offender Manager, Lawyer, Bank Analyst, Psychotherapist, Resilience Coach, Communications Consultant, Journalist, Senior Client Relationship Manager, Police Officer, Social Worker, CEO, Writer, Vehicle Recovery Driver and Data Analyst.

Sentence lengths range from 18 months to 25 years, and 5/18 (28%) of adults witnessed their parent's arrest.

Only 4/18 adults received any form of support before the age of 18 due to their parent's imprisonment, and initial discussions focused on what support adults felt would have been beneficial to them as a child.

"I needed an external person to explain my experiences to."

"I had a trusted adult to talk to, and she made me feel safe."

"What I needed really was a friend, some continuity. Someone that I could trust and talk to. Perhaps a mentor just to talk about my feelings and untangle them with somebody."

9/18 participants said that teachers at their school did not know their parent was in prison. Of these 9, **100% indicated that they would have liked teachers at school to have been informed that their parent was in prison.**

"I was never spoken to by any teachers and to this day do not know if they knew or not."

"I was too scared to tell people what was happening, my parents encouraged me to lie about it, which increased the shame I was already feeling. It was a huge weight to carry at school and there were signs I was struggling, but the school never asked any questions."

"What is needed is a trusted adult in every single school for children to talk to."

These insights underline the importance of early intervention and relational support for children affected by parental imprisonment. Participants strongly advocated for the presence of trained, approachable adults — such as mentors, school staff, or support workers — who are equipped to listen without judgment and offer emotional stability during a time of upheaval.

The Importance of Recognition and Identification

There was strong consensus within the group that a critical first step in supporting children affected by parental imprisonment is ensuring they are identified and recognised by professionals. Without this recognition, access to meaningful support is significantly limited.

"It's so important to identify children (with a parent in prison), so professionals can be there if they need and want the support." – Charlotte (Social Worker)

Participants noted that while schools often have resources — such as Pupil Premium funding — that could be directed toward targeted support, these cannot be effectively allocated if children affected by imprisonment remain invisible within the system.

"In theory, schools can choose to spend Pupil Premium funding on any support for any child. But if you don't know who the children are with a parent in prison, then you're unable to spend it on this." – Caron (Headteacher)

This feedback underscores the need for clear identification processes, alongside professional training and safe disclosure mechanisms, to ensure children do not fall through the cracks of support systems designed to help them.

Lack of Communication and Information-Sharing Between Services

A common theme across all three focus groups was the absence of clear, consistent communication between statutory services in relation to parental imprisonment. Many participants described a fragmented system where no single agency took responsibility, and where important information was either lost, withheld, or not proactively shared with those who needed it.

"Every agency thinks another agency is picking it up."

This lack of coordination often left families having to repeat their stories or re-establish critical support structures, particularly in healthcare and education.

"I was unable to access medical history, and had to start again from a medical point of view. You should have to share that information with your children."

"Information should have been relayed to the GP, so they were aware as well. Then they would be able to ask the right questions."

Continued Engagement and Peer Support

Following the focus group, participants expressed a strong desire to stay connected and continue working together to drive meaningful change. At their own request, a WhatsApp group was created to enable ongoing discussion, allowing members to share thoughts, ideas, and experiences in a supportive and informal space.

Building on this momentum, Children Heard and Seen will be facilitating a monthly peer support group for participants. These sessions will offer a structured opportunity to explore the themes raised during the focus group in greater depth, provide mutual support, and collaborate on ways to influence policy and practice relating to children affected by parental imprisonment.

Focus Group 2: Adults caring for children with a parent in prison

Value of Peer Support in Reducing Stigma and Isolation

14 adults attended the Lived Experience Focus Group for adults caring for children who have/had a parent in prison.

Prison sentences range from 3 months to 11 years, and in 10/14 cases (71%), the crime was reported in the media.

14/14 (100%) of adults stated they did not feel that children with a parent in prison are adequately supported by current services and policies.

As with previous discussions, attendees emphasised the critical importance of peer group support for children affected by parental imprisonment. These groups offer a safe and understanding space where children can connect with others who share similar experiences, helping to counter feelings of shame, stigma, and isolation.

"The community is what my children got the most out of — actually meeting other children in the same situation."

Peer connections help children feel less alone, and crucially, challenge any internalised stigma about their situation.

“What is great is learning that they are normal children. That they are ok and not bad people.”

Being able to engage in group activities with peers who understand their circumstances — without pressure to speak or stay silent about it — was seen as empowering.

“When they go to group activities, they can talk about having a parent in prison, or not. They don’t have to hide it.”

These reflections highlight the importance of maintaining and expanding access to peer support groups as a protective factor for children's mental health and self-esteem.

Role of the School

In 13/14 cases the school was aware that the child’s parent was in prison. This is likely due to Children Heard and Seen actively encouraging and supporting parents to disclose this to the school. However, the role of the school in providing support varied significantly in each instance.

“The school had nothing prepared in this circumstance. At first they were shocked.”

“The school have been a wonderful safe space for my daughter. It happened just as she left primary school, and the teachers were aware and looked out for her, and provided support to us.”

“One of my children was no longer allowed to share in assemblies as she once shared that her dad was imprisoned, and the head teacher was worried the other children might get upset.”

Lack of Communication and Access to Information

One of the common themes throughout the discussion was the lack of communication between different agencies and information made available to adults. This was particularly apparent when the adult caring for the child was not their parent (grandparent or great aunt). In numerous cases, families are reliant on the parent in prison and/or their extended family for any information regarding their crime and terms of imprisonment.

“There was no clear information about what was happening. All the information was relayed through my ex’s current partner.”

“There was no info regarding the parent in prison. As I’m not related, I wasn’t told anything.”

“My ex-husband was recently released from prison and we were not notified or offered any support. Families should be recognised as the indirect victims of offenders.”

Perceived Power Imbalance

Some attendees expressed frustration at what they saw as a disparity in rights and responsibilities between those in prison and the carers left to support their children. Carers often felt powerless, particularly when legal structures appeared to prioritise the rights of the imprisoned parent over the well-being of the child.

“Even though my children are the victims, a lawyer told me that their father’s parental responsibility won’t get removed. It should be a given that if you’re convicted of child sexual offences, your parental responsibility is removed.”

This sentiment reflects broader concerns about safeguarding and justice. Despite convictions for serious offences, parental responsibility can remain intact, leaving carers feeling unsupported by the system.

“Prisoners have all of the rights and none of the responsibilities. They don’t pay any child maintenance or anything.”

Many felt that while the imprisoned parent retained certain rights (e.g. to communication or decision-making), the financial and emotional burden of parenting was borne entirely by those outside prison. These comments underscore the need for reform and better support for families left behind.

Focus Group 3: Children who have/have had a parent in prison

12 children attended our Lived Experience Focus Group for children who have/had a parent in prison, living across the country. Their parents’ sentences range from 3.5 years to 14 years.

Offences include convictions for drug offences, domestic abuse, child sexual offences, theft and possession of a dangerous weapon. In one case the offence type is unknown.

10/12 children have a father in prison, and 2/12 children have both their mother and father in prison.

Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment

To help reduce anxiety and build familiarity, children were invited to a pre-focus group Zoom session one week before the event. This gave them the opportunity to introduce themselves, meet others in a safe and supportive setting, and begin thinking about what they hoped to achieve by taking part. On the day of the focus group, children arrived early to take part in a relaxed and enjoyable activity — a boat ride along the River Thames, followed by lunch and ice cream. This informal time together helped relieve any stress or nervousness, allowing the children to feel more comfortable and ready to participate meaningfully in the group discussions.

Children's Perspectives on Support and the Need for Change

Discussion centred on the types of support children have found most helpful, and what changes they believe are needed across schools and government services. A recurring theme was the deep sense of shame and stigma that many experience due to their parent's imprisonment — often compounded by negative reactions from peers or their wider community.

"Not everybody's nice, not everybody will understand my situation. Some people put a brick through our window, and threatened to set their house alight. In groups you've got friends, you've got somewhere to go to with people who've experienced the same thing as you — so you're not alone."

Children spoke powerfully about how peer support groups helped reduce feelings of isolation and judgment. These groups created safe spaces where they could be open about their experiences without fear.

"I know that in the groups other people are going through the same thing, and I won't feel as judged because people have gone through it as well."

"Anyone at Children Heard and Seen will understand and they won't treat me like a criminal."

There was a clear call for wider availability of this kind of support.

"I feel like there should be groups in every city or town, where you can talk to somebody and they won't judge you."

These insights show not only the effectiveness of peer support, but also a pressing need for more inclusive, trauma-informed responses from education and statutory services that recognise and support the unique experiences of these children.

Call for Greater Awareness and Training in Schools and Social Services

Children repeatedly expressed the need for more compassionate, informed responses from professionals in schools and social care. Echoing the views of earlier groups, they described feeling judged, misunderstood, or unsupported by the very systems meant to help them.

"Sometimes it feels like social care think they're better than us. They're not as supportive as they could be, it feels like they're walking all over us."

"I feel like social care could do with more training around this — they are uneducated."

There was a clear sense that current training and awareness levels are not sufficient to meet the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment. Schools, in particular, were often seen as lacking both understanding and effective mental health support.

“The school doesn’t really help very much. They need better mental health training across the board.”

One child’s experience highlighted the potential harm caused by a lack of follow-up or tailored support:

“School just sort of told me, we know what’s happening – and that was it. I was out of school for 9 months after that.”

These comments underscore the urgent need for widespread, specialist training across education and social care settings to ensure that children feel supported, not stigmatised, and that their well-being is prioritised.

Ongoing Support and Follow-Up

Following the focus group, all participating children and their families were contacted individually by a member of the Children Heard and Seen team. These follow-up conversations served multiple purposes: to check in on the wellbeing of each child after sharing potentially sensitive experiences; to thank them for their contributions; and to offer further emotional or practical support if needed.

This aftercare approach reflects the charity’s trauma-informed practice and commitment to safeguarding. Families were reassured that support remained available and were signposted to ongoing services, including 1:1 support, and peer support groups, if appropriate. By maintaining contact beyond the focus group, the team helped ensure that no child was left feeling vulnerable or exposed after taking part.

Conclusion

The findings from these lived experience focus groups make clear that parental imprisonment is a hidden issue with profound and lasting impacts on children and families—impacts that current systems fail to adequately address. Across all groups, participants called for urgent policy-level action to improve recognition, coordination, and support. This includes mandatory identification of children affected by parental imprisonment in schools, investment in specialist training for professionals, and improved information sharing across services.

Critically, all support must keep the needs, voices, and rights of the child at its core—not filtered through the lens of the imprisoned parent. Children affected by parental imprisonment must be recognised as individuals in their own right, with tailored, trauma-informed responses that prioritise their wellbeing, safety, and development. By embedding child-centred approaches across education, social care, and criminal justice policy, and making clear commitments to this often-overlooked group, we can reduce stigma, prevent intergenerational harm, and ensure no child is left to cope alone.