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Parents, Children and Prison: Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children

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Parents, Children & Prison: Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children

Centre for Social & Educational Research,
Dublin Institute of Technology

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Acknowledgements

The Centre for Social and Educational Research

The Centre for Social and Educational Research, an independent research and policy analysis body, is located within the Dublin Institute of Technology.

In 2001, a dedicated Families Research Unit was established. This development was a consequence of the increasing number of research and evaluation studies conducted by the Centre in the broad field of families research and of the need to consolidate and advance the families research agenda. The work of this Unit informs and is informed by the research carried out in two other units – the Early Childhood Care and Education Research Unit and the Residential Childcare and Juvenile Justice Research Unit.

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Executive Summary

The Centre for Social and Educational Research, DIT, was commissioned by the Management Committee of the Visitors' Centre in the Mountjoy Prison Complex to carry out research into the effects of parental imprisonment on children. The topic has to date received little formal attention in Ireland, despite the fact that imprisonment affects a much wider section of the population than those who are serving custodial sentences. The purpose of the research was to address the lack of information that exists about the children of prisoners in Ireland and to provide an initial profile of their needs. In doing so, it aimed to increase awareness about the issue of child poverty among the children of prisoners and to produce recommendations that could be used to lobby for specific changes in prison policy, premised on a rights-based approach. A further objective of the research was the production of recommendations that could be used to ensure that the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment are given a broader consideration within the anti-poverty, equality and justice arenas.

Research conducted in several other countries has highlighted the negative impact that a parent's imprisonment can have on children (eg, Shaw 1992; Healy 2000; Boswell and Wedge 1999; Tudball 2000). Among the key findings to emerge from the studies are the fact that parental imprisonment can have a negative effect on the financial situation of children, that it can give rise to changes in children's behaviour, and that it can fundamentally alter and sometimes lead to a breakdown in parent-child relationships. In addition, children may be placed under a great deal of stress if they are stigmatised as a result of their parent's imprisonment, or if they feel that they have to keep the sentence a secret from their peers and from others. These themes were reflected in the design of the instruments used for the study.

The research was conducted in the Mountjoy Prison complex during the summer months of 2001. During this period, interviews were conducted with caregivers who use the Visitors' Centre in the prison complex and with parents in prison. A total of 26 prisoners (5 female, 21 male) agreed to participate in the study. Interviews were also carried out with 19 caregivers (18 female, 1 male). Data were collected by means of a questionnaire that was administered on a one-to-one basis. Informal discussions took place with children who use the Visitors' Centre, with childcare workers and staff members from the Visitors' Centre, with staff of the Probation and Welfare Office, with ex-offenders, and with prison officers.

Summary of Recommendations

The following is a summary of the recommendations arising from the research, the full version of which is set out in Chapter 9.

- A code of practice for all service providers should be developed on informing children about a parent's prison sentence;
- The introduction of counselling services and support groups for caregivers is necessary in order to provide them with support throughout the sentence;
- The children of prisoners need to be given attention as a specific target group of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy;
- Representatives from voluntary and statutory groups working with prisoners' children should be involved in developing initiatives to support the children, in collaboration with the National Children's Office;
- In-service training should be introduced for teachers who work with the children of prisoners;
- Support groups and counselling services that cater for the children of prisoners and that are accessible through schools should be established;
- Consideration should be given to establishing visitors' reception centres in all prisons;
- A system for monitoring the parental status of prisoners needs to be set up;
- Parents should be entitled to one extra phone call of 10 minutes to their children, on a weekly basis;
- Prison staff should receive specific training on working with prisoners and their families;
- The caregivers of prisoners' children should be put in contact with MABS;
- Greater efforts must be made to encourage the maintenance of contact between prisoners and their children throughout the sentence, through the introduction of special visiting schemes;
- Consideration should be given to the publication of an information leaflet for visitors that contains details about prison visiting arrangements;
- Parenting courses should be made available in all prisons, where appropriate;

-
- A group representing the interests of children affected by imprisonment should be consulted in any future reviews of the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement, 2001-2003;
 - Changes need to be made to the visiting area in Mountjoy men's prison to make it more child-friendly, including the introduction of a play area for children;
 - The introduction of parenting courses into the Dochas Centre, Mountjoy Prison, should be accompanied by pre-course counselling;
 - Prisoners in Mountjoy men's prison should be entitled to receive 15-minute visits on Saturdays;
 - Further research into the financial effects of parental imprisonment needs to be carried out;
 - Before any counselling or support services are set up for children, research should be undertaken into what they would like to see such services providing.

The recommendations will involve the following groups and organisations:

- The Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform
- The Department of Education & Science
- The Department of Social, Community & Family Affairs, through the Family Support Agency
- The National Anti-Poverty Strategy
- The National Children's Office
- The Irish Prison Service
- Mountjoy Prison
- NGOs and community organisations working in prisons

Chapter 1

Introduction & Policy Context

Chapter 1: Introduction & Policy Context

1.1 Background

"They're always looking for their daddy at night time and when the morning comes, they're still looking for him. Always asking when he's coming home." [Female caregiver, four children]

"You see rehabilitation, d'ya know, how can you be rehabilitated if you lose your family along the way? You get bitter, you get upset. If you lose your family and your kids, it's even worse and you're bitter then. Then you get out and you have the wrong attitude." [Male prisoner, three children]

Despite the reduction in the number of known indictable crimes that took place in Ireland between 1995 and 1999¹, the number of people committed to prison has grown in recent years. The number of prisoner places in Ireland has increased rapidly over the past six years², and the Irish Prison Service states that the average daily prisoner population in Ireland is now approximately 3,000. As is illustrated by the above quotes, the impact of imprisonment is not confined to prisoners alone, however. It also affects their families and children, which makes it imperative to consider the wider implications of incarceration for society.

Although the effect of parental imprisonment on children has been documented in a number of international studies (eg. Boswell and Wedge, 1999; Healy, 2000; Tudball, 2000), it has to date received little formal attention in Ireland. Within the Irish prison system, no systematic records are kept about the parental status of prisoners, with the result that it is not known how many children are affected by parental incarceration. Two previous surveys conducted in Irish prisons (Carmody and McEvoy, 1996; O'Mahoney, 1997) indicated, respectively, that 60 and 72 percent of respondents were parents. These figures suggest that imprisonment has an impact on a much larger section of the population than those who are serving sentences.

The Centre for Social and Educational Research, DIT, was commissioned by the Management Committee of the Visitors' Centre in the Mountjoy Prison Complex to carry out this research, with a view to addressing the lack of information about the children of prisoners. The purpose of the study is to provide an initial profile of the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment in Ireland. It aims to produce recommendations that can be used to increase awareness of the issues of child poverty among the children of prisoners and to lobby for specific changes in prison policy. The recommended changes are premised on a rights-based approach, which considers children's rights as set out in various international and domestic conventions and strategies. In addition, it aims to produce information that can be used to ensure that the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment are given a broader consideration within the anti-poverty and equality arenas.

This chapter discusses the policy context of the research. It examines the issue of child poverty in Ireland and outlines the framework within which children's rights are located, both internationally and domestically. In addition, it highlights the sections of the National Children's Strategy, the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, the National Drugs Strategy and the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement that are of relevance to the children of prisoners.

1.2 Child poverty in Ireland

Recent findings about child poverty in Ireland are particularly significant for the children of prisoners. Although there is no formal statistical information available on families affected by parental imprisonment, previous studies suggest that convicted offenders in Ireland tend to come from households that are already experiencing financial difficulties. O'Mahoney (2000:6) highlights how several studies have documented the extent to which people who end up in prison

tend to come from the lowest echelons of Irish society in terms of their material wealth and access to the benefits and opportunities of society.

His own sociological study of male prisoners in Mountjoy (1997:40) found that

the composition of prisoners in Mountjoy is biased towards residents of a small number of predominantly working class urban areas characterised by a high proportion of corporation housing and by many other indices of relative deprivation such as high unemployment rates and opiate abuse.

Despite the fact that Ireland's economic performance has improved dramatically since 1994, the problem of child poverty still persists. In 1997, 17% of Irish children were found to be in severe or "consistent" poverty, ie,

¹ A reduction of 21% occurred between 1995 and 1999 (Irish Prison Service, 2001:16)

² From 2,210 places in June 1995 to 3,576 places in June 2001 (ibid:17)

living in households that were both below 60% of the average household income and experiencing basic deprivation (Nolan, 2000). In addition, it was found that about one in four Irish children (26%) lived in households with below half the average income in 1997, a situation that had remained unchanged since the previous decade. More recent studies indicate that the rate of consistent child poverty fell again in 1998, dropping to 12% (Social Inclusion Strategy, 2001). Child poverty in Ireland ranks sixth highest on a list of 23 OECD countries (Barnardos, 2002:2):

According to Nolan (2000), poverty risks were more volatile for children than for adults during the period between 1973 and 1999, making them a more vulnerable group. Although the fall in unemployment rates between 1994 and 1997 was of central importance to the drop in the proportion of children living in households below half or 60% of the average income,

the relative income poverty risk associated with unemployment rose from 1994 to 1997, however, as social welfare support levels lagged behind rapidly increasing average incomes (2000:49).

Over half of the children who were found to be “consistently poor” were living in households seriously affected by unemployment. Almost 40% of the children who were living in households with below half the average income were in houses that were headed by an unemployed person. The children of lone parents and those in families of three or more children were found to be more likely to experience poverty (Nolan, *ibid*):

children living in larger families continued to be at high risk of relative income poverty, even where the head was in work. Where the household was relying on social welfare, the poverty risk for such children was very high indeed.

According to the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (1997: 47), child poverty has more wide-ranging implications than a lack of income adequacy. It states that children who are poor have been shown to do less well educationally, to be more likely to suffer from ill health, and to be vulnerable to homelessness, among other problems.

The fact that prisoners may come from families who are already suffering from economic deprivation has serious consequences for their children. Children who are living in a household that is experiencing consistent poverty may find that their situation is made worse by the imprisonment of a parent, particularly if that parent was providing financial support. Social welfare payments

are available for the partners of prisoners in the form of the One-Parent Family Payment. In order to qualify, recipients must have earnings of £230.76 or less per week and must satisfy a means test. In addition, the recipient’s spouse must have been sentenced to prison for a term of at least 6 months or have been in custody for at least six months without being sentenced. However, the payments do not take into account the fact that extended family members may assume the role of caregiver for the children of prisoners. The existence of a qualifying period of six months may also have negative implications for children whose parents are serving shorter sentences, but who were providing financial support prior to imprisonment.

According to the Combat Poverty Agency (2001:1), child poverty is a multidimensional problem that has knock-on exclusionary effects in terms of access to resources and participation in everyday activities. The Agency has called for the development and application of a set of child-specific deprivation indicators (Nolan, 2000: xxiii). It states that such indicators would better reflect the impact of poverty on children in terms of their exclusion from, enjoyment of, and participation in everyday activities. In addition (*ibid*),

such indicators can better capture children who experience deprivation due to the unequal sharing or prioritisation of resources in families, including non-poor households.

Examples given of potential indicators of deprivation include a birthday party with friends and relations, participation in after-school classes, and an occasional family outing. Such indicators illustrate how child poverty may not solely be measured in terms of a family’s income, but can have extended effects on different aspects of children’s lives and development. The exacerbation of pre-existing child poverty through parental imprisonment will therefore have a bigger effect on a child’s life than the immediate and measurable change in their economic wellbeing.

1.3 Children’s Rights

The children of prisoners have often been referred to as “forgotten children” or “hidden victims of imprisonment” (Shaw, 1992; Healy, 2000). No acknowledgement tends to be made of their rights when one of their parents is imprisoned. According to Shaw (1992:196),

Much of what goes on in prisons has as its rationale “good order and discipline, security and control.” It is not surprising, therefore, that visits are seen as the right (or privilege) of the inmate; never as the right of the child to maintain a relationship with its father or mother.

In addition, it has been noted that children's needs tend not to be considered when a parent is sent to prison, except in the case of a baby or the unborn child of a female prisoner (McDermott, 2000). However, several international conventions and charters have been drawn up that contain provisions which are applicable to the children of prisoners and which refer specifically to their right to contact with parents.

1.3.1 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The main basis upon which children's rights in Ireland are premised is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which the state ratified on September 21, 1992 and which came into force on October 21 of the same year. According to Article 9 (3) of the CRC,

States Parties shall respect the rights of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests.

The article is very important for the children of prisoners, as it explicitly states that they have a right to maintain contact with the parent from whom they are separated, unless it goes against their best interests. Other relevant articles contained in the Convention are Article 2, which states that the rights contained in the Convention are applicable to every child. Article 2 (2) says that

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members

In addition, Article 3 states that a child's best interests govern all actions concerning him/her, while Article 12 states that children and young people have a right to express their opinion in all matters which affect them.

1.3.2 The European Context

The European Charter of Fundamental Rights:

The right of children to regular contact with both parents is also stressed in Article 24, paragraph 3, of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, which states that every child has the right to retain, on a regular basis, a personal relationship and direct contact with both his or her parents, unless it is contrary to the child's best interests.

The European Convention on Human Rights:

The rights of children whose parents are in prison are explicitly protected by Article 8.15 of the European Convention on Human Rights:

Any child who has one or both parents in prison must be allowed to maintain contact with them.

Council of Europe Recommendation 1340 on the Social and Family Effects of Detention:

Other ways in which the rights of children whose parents are in prison have been highlighted at an international level include Recommendation 1340 (1997) on the Social and Family Effects of Detention, which was released by the Council of Europe. In the Recommendation, the Assembly states that imprisonment can result in a wide range of social problems related to family life that have a particular effect on children. As a result, custodial sentences can have implications beyond the principle that the punishment should only apply to the offender because families of prisoners also suffer indirect effects, such as a deterioration in their financial situation.

Recommendation 1340 notes that female prisoners can face specific social problems. These stem from the fact that they are subject to particular stereotypes and that they have reduced chances, compared with their male counterparts, of being reunited with their spouses and finding employment on release. In addition, the loss of their parental rights can have serious consequences because many of them have young children for whom they were responsible before their imprisonment. Point 4 states that

the principle that the punishment should be limited to the duration of the sentence itself does not appear to apply either: the effects extend beyond the actual period of imprisonment, as is clearly demonstrated by the difficulties which former prisoners face in finding employment.

The Assembly set out a list of recommendations with which the Committee of Ministers should invite member states to comply. These include Point 6 (i), which states that regarding short sentences, the qualifying periods for prison leave should be reduced, in order to help prevent the breakdown of family relations. Point 6 (vi) suggests that the conditions for prison visits by families should be improved, especially by providing places where prisoners can be alone with family visitors. In addition, Point 7 (iii) asks the Committee of Ministers to "encourage expedients to reduce recidivism and to support the role of the prisoner's family and community in assisting rehabilitation during and after detention". The Text was adopted by the Assembly on September 22, 1997

1.4 Domestic Policy

The Child Care Act 1991, the Children Act 1997, and the Children Act 2001 have made concerted efforts to establish rights and to prioritise rights and responsibilities towards children, as has been noted by McDermott (2000:45):

The essential multi-purpose thrust of the Child Act 1997 was to amend and significantly improve the law in relation to guardianship, custody, access and maintenance of children.

Aside from these acts, the key domestic policy reference points that form the context of the research stem from the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, the National Children's Strategy and the National Drugs Strategy. In addition, the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement, 2001-2003 makes specific mention of the important role that can be played by the families of prisoners in the rehabilitation process.

1.4.1 The National Children's Strategy

The National Children's Strategy was published by the government in November 2000 and outlines its commitment to the development of a coherent children's policy. The Strategy is an interdepartmental initiative that aims to further the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It sets out the main pillars that it is aiming to achieve and outlines operational systems for the implementation of these goals. The infrastructure of how action will be taken at both at local and national level is also presented in the report.

The identified goals of the Strategy are:

- Children will have a voice in matters that affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age.
- Children's lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and effectiveness of service.
- Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.

To pursue the national goals, the Strategy provides a list of 14 operating objectives that are broken down into three groups. Objectives A-E state that all children have a basic range of needs, Objectives G-K state that some children have additional needs, and Objectives L-N state that all children need the support of family and community. Objective L (2000:72) is of primary importance for the children of imprisoned parents. It states that

Children will have the opportunity to experience the qualities of family life³.

The right of children to participation in family life can be severely disrupted by parental imprisonment, however. As a result, there is a need to give the children of prisoners particular consideration in order to ensure that their rights are upheld and respected.

³ The term "qualities of family life" is not defined in the Strategy, but reference is made to the importance for children of a good experience of family life.

1.4.2 The National Anti-Poverty Strategy

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) defines poverty as follows (1997:3):

People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural, and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.

The central focus of the NAPS is on the sector of the population who have been found to be "consistently poor", ie, subject to income poverty and who appear to be suffering some form of deprivation due to lack of resources. There is a need to identify the households that face especially high risks of poverty. Groups identified included the unemployed, children, single adult households and households headed by someone working in the home, lone parents, and people with disabilities. Amongst the principles that inform the NAPS are

- Ensuring equal access and encouraging participation for all
- Encouraging self-reliance through respecting individual dignity and promoting empowerment

The main aim set out in the NAPS was the reduction of the numbers of people who are "consistently poor" to less than 5 -10 % (as measured by the ESRI) during the period from 1997 to 2007. As a result of strong economic growth, the NAPS global target was revised in 1999 to focus on the reduction of consistent poverty to below 5% by 2004.

Child poverty constitutes a particular strand of the NAPS. The position of children within the poorest houses is worsening because of unemployment, low pay, lone parenthood, and government fiscal policy. The Strategy (1997:47) states that the adequacy of child support payments is an important factor for children who are living in families dependent on social welfare:

Child poverty can seriously damage the life chances of many children, leading to a cycle of deprivation which repeats itself from generation to generation.

As outlined in section 1.2, previous studies have indicated that prisoners tend to come from households that are already experiencing financial difficulties. Their absence as a result of a prison sentence therefore has implications for their children, as it could result in a loss of income for the family. However, it is also possible that the imprisonment of a parent could mean that families receive a more stable income through the Social Welfare system. According to the Social Inclusion Strategy (2001:7), a longitudinal analysis of data⁴ carried out by the ESRI indicated how

⁴ Data were taken from the results of the Living in Ireland survey from the period between 1994 and 1998.

the relationship between relative income poverty and deprivation increased as the period of relative income poverty continued over a number of years.

If the loss of income brought about by imprisonment cannot be compensated for by the family network or by state support and continues for a period of time, children will be at a greater risk of experiencing relative income poverty. They may also face disadvantages within the educational system. The summary report of the Working Group on Educational Disadvantage contained in the NAPS specifically notes that prisoners and their families are one of the key groups that are experiencing educational disadvantage (1997:125). The children and families of prisoners therefore need to be recognised as a vulnerable group that requires specific forms of assistance.

1.4.3 The National Drugs Strategy

According to the National Drugs Strategy 2001-2008, the Irish prison population forms a specific target group for anti-drug policies. The Strategy highlights how two studies carried out by Long et al⁵ illustrate the high level of initiation into injecting drug use and the sharing of drug using equipment within prisons. It states that surveys suggest that two-fifths of the Irish prison population have a history of injecting drug use, and that nearly half of them continue to inject while in prison.

According to the Strategy, comprehensive rehabilitation services are required to help prisoners who take drugs. The rehabilitation process “may involve the restoration of important friendships with family and friends” (2001:103). One of the overall aims of the Strategy is to enable people with drug misuse problems to access treatment and other supports and to re-integrate into society. The action plan for the Prison Service includes the following goals:

- To expand prison-based programmes with the aim of having treatment and rehabilitation services available to those who need them including drug treatment programmes, which specifically deal with the re-integration of the drug-using offender into the family/community.
- To expand the involvement of community and voluntary sectors in prison drug policy

The “First Report of the Steering Group on Prison-Based Drug Treatment Services” was released in July 2000. It proposed a systematic and partially centralised approach to drug treatment services in the prison

system, based to a large degree on the Mountjoy Prison Complex. The implementation of its recommendations was approved in principle by the government in October 2000. The National Anti Drugs Strategy (2001:58) states that

these proposals will result in a major overhaul of prison-based drug treatment services and should make a major contribution to breaking the cycle of drug dependency, crime and imprisonment, which are inextricably linked at the moment.

The Strategy recognises the importance of encouraging links between prisoners who use drugs, their families, and the wider community, in order to facilitate post-release reintegration. In this respect, the important role played by the family in supporting and encouraging prisoners is recognised. Contact of a continual and high quality nature needs to be maintained between prisoners and their families throughout their sentences, in order to ensure that relationships do not break down. Families can also play an important role in encouraging prisoners who are attempting to overcome drug misuse problems.

1.4.4 Irish Prison Service, Strategy Statement 2001-2003

The Irish Prison Service currently forms part of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. However, it is government policy to establish it as a statutory, executive agency. It is expected that legislation on the change will be introduced in the Oireachtas in early 2002. Since April, 1999, a non-executive Prisons Authority Interim Board has been in place to provide advice on the management of the prison system, pending the appointment of a statutory board (Irish Prison Service, 2001: 4). Under the guidance of the Board, the first ever Strategy Statement of the Irish Prison Service was published in 2001.

The Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement, 2001-2003, contains several references to the importance of helping to maintain contact between prisoners and their families. Accordingly, measures will be introduced over the next few years in order to encourage prisoners to stay in touch with their families during their sentences. The aim is explicitly stated as one of the values of the Prison Service (2001:9), which promises to endeavour to help prisoners, where possible and appropriate, to maintain relationships with their families. The Strategy states that the Prison Service seeks to promote rehabilitation by keeping up relationships between prisoners and those who support them both during their sentence and after release:

Critical environmental factors include the level of community, especially family, contact to sustain prisoners during their imprisonment.

⁵ Long, J., Allwright, S., Barry, J., Reaper-Reynolds, S., Thornton, L., Bradley, F. (2000), “Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and HIV in Irish Prisoners, Part II: Prevalence and Risk in Committal Prisoners, 1999” and Allwright, S., Barry, J., Bradley, F., Long, J., and Thornton, L. “Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and HIV in Irish Prisoners: Prevalence and Risk”. (1999), Department of Community Health and General Practice, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin.

According to Strategy 7 (2001:31), the Prison Service will help prisoners maintain their relationships with family and the community. Among the measures that will be undertaken in order to achieve this aim are

- The examination of visiting hours and the potential for visits by appointment, in the interests of more family-friendly visiting arrangements
- The design and implementation of measures to enable prisoners to maintain family contact through the use of new prisoner telephone systems
- The examination of the possibility of increased telephone contact between prisoners and their families and community-based services

In addition, Strategy 11 (ibid: 39) states that the Service will elaborate positive sentence management. One of the proposed means for achieving this objective is the extension of parenting courses (which are currently run in about half of all prisons) to all prisons where they are appropriate.

1.5 Discussion

A comprehensive body of rights exists that relates to the children of prisoners, particularly to their right to contact with the parent from whom they are separated. Amongst these are the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the Council of Europe's Recommendation 1340 on the Social and Family Effects of Detention. At a domestic level, the National Children's Strategy stresses the right of children to have the opportunity to experience the qualities of family life. The National Anti-Poverty Strategy is of particular relevance to the children of prisoners: previous studies have shown that prisoners tend to come from areas that are characterised by various indices of relative deprivation. This increases the likelihood that their children may be at risk of child poverty, the eradication of which forms a particular strand of the NAPS.

The families of prisoners are specifically mentioned in the National Drugs Strategy 2001-2008 as a group that can help prisoners with drug misuse problems throughout the rehabilitation process. The Strategy also recognises that encouraging contact between prisoners and their families can help to facilitate post-release reintegration. In the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement 2001-2003, several references are made to the importance of helping to maintain contact between prisoners and their families throughout a custodial sentence. The increasing emphasis that is being placed on positive sentence management for prisoners and the recognition that is being given to the role that their families can play indicates that some changes are taking

place in the way that prison sentences are viewed. A report by the NESF⁶ on the reintegration of prisoners highlights the need for the radical reform of planning of services for prisoners. It states that an emphasis on reintegration needs to be introduced at both the national and local prison level and recommends that an individually tailored sentence management plan should be drawn up in consultation with each prisoner. The recommendations of the report illustrate the need to place an emphasis on measures that will assist prisoners with their reintegration into society, thereby helping to reduce the likelihood that they will re-offend.

1.6 Outline of the report

Chapter One set out the policy context in which the research took place, examining policies and legislation at both the international and the domestic level. Chapter Two provides an overview of literature relating to the topic of parental imprisonment and its effects on children, including a brief discussion of some of the models of best practice introduced in other countries. In Chapter Three, an outline of the prison system in Ireland is presented and the present visiting system and facilities in Mountjoy prison are described. Chapter Four discusses the research strategies employed during the course of the study and sets out some of the ethical and procedural issues that arose as a result of the sensitive nature of the research.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven present the research data and findings, including the responses of parents in prison, caregivers, and children affected by parental imprisonment. Chapter Eight provides an overview and discussion of the key findings of the research, in addition to considering the recommendations arising from the findings and the policy makers and other organisations at which they are targeted. In Chapter Nine, the final recommendations are outlined.

⁶ National Economic and Social Forum (2002), *Reintegration of Prisoners Forum Report No. 22*, Dublin: National Economic and Social Forum.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Background

Chapter Two reviews some of the international literature and studies that are available concerning the children of prisoners. It discusses some of the general findings of the studies, concentrating in particular on the financial impact of parental imprisonment and the differential effects that may arise as a result of the gender of the imprisoned parent. In addition, it outlines the main emotional and behavioural responses that children may have to parental imprisonment, as noted by several studies. The stigma that may be associated with the imprisonment of a parent is also discussed. Finally, several international models of good practice relating to the children of prisoners are outlined.

Although parental imprisonment affects a large number of children, the Standing Committee on Social Issues of New South Wales (1997) notes that a lack of research into the topic appears to be a world-wide phenomenon. The research that has been carried out in several countries into the effects of parental incarceration on children illustrates that it can be a very traumatic experience for the child of the offender.

Despite the lack of emphasis that has been placed on the situation of prisoners' families, it appears that they can play an important part in helping ex-offenders to reintegrate into society. A report by the Florida House of Representatives Justice Council Committee on Corrections (1998) states that offenders who return home to an intact family have lower rates of recidivism than those without such support structures. Access to the outside world and the ability to maintain contact with family members both play an important role in the rehabilitation of prisoners, as is recognised by Rule 65 (C) of the European Prison Rules:

Prisons should be managed so as to sustain and strengthen those links with relatives and the outside community that will promote the best interests of prisoners and their families.

According to McDermott (2000:137), any unjustifiable restriction on an inmate's access to his or her family will impede chances of successful reintegration into the community on release, while restrictions can punish the extended family, who have not been convicted of any criminal offence.

In addition, child advocates have long believed that parental criminality is a risk factor for crime, which makes the children of offenders a high-risk group (ibid). O'Mahoney's study of prisoners in Mountjoy Prison (1997:49) indicated that 50% of the 108 respondents had a first-degree relative who had been in prison. Of these, a total of 17 respondents said that one of their parents had been in prison at some stage. A study carried out by VACRO into the needs of children and families of prisoner in Victoria (2000: xvii) concluded that

Based on the family history of their parents, children of prisoners are more likely than children in the general community to be imprisoned themselves.

Imprisonment also has a more immediate and wide-reaching impact on affected families. Hagan (1998) states that the incarceration of parents can seriously diminish the economic and social capital on which families and communities depend to successfully raise children. The disintegration of the family that often results from imprisonment means that children can experience prolonged and intensified periods of instability and uncertainty. He suggests that parental imprisonment may have the following negative effects: the strains of economic deprivation; the loss of parental socialisation through role modelling, support and supervision; and the stigma and shame of being labelled by society.

Children can be affected in different ways, depending on the role that was played by the parent who is imprisoned. One significant issue that arises is the provision of alternative care in cases where women who were the primary caregivers are incarcerated. Women are more likely than men to be primary caregivers prior to incarceration, which means that the children of female inmates are likely to experience greater disruption to care-giving arrangements (Healy et. al, 2000). Extended family networks often become involved, with grandparents, aunts and uncles taking over the role of carer. If such support is not available, foster care becomes an option (Howard, 2000). On the other hand, the imprisonment of fathers can sometimes remove the main earner from the family structure, which increases the likelihood of financial hardship. Remaining single parents may therefore have less money and less time for their children, which can affect their overall development.

The following sections outline some of the difficulties that children may experience as a result of parental imprisonment. The difficulties involved in making any generalisations about the impact on children of separation from their parent as a result of imprisonment have been noted by several commentators (eg, Shaw, 1992; Johnston et. al, 1996), however. Seymour (1998)

states that the true extent of the problems caused by parental imprisonment cannot be estimated because few reliable statistics exist. She outlines how much of the research on children with incarcerated parents has been methodologically limited and that there have been no longitudinal studies following children through different phases of parental incarceration and release. The extent to which a child will be affected by parental incarceration depends on a large number of variables, including the age at which parent-child separation occurs, the length of separation, the child's familiarity with his or her new caregiver or placement, and the degree of stigma that the child's community associates with imprisonment⁷.

2.2 Financial effects

According to studies that have been conducted in countries that include Denmark, England, the United States and Australia, the majority of prisoners tend to come from low income backgrounds, which has immediate implications for their families. One example is provided by Roger Shaw's studies of 415 imprisoned men in England, which were conducted in 1987 and 1992⁸. Among other topics, the findings indicated that the children of imprisoned fathers tended to be socially, financially and educationally deprived to start off with (1992: 45):

Thus the incarceration of a father frequently adds emotional trauma and further economic hardship to existing gross disadvantage.

Shaw's conclusions appear to be very relevant to the situation in Ireland, in the context of O'Mahoney's findings on the socio-economic background of prisoners in Mountjoy, as outlined in Chapter 1.2. The socio-economic status of prisoners' families often means that their needs do not receive much attention. As Wedge and Boswell (1999:35) point out, prisoners' families tend to belong to low income and low status groups, whose needs and rights do not receive routine consideration during the sentencing process and who are not seen to merit systematic support during the sentences themselves.

In some cases, mothers who are left to support the children on their own may have no option but to take up employment outside the home. Their children could therefore receive less attention than they had in the past. Problems of a different nature may arise when the parent who is imprisoned is a mother. As has been

highlighted by other studies (eg, Howard 2000; Healy et. al, 2000), when women are imprisoned, it is more likely that their extended family will take over care of their children than that the children will be looked after by their other parent. This can place extra economic strains on grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc, who have to take over financial responsibility for the children.

2.3 Emotional and behavioural responses to parental imprisonment

It has been noted that some children can become defiant or aggressive and can display antisocial behaviour as a result of having a parent imprisoned (Springer et. al, 1999). According to one of the first studies carried out on the children of prisoners (Sack et al, 1976⁹), typical reactions that can characterise their responses to parental imprisonment include more aggressive and disruptive behaviour, reduced levels of obedience and a decrease in school performance.

The trauma to which children may be subjected as a result of parental imprisonment can be further increased by the uncertainty and disruption that often affect them as families attempt to adjust to the loss of a caregiver and/or primary income provider. Children can also be placed under additional stress as a result of attempting to keep the fact that their parent is in prison a secret (Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1997). Among the broad range of emotions and behavioural responses that children experience when their parents go to prison are the following: fear and anxiety, separation anxiety, nightmares, fear of strangers, and uncertainty about the justice system¹⁰.

If the imprisoned parent has made a positive contribution to the life of the family in the past, his or her incarceration can deprive the family of an important resource for the socialisation of the child. Hagan (1998, op. cit) states that it is important to recognise that

the withdrawal or loss of a parent can result in the reduction not only of economic capital, but also of the social capital of relationships among family members and the organization of family life toward the maintenance and improvement of life chances.

The importance of parental supervision, role modelling and support in enhancing children's development have been repeatedly emphasised by sociological and criminological theorists. The parent's removal can result in the loss of these positive influences, increase the importance of the role played by the remaining parent, and expand the role played by the child's peer group. As a result, the absence of a parent may ultimately push the child in the direction of antisocial peers (ibid).

⁷ As noted by a member of the Research Advisory Group for this study, the child's relationship with the parent pre-imprisonment is another important variable to be considered.

⁸ Shaw, R, "Children of Imprisoned Fathers," 1987, London, Hodder and Stoughton, and "Prisoners' Children: What are the Issues?" 1992, London, Routledge.

⁹ As discussed in the VACRO report on the needs of children and families of prisoners, Doing it Hard, (2000:7).

¹⁰ As noted in the VACRO report on the families and children of prisoners, Doing it Hard, (2000:7-8).

Another issue that can arise as a result of parental imprisonment and one that may have serious implications for children's development and for their relationships with their parents in the long term is that of unrealistic expectations about absent parents. According to a longitudinal study carried out by Pellegrini¹¹ into children's perceptions of their fathers' incarceration, children tended to adopt mechanisms of dissociation in order to incorporate the conflicting images of their imprisoned father as "dad" and also as a criminal. The children who participated in the research found it possible to retain a wholly or partially positive view of the father by blaming his criminal act on drugs or alcohol. Pellegrini's findings indicate that problems may arise post-release, if children discover that their expectations about their parents differ from the reality.

Other areas of concern that have been identified include the effect on children of the manner in which parents are taken away and imprisoned. According to a survey on the effects of parental detention in prison that was conducted with pre-school children in South Africa in 1986 (Skinner et.al, 1989:257),

Common reactions on the part of children to both detention and ordinary imprisonment are eating problems, insomnia, aggressive play and clinging behaviour. There are aggressive and emotional wishes against traditional authority figures.

Problems can also arise when contact between parents and their children begins to disintegrate due to prison visiting conditions. Hairston (1998:624) states that

It is relatively easy to see how some prisoners and families choose to forego regular visits to save themselves the embarrassment and helplessness associated with family contact under poor visiting conditions. The practical issue... is that parenting cannot be put on hold to be taken up 'when I get out of prison'. Children grow up: their memories fade or they create new ones through fantasy and imagination. When there is no contact to support an enduring bond, they begin to experience their parents as strangers. Such situations can lead to permanent, rather than temporary, severance of family ties.

Research has indicated that the experience of grief by a child when a parent or close relative is imprisoned may be similar to that experienced when someone dies. According to a study carried out for the Ormiston Trust (Noble, 1995), 80% of the 30 families interviewed stated that their children had exhibited a tendency to experience separation from their fathers as a type of bereavement, especially in the early stages of imprisonment. However, as Howard (2000, op.cit) has noted,

the normal outlets for grieving are often denied because of the nature of the loss. This appears to be more traumatic for a child who had a good relationship before incarceration.

2.4 Stigma caused by parental imprisonment

Previous studies have found that it is common for families to feel stigmatised when one of their members is imprisoned, which can have long-term effects on children's development. According to the Standing Committee on Social Affairs (1997:54), stigmatisation can be very difficult for children and can "place an enormous burden on a child and compound the trauma of separation from the parent." The study carried out by VACRO found that children did not want their neighbours or friends to find out about their parent's imprisonment, in addition to which parents were concerned that their children would be singled out or ostracised at school. Fear of stigmatisation can place children under further stress, in that they may feel pressurised into keeping the reason for their parent's absence a secret from their peers or people in the wider community.

Further problems can be caused by the fact that parents or caregivers may be unwilling to tell children the reason for the parents' absence. Prisoners' families may be concerned about how others would react (Myers et. al, 1998):

Some parents, due to the very realistic concerns about community scorn or rejection, try very hard to hide the truth of the situation from their children... As a result, children may experience shame, and many have reported social isolation from their friends.

According to Shaw (1992:9), the lack of information can be very frightening for children and can encourage their fears or fantasies about where their parent actually is. Gabel et. al (1995:113) state that the fact that the truth may be hidden from the children or from the community in general can be very detrimental for children because they

are unable to process the effects of trauma, including the trauma of parent-child separation without expressing their feelings verbally.

2.5 International models of good practice

Several countries, including Australia, Britain, and Denmark, have developed specific models in an attempt to cope with the problems that face children whose parents have been imprisoned. One of the main ways in which they have done so is the development of parent-

¹¹ Further details of Pellegrini's research are contained in Boswell and Wedge's study of fathers in prison in Britain, *The Parenting Role of Imprisoned Fathers*, (1999: pp28-30)

child facilities within prisons. The following section contains a summary of the various policies employed in several countries, as noted in a report made by the Standing Committee on Social Issues to the Parliament of New South Wales Legislative Council (1997).

DENMARK: In Denmark, both mothers and fathers may be eligible to keep their children with them in the open prison, Horslerød. The prison, which is mixed and the largest correctional facility in the country, contains a family unit that is separate from the main complex. When a parent is admitted to the family unit, s/he is required to sign a contract stating that s/he will not consume any drugs or alcohol. If the contract is broken, the parent is moved from the unit and the child is taken from the prison. Parents in the unit are allowed to leave the facility for one night a week to stay with their families, if they wish. In addition, parents and children can leave the unit and mix with the community, while children can attend the local kindergarten once a week. If a parent is given a long custodial sentence, they are generally not eligible to have their child with them. Children up to the ages of 7-8 years are allowed to visit every third weekend, from Friday to Sunday. The child stays with his/her parent in their unlocked rooms.

AUSTRALIA: As is the case in the United States, the legislation concerning parental contact during imprisonment differs throughout Australia. In South Australia, children are able to reside with their mothers in Adelaide Women's Prison's Living Skills Unit and the Port Augusta Prison. The former contains two parenting units, each of which has accommodation for two women with babies or toddlers. Provision has been made for older children up to age 12 to have longer visits with their mother and full-day visits on alternate Saturdays. In Queensland, children can be accommodated with their mothers in three units: Brisbane and Townsville Women's Custodial Correctional Facilities and the Helena Jones Community Correctional Facility. Victoria has operated a policy of permitting children in custody since 1988. The policy's objectives acknowledge the importance of maintaining relationships between the parents and the children, especially when very young children are involved. Children are therefore permitted to stay with parents where it is both in the child's best interest and consistent with prison security and management. In addition, Victoria is the only state that allows fathers to apply to have their child/ren reside with them. The security and environmental problems associated with men's prisons make it unlikely that approval to stay with a father will be granted, however.

BRITAIN: As outlined by Boswell and Wedge (1999), several British prisons have introduced children's visit schemes and family visit schemes in an attempt to ensure that contact is maintained between families

throughout a prison sentence. Children's visits are usually held on weekdays, and their primary purpose is to maintain and strengthen father/child relationships. The visits are usually facilitated by voluntary agency staff. During the visits, refreshments of some sort can usually be obtained. The arrangements for the visits (including prisoner eligibility, length, and number of children allowed) varies from prison to prison. With family visits, the focus is placed on maintaining and strengthening family relationships. These visits usually last for between half a day and a whole day and tend to include lunch for the whole family. In addition, some prisons have recently introduced family learning schemes. The aim of the scheme is to help pre-school children to learn to read and write: caregivers can bring their young children into the prison and work with the parents and education staff to approach the child's learning needs as a family. The process helps to develop patterns of family learning and sharing that may continue after the father's release.

2.6 Discussion

As highlighted in the literature review, parental imprisonment can have a wide range of negative effects on children. The research that has been carried out with the children and families of prisoners in other countries suggests that incarceration can seriously diminish the social and economic capital upon which families and communities depend to successfully raise children. Children may be affected in different ways, depending on the role that was played by the parent who is imprisoned. A significant issue that can arise is the differential effect on children's routines and living arrangements after the start of a sentence, depending on the gender of the parent serving the sentence. Women are more likely than men to be primary caregivers prior to incarceration, making it more likely that the children of female inmates will experience greater disruption to their care-giving arrangements. Extended family networks often become involved in looking after the children, with foster care becoming an option if such support is not available. On the other hand, the imprisonment of fathers can sometimes remove the main earner from the family structure, which increases the likelihood of financial hardship among families that may already be at risk of relative or consistent poverty.

In addition to financial effects, parental imprisonment may lead to changes in children's behaviour and can have a negative effect on parent-child relationships. It is often difficult for prisoners to maintain contact on a regular basis with their children as a result of poor visiting conditions within prisons. This can fundamentally alter their relationship with family members and lead to problems because of unrealistic

expectations from both parties post-release. Another problem that may arise for children stems from the stigma that is sometimes attached to having a parent who is in prison. Fear of stigmatisation can place children under further stress, in that they may feel pressurised into keeping the reason for their parent's absence a secret from their peers or people in the wider community.

In an effort to minimise the harmful impact of parental imprisonment on children, measures have been introduced in several other countries that attempt to encourage the maintenance of parent-child relationships throughout a custodial sentence. These range from Horserod Prison in Denmark, where both mothers and fathers may be eligible to keep their children with them in the family unit, to the child's visit schemes and family visit schemes in place in some British prisons. When considering any changes that could be made to current visiting policies within the Irish prison system, it is worth bearing the latter in mind. They offer an example of the relatively simple measures that could be introduced, which could have a positive effect on maintaining and strengthening relationships between prisoners, children, and families in general.

Chapter 3

Context of the Research

Chapter 3: Context of the Research

3.1 Prisoners in Ireland: An Overview

Chapter Three outlines the context in which the research took place. It sets out available statistical information about the prison population in Ireland and outlines some of the characteristics of male and female prisoners that were noted in previous studies. In addition, it discusses research regarding health and the incidence of drug misuse within prisons. Mountjoy Prison, which was the location of the research, is then discussed, and information is presented about the visiting areas in the men's and women's prisons.

According to the Irish Prisons' Service (2001), the current average daily prisoner population is approximately 3,000. In total, 97% of all prisoners are male and 65% of sentenced prisoners are under 30 years of age. Eight out of ten prisoners are serving sentences of more than one year, 25% are serving sentences of between five and ten years, and 10% are serving more than ten years. Between December 1999 and December 2000, the number of people in custody increased by 6.3%, while the number of people serving a sentence dropped by 4.2%. Total expenditure on prisons and places of detention in 2000 reached £189,817,000. In a written response to a Dail Question, Minister John O'Donoghue stated on May 23, 2001, that it cost £1,135 a week or £59,020 annually to keep an offender in prison in 2000.

3.1.1 Male prisoners

The Irish Prison Service (2001) notes that in total, 97% of all prisoners in Ireland are male. The most comprehensive sociological study of male prisoners conducted in recent years was carried out by O'Mahoney (1997)¹². One hundred and eight prisoners participated in the study, and 72 % of these respondents stated that they had fathered at least one child. Among the other findings of the study were the fact that 50% of participants stated that they had a first-degree relative who had been in prison. As outlined in Chapter 1.2,

¹² It should be noted that the study was limited to Mountjoy Prison, with the result that its findings may not reflect the background of prisoners in other places of detention.

the respondents tended to come from areas that were marked by various indices of relative deprivation. O'Mahoney concluded (1996:61) that

almost all of the Dublin prisoners were from areas characterised by a high proportion of corporation housing and often by the prevalence of opiate drug abuse and high levels of long-term unemployment.

Eighty-eight percent of the sample had been unemployed prior to their committal to prison. The survey revealed that 77 percent of respondents had spent time in St. Patrick's Institute for juvenile offenders. It found that the dominant types of offences leading to imprisonment were property crimes, especially burglary, robbery and larceny, which accounted for almost 70 percent of the prison population at the time of the survey. In addition (1997:91),

the sample was highly recidivist and had an average of 14.3 convictions and an average of 10.3 separate sentences of imprisonment.

3.1.2 Female prisoners

According to the Irish Prison Service (2001), women account for 3 percent of the average annual prisoner population. A study published by the Department of Justice in February 1996 stated that a total of 571 women were committed to Mountjoy in 1994. The study focused on 100 female prisoners who were interviewed over a period of 6 weeks. Its findings revealed that the majority lived in the Dublin inner city area and had been brought up there. Sixty-two of the respondents had children, while the average number of children was 2.7. The study (1996:5) noted that

Most of the children seem to be cared for by family members or the partner of the woman while she is in prison, which seems to suggest that there was a good family support system in operation.

It was stated, however, that 11 of the women had at least one child in community service care.

According to the Irish Penal Reform Trust (2000), far fewer women than men pass through the criminal justice system:

they are cautioned, convicted and imprisoned much less frequently. This is true for all age groups and every type of offence.

The gender gap between male and female prisoners is greatest for offences against the person (60:1) and least for shoplifting (3:1). The Trust states that women who are released from prison are confronted by poverty, homelessness, instability and violence, all of which contribute towards making recidivism likely. The specific problems that female prisoners can face on release are recognised internationally, as is illustrated by the Council of Europe Recommendation on the social effects of detention.

3.1.3 Health and drug use in prisons

HEALTH: A Healthcare Study of the Irish Prison Population was undertaken between June and July 1999, under the guidance of the WHO. A total of 777 prisoners (59 of whom were female) participated. The study indicated that reported levels of excellent or very good health (29% for males and 16% for females) were lower than that of the general population (40 % of similarly aged males) as recorded by the SLAN healthcare survey of the general Irish population. According to the report (2000),

*all the mental health indicators were much worse for prisoners than the general population and high indeed for female prisoners.*¹³

A separate healthcare study (Long et. al, 2001:1) carried out in nine Irish prisons and covering 1,205 prisoners indicated that

the prevalence of infection with hepatitis B among prisoners was 9%, the prevalence of infection with hepatitis C was 37% and the prevalence of HIV was 2%.

In addition, it was found that infection rates in women were slightly, but not significantly, higher than those found in men. Amongst the female respondents, the prevalence of hepatitis B was 12%, while hepatitis C prevalence was 42% and HIV prevalence 2%.

DRUG USE: One section of O'Mahoney's 1997 study focused on drug use amongst male prisoners in Mountjoy. Eighty-six percent of the sample stated that they had used cannabis at some stage, while 83 out of the sample of 108 had experience of drugs other than cannabis (ibid:95):

A large majority of these (71 out of 83) had used heroin, and for a large majority, heroin was the drug of choice and the main drug of addiction.

Carmody and McEvoy's 1996 survey of female inmates in Mountjoy Prison also covered the topic of drug use. It indicated that 60 of the 100 women included in the study had taken drugs at some stage in their lives. Opiates were the most likely drugs to have been used, with 57 of the respondents stating that they had used taken heroin at some time.

According to the National Drugs Strategy, two major studies of prisoners conducted by Long et. al also indicated high levels of drug misuse in prisons. One was a survey report that sampled 1,205 prisoners in 9 prisons, while the second was a committal report that surveyed 607 prisoners in 7 prisons. The findings indicated that 43% of those included in the census survey had injected drugs at some stage, compared with 29% of those in the committal survey. Overall, 630 of

the respondents in the second survey stated that they had used heroin. It was noted in the Strategy (2001:27) that

data from both surveys highlighted the level of initiation into injecting drug use and the sharing of drug using equipment within prisons. A similar proportion of injecting drug users reported starting injecting while in prison.

The findings are relevant within the context of establishing some of background details about the children of prisoners. The surveys illustrate how prisoners suffer from lower levels of health than those of the general population and may be more likely to suffer from mental illness. In addition, a high proportion of prisoners have injected drugs at some stage, many of them starting while in prison.

3.2 Mountjoy Prison Complex

It was initially envisaged that the research would take place in two sites, one in Dublin and one outside Dublin. As a result of time constraints, however, it was decided that the research should concentrate on Mountjoy Prison in Dublin. Mountjoy Prison is located on the North Circular Road in Dublin. The complex is divided into the following four units: Mountjoy, St. Patrick's Institution, the Dochas Centre, and the Training Unit.

- Mountjoy is a committal prison for males aged 18 years or over, who are serving sentences up to life imprisonment. It is classified as a closed, medium security prison.
- St. Patrick's Institution is a medium security, closed complex that was opened in 1956. It serves as a place of detention for male juveniles who are aged between 16 and 21.
- The Dochas Centre is a committal prison for female offenders aged 17 years and over. It is the main prison for females in the state and was brought into service in December 1999.
- The Training Unit is a purpose-built custodial centre that was completed in 1976. It is a semi-open, low security unit that caters for male adults aged 18 years or over who are serving sentences up to life imprisonment. It is usually used to accommodate long-sentence offenders who are nearing the end of their sentence.

The design capacity of Mountjoy (males) is 547, while that of the Dochas Centre is 80. St. Patrick's Institution can accommodate 239 people and the Training Unit caters for 96 people (Mountjoy Complex Redevelopment Group, 2001:23).

¹³ www.hipp-europe.org/resources/internal/Irish-prisons/0020.htm

3.3 Visiting arrangements, family contact, and temporary release

Sentenced prisoners in Mountjoy and in the Dochas Centre are entitled to one visit per week, for a duration of 30 minutes. Prisoners who are on remand are entitled to one half-hour visit every day. In addition, prisoners may be entitled to one 15-minute “special visit” every week. They must apply directly to the prison officers in order to receive this visit, and permission may be withheld. The number of adults who can visit at any one time is limited to three. There is no limit on the number of children each prisoner is entitled to see. Female visitors generally receive their visits on Saturdays and Sundays.

All inmates have a statutory right to remission of one quarter of their sentence, unless part of the remission is repealed because of disciplinary measures. Temporary release is also available in three different forms (McDermott, 2000:397):

- Day-to-day temporary release, which is usually considered towards the end of a sentence;
- Full temporary release, or compassionate release;
- Release under escort.

3.3.1 The Visitors’ Centre

The Visitors’ Centre in the Mountjoy Prison complex was opened in 1999. Prior to this, visitors who came to the prison had the option of waiting in a port-a-cabin, where refreshments were provided for visitors. At the entrance to the Centre is a reception area where visitors tell prison staff the name of the person they are coming to visit. They are then presented with a number and asked to wait until the prisoner they are visiting is brought to the visiting area within the prison, when their number will be called for them to go into the relevant prison. Inside the Visitors’ Centre is an area with tables and chairs where people can wait until their visit is called. The Centre also contains a refreshment area and a play area that caters for children aged between 2 and 10 years. The play area is divided from the rest of the Centre by a wooden partition, with windows that allow children to look out at the seating area. A variety of games and activities are available in the play area, which is staffed at all times by at least two childcare workers.

The Centre is staffed by professional childcare workers, co-ordinators and counsellors. A counselling service is available through the Centre for caregivers, in addition to which the staff operate a parenting programme that gives caregivers the opportunity to discuss any difficulties they may have with the co-ordinators. A support group, which is held every week in an off-site

venue, is also available for visitors. The Centre contains an information desk where visitors can access a wide variety of information about their entitlements, rights, etc, as well as which extensive material relating to child development is available. The staff are developing leaflets for caregivers of children whose parents are in prison and have made available a booklet for children about visiting prison. In addition, staff from the Centre have developed links with the Ormiston Trust and with other groups who work with the children of prisoners.

According to a study of the play area conducted in 2000¹⁴, clients were very positive about the Visitors’ Centre, especially those who were accustomed to the older facilities. As is illustrated by the following table, a large number of children use the play area on a regular basis.

Table 3.1:
No. of children who used the play area in the Visitors’ Centre, 2001

Jan.	Feb.	March	April	May	June	July	August
600	630	689	634	630	585	629	653
Source: Compiled from staff records, Visitors’ Centre							

3.3.2 Visiting areas within the Mountjoy Prison Complex

MEN’S PRISON: In the visiting area in the men’s prison, prisoners and their visitors are seated across from each other at a long table. The table is divided by a partition that is of about shoulder height when seated, making it difficult to converse across and contributing to prisoners’ lack of privacy when discussing family matters. Booths (commonly known as “box visits”) are available for visits with solicitors, etc, and may also be made available for families, if requested. There are no creche facilities available in the visiting area. There are also no toilet facilities available for children, which means that visits must be cut short if children need to go to the bathroom. Physical contact is not allowed between prisoners and their visitors.

DOCHAS CENTRE: Visits in the Dochas Centre take place in an open area that contains tables and chairs, around which prisoners can sit with their visitors. Mothers are allowed to have physical contact with their children. The visiting area contains a play area with toys, in addition to which there is a playground outside that children can use. Professional childcare workers from the Visitors’ Centre work in the play area at the weekends.

¹⁴ McDermott, Eileen, “The Role of the Children’s Play Area in Mountjoy Prison in Supporting Families and Children of Prisoners,” unpublished thesis presented for the Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education, DIT, 2000.

3.4 Discussion

The average annual prisoner population in Ireland is 3,000, of whom 3% are female and 97% are male. Previous studies have highlighted pertinent details regarding the backgrounds from which prisoners come, including the fact that many of them are from areas that suffer from high levels of economic deprivation. Research has also indicated that prisoners tend to suffer from lower reported levels of health than those of the general population, especially in terms of mental health. The incidence of drug use is reportedly high within prisons, with studies suggesting that significant numbers of prisoners start or continue to use drugs during their sentence. Such findings are significant for the children of prisoners, as they illustrate how they may be at risk of disadvantage even before their parent is imprisoned, and are therefore in need of special support at all stages of the sentence.

This research was based in the Mountjoy Prison Complex in Dublin, which comprises the men's prison, the Dochas Centre for female offenders, St. Patrick's, and the Training Unit. Parents from both the men's prison and the Dochas Centre were interviewed during the course of the study. They are entitled to one 30-minute visit every week, and may also be allowed a 15-minute "special visit." The prison complex contains a Visitors' Centre with a play area that is used by children before they go to visit their parents. Within the prisons themselves, conditions vary between the visiting areas. Visits in the men's prison generally take place across a table that is divided by a partition, which makes it difficult to carry on conversations. Physical contact is not allowed between fathers and their children. The Dochas Centre's visiting area contains a play area for children, and visits take place around tables, with mothers being allowed to have physical contact with their children.

Chapter 4

Research Strategies

Chapter 4:

Research Strategy

4.1 Background

The study was conducted at Mountjoy prison in Dublin during the summer months of 2001. During this period, interviews were conducted with caregivers/parents who use the Visitors' Centre, and with parents in prison. Informal discussions also took place with children who use the Visitors' Centre, childcare workers and staff members from the Visitors' Centre, with staff of the Probation and Welfare Office, ex-offenders and prison officers.

4.2 Limitations

The sensitive nature of the study meant that the scope of the research was limited in several ways. It was initially envisaged that interviews with children would constitute a large part of the data collection for the study, in keeping with the aim of the National Children's Strategy to increase consultation with children on matters affecting them. However, a key concern that emerged at the outset through discussions with staff of the Visitors' Centre was the fact that many children who use the play area are not aware that their parent is in prison¹⁵. Instead, they believe that they are visiting a hospital, a workplace, etc., which resulted in the need to ensure that children were not inappropriately informed of their parents' whereabouts while the study was being conducted. Appropriate methods of contacting caregivers away from their children had to be devised, which proved to be more time-consuming than had been planned for at the start of the research.

Responses given by caregivers in interviews confirmed that a sizeable number of children had not been told about the reason for their parents' absence. The findings had implications for consultations with children. Following discussions with the research advisory group, it had been decided that data collection with children would take place in the play area of the Visitors' Centre, an environment in which they felt very comfortable. However, the topics that could be discussed with children in the play area were very limited because of the risk of inappropriately informing any of them about the prison.

¹⁵ Children who use the play area are aged between 2 and 10 years.

Some informal discussions were held with children in the play area, in addition to which attempts were made to establish contact with children through organisations that work with ex-offenders. Within the time constraints of the study, however, it was not possible to contact any children of ex-offenders who were willing to participate in interviews or focus groups.

The difficulties involved in contacting children willing to take part in the study are in themselves indicative of the problems that children can face as a result of parental imprisonment. Although it was possible to ask children who use the Visitors' Centre very general questions about the play area and the visiting areas, the topics had to be limited because many of them had not been informed that they were in a prison. Additionally, the staff of the organisations who worked with ex-offenders felt that parents who had been in prison may not have wanted the topic raised with their children because they did not want to discuss their past.

4.3 Sampling methodology

As outlined in Chapter One, information about prisoners' parental status is not recorded on committal sheets. Prisoners are instead asked about any significant relationships they have. Any information that is recorded about their children is given on a voluntary basis, and no exact records exist that detail the number of children affected by parental imprisonment. As a result, there was no existing sampling frame from which to select participants. In addition, as discussed above, it emerged early into the research that many of the children who used the play area were not aware that their parent was in prison. It was therefore decided not to place any material regarding the study in the Visitors' Centre, in order to minimise the chance of any child being inappropriately informed about the nature of the Centre. It was instead agreed that the best way to access both the caregivers of children whose parents were in prison and the children themselves would be to approach them on an individual basis in the Centre, while they were waiting for their visits to be called. A total of 19 caregivers (18 female, one male) were contacted in this manner.

Due to the time constraints of the study, parents in prison were contacted through prison staff. The staff approached prisoners whom they knew to be parents and told them about the study. Staff were asked to try to contact two groups of parents: those who had participated in the Connect Project¹⁶, and those parents who had not, in order to ensure as representative a sample as possible. A total of 26 prisoners (21 male, 5 female) were contacted and agreed to participate¹⁷. The number of prisoners who took part in the study is not

¹⁶ Further details about the Connect Project are contained in Appendix 1.

¹⁷ Of these, 11 of the fathers and 3 of the mothers had participated in the Connect Project.

representative of the overall number of parents in prison. Instead, the research provides an initial assessment of their views on the problems their children can face throughout their prison sentence. No matching of the caregivers who were interviewed with the prisoners who were interviewed took place.

A total of six children participated in the study. They were contacted through the Visitors' Centre, where they used the play area on a regular basis. Again, no matching of the children with either their caregivers or their parents in prison took place. In addition, informal discussions took place with prison staff, staff of the Visitors' Centre, staff from the Probation and Welfare Office, and ex-offenders, with whom contact was established throughout the course of the research.

4.4 Design of research methods

It was decided that the use of a semi-structured questionnaire would be the best method of collecting information within the limited time frame of the study. In addition, it was decided that the questionnaire should be administered on a one-to-one basis to ensure that the questions were fully explained to respondents and that any queries they had were answered immediately. Following a review of international and Irish literature relating to parental imprisonment and to the Irish penal system, an initial questionnaire that combined a set of fixed-choice response questions and set of open-ended questions was drawn up. Two versions were designed, one for caregivers who used the Visitors' Centre and the other for parents in prison. The fixed-choice response questions were designed to collect standardised information about the respondents, while the open-ended questions were designed to gather qualitative data that would allow respondents to express their opinions on issues relating to the effects of parental imprisonment on children. The interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed.

The questionnaires were reviewed by the Research Advisory Group and amended as necessary. The questionnaire for data collection with parents in prison was then piloted with the following:

- A staff member from the Probation and Welfare Office,
- Staff and ex-offenders from the PACE workshop,
- Staff members from EXPAC.

Following these consultations, several small revisions were made before the final version was completed (see appendix three).

The interview schedule for parents/caregivers of children affected by parental imprisonment was piloted with the following

- a staff member from the Visitors' Centre;
- a parent who used the Centre on a regular basis; and
- a grandparent who used the Centre on a regular basis.

Again, several small revisions were made before the final version was completed (see appendix four).

4.5 Data collection

CAREGIVERS: The researcher made six initial visits to the Centre over a period of two weeks, during which time several potential respondents were approached and asked if they would be interested in participating in the study. The data collection with parents/caregivers of children affected by parental incarceration took place over the course of eight days between August 10th and August 25th, 2001. Most of the interviews took place during the afternoon, when the Centre was busiest. The researcher approached each potential respondent on an individual basis, in order to ascertain their eligibility and willingness to take part in the study. All respondents were presented with an information sheet about the study (see appendix two). Nineteen caregivers (18 female, 1 male) agreed to participate.

PARENTS IN PRISON: Following a meeting with Governor John Lonergan to explain the purpose of the study, links were established with staff from the Connect Project (see appendix one for further details about the project). Among other courses, the staff of the Connect project have run courses on parenting and were in a position to identify potential respondents, given the lack of any systematic records of prisoners' parental status. Interviews with mothers in prison ($n=5$) took place on August 22nd. The interviews with mothers in the Dochas centre were organised through the staff of the Connect project. The nature and objectives of the study were explained to potential respondents. Five women agreed to participate and all were given the information sheet about the study. All respondents gave their consent to having the interviews recorded. Interviews with fathers in prison ($n=21$) took place on August 28th, 29th and 30th. Nineteen of the respondents were contacted by the staff of the Connect project, while the remaining two heard about the study from other prisoners and approached the researcher to asked if they could participate. All respondents agreed that the interviews could be recorded.

CHILDREN: As discussed above, the sensitive nature of the study and the fact that many of the children were not aware where their parents are raised several difficulties for data collection, including various ethical issues. Unstructured interviews were conducted with six children in the play area of the Visitors' Centre. The

questions raised with children made no mention of prison, but instead concentrated on their opinions of the play area and of the visiting area where they met their mother/father, in order to ensure that none of them were inappropriately informed about the nature of the Centre. Data collection with the children took place on September 20th and 21st. When the children arrived in the play area, their caregivers were approached and informed about the study. They were given a copy of the information sheet and asked if the researcher could sign the parental consent form on their behalf (see appendix seven). The children were then approached and asked by the researcher if she could talk to them about the play area and about coming to visit their parent. Informal discussions took place with the children while they painted pictures with the researcher in the art area. Meeting with the children in this setting enabled the researcher to complement the data collection through participant observation.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS: Informal discussions were held with ex-offenders, prison staff, and probation and welfare officers. In addition, discussion took place with five childcare workers and one member of staff from the Visitors' Centre in Mountjoy. Further information was obtained through contacts with the Catholic Prison Ministry in Brisbane, the Victoria Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders in Melbourne, and researchers from De Montfort University in Leicester and the University of East Anglia in Norwich.

4.6 Ethical and procedural issues

The study was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of the Sociological Association of Ireland (SAI). The guidelines (1991:11) state that research and evaluations should be

based on the freely given consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility... to explain as fully as possible and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken and how it is to be promoted.

Before the interviews took place, the researcher explained the purpose of the interviews to all respondents and gave them a copy of the information sheet about the study. Any questions they had about were answered, and it was explained that they could stop the interview at any time and did not have to answer any questions if they were not comfortable doing so. In order to preserve their anonymity, the researcher signed a consent form on their behalf and ensured them that no individual would be identified through the information provided in the final report (see appendix five and six).

In addition, several measures were employed to ensure that none of the children were inappropriately informed about the reason for their parents' absence:

- no material relating to the study was displayed in the Visitors' Centre
- parents/caregivers were not approached in the Centre if their children were not in the play area; potential participants were not approached if there were any children within earshot
- the interviews were interrupted if the children approached the parents/caregivers
- data collection with the children in the Visitors' Centre was restricted to questions about the play area and to general question about the visiting area in the prison.

The sensitive nature of the study and the fact that could raise some difficult issues for participants was recognised from the outset. Parents/caregivers who participated in the data collection in the Visitors' Centre were informed about the presence of a counsellor in the Centre. Anyone who stated that they wished to discuss the matter further was given her contact number.

4.7 Discussion

From the outset, the sensitive nature of the study raised a number of ethical and procedural issues that had implications for data collection. The fact that many of the children were not aware of the reason for their parents' absence illustrates how highly sensitive the topic is, and how children may easily be excluded from any discussions or consultations relating to their parents' imprisonment. A combination of these issues and the time constraints of the study meant that it was not possible to conduct in-depth interviews with children who were affected by parental imprisonment. Instead, informal discussions and a participant observation style of fieldwork were employed as methods of data collection. In addition, as many different stakeholders as possible were contacted, in order to record their opinions on problems and difficulties that can arise for the children and families of prisoners.

Chapter 5

Parents in Prison

Chapter 5: Parents in Prison

5.1 Background

The sample of parents interviewed for the study was not representative of the general prison population in terms of numbers. As a result of the fact that no statistical records are kept about the parental status of prisoners, no sampling frame was available. The respondents included five women (19.2% of the total number of prisoners interviewed). On the day that the interviews took place, there were 79 women in the Dochas Centre, with no available statistics on the total number of mothers who were in prison. Twenty-one parents from the men's prison (80.8% of the total number of prisoners interviewed) also agreed to participate. The total number of prisoners in the men's prison on the days on which the interviews took place ranged between 367 and 369.

Table 5.1:
Age group of parents in prison

	Frequency	Percent
18 - 24	4	15.4
25 - 34	17	65.4
35 - 44	4	15.4
45 +	1	3.8
Total	26	100.0

Most of the respondents (80.8%) were aged under 34 years, with the majority aged between 25 and 34 years. Four respondents were aged between 35 and 44 and only one (3.8%) was aged over 45.

Number of children:

The majority of parents (92.3%) had between one and three children. Eight (30.8%) had one, seven (26.9%) had two and nine (34.6%) had three. Only two (7.7%) had four children, and none of the respondents had more.

Table 5.2:
Age group of prisoners' children

	Frequency
0 - 3	11
4 - 6	15
7 - 9	16
10 - 12	8
13+	7
Total	57

The 26 respondents had a total of 57 children between them. Of these children, 42 were aged under 9 years. Eight of children were aged between 10 and 12 years, while the remaining seven were aged over 13 years.

MARITAL STATUS: When asked about their marital status, twelve respondents (46.2%) stated that they were cohabiting with their partner prior to their admission into prison. Six (23.1%) were married, two (7.7%) were separated and six (23.1%) stated that they were single.

LENGTH OF SENTENCE: Eight of the respondents (30.8%) were serving sentences of between one and three years, while 16 (61.5%) were serving sentences of three years or more. Only two (7.7%) were serving sentences of between three and twelve months, and none of the prisoners were on remand. In the men's prison, this was due to the fact that the facility is no longer being used to hold people who are on remand. Although a large number of the women in the Dochas Centre tend to be on remand, the mothers who were contacted were all serving sentences of at least one year. Due to the nature of how the interviews were arranged (through the staff of the Connect Project), it is not unusual that the respondents contacted were serving longer sentences. Five of the respondents (19.2%) had served three months or less of their sentence, while ten (38.5%) had served more than three months, but less than twelve. Six (23.1%) had served between one and three years and the remaining five (19.2%) had served more than three years. The figures show that 11 of the parents, or 42.3%, had been away from their families for at least one year. The respondents were not asked why they were in prison, as it was felt that such a question would have a negative effect on the recruitment of respondents for the study.

PREVIOUS SENTENCES: Eighteen of the respondents (69.2%) stated that they had served other sentences in the past, while the remaining 8 (30.8%) were serving their first sentences. When asked about the number of sentences they had received in the past, three said that they had served one other sentence and one person had served two sentences. Five respondents had served between three and five sentences, and nine had served six or more.

5.2 Contact with children

Nineteen of the respondents stated that they lived with their children prior to their admission into prison. Six had not lived with them, while one respondent had lived with at least one child. Among the reasons given by the respondents as to why they did not live with their children prior to incarceration were:

- *Drug habits:* Two stated that they did not live with their children because of their drug habits.
- *Serial recidivism:* Another said that he had not lived with his children because he had been in and out of prison on a regular basis since he was 14.
- *Homelessness:* One father had not lived with his children because they were staying in B&Bs while waiting for permanent housing, so he was forced to move around on a regular basis.

The seven parents who had not lived with their children prior to their imprisonment had had some type of contact with them on a regular basis. Two respondents had met their children on a daily or almost daily basis; three had had contact at least once a week, and one had met the children at least once a month. One respondent had met the children about once every six months.

RECORDS OF PARENTAL STATUS: Five of the respondents (19.2%) stated that they were asked about their parental status when they were admitted to prison, while four (15.4%) stated that they did not know or could not remember if they were questioned on the subject. A majority of 17 respondents (65.4%) stated that they were not asked if they were a parent, however. One mother stated that staff only became aware that she was a parent when she told the Governor that she wanted to see her children. Another mother said that people only knew she had children because she talked about them, while another stated:

Some people in here, they don't treat you like you're a mother. They forget. You're treated more like a number or something.

The situation appeared to be the same in the men's prison: several of the fathers stated that they were asked nothing about their children on their admission and that nobody showed any concern about the welfare of their children.

ALTERNATIVE CARE ARRANGEMENTS: The respondents were asked if they had been given time to organise alternative care arrangements for their children after they were sentenced. The question was not applicable to the six parents who did not live with their children prior to the start of the sentence. Of the remainder, 18 stated that they had had time to make arrangements for their children's care. In most of these

cases, however, the children had been living with both parents prior to the sentence and the other parent had become the sole caregiver. One mother stated that she did not get a chance to make alternate arrangement for her child and that her mother was forced to take over her role, to prevent the child from going into foster care. One father said that his sister had initially looked after his child, but that she became sick and his mother had to take over the role of caregiver.

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AFTER THE

SENTENCE: Of the total 57 children whose parents took part in the interviews, 45 were living with their other parent since the start of the sentence. A further 6 were living with one or both of their grandparents, three were in foster care, and two were living with another of their relatives (parents' siblings). One of the children was living with both the other parent and another relative. In total, 12 of the children were no longer living with either of their parents. One had been in foster care before the sentence began and three had been living with other relatives, but the remaining 8 had been living with at least one parent and had suffered large disruptions to their normal routines as a result of the incarceration.

The responses indicate that the gender of the parent who is imprisoned can have a great effect on whose care they enter into post-sentence. None of the children of the five mothers who participated in the study were living in the full-time care of their fathers since the start of the sentence. Two of the mothers said that one or all of their children were in foster care; one stated that her child was in the care of both the father and another relative; and the remaining two stated that their children were being looked after by their grandparents.

The situation was quite different for the children of male prisoners, the majority of whom were now being looked after by their mothers. The only exceptions to this were one father whose children were living with one of his siblings and two fathers whose children were living with one or both of their grandparents. One of the respondents stated that he had children with two different mothers and that both sets of children were living with their mothers. The issues of alternative care provisions in cases where prisoners have multiple families requires further exploration.

The findings concur with previous studies (Healy et. al, 2000), which indicate that the imprisonment of a mother tends to place a greater strain on extended family networks, with grandparents and siblings taking over the role of caregiver. In addition to causing greater upheaval and change in children's lives, the imprisonment of a parent may force a grandparent back into the role of primary caregiver, which she or he may find difficult to resume.

Table 5.3:
Frequency of parents' contact with children by telephone

	Frequency	Percent
Daily/almost daily	14	53.8
At least once a week	4	15.4
At least once a month	4	15.4
Never	4	15.4
Total	26	100.0

Fourteen of the respondents (53.8%) stated that they have phone contact with their children on a daily or almost daily basis, while four (15.4%) said they talked on the phone at least once a week. Several of the parents who had been in prison for more than two years said that being allowed daily phone contact had had a very positive impact on their relationship with their children. Previously, they were allowed one phone call a week. One mother, whose daughter had recently become old enough to talk on the phone said:

When she gets the phone, she says "My hold mammy," and she thinks she's holding me.

One of the respondents stated that he does not like having his daughter brought up to visit, so he mainly keeps in touch with her through phone calls and cards or letters. Another said that his girlfriend does not like bringing the children up to the prison because it makes her nervous. He relies on phone calls and letters to keep in contact with his children and said:

If that's all I had to go on, the visits, the relationship would be over.

As the responses indicate, telephone calls play an important role in helping prisoners to maintain contact with their families. Their significance is recognised in the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement 2001-2003, which includes the aim of examining the possibility of increased levels of telephone contact between prisoners and their families by the end of 2001. Increasing the amount of time allowed for telephone calls would enable prisoners to spend more time talking to both their children and their partners/families, thereby facilitating the maintenance of contact between the two groups. Such a development would be of particular importance to those parents who do not feel comfortable about having their children come into the prison for visits.

Table 5.4:
Frequency of parents' contact with children through cards/letters

	Frequency	Percent
At least once a week	4	15.4
At least once a month	7	26.9
Less than once a month	10	38.5
Never	5	19.2
Total	26	100.0

The respondents tended to use cards and letters less than phone calls as a means of keeping in contact with their children. They were still considered to be important by most, however, with ten (38.5%) stating that they send cards or letters for birthdays and other special occasions. One mother whose children were in care said that she sends them letters on a regular basis so they can read them when they are older and will know what happened. One father stated that they were very important, but added:

The seven-year-old, I send her a letter every three or four weeks. I don't want to send her too many because she gets very upset after reading them.

One father who did not live with his children prior to his sentence said that he had a court case in order to gain written access to his children:

I write to them when I can. I mean, you sit down to write the letter, but what can you do? You can't tell them about this place.

Table 5.5:
Frequency of parents' contact with children through visits

	Frequency	Percent
At least once a week	12	46.2
At least once a month	6	23.1
Less than once a month	6	23.1
Never	2	7.7
Total	26	100.0

The responses indicate that all except two of the parents have some kind of contact through visits with their children. The children of both those parents are in care and their access is restricted. Others stated that their children could come up to visit on a more regular basis, but they don't like them to come into the prison, or their partners are not very comfortable with the visiting arrangements. As indicated below, a high level of dissatisfaction was expressed with the visiting area in the men's prison, which affected the frequency of contact that some prisoners had with their children. One father stated that he sees his two older children on a regular basis, but does not see the youngest as often due to the difficulties his partner has with bringing all three of them to the prison on public transport.

5.3 Visiting Arrangements

Only three of the respondents (11.5%) said that they thought the visiting areas were suitable for family visits, while the remaining 23 (88.5%) felt that they were not. The three respondents who had a more positive outlook on the visiting facilities were female and were referring to the Dochas Centre: one mother said that the Dochas Centre was more suitable for family visits than the previous women's prison was, because it did not look like a prison. Another said that she had no real opinion on the matter, stating:

It's just the way it is, you know, I'm a prisoner, I have to accept it.

The remainder (88.5%) found the visiting areas unsuitable, with many expressing strong opinions on the matter. As outlined in the previous chapter, visits in the men's prison either take place in a "box," with one of the prison staff present, or in a communal room where the prisoners are seated on one side of a counter and the visitors on the other. The counter is divided by a glass screen. Male respondents with small children stated that the layout of the area often posed problems during visits:

It's absolutely dreadful out there... I can understand that they're worried about people getting stuff in, but surely they could organise it better than the way they have it out there. Your kids aren't allowed to come across.

It's very hard to tell your child they can't come over [the counter] because they think then that you're neglecting them or something. I could get visits more regularly but I don't want to. It's not the right environment.

Several fathers also referred to the lack of privacy in the visiting area as a problem. Prisoners are allowed to have a maximum of three adult visitors at a time. In addition, there is no limit on the number of children who are allowed in:

You have an officer sitting at one end and another at the other, and then with all the people crowded in, you've no privacy at all.

You just want your family to be private, you know, like special things you'd be saying, you want that to be private... and that's hard.

There's too many people and you can't hear what anyone's said and then other people have kids there and they're screaming and crying, you know?

Other problems that were mentioned included

- the intimidating atmosphere in the visiting area, which several people worried their children would pick up on;
- the lack of hygiene standards;
- the high noise levels if the area is full;

- the lack of facilities for visitors in wheelchairs; and
- the lack of facilities for keeping children amused during visits.

Several respondents stressed the fact that their children often became bored during the visits and started to run around. One father stated:

when the kids do get a bit bored, the 2-year-old will want to get down to play. We usually ask the eldest to look after her. But if she wants to talk to me and the 2-year-old wants to play, it gets a little bit tricky. But there's nothing you can do when you're in here.

The feelings of many male respondents about the visiting facilities were summed up by one father, who stated that:

It's designed to break up families rather than hold them together... It's an ordeal for people to come in. That's why I wouldn't ask for extra time with my wife. It's a gruelling task to come in here.

Respondents were also asked their views on whether they thought the prison visiting policies encouraged them to stay in touch with their families. The question covered such issues as the length of visiting times and the attitude of prison staff during and after visits. Again, the majority of respondents expressed a high level of dissatisfaction. Four (15.4%) stated that they felt the visiting policies encouraged them to stay in contact with their families, but 22 (84.6%) felt that they did not. According to one father,

it's not a conscious thing, but it's very anti-family here, especially for long-term prisoners... when a sentence goes on for a certain amount of time, that means you're going to be away from your family for a certain amount of time and you have to make more effort to stay in touch.

Another expressed his awareness of the difficulties encountered by his partner in trying to keep the relationship going under the circumstances of restricted contact:

All the hard work is for the people on the outside, really... If they're going to be loyal and all that and bring the kids in, that's the hard work. It starts getting harder then when people don't want to do that.

One respondent discussed the difference between the visiting policies in Mountjoy and those in the English prison where he began his sentence. He stated that he had established a good relationship with his children because of the visits he was allowed in England, but said that he would see his children less now because the visiting conditions and policies were so unsuitable and were upsetting to the children. The responses illustrate how the visiting facilities are not considered to be family-friendly by their users.

5.4 Children’s awareness of the prison sentence

A majority of parents (61.5%) stated that their children were not aware that they are in prison. Among the explanations for their absence that their children had been given were hospital, the navy, work and the army. One father stated that he initially told his children he was in the army, but they figured it out for themselves after they had been to visit several times. Another stated that his youngest child had been told where he was, but she did not want to believe it, so the family pretended that he was working. In addition, several of the children had been informed about their parents’ sentence by people from outside their immediate family group, before the parents or caregivers had explained the situation.

One of the parents who had explained to his children where he was had done so partly because his son wanted to go into prison to be near him:

he wanted to go down and rob Xtravision so he could come in here to his daddy and I had to tell him that robbing is wrong and he knows that it’s wrong, but he wants to come to jail... he thinks he’d come in here to me.

Table 5.6:
Reasons why parents have not told their children about the sentence

	Frequency	Percent
Parent worried child might get upset	1	3.8
Parent thinks child is too young to understand	10	38.5
Parent worried child might think it’s o.k. to go to prison	3	11.5
Parent worried what other people might think	2	7.7
N/A	10	38.5
Total	26	100.0

Of the 16 parents whose children were not aware that they were in jail, one (3.8%) stated that it was because the children might get too upset. He did not want them to come up and visit him because he believed the visit would be too much for them and that the conditions were unsuitable. Three (11.5%) said it was because they were worried that their children might think it was okay to go to jail: one father said about his son:

[he] is wild enough without getting into that scene. I actually have to stop coming into these places because he’s getting to that point, he’s getting very wild. He might think, “Oh, me daddy was in jail, I’ll go to jail.”

Ten (38.5%) of the respondents stated that they believed their children were too young to be told that they were in prison and that they would not be able to understand. One father stated:

the youngest thinks it’s work. When he gets older, he’ll be saying “I used to go there,” he’ll walk by in a couple of years and say “I used to go in there,” “but that’s a prison”, “no it’s not, it’s where me dad worked.” He’ll get a right slap in the face.

A conflict of interest appeared to arise in the cases where children were in care. One mother said that the social worker dealing with her children said they were not to be told where she was. However, one of her children asked her grandmother if there was something wrong with her mother:

and she said, “no, why?” and she [daughter] said “I think there’s something wrong with her. She never stayed away this long before”... I wanted them to know because a lot of the nephews and nieces would have known and someone would have said it. So I fought for 8 months to get the visit so they’d know where I am.

Another mother, whose child had been told that she was in work, talked of some of the difficulties that have arisen because her daughter is not aware of the situation:

All the time when she’s going, she wants to know am I going with them and that’s the bit I find very hard, the part when she says, “Mammy, are you coming too?” or “when will you be coming?”

She stated, however, that the child’s grandmother, who was looking after her daughter, did not think it was appropriate to tell the daughter and that she would go along with whatever she decided was best.

The two parents who had not told their children because they were worried about what other people might think or how they might react both stated that they were particularly concerned about the reactions of other children. They believed that their children’s peers might say things that would hurt the children. One said

I wouldn’t like them carrying it back to school or anything, to their friends outside. I don’t know if it’d be tough for them, but I know when I was growing up and in school, if you heard that anybody was in prison, you’d think “trouble, murders” and all this.

5.5 Effects of the sentence on parent/children relationships

Twenty-five of the respondents (96.2%) stated that they found it difficult or very difficult to keep up a relationship with their children, with only one (3.8%) stating that it was easy. Among the reasons given for the difficulties were the length of the visiting times, the conditions in the visiting areas, and their loss of authority because of their absence from home. One father stated:

you haven't got enough time to talk to them. You can't tell them some of the things you'd like to say. And if they're being bold or anything, you can't correct them, d'ya know? Like, if they'd done something, I'd chastise them, but not in front of people. I wouldn't make a show of them in front of people.

Another stated that he found it very difficult to keep up a relationship with his son:

I just feel like I'm losing touch with him. Even when I try talking to him on the phone and she's [partner] saying that he does be pushing the phone away, I do be thinking all sorts of things. So it's hard.

One father discussed some of the difficulties he encountered when trying to talk to his son during visits, saying that his son often started to cry when he took him over and that he had to give him sweets in order to quieten him down. Another stated that his eldest son tended to keep his emotions to himself and was very quiet when he came up to visit. His partner said that his son was continually asking if he had to go up to visit in the prison, so he told him only to come up when he was feeling like it, which has made it more difficult to keep up a relationship.

One of the mothers said that she found it very difficult to keep up a relationship with her young daughter, saying "she doesn't really know me." Another said that although her daughter was very young, she still knew who she was and referred to her as her mother. However, the mother feels like she has missed out on very important parts of her child's development that could affect their relationship:

the child couldn't even speak when I was getting locked up. You know, now she's able to speak and walk. She couldn't even walk when I first came in here. I missed out on all that.

The levels of satisfaction that parents had about their level of participation in their children's lives appeared to vary according to the type of relationship they had with their children's caregiver. None of the respondents were very satisfied with their participation in making decisions about their children's lives, but six (23.1%) said that they were satisfied. One father stated that he was happy with his participation, because he and his partner discussed the children and made most decisions about them together. One mother said that her say in making decisions about her child depended on the situation and on what her child's caregiver also felt was the best decision. Her feelings were echoed by several other parents, who felt that they retained some control over their children's lives, but that what happened was ultimately up to whoever was looking after the child:

I've no right to be telling them this that and the other because their mother's out there with them. But I do say things to them.

I'd prefer to leave them [children's mothers] to make the decisions, to be honest, because they're looking after them.

Because she's the one on the outside, unless it was a totally off-the-wall decision, I'd leave the final decision to her. Normally we agree and compromise on it, and with the kids as well.

Another respondent stated that he goes along with whatever his partner decides and never questions her decisions because she is looking after the children on a full-time basis and has her hands full with that.

One father who said that he had no input into his making decisions about his son's life stated that he did not feel comfortable with giving out to his son if he had misbehaved because the visits were so short and he did not want to upset his son and alienate him. The problems that can arise from not being in a relationship with the child's other parent were also raised several times:

It's difficult to keep up a relationship with your kids, especially if you're not in a relationship with the parent. It's up to you to stay in touch.

I'm in a situation where I have no say in anything. I don't get on with her at all, so I've no say at all. I have to be nice, really nice to her [ex-partner] just to see me kids.

One respondent expressed his feelings of frustration with being cut off from his family and from being part of their lives through making decisions, saying that he thought his partner sometimes ignored his suggestions because he was absent from the home. The responses clearly illustrate how some aspects of parent/child relationships may break down during a prison sentence. In particular, the conditions in the visiting area and the lack of privacy were mentioned by several male respondents as posing a barrier to attempts they made to assert their role as an authority figure. Any breakdown in the relationship between children and parents has implications for the post-release situation: in informal discussions, several ex-offenders mentioned the fact that they found it difficult to resume responsibility for their children when they returned home. One issue that was repeatedly highlighted was the fact that children would question the parents' right to make any decisions about their lives. The children tended to feel that the parent was not in a position to make decisions because they had not done so while they were in prison.

5.6 Effects of the sentence on children’s financial situations

Table 5.7:
Parents’ opinions on how their children’s financial situation has changed since their sentence began

	Frequency	Percent
Financial situation has got a lot worse	10	38.5
Financial situation has got a little worse	7	26.9
Financial situation has stayed the same	7	26.9
Financial situation has improved a little	2	7.7
Total	26	100.0

Ten of the parents (38.5%) stated that they believed their children’s financial situation had got a lot worse since their sentence began, while seven (26.9%) felt that it had got a little worse. Seven (26.9%) stated that it had stayed the same, while two (7.7%) believed that their children’s finances had improved a little. None of the respondents felt that their children’s financial situations had improved a lot.

Of the two respondents who stated that their children’s financial situation had improved, one mother felt this to be the case because she was so strung out on drugs when her sentence started. One of the fathers who felt that the financial situation had stayed the same also stated that the reason for this was his drug habit:

I wouldn’t say I’d have been great at supporting them that way. I had a drug habit at the time. So it’s more or less stayed the same.

The negative effects of imprisonment on children’s financial situations that were mentioned by respondents included:

- **The impact on the extended family:** One mother stated that although her children were in care, her mother was helping to support them financially, which placed a large strain on both her and on the extended family. Another stated that she had supported her child financially before she went into prison. Her child was being cared for by her mother, with help from her extended family, but things had become worse for her financially because her income had disappeared. Another mother also stated that her extended family had taken over the task of supporting her child financially.

- **Effects on children’s participation in various activities:** According to one father who felt that his children’s financial situation had got a little worse,

she [children’s mother] does great, I mean, she provides for them. They wouldn’t be missing out, but they wouldn’t be getting as much as they would have, you know, treats, days out, they’d only get them about once every two months now... They have a good support network, though, with her mother and her aunties and stuff.

Another father, who felt that his family’s financial situation had got a lot worse, talked about the effects of their lower income on his children in terms of her socialising:

with the eldest one, all the other girls on the road are talking about where they went on their holidays. They’ve all been away for two weeks or a week. She’s gone nowhere because me wife has absolutely no money out there. She just has basically what the government gives out, that’s £140 a week.

- **Effects on caregivers:** One father, who also felt that his family’s situation had got a lot worse, stated that his wife had to give up the job that she had trained for and take up three other jobs in order to earn enough money to support the family. Another talked of the extra strain on his partner, not only in terms of being the sole income earner for their children, but also because she had to give him money when he needed it. Another father stated that his partner had had to start working outside the home since the start of his sentence which, he felt, made things a lot more difficult for her. The strain placed on slightly older children was also discussed by one father, who stated that one of his children had left school to start working since the start of his sentence. Another of his children had got a part-time job, but had to give it up when he went back to school.

In addition, one of the respondents stated that although he had not been working at the time of his admission, he had been receiving social welfare benefit that his family relied on and that they lost when his sentence began. When questioned about his children’s financial situation, one respondent simply stated “she has nothing out there now,” while another said that “every penny we had was between us and now it’s just her.”

5.7 Encouraging and maintaining contact between prisoners and children

Parenting courses: Parenting courses are available in the men’s prison as part of the Connect Project, but are not currently available in the Dochas Centre. A parenting course was run for female prisoners in the past, but was ended because the facilitator felt that it was raising too many issues for participants that there was no time to deal with properly. Any of the men who participate in the parenting module of the Connect project are eligible to avail of “parenting days”, which take place every three months. On these days, they are allowed to spend two hours with their children in the auditorium of the men’s prison, which is converted into a play area for the occasion. Respondents whose children had visited during the parenting days commented very favourably on them:

That's what my whole sentence is based around now. Every three months just goes like that. We threw a birthday party for me daughter here on the last one... Because I wouldn't get a chance to be at her birthday parties any other time, d'ya know what I mean?

The parenting days are great. They're excellent. Even if they, say, had them once every month, it'd be great. I'd sacrifice my visits once a week for one of them every month.

I think it's an excellent idea. The lads love bringing their kids in. The mummies are away and the kids are in, d'ya know? It makes it easier to integrate with them.

Twelve of the respondents stated that they had taken part in a parenting course during their time in prison. Out of these 12, 11 stated that they had found the course to be helpful or very helpful. Of the fourteen people who had not taken part in a course, 12 stated that they would be interested in doing so. Several stated that their interest would depend on the content of the course and on who it was being delivered by. According to Strategy 11 of the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement (2001:31), one of the aims of the service is to elaborate positive sentence management through the extension of parenting courses to all prisons where they are appropriate. The responses indicate that there was a high level of interest among parents in taking part in such courses, which could help to increase the quality of contact that they have with their children.

Anticipated contact with children post-release:

Nineteen of the respondents (73.1 %) stated that they were planning to live with their children on release. Of the remaining seven who were not planning to live with their children, all stated that they would maintain contact with their children. The responses are very significant for the post-release situation, because they indicate that all of the prisoners are planning to keep up some type of contact with their children. If the parent/child relationship has been damaged throughout the prison sentence, it may prove very difficult to resume when the parent is released. The problems that may arise in the post-release situation if parent/child contact breaks down were discussed by several respondents:

You see rehabilitation, d'ya know, how can you be rehabilitated if you lose your family along the way, you just get bitter, you get upset. Then you get out and you have the wrong attitude. But if they help you keep your family and support you to keep your family, that should be part of your sentence... It'd work, you know, instead of taking blokes like meself... [who] have families and then they break up and then sticking me in a halfway house and when I get out, I'm back here again.

Think of this. I came in with a happy family and I got [no. of] years. Now if I was to go out after [no. of years] and have no family, I'd end up a lunatic... Most people that re-offend, that's why they re-offend, because they're getting out to nothing. Most people who come in do have a girlfriend and a kid and they're going back out there to nothing.

5.8 Changes in children's behaviour since the start of the sentence

The respondents were asked about any changes that had taken place in their children's behaviour since their sentences had started, either that they had noticed or that the children's caregivers had pointed out. Seventeen of the respondents stated that their children's behaviour had changed in noticeable ways, the most common of which included hyperactivity, becoming more withdrawn, and "acting up" with their caregivers. Many of the parents said they felt that their absence from the home or from their children's routine was the main cause of these changes.

One father said that since he came into prison, his child had become "clingy, very, very clingy." She had also become bolder and was acting up with her caregiver. However, he felt that he was unable to say anything to her about her behaviour because she would get too upset. Another father felt that the biggest effect of his imprisonment on his son was the fact that he had no male role model in his life in his life any more:

He has no father figure for a start. He has no-one to look up to. He's no-one to bring him out and play football with him, he can't go to the park. She [caregiver] hasn't got the time to bring him to the park, she hasn't got the energy.

His partner had told him that she was finding it more difficult to control the son's behaviour and that there was no family structure or routines in the household any more. Another father stated that his youngest son in particular had been affected by his absence:

My youngest seems to have went into himself, d'ya know what I mean, he's withdrawn. He's not the same since I've come in... like, if I was out there, he'd be more talkative and all that.

One father expressed his concerns about the effects of his absence on his children's behaviour:

They've got out of hand. They try to take advantage of me not being there, even though I'm still around, like, I'm not dead, I'm in jail. But I'm not there, and they do try to take advantage of that. They play up on her, being bold.

He stated that when he was at home, he usually disciplined the children. In his absence, their mother finds it difficult to take over the role.

Another respondent stated that his children were always initially shy when they came up to visit, but that they usually got over that after a few minutes. However, their caregiver stated that they had become more withdrawn at home and that they say they miss him a lot and talk about him frequently. One father mentioned that he was worried about how his children would change during the period that he was in prison, and stated that he felt it might be difficult to return home after missing out on so much of their growing up:

when my daughter gets to the age of 12, she'll be gone from a child into a teenager and when I get out, I'm going to have to cope with a teenager.

According to one father, his child's behaviour has changed drastically since the start of his sentence:

He's got a lot bolder as well. He's got very, very bold. It's because I'm not there, it is. She [partner] was saying that even when she brings him in here, he's grand, but as soon as they go out the gate, he starts... he's even got bold in school, because he was, he was very placid.

Another father did not have very much contact with his child before the sentence started and has only recently begun to build up a relationship with him, so he felt that he could not comment on any changes that had occurred in his behaviour. He never discussed the matter with his child's caregiver, because he did not feel comfortable doing so.

One father stated that his partner found it more difficult to make decisions about the children on her own, without his support:

They've just kind of become more cheeky, I think, and it's harder for my partner to control them as well because she doesn't have anyone else there. There's no sort of second opinion. Whereas before she'd say 'ask your father' or I'd say 'ask your mother'. It's easier for them to get over on her when she'd just there on her own, so she does give in to them for peace sometimes.

5.8.1 Changes in children's behaviour with parents

The respondents were asked if they had noticed any changes in the way that their children behaved with them since the beginning of their sentence. According to one mother:

Me mother says a lot to her on the visit, like, "S., don't be acting up," so I think she does that a lot more around me, like, acting up. She thinks she'll get away with it.

Another mother stated that she was very worried about the effect of her imprisonment on her daughter:

[she] is probably thinking "what did I do?", you know, all that kind of thing in her head... I reckon she'd be thinking "what have I done wrong? Why amn't I with my mammy?"

One mother said that being away from her young daughter had had a big effect on their relationship. She stated that it had taken her daughter a long time to settle with her caregivers when her sentence started, but since she had settled in, her behaviour with her mother had changed a lot:

When she comes up here, she just doesn't want to do anything. She's different. When I phone, like, I can hear her in the background. She can talk and all, but she won't say anything when she comes up here.

One of the fathers had also noticed changes of this nature in his children's behaviour:

Me and her were very, very close before I came in. Now she wouldn't come to me straight away. Towards the end of the visit, she'd be getting there. The eldest child, the wife doesn't like taking her up here too many times on the visits because she gets very, very upset when she has to go. She just bawls and cries all the time.

Another stated:

I don't think he even realises who I am. With the sweets and all that, he'll come over to me, but he's just sitting there calling for his ma until his ma takes him...I pretend that it doesn't upset me there, I just get on with the visit, but it does affect me.

He felt, however, that if he was in contact with his child for an extended period of time, it became easier to bond with his child. She came into the prison for one of the parenting days organised by the Connect project, and although she was nervous at the start of the day, he felt that things were back to normal between them at the end of the visit.

5.9 Attitudes towards being a parent in prison

The respondents were asked to discuss how they felt about being a parent in prison. All of them stated that it made a big difference to their lives in prison, with responses ranging from resignation to an active wish to finish the sentence and return home. Several of the male respondents talked about how they have been in prison before they had children and described the differences that it made to be a parent. Some expressed feelings of powerlessness because they were away from their children and were not able to look after them or ensure that they were alright.

One of the male respondents stated that it was possible to tell the difference between people in prison who were parents and those who were not because of their different attitudes:

It makes a difference to how you think about things. A parent has to be a bit more responsible. You do notice the difference between people who have kids and people who don't.

Absence from the home and the concomitant worries about whether the children were alright or safe were mentioned by several fathers as things they thought about on a regular basis:

That's the worst part, thinking about them and hoping they're okay. They went away for a week there last June and I couldn't sleep, hoping that she [daughter] was alright. I know she was with her mother and all and her grandad, but I wasn't there, so I was worried sick about it.

I do worry about them. Like, if she says 'He wants to go to a party' and I tell him to be home at 12 o'clock and I'd be in there and I'd be worrying and saying 'I hope he's alright.' I have to wait until the next morning and I can ring and make sure he got home alright.

If you hadn't got kids, it's a lot less worry on you, you wouldn't worry as much. When you're here, you're thinking about your kids outside and what if anything happens to them. I mean, if anything goes wrong, you'd go off your head, like. The first sentence, when I had no kids, it never bothered me one bit. I get in, do me time, get out, but it's getting harder now because you've kids and all. Like, at Christmas and birthdays, you know, things like that. It's a lot harder.

It kills me. I was never in this situation before, with a girl I wanted to be with and a child and all that. This sentence is very hard... before, when it was just me, I could take that, I could come and go, but now I have a child, all I want to do is make sure he doesn't have to come to this place.

Another concern that was highlighted by some parents was their worries about being away from their children when they were ill, especially if they had to go into hospital. The respondents stated that they felt very powerless to do anything to help their children during times of sickness.

Two of the respondents stated that they did not think that the prison system made enough allowances for prisoners who were parents. Both felt that it was an important aspect of their lives and of their identity and felt that more should be done to officially recognise their status as parents. In particular, one respondent felt that the prison system should make allowances for parents who were serving long sentences and do as much as possible to encourage them to keep up contact with their families:

there's no difference made to say 'this guy has a family, this guy is doing 3 months and this guy is doing 10 years'... Obviously it's important that this person keeps the bond because he has a while to go, d'ya know? There's nothing like that.

Several parents mentioned the fact that being a parent had provided them with a motivation for getting out of jail and not returning. One mother stated that she had come to realise that she couldn't "mess up again" because she would lose her children for good if she did. Another mother said that she needed to get out and spend time with her children, because it would be too late otherwise and she would have no relationship with them. One father stated that he had been in prison before when he had no children, but the birth of his son had had a big impact on how he viewed his sentence:

It's not for me anymore... I am making a go of it, that's all I want.

5.10 Discussion

The responses indicate that having children may impact on the ways that many prisoners view their sentence. Many of the respondents expressed concern about the effect that being in prison had on their relationship with their children. The lack of child-friendly visiting facilities in the men's prison was repeatedly highlighted as an obstacle to maintaining contact with children. Other concerns included the changes that had taken place in children's behaviour since the start of the sentence, the extra stresses that the children's caregivers had come under and the financial pressures that were seen to have resulted from the sentence. In some cases, being away from their children had encouraged respondents to decide that they never want to return to prison. This suggests that positive sentence management programmes for parents in prison could perhaps focus on issues relating to their children.

Chapter 6

*Caregivers of children whose
parents are in prison*

Chapter 6: Caregivers of children whose parents are in prison

6.1 Background

Interviews were carried out with a total of 19 caregivers who were looking after the children of prisoners. The breakdown of respondents according to gender illustrates some of the difficulties encountered when trying to contact fathers or grandfathers who were caring for the children of prisoners: 18 (94.7%) of respondents were female and only 1 (5.3%) was male. In part, this was due to the fact that women in the Dochas Centre who are not on remand tend to receive their visits on Sundays, which is the one day of the week when the Visitors' Centre is closed. However, it may also be taken as an indication of the fact that when mothers are sent to prison, their children are more likely to be looked after by grandparents or extended family members, rather than by their fathers.

Table 6.1: Age group of caregivers

	Frequency	Percent
18 – 24	6	31.6
25 – 34	8	42.1
35 – 44	5	26.3
Total	19	100.0

As with the parents in prison who took part in the study, the majority of caregivers (42.1%) were aged between 25 and 34. Six (31.6%) were aged between 18 and 24, and the remaining five (26.3%) were aged between 35 and 44.

Seventeen of the respondents (89.5%) stated that they were coming to visit their partner. Again, given the fact that 16 of these respondents were female, it appears that women are much more likely to take over care of their children if their partner is imprisoned. One respondent was visiting an ex-partner, and one was visiting her son. The majority of respondents (nine, or 47.4%) said that they bring one child with them when they come to visit, while eight (42.1%) bring two children. One

respondent (5.3%) brought three children and another one brought four children. Between them, the respondents brought a total of 32 children to visit in the prison.

Of these 32 children, 13 were aged between 0 and 3 years, 7 were aged between 4 and 6 years, and a further 7 were aged between 7 and 9 years. Three of the children were aged between 10 and 12 years, and the remaining two were aged over 13 years. Twenty-seven of the total number of children brought to visit a parent in the prison by their caregivers were therefore under the age of 9. Eighteen (94.7%) of the respondents said that the children they bring with them to visit are their own, while one respondent stated that she brings her grandchild. All of the respondents said that they come to see the prisoner they are visiting once a week or more.

6.2 Contact between children and the parent in prison

The majority of respondents (16, or 84.2%) stated that the children in their care lived with the parent that they visit before their sentence started, while three (16.8%) said that the children did not.

**Table 6.2:
Frequency of children's visits to parents in prison**

	Frequency	Percent
Once a week or more	13	68.4
At least once every two weeks	3	15.8
At least once a month	2	10.5
At least once every three months	1	5.3
Total	19	100.0

Although all of the respondents visited the prison at least once a week, the number of times they brought the children in their care varied. Thirteen (68.4%) bring the children once a week or more; three (15.8%) bring them at least once every two weeks; two (10.5%) bring them at least once a month, while one (5.3%) brings them at least once every three months. One mother stated that although she brings her children to visit twice a week during the summer holidays,

Once the kids go back to school I'll only be able to come up once a week because it's a strain to get the extra visit on a Friday. Afternoons are better, but I can't make it then in the afternoons because I'm at work and my second child, she's too young to be left.

Her comment highlighted the difficulties that some caregivers have with getting to the prison during visiting hours, especially if they live any distance from the prison.

Table 6.3:
Distance travelled by caregivers to visit the prison

	Frequency	Percent
0 – 3 miles	6	31.6
4 – 6 miles	1	5.3
10+ miles	12	63.2
Total	19	100.0

The majority of caregivers (63.2%) lived more than ten miles away from the prison; one (5.3%) lived between four and six miles away; and six (31.6%) lived less than three miles from the jail. Seven of the respondents who lived some distance from the prison mentioned that they found it difficult to get there, especially if they had young children and were relying on public transport. The most frequent method of transport for getting to the prison that was cited was by car (47.4%), with the bus coming second (36.8%). Two respondents (10.5%) stated that they walked, while one (5.3%) got a taxi. Again, the difficulties involved in bringing children to the prison on public transport were mentioned by several respondents:

I take two buses. It's okay during the summer holidays, but once the kids are back in school, you can forget about it, like. I'd be lucky if I get here before 11 o'clock some mornings. It's a nightmare.

Table 6.4:
Frequency of telephone contact between children and parents in prison

	Frequency	Percent
Daily/almost daily	17	89.5
At least once a week	2	10.5
Total	19	100.0

As was the case with parents in prison, the amount of phone contact that caregivers said their children have with the parent that the visit is very high¹⁸. Seventeen (89.5%) said that the child they are caring for talked to their parent on a daily/almost daily basis, and the remaining two (10.5%) said their children had phone contact at least once a week.

Table 6.5:
Frequency of contact between children and parent in prison through cards/letters

	Frequency	Percent
At least once a week	4	21.1
At least once a month	6	31.6
Less than once a month	5	26.3
Never	4	21.1
Total	19	100.0

¹⁸ 53.8% of prisoners stated that they talk to their children daily or almost daily, while a further 30.8% said they talked to them at least once a month.

As was stated by parents¹⁹, the frequency of contact through cards or letters was not as high as through phone calls. The responses indicate that written contact plays an important role in maintaining contact between children and their parents during the sentence, however. Four (21.2%) stated that their children never received or sent cards or letters and five (26.3%) said that their children did so less than once a month. However, six (31.6%) said that their children had contact with their parents in this fashion at least once a month, and a further four (21.1%) stated that they received cards or letters at least once a week. Several respondents talked about how important it was for children to receive cards on birthdays and other special occasions.

6.3 Children's awareness of the parent's sentence

As was illustrated by the interviews with parents in prison²⁰, a large number of children who visit the prison are not aware that their parent is in jail, or have not been informed that this is the case. Five caregivers (26.3%) said that the children in their care were aware of the situation, while thirteen (68.4%) stated that they were not. One respondent stated that he was advised by professional counsellors not to tell his child about the prison sentence because she was too young, so she thinks that her mother is in hospital. One caregiver (5.3%) was unsure whether or not her child knew about the sentence: she stated that she had not told him about it but thought that he might have guessed:

He said to me one time, we were watching television and there was somebody on Death Row and he said to me, 'she's in prison.' I said, "how did you know? We don't know anyone in prison, sure we don't?" and he said 'no, my dad's building houses.' So he kind of knows, but he's pacifying me, d'you know what I mean?

Again, the reasons that children were given for their parents' absence included work, school and the army. One child stated that his father was away working a lot and also told people that his father was away:

Yeah, he told a girl in school that his da was on vacation in Hawaii... he says, like, if the teacher asks him something about his da, he says he's on vacation in Hawaii.

Several of the respondents said that their children were too young to understand, but because their parents were going to be in prison for a relatively long time, they would explain to them at a later date.

¹⁹ 51.3% of prisoners said that they had contact with their children through cards or letters at least once a month.

²⁰ 61.5% of prisoners said that their children were not aware that they were in prison.

Table 6.6:
Reasons why caregivers have not told the children about their parents' sentence

	Frequency	Percent
Caregiver worried the child might get upset	3	15.8
Caregiver thinks the child is too young to understand	11	57.9
N/A	5	26.3
Total	19	100.0

Two main reasons why caregivers had not informed the children about the prison sentence were given: three (15.8%) stated that they were worried the children might get upset and eleven (57.9%) said they felt that the children were too young to understand. One mother stated that she hadn't told her child because

I didn't think he'd be able to cope at the time when he [father] came in. He was so broken hearted. He was there one minute and gone the next. We weren't expecting it, d'ya know what I mean?

The fact that 13 of the total number of children in the care of the respondents were aged between 0-3 years may partially account for the high numbers of children who had not been told about the prison sentence. However, several of the caregivers with children in this age group had informed them about the sentence, while some of the older children (aged 4-9) had not been informed because the caregivers felt that they were too young. The responses may be indicative of the fact that some caregivers find it difficult to bring up the topic with children and are unsure of how to explain the situation.

6.4 Effects of the sentence on the children's financial situation

Table 6.7:
Caregivers' opinions on changes in the children's financial situation since the start of the sentence

	Frequency	Percent
Financial situation has got a lot worse	3	15.8
Financial situation has got a little worse	4	21.1
Financial situation has stayed the same	11	57.9
Financial situation has improved a little	1	5.3
Total	19	100.0

The responses of caregivers to the question about the impact of imprisonment on their children's financial situations varied somewhat from those given by parents

in prison²¹. Three (15.8%) felt that things had got a lot worse and four (21.1%) said that they had got a little worse. Eleven respondents (57.9%) believed that things had stayed the same financially, while one (5.3%) stated that the children's financial situation had improved a little.

One mother said

things are hard, but we manage. He [father] is very good and he saves his money and sends it out.

Another said that her children's financial situation has got a lot worse because she relied on her partner enormously and that source of income had disappeared totally. According to one mother,

Our quality of life hasn't changed financially. They still kind of get what they want, but that's because I'm living off my savings from my earnings. Who knows what will happen when they run out?

Another mother felt that her partner's imprisonment had had an enormous financial impact on her and her children:

I'm only on the dole and I'd like if there was someone to help me every week. They [children] need clothes, like, and I'm on my own and it's very tough.

On the other hand, two mothers stated that her partner's absence had not made any difference to her family's financial situation because she had always worked and would continue to do so. Another stated that her children's financial situation had actually improved because she had started to work outside the home, which she had not done before. In addition, three respondents stated that their extended families provided them with financial assistance, which they found to be of great help.

6.5 Support services

The caregivers were asked whether the children's teachers were aware that their parent was in prison. The question was not applicable to eight of the respondents (42.1%), whose children were too young to go to school. Of the remaining eleven caregivers, two (10.5%) said that their children's teachers were aware of the situation, eight (42.1%) said the teachers did not know, and one (5.3%) was not sure. Both of the caregivers with children whose teachers were aware of the situation had found the teachers to be "very supportive" or "supportive".

Only three of the respondents (15.8%) said that they had any contact with groups to support them and their children. The remaining 16 (84.2%) received no support

²¹ 38.5% of prisoners stated that their children's financial situation had got a lot worse, while 26.9% stated that it had got a little worse.

from groups outside their network of family and friends. Of the three who were in contact with groups that provide support, two stated that they received help from drug counselling services and one was supported by the staff of the Visitors' Centre. A support group and counselling services are available within the Visitors' Centre, and have so far received a positive response. According to staff who run the support group, many caregivers are unwilling to approach local agencies to discuss their problems because of the stigma that they feel is attached to being the partner/relation of a prisoner.

6.5.1 Planned contact with the parent post-release

Eighteen (94.7%) of the caregivers stated that they believed the prisoner would live at home with his/her children on release. The remaining respondent said that the parent would not live with the children, but would keep in touch with them. The high number of respondents who expected that the prisoner would live with the children post-release was also reflected in the responses of parents in prison. The answers indicate the importance of maintaining contact throughout the sentence, to ensure that neither parents nor children have unrealistic expectations of the post-release situation.

6.6 Visiting areas

When asked if the children they brought to the Visitors' Centre enjoyed using the play area, all respondents stated that they did. Several of them who had been visiting the prison for a number of years commented very favourably on the changes that had taken place since the play area was opened. They were asked if the children behaved differently when they went to visit their mother or father in the prison. Most of them stated that they noticed changes in their behaviour: among the most common reactions listed were boredom, wanting to play with other children rather than talking to the parent, and hyperactivity.

they're kind of bored when they go over there and they run around a lot. It's hard to keep them sitting down, like, but when you come in here [Visitors' Centre], they go in there [play area] and it's not a bother. I think there should be something like that over there for the visits.

He goes wild in there [visiting area], like. He can sit quiet for about two minutes and then he starts to run amok. He gets bored, like.

They get bored. Like, they're too young to understand. They say hello and give him a hug and the novelty wears off.

He gets hyper there. It's hard to keep him amused.

Another difficulty that was mentioned were the restrictions on physical contact between prisoners and their children:

Like, I've a fellow of six and he wants his daddy to hug him and hold him for a while and they're not allowed.

My eldest child was very close to her dad, she particularly found it very tough. She wouldn't come to visit at the beginning because she said "I can't even hug him, what's the point?"

However, the male respondent had a more positive outlook on the visiting area in the Dochas Centre:

I think it's good, it's good for children. It's not like a real prison with bars, and that's good for younger children. It does help, because there has to be a certain amount of contact kept, like, you can't just keep them away.

In general, high levels of dissatisfaction were expressed with the visiting area in the men's prison. One respondent stated that it was "like something out of Charles Dickens." As emerged from the interviews with fathers in prison, the caregivers tended to find that the visiting area was small, noisy and crowded. Many cited the lack of privacy as another problem, and several highlighted the fact that there were no facilities specifically targeted at children to help keep them amused as a contributing factor to their children becoming bored quickly. As a result of the conditions, many felt that their children did not get a chance to talk to their parent properly during the visits:

It's just more children running around and they're running around with the children. They would go in and say hello and that but then they go off with the other kids, like.

They're sort of shouting at him and he's shouting back.

6.7 Changes in children's behaviour and health

A majority of respondents stated that they had noticed changes in the children's behaviour since the start of their parents' sentence. The main changes that were noted included children "acting up" a lot more, being less likely to do as they were told, and becoming upset or withdrawn. One mother stated that her children had become depressed since their father went into prison, and that they were continually asking about him and saying that they missed him. Another said that her children also talked about their father a lot more since his sentence started and that they were more affectionate towards him when they went in to visit than they would have been previously. According to another mother, at the start of her partner's sentence, her son had

got withdrawn into himself. He was very upset and he was crying and crying for his daddy. He was just very upset, d'ya know what I mean, and he missed him a lot.

One mother mentioned the fact that her partner's absence had made it more difficult for her with the children:

There's more disregard. They'd be more cheeky. They push me around more than they would if he was around, y'know. When he's around, he can put his foot down and they'd stop. If he's not around they know how far they can go and that they can get away with certain things.

Another mother mentioned the fact that her children had become

More hyper. And they're bolder, because their daddy's not stopping them.

Another mother said that her child had become "more clingy, and he's crying more for his daddy. He wants his daddy more." According to one respondent, the child in her care had become more aggressive, which she felt was due to the fact that he had been used to seeing his father every day.

However, another mother felt that her children were too young to fully understand the situation, with the result that their father's absence had not had too much of an effect on them:

you know the way that kids just adjust, and like, they don't ask questions, it's just like a way of life. And maybe if they were a bit older and they understood, they probably would be asking questions, but they don't.

In addition, three of the respondents felt that their children were so young when their fathers had gone in to prison initially that it was impossible to notice any changes in their behaviour:

I wouldn't notice, like, because he went in and I had the baby four weeks later.

6.7.1 Changes in the children's behaviour with parents

When asked if they had noticed any changes in how the children in their care behaved with their parents since the start of the sentences, the majority said that they had. Among the main changes noticed were more affectionate behaviour when visiting the parents than might have been exhibited in the past and shyness with the parents. One mother stated that her children were always shy with their father when they saw him initially and said that it was difficult for them to keep up a relationship because the visits were so short. Another said that the children in her care were more affectionate

with their father when they went to visit than they would have been previously, which she felt was because they only saw him once a week for a short time:

they would be more affectionate with him over there than they would be if they saw him all the time. It's so short they'd want to make the most of it.

Several caregivers said that their children exhibited more affection towards their parents during the visits than they would have done in the past:

They'd be more clingy to him than they would have, like, hugging and kissing him.

She'd be more affectionate [with parent] now.

One caregiver stated that one of her children had found it very difficult at the start of her father's sentence, which had a big effect on the way she acted towards him:

She's gone very, very angry with the whole situation... she's actually very cold towards him.

Another felt that her youngest child could not understand the situation yet, but that the sentence had had a huge effect on the child's relationship with her father:

To her, he's just a name, he's just like "daddy", d'ya know what I mean? "Dad" doesn't mean parent to her.

One respondent stated that although her child was very young when his father went into prison initially, he had grown up enough to start missing him and to notice that he was not around at home. Another respondent stated that her child's behaviour had not changed at all because he saw his father on a regular basis and did not appear to miss him very much at home.

6.7.2 Changes in children's health

When asked about any changes they had noticed in their children's health since the start of the parent's prison sentence, the majority of caregivers stated that they had not noticed any differences. One respondent stated that although she had not noticed any immediate changes in her children's health, they were very upset in general:

It's just mainly anger and bitterness, like, why has he put us through this?

Of those who had noticed differences, the main change mentioned was that the children were having more nightmares than they had previously or were having difficulties with sleeping patterns:

They're always looking for their daddy at night time and when the morning comes, they're still looking for him. Always asking when he's coming home, d'ya know?

The little one used to cry a bit in her sleep since he left.

6.8 Stigma as a result of parental imprisonment

The respondents were asked if they or the children ever discussed the parents' absence with other people, and, if so, what type of reactions they had encountered. Their responses were very varied, with some caregivers saying that they did not want the fact that the parent was in prison made common knowledge, while others stated that they had received a lot of support from their families, friends, and communities. Extended families were mentioned by most of the respondents as the main source of support, which is indicative of the strains that the imprisonment of an individual can place on other people. In addition, friends were mentioned as another source of moral support, both for the caregivers and for the children. One mother stated that although her child did not like to talk about his father's absence, many people in the area where she lived were aware of his prison sentence and had been very supportive of her and her son. Another mother stated that her family and friends had been very supportive, and said that she would not worry about what other people thought, because she had been to counselling before and found it very useful for coping with the situation. When asked if she felt that people would treat her child differently if they knew where his father was, one caregiver stated:

No, I wouldn't. Like, the neighbours are very supportive. It wouldn't be a problem.

One respondent stated that she would worry about what people might say to her children if they learned what their father was in prison for:

It's not even the fact that [father] is in here, it's what he's in for. And when they hear that, they're very taken aback and you'd normally get very abrupt reactions. But in general, I think that people that know me and that know him, they'd be very good.

Another caregiver felt the same way, saying that most of the people who knew her and her partner were understanding, but that she would not like the people she worked with to learn about why her partner was in prison, as it might affect their perceptions of her. One mother said that she did not like her children discussing their father's sentence with people outside the family, because she was afraid of how they might react and that they might treat the children differently if they knew their father was in prison.

Another caregiver whose children were aware that their father was in prison said that they discussed the situation with their friends. However, she said that she sometimes worried about how they interpreted the sentence:

They kind of think it's something to be proud of and I'm trying to tell them not to be talking to people about it, like. They think, "Oh, my dad's in prison, he's a big man, that kind of thing."

One mother stated that one of her children in particular was very worried that her friends might find out where her father was:

he embarrassed her, first of all, with her friends and stuff. She has to cover up when her friends come to the house and say "where's your dad?" "Oh, he's working."

She later stated that she thought the situation was made more difficult for her daughter because the family lived in an area where it would be very uncommon for anyone to be in prison or to ever have had a prison sentence. As a result, her daughter tended to tell people that her father worked away. The different effects on children of having a parent in prison, depending on the community from which they come, are illustrated by this example. According to a staff member of an organisation that works with ex-offenders, it may be more acceptable in some communities to have a parent in prison, because the sentence is seen to have come about as a result of financial circumstances. Less stigma may therefore be attached to imprisonment in some areas.

One mother stated that although her daughter did not mind discussing the reason for her father's absence, with her friends, the situation could change as she got older:

She wouldn't have any stigma attached to her at that age. I think when she gets a bit older, it'll change. But it's not really an issue, like, she's too young.

Two other respondents stated that they felt their children would not feel stigmatised by their parent's absence because they were too young, but that the situation would probably change as they got older.

6.9 Discussion

The responses illustrate how caregivers may experience different pressures over the course of the prison sentence. Some of the problems that they face range from difficulties with bringing children to the prison on public transport, to dealing with the behavioural changes that may arise as a result of the parents' imprisonment. One particular problem that emerged from the interviews was the fact that some caregivers have not told the children where their parent is and are worried about doing so. Despite the strains that caregivers come under, there was a low level of reported contact with any support groups or organisations. Both children and caregivers may need help to work through the issues that arise throughout the course of a prison sentence, especially during the initial stages when concerns about upsetting children by telling them about the sentence are prevalent. Many caregivers expressed dissatisfaction with the visiting facilities in the men's prison, which suggests that they are not of a family-friendly standard.

Chapter 7

***Having a parent in prison:
the views of children and key stakeholders***

Chapter 7: Having a parent in prison: the views of children and key stakeholders

7.1 Background

As outlined previously, the data collection with children posed some difficulties, due to the sensitive nature of the topic. It was not possible to conduct in-depth interviews with children in the play area, as was initially envisaged, due to the fact that many of them had not been told that their parents were in prison. However, due to the fact that children feel very comfortable in the play area, some information was collected informally while the children were playing. Their responses are outlined in this chapter, as are the views of staff of the Visitors' Centre and prison staff on the main effects of parental imprisonment.

7.2 Data collection with children in the play area

In total, informal discussions took place with six children who use the play area in the Visitors' Centre. The conversations took place either in the art area, or in the general play area. The children's ages ranged from four to twelve. All were girls, and two of them were sisters. The topics brought up for discussion were very general, centring around who they were coming to visit, what they thought of the play area in the Visitors' Centre, and their opinions on the visiting area in the prison.

All of the children were coming in to visit their fathers. They all said that they enjoyed using the play area a lot, especially the art area. Four of them said that they liked making paintings to bring to their fathers. When asked if she liked coming to see her father, one child (aged 7) said that she did but added:

I miss my dad. It's very sad that he's gone.

Another child (aged 6) said that she liked coming to see her father, but that there were no toys in the place where she went to visit him, so she usually played with other children during her visits. Two other children also stated that they played with children when they went to

visit their fathers. One (aged 7) said that she enjoyed chasing other children around but said that she did not think "they" liked it when she ran and that she was not really supposed to play during the visits.

One child (aged 7) stated that she comes to visit her father a lot. She said that when she goes to see him, she sits down and talks to him and does not like to play with other children. The oldest child (age 12) also said that she talks to him for the whole visit and that the visiting area was "alright", but a bit noisy.

7.3 Interviews with staff of the Visitors' Centre

Four childcare workers and two staff members from the Visitors' Centre were interviewed in order to ascertain their views on the effects of parental imprisonment with children. As outlined previously, the staff work closely with the families of prisoners who come to visit, often building up a rapport with those clients who use the facility on a regular basis. In addition to working with the children in the Visitors' Centre, the staff are also involved in the play area in the Dochas Centre.

7.3.1 Staff views on children's awareness of their parents' sentences

The childcare workers stated that the children often brought up the topic of their parents' absence while in the play area. They had found that children who were going to visit a family member who was not a parent were aware that they were in prison, while a lot of children visiting their parents had not been informed about their sentence. Problems can arise in situations where one child might be aware that they are visiting a prison, while others who are playing in the vicinity are not. However, one staff member felt that although children are not being told where the parent is, they hear people at home talking about the situation and therefore have some idea about what is really happening:

They don't know exactly what it is. They know that's not the truth, but they don't know what the truth is.

According to one childcare worker, children often talk about the fact that they are visiting their parents, but in general tend not to mention the fact that they are in prison:

Sometimes you get the feeling that they know they're in a prison, but they think that we don't know they are... It's like they're keeping it a secret.

7.3.2 Staff views on the effects of parental imprisonment on children's behaviour

All of the childcare workers felt that it was difficult in some ways to discuss the effects of parental imprisonment on children's behaviour, because they were so happy to be in the play area. It was therefore difficult to pinpoint any behavioural patterns that may have been related to the fact that one of their parents is in prison. According to one:

They're enjoying themselves so much when they're in here that it's hard to see what the effects are.

In general terms, they talked about noticing the stress that caregivers are under and the perceived effects that this may have on the children. All felt that visiting the prison, especially for the first few times, could be extremely stressful and that this had an impact on children:

I think it's more when people arrive sometimes that you see the effects, when you see them coming in with buggies and loads of kids and they're stressed out and shouting at the kids... They're telling them to shut up and they talk to them quite harshly when they're outside.

According to one staff member, children may need extra attention when they come into the Visitors' Centre because some of them can find the experience of visiting their parent in prison traumatic.

One of the childcare workers stated that children often feel that they have to take on extra responsibilities when one of their parents goes into prison. This can sometimes lead to feelings of anger, especially if the child is not able to talk about the situation with anyone. It can also lead to the children being bullied, or beginning to bully others, as an outlet to release their frustrations:

It's all aggression, like, if they can't take it out at home and the parent's not willing to talk to them... if none of that's said to them, they're left to fester in their own minds about why he's in prison and think "what did I do?"

In addition, several of the childcare workers stated that caregivers often said that their children's behaviour in school had changed. The main changes noted were children becoming more withdrawn and saying that they had no friends in school. A further problem that was noted was the fact that some children had to miss school on a regular basis in order to visit their parents, which affected their work. The childcare workers also felt that contact between children and their parents could break down quite easily when the children became teenagers and stopped going to visit the prison as frequently:

You'd worry about that because if they don't get to see their dad for years, except for once a fortnight, that's going to have a huge effect when he comes out. They're not going to see him as a parent, they're going to see him as this other person.

7.3.3 Problems arising as a result of parental imprisonment

According to workers in the Visitors' Centre, the main problems that children faced as a result of parental imprisonment were

- **Single parenting:** if a child has been accustomed to having contact with two parents, problems arise when there is only one parent left to look after him/her and all the household affairs.
- **Financial problems:** parents often face financial difficulties if their partner is imprisoned. They may want to compensate for the parents' absence by giving children material goods, which can increase the pressure on them to get into debt and to resort to moneylenders.
- **Visiting arrangements:** there is a lack of general information provided to prisoners' families about visiting arrangements. Often, they arrive at the Visitors' Centre without knowing where to go or how to arrange their visit.
- **Stigma:** families may feel alienated from their communities as a result of parental imprisonment, because there is still a stigma attached to being the partner or child of a prisoner, especially within certain areas.

7.4 Views of prison staff on the effects of parental imprisonment with children

Data were collected through informal discussions with staff working in the prison about the main issues they believed to arise as a result of parental imprisonment. Several stated that they found it hard to know if a prisoner was a parent, because of the lack of records kept on the topic. However, as was outlined in Chapter Five, a Probation and Welfare officer stated that many prisoners are wary of giving any personal details when they are admitted into prison and may never mention the fact that they have children because they would be afraid of putting social workers in touch with them. Several staff members said that they only became aware of the fact that some prisoners were parents several months into their sentences.

Among the main issues that were brought up in relation to maintaining parent-child contact through visits were

- The fact that some children found the prison visiting areas to be very threatening, including the presence of officers in uniform. Two staff members suggested that officers should wear plain clothes during visiting hours.
- In the men's prison, the lack of facilities for children were mentioned several times. The visiting area was compared unfavourably to the parenting days held every three months in the auditorium as part of the Connect project. Several officers stated that it was very hard for children not to get bored, and that noise levels could be very high if the children were trying to amuse themselves rather than talk to parents during the visits
- The problem of drugs being passed into the prison was mentioned by all staff members. Several were concerned that some prisoners would take advantage if they were allowed any physical contact with their visitors and would use the opportunity to smuggle drugs in.
- One member of staff raised the issue of parents' relationships with their children if they have been away from home for a long time and have missed out on stages of their development. It was felt that it was possible to see from the visits that several parents had no idea about how to interact or play with their children, which could give rise to problems if they return home after their sentence.
- Although the parenting course run as part of the Connect Project was very successful in the men's prison, it had to be stopped in the Dochas Centre because it was raising too many issues that the counsellor did not have time to cover. Staff felt that a programme that could help participants to discuss any issues that might arise would have a good chance of being successful.

7.5 Discussion

Informal data collection with the children of prisoners and with key stakeholders highlighted some of the issues that can arise throughout a parent's prison sentence. The responses indicate the need for supports for both children and caregivers throughout the prison sentence and highlight the importance of family-friendly visiting facilities. The children's positive responses to the play area in the Visitors' Centre indicate the importance of such services. A systematic evaluation of existing reception facilities for children who are visiting prisons should be implemented, and, subject to the recommendations that arise, reception centres should be introduced in prisons where they are not in place.

Chapter 8

Discussion & Conclusions

Chapter 8: Discussion & Conclusions

8.1 Overview of the findings

The study has highlighted some of the main issues of concern for the children of prisoners, as reported by the various respondents. In this section, the key findings of the research and their implications are discussed. Recommendations for possible changes in policies affecting the children and families of prisoners are outlined at the end of each section. These recommendations may be divided into the following groups: policy recommendations, recommendations for the Irish Prison Service²², recommendations for Mountjoy Prison, complex and recommendations for future research. (Chapter 9 presents the recommendations in this format.)

A total of 51 respondents were interviewed for the study – 19 caregivers, 26 parents in prison, and 6 children. In addition, the views of key stakeholders who included staff and childcare workers from the Visitors' Centre, prison staff, and ex-offenders were collected through informal discussions. The majority of caregivers (14) and prisoners (21) were aged under 34 years. Between them, they had a total of 89 children in their care. All identified their country of origin as Ireland. Eighteen of the prisoners interviewed (69.2%) stated that they had received sentences in the past. Only two prisoners were serving sentences of between 3 and 12 months, while 16 of them (61.5%) were serving sentences of three years or more. Eleven of the prisoners had been away from their families for at least one year as a result of their sentences.

8.2 Contact between prisoners and children

Nineteen of the prisoners said that they had lived with their children prior to their admission to prison. The remaining seven had had some form of contact with their children on a regular basis, ranging from seeing

them every day to seeing them at least once every six months. Sixteen of the caregivers said that the children in their care had lived with their parent prior to the start of the sentence.

Between them, the prisoners had a total of 57 children. Forty-five of them were living with their other parent since the start of the sentence, a further six were living with their grandparents, three were in foster care and two were living with another relation. The differential effect of imprisonment on children according to the gender of the parent who is in prison was illustrated by the responses. None of the children of female prisoners were in the full-time care of their fathers. Instead, they were being looked after by grandparents or other relatives or were in foster care. Of the 19 caregivers interviewed, only one was male. The responses indicate that children whose mothers are imprisoned are more likely to suffer from changes in their routine and living arrangements. In addition, the imprisonment of a mother may place more strains on the extended family, especially grandparents, if they are called on to take over the role of caregiver.

Previous studies carried out in other countries (eg, Healy et. al, 2000; Howard, 2000) have also indicated that the gender of the parent who is imprisoned has a large effect on determining who the child will live with during the sentence. As a result, particular attention needs to be paid by service providers to the children of female prisoners and to extended family networks, especially grandparents, who may find themselves unexpectedly faced with taking over the care of their grandchildren. The right of children to maintaining contact with their parents may also become an issue, depending on who takes over the care of children after the start of a sentence. If the relationship between the prisoner and the caregiver breaks down or did not exist to begin with (as may be the case with foster care), children may not be brought to visit in the prison. In some cases, they may have no say about whether or not they want to visit, because they are not consulted on the issue, while some may not even be aware of the situation. The breakdown in contact between children and their parents that may arise when a parent is imprisoned may constitute a breach of children's rights as set out in Article 9(3) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 24(3) of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, and Article 18.5 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The right of children to maintain contact with their parents needs to be respected throughout the duration of the prison sentence. It is proposed that a key departure point for the development of any services relating to the children and families of offenders would be the development of a system for collecting information about the parental status of prisoners.

²² The Irish Prison Service is currently part of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. However, it is government policy to establish it as a statutory, executive agency. It is expected that legislation on the change will be introduced in the Oireachtas early in 2002. Since April 1999, a non-executive Prisons Authority Interim Board has been in place to provide advice on the management of the prison system, pending the appointment of a statutory board. As such, the recommendations are directed towards the Irish Prison Service for the attention of the Prisons Authority Interim Board, rather than towards the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

All of the caregivers stated that they brought the children to visit their parent in prison at least once every three months, while 13 (68.4%) said that they came to visit at least once a week. Eighteen of the prisoners said that they received visits from their children at least once a month, while six stated that they never received visits. Contact through phone calls was very frequent: 14 prisoners (53.8%) said that they talked to their children on the phone daily or almost daily, while 17 caregivers (89.5%) said that the children in their care talked to their parent daily or almost daily. The responses indicate that telephone conversations play an important role in maintaining contact between prisoners and their children, especially in cases where children do not visit the prison on a regular basis. Strategy 7 of the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement, 2001-2003, calls for an examination of the possibility of increased phone contact between prisoners, their families and community-based services. In keeping with this, it is suggested that parents be allowed to have more phone contact with their children.

Recommendations for monitoring and encouraging contact between prisoners and their families:

- *Recommendation for the Irish Prison Service:* A system for monitoring the parental status of prisoners and the number of children they have needs to be established. Such data could be used to facilitate the planning and delivery of services for children affected by parental imprisonment.
- *Recommendation for the Irish Prison Service:* The amount of time allotted to prisoners for phone contact on a daily basis should be extended from the 6 minutes that they are currently allowed, in order to enhance the frequency and quality of contact they have with their children. Parents should be entitled to one 10-minute call to their children on a weekly basis, in addition to the other calls they are allowed.

8.3 Prison visiting arrangements

Only three of the prisoners interviewed (11.5%) said that they thought the visiting areas were suitable for family visits. The three respondents were female and were referring to the facilities in the Dochas Centre. The remainder (88.5%) expressed negative opinions about the visiting areas. Their views were mirrored by the caregivers, many of whom compared the visiting area in the men's prison very unfavourably with the play area in the Visitors' Centre. Among the main problems with the visiting area in the men's prison that were mentioned by respondents were

- Lack of facilities to help keep children amused during visits;
- The restrictions on physical contact between prisoners and their children;
- Lack of privacy;
- High levels of noise;
- Low standards of hygiene;
- The intimidating atmosphere in the visiting areas, which was believed to have a negative effect on children; and
- The awkward layout of the visiting area in the men's prison and the problems this caused visitors and prisoners who were trying to have conversations.

More positive views were expressed about the visiting area in the Dochas Centre, however. One respondent felt that it looked less like a prison, which made it easier for children. Another stated that the play area was helpful for keeping children amused during visits. Point 6 (vi) of the Council of Europe Recommendation 1340 (1997) on the Social and Family Effects of Detention calls for the improvement of conditions for prison visits with families. One way in which the atmosphere in visiting areas could be improved would be through the provision of in-service training for prison staff who work in visiting areas, which would help to raise awareness about issues affecting the children and families of prisoners.

The responses suggest that, at present, conditions in the visiting area in the Mountjoy men's prison do not encourage families to stay in contact with prisoners. Objective L of the National Children's Strategy states that children will have the opportunity to experience the qualities of family life, a right that may be affected by their perception of conditions in the visiting facilities. The condition of facilities may also have a negative effect on the rehabilitation process for prisoners who use drugs, as outlined in the National Drugs Strategy. The Strategy calls for the restoration of important friendships between prisoners and their families, which may be prevented if caregivers are unwilling to bring children to the prison because of conditions in the visiting area. The play area in the Visitors' Centre was commented on very positively by all caregivers and children, and could be used as a model for the introduction of a play area in the future. In the short term, consideration needs to be given to removing the partition that separates prisoners from their visitors, which constitutes a major obstacle to any type of contact between children and their fathers. While it is obvious that security concerns must be given priority in any prison visiting facilities, fears about the passing of drugs could be addressed through the introduction of urine samples for prisoners who are

allowed physical contact with their children. High-security prisons that allow physical contact between prisoners and their children, such as Maghaberry Prison in Northern Ireland, have introduced measures for searching visitors to allay any further worries about items being smuggled in²³.

A further issue that needs to be addressed is the fact that fathers in Mountjoy men's prison are not allowed to receive their 15-minute "special" visit on a Saturday. These visits are allowed on all other weekdays. If prisoners' children are in school or their caregivers are unable to bring them to the prison during the week because of work commitments, they may not be able to avail of the visit at all. The introduction of measures to improve the quality and frequency of contact between prisoners and their children could have the further benefit of making it easier for ex-offenders to reintegrate into society post-release.

The length of the visits also poses an obstacle to maintaining any type of meaningful contact between parents and children. The qualitative difference between regular visits with children and those that take place as part of the Connect Project were remarked on by all the men who had experience of the parenting days organised by the Project. Several stated that they would be happy to forgo other kinds of contact, in order to continue the two-hour visits. As outlined in Chapter 2, several prisons in Britain have introduced children's visit schemes and family visit schemes that allow prisoners to have more contact with their families, in a setting that is closer to the everyday context of family interactions, eg, eating a meal together or doing school work together. As discussed above, the introduction of urine samples could help to alleviate concerns about the passing of drugs²⁴.

In order to ensure that visitors are properly informed about prison visiting arrangements, the Irish Prison Service should consider compiling and publishing an information sheet for visitors. The information could include details on visiting times and arrangements in prisons, details about the telephone calls that prisoners are allowed, and information about any reception facilities available for visitors. Information on the social welfare entitlements of prisoners' families, the support services offered by voluntary groups, and any counselling services that are available should also be included.

²³ In Maghaberry prison, rub-down searches for visitors are currently being replaced by portals and hand-held metal detectors that make the searching procedure less invasive for visitors.

²⁴ During the interviews with parents in prison, several of the fathers brought up the subject of urine samples spontaneously and stated that they would be happy to give samples if it was necessary to improve the quality of their contact with their children.

The Visitors' Centre was commented on very favourably by all the caregivers and children who participated in the study, suggesting that such a service plays an important role for families who are visiting prisoners. The Mountjoy Visitors' Centre should be systematically evaluated and, subject to the recommendations arising, reception centres for visitors should be introduced into all prisons. Such centres could be run as a collaborative effort between voluntary and community groups working in prisons and the Irish Prison Service.

Recommendations concerning prison visiting arrangements:

- *Recommendation for the Irish Prison Service:* In-service training on working with families and children should be made available for staff who work in the visiting areas in prisons. This would help to foster a more family-friendly environment for children who are visiting prisons.
- *Recommendation for Mountjoy Prison (males):* The visiting facilities in the Mountjoy men's prison need to be reviewed as part of the Redevelopment Plan, in order to facilitate the maintenance of contact between prisoners and their children throughout the prison sentence. An immediate change that could be made would be the removal of the partition that separates prisoners from their visitors, which constitutes a physical obstruction to any contact they can have with their children. Any such changes would have to be accompanied by measures to address security concerns, eg, urine samples for prisoners and searches for visitors. In the long-term, the inclusion of a play area in the visiting area should be considered.
- *Recommendation for Mountjoy Prison:* Prisoners in Mountjoy men's prison should be entitled to receive their 15-minute visit on Saturdays, in order to encourage the maintenance of contact with their children.
- *Recommendation for the Irish Prison Service:* The children's visit schemes and family visit schemes that are operated in some British prisons provide one possible model for encouraging meaningful contact between prisoners and their families and could be introduced by the Irish Prison Service on a pilot basis. Concerns about the passing of drugs during visits could be addressed through the introduction of urine samples for all prisoners who are allowed physical contact with their children.
- *Recommendation for the Irish Prison Service:* Consideration should be given to the publication of a leaflet for visitors that contains such details as prison visiting arrangements, Social Welfare

entitlements for the families of prisoners, and any visitors' reception facilities that are available in the various prisons.

- *Recommendations for the voluntary sector and the Irish Prison Service:* Consideration should be given to establishing reception centres for visitors in prisons in the state. The Mountjoy Visitors' Centre could provide a possible model for future facilities, subject to evaluation. Voluntary organisations already working with prisoners and their families would be well placed to set up such services, in collaboration with the Irish Prison Service.

8.4 Children's awareness of parents' prison sentences

The responses indicated that a large number of children had not been informed about the reason for their parents' absence. Sixteen of the parents in prison (61.5%) stated that their children were not aware that they were in prison, while 13 (68.4%) of caregivers said that the children in their care did not know about the sentence. However, several respondents felt that the children had guessed or had some idea. Among the explanations given for the parents' absence were work, the army, the navy, and hospital.

The main reasons why parents and caregivers said that they had not told children about the sentence were

- Fears that the child might get too upset
- Belief that the child was too young to understand
- Worries that the child might think it's okay to go to prison
- Worries about what other people might think if they knew

As outlined in Chapter 2.4, the fact that children may not be told that their parent is in prison is a relatively common phenomenon in other countries. However, as was also outlined, not telling children can give rise to fears about where the parent really is. It denies them the opportunity to discuss their feelings, which may affect their ability to process the effects of trauma. The findings of this study suggested that children's behaviour tended to change following the start of a parent's sentence. Respondents talked about children blaming themselves for their parents' absence; becoming more withdrawn or exhibiting more aggressive behaviour; and figuring out what was going on, but pretending not to know because their caregiver had not yet explained the situation to them. In order to minimise the potentially negative effects that may result from children's uncertainty about the reason for their parents' absence, caregivers and parents should be encouraged by service providers who work in the area to inform children about the prison sentence as soon as possible.

However, it is important that support services for both children and caregivers are in place before any such code is developed, in order to ensure that appropriate and sufficient follow-up assistance is available for them. Many prisoners and caregivers were obviously concerned about how to tell their children about the prison sentence, in addition to worrying about how they would react to the news. There is a need for the establishment of counselling services for both children and caregivers that would help them to broach the topic in an appropriate manner and address any of the issues that may arise. A counselling service and a support group are available through the Visitors' Centre in Mountjoy, and could provide a possible model for future developments in this area, subject to evaluation. Funding for support and counselling services could be made available through the Family Support Agency of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.

Recommendations regarding the caregivers of children whose parents are in prison:

- *Recommendation for the Irish Prison Service:* A code of practice on informing children about a parent's imprisonment that is targeted at all service providers who work with prisoners, their children, and their families should be drawn up and published by the Irish Prison Service. This code should be prepared in consultation with representative groups from the voluntary sector. It could form part of wider efforts to introduce positive sentence management for prisoners by taking into consideration the needs of families throughout the sentence.
- *Recommendation for the Family Support Agency:* The introduction of counselling services and support groups for caregivers is necessary in order to provide them with support throughout the sentence. Areas of particular concern that should be addressed by such groups include financial advice and support, advice on how to tell children that their parent is in prison, and advice on behavioural problems that may arise. These services and support groups should be funded by the Family Support Agency, which should work in conjunction with the Irish Prison Service and voluntary groups to identify pertinent issues. Again, support for the families of prisoners could form part of any positive sentence management programme, as it would help to ensure that the families remain intact throughout the sentence.

8.5 Effects of imprisonment on parent/child relationships

Twenty-five of the prisoners (96.2%) stated that they found it difficult or very difficult to keep up a relationship with their children while they were in prison. Among the reasons that were given for the difficulties were the shortness of visiting times, the conditions in the visiting areas, and the parents' loss of authority as a result of their absence from the home. In addition, several parents mentioned the fact that they had been away from their children during important stages of their development, which they felt had affected their ability to bond. None of the parents in prison were very satisfied with the amount of participation they had in making decisions about their children's lives. Even those who believed they still had some input into making decisions felt that the final decisions were up to the child's caregiver. Several of the parents expressed concerns about the fact that they were no longer in a relationship with their children's caregivers, which made it difficult for them to make any kind of contribution to decisions about the children's lives.

Most of the caregivers felt that their children's behaviour towards their parents in prison had changed since the start of the sentence. Among the main changes that they had noticed were increased affection, shyness, clinging to the parent, and a sense of awkwardness with the parent during visits. The findings are very worrying in light of the fact that the majority of respondents believed that the prisoner would be living with the children at the end of the sentence. Eighteen of the caregivers (94.7%) said they believed the prisoner would live with his/her children on release, while the remaining respondent thought that the parent would not live with the children but would stay in touch. Nineteen of the prisoners (73.1%) stated that they were planning to live with their children when their sentence finished. Of the remaining seven, all said that they did not expect to live with their children when their sentence finished but that they would keep in contact with them.

If children are not able to have regular and prolonged contact with their parents throughout the sentence, it is very likely that a sense of alienation will be established, which will make the transition back to the home very difficult for both parties. Again, Objective L of the National Children's Strategy outlines the right of children to the opportunity to experience the qualities of family life, a right that may be negatively affected post-sentence if contact is not maintained or breaks down while the parent is in prison.

The introduction of parenting courses for all prisoners, where appropriate, could help them to maintain relationships with their children. The research indicated

that there was a very positive response to the parenting course run as part of the Connect Project. One of the aims of the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement is the extension of all parenting courses to prisons where they are appropriate. If records were kept about the parental status of prisoners, it would facilitate the extension of parenting courses to prisons where they are not yet available. In some cases, pre-course counselling may be needed to ensure that parents can deal with any issues that may arise, as was highlighted by the fact that the parenting course was withdrawn from the Dochas Centre. Participants found it very upsetting to talk about certain topics and no concomitant counselling was available for those who required it.

Recommendations concerning parenting courses for prisoners:

- *Recommendation for the Irish Prison Service:* In keeping with Strategy 11 of the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement, 2001-2003, it is recommended that parenting courses be made available in all prisons, where appropriate. The parenting course run as part of the Connect Project in Mountjoy men's prison received very positive reviews from participants and could be used as a model for future programmes, subject to evaluation.
- *Recommendation for Mountjoy Prison (Dochas Centre):* In certain circumstances, such as in the Dochas Centre, parenting courses may need to be augmented by pre-course counselling to ensure that participants are comfortable discussing the topics that are raised.

8.6 Effects of imprisonment on children's financial situation

Ten of the prisoners (38.5%) said that their children's financial situation had got "a lot worse" since the start of their sentence, while seven (26.9%) said that it had got "a little worse". A further seven (26.9%) felt that it had stayed the same, and two stated that it had improved a little. Several of the respondents felt that their imprisonment had had a negative effect on their extended families, on the children's caregivers, and on the children's ability to partake in social activities. However, two stated that they had drug habits before their admission into prison and felt that their children's financial status had probably improved a little since their sentences began.

The caregivers interviewed had a slightly different outlook on the financial effects of the parent's imprisonment. Three (15.8%) stated that the financial situation had got "a lot worse"; four (21.2%) said that it

had got “a little worse”; and eleven (57.9%) stated that it had “stayed the same”. One (5.3%) stated that the children’s financial situation had improved a little. Again, extended families were mentioned as a source of support, in addition to which several caregivers stated that they had started to work outside the home in order to ensure that the children did not suffer financially.

The responses suggest that some caregivers and their children are adversely affected by the imprisonment of a parent who may have been contributing financially to the family before the start of the sentence. In addition to the loss of income, some caregivers have to take up or change their employment in order to provide for children. The changes can affect children, both in terms of their economic status and in relation to the amount of attention they may receive, if their caregiver has to work and look after them at home. Extra strains may be placed on extended family networks, with family members finding themselves in the position of supporting the children because there is no-one else to do so. As a result, the likelihood that some children of prisoners will find themselves at risk of relative poverty or consistent poverty is increased: the children of lone parents, which would include children with a parent in prison, are defined as one of the high-poverty risk groups under the NAPS. Concerns about losing their job if people found out about the sentence were also voiced by caregivers, which increases the risks that children would be affected by poverty.

Recommendations concerning the financial wellbeing of prisoners’ children:

- *Recommendation for the implementation of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy:* The children of prisoners need to be given attention as a specific target group of the NAPS. The establishment of a Working Group on Prisoners’ Children, composed of representatives from the voluntary and statutory sectors, could help to advance their needs and concerns at the national level.
- *Recommendation for the Irish Prison Service:* In collaboration with voluntary groups that work with the children of prisoners, the Irish Prison Service should introduce measures to ensure that the caregivers of prisoners’ children are put in touch with MABS. This would help to ensure that they are assisted to maximise their income and manage their finances as effectively as possible.
- *Recommendation for future research:* Further research into the financial and other effects of parental imprisonment should be funded by the National Children’s Office, in order to identify specific measures that could be introduced to assist families affected by incarceration.

8.7 Support services

Only three of the nineteen caregivers said that they had contact with any support groups: two stated that they received help from drug counselling services, while one was supported by the staff of the Visitors’ Centre. The remaining 16 said that they received no support from voluntary or statutory organisations, but relied on their families and friends for help. The findings illustrate the need that exists for targeted supports for the families of prisoners and the caregivers of their children, as discussed above.

When asked about support that the children in their care received in school, eleven caregivers said that the children did go to school, but only two said that the teacher was aware of the prison sentence. Both stated that the teachers had either been very supportive or supportive of the children. The findings indicate that schools and teachers could play an important role in helping children to cope with the effects of parental imprisonment. The introduction of training courses for teachers on recognising and dealing with the changes that may occur in children’s behaviour if one of their parents is in prison would help to minimise the negative effects on children’s educational progress.

Although some of the prisoners stated that their sentence had not had a negative impact on their children’s progress in school, concerns were voiced about how the children would be treated by their peers. Several childcare workers from the Visitors’ Centre also stated that children’s behaviour in school could often change as a result of parental imprisonment. The introduction of programmes in primary and post-primary schools that discuss some of the issues that can arise for the children of prisoners would help to make debate about the topic more open. Programmes could be used to target any discrimination that the children of prisoners might be experiencing because of their parents’ status, which is contrary to Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Most importantly, the introduction of confidential counselling services and support groups for children that could be accessed through schools would help to provide children with support and assistance at every stage of the prison sentence. Services could be offered through the National Educational Psychological Service, which has operated in primary and secondary schools since 1998.

The research indicates that children are rarely considered or consulted at any stage of a parent’s prison sentence. Their lack of input may lead to a breakdown in the quality and frequency of their contact with their parents. This constitutes a breach of their rights as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the

European Convention on Human Rights, in addition to ignoring the objectives of the National Children's Strategy. The National Children's Strategy established the National Children's Office, which includes "local, statutory and voluntary agency representatives... to address particular issues and to identify better-tailored solutions" (2000: 85). The inclusion of representatives from both voluntary and statutory groups that work with the children and families of prisoners would help to ensure that the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment are given greater consideration throughout the implementation of the Strategy.

Recommendations for support services for the children of prisoners:

- *Recommendation for the Department of Education and Science:* In-service training for teachers who work with the children of prisoners should be introduced. The Department should work in collaboration with the Irish Prison Service to ensure that training is targeting schools and teachers in the areas most affected by imprisonment. In addition, representatives from groups that work with children affected by imprisonment should be involved in the development of training modules.
- *Recommendation for the Department of Education and Science:* A counselling service that caters specifically for the children of prisoners and that is accessible through schools needs to be established, initially operating on a pilot basis in schools where it is known that students are affected by parental imprisonment. The service could be introduced through the National Educational Psychological Service. Again, collaboration with the Irish Prison Service would be necessary to ensure that services are being directed towards schools in relevant areas.
- *Recommendation for the National Children's Office:* Voluntary and statutory groups that work with the children of prisoners should be involved in developing initiatives to support the children, in collaboration with the National Children's Office. This would help to ensure that the needs of prisoners' children are considered throughout the implementation of the National Children's Strategy.
- *Recommendation for future research:* The National Children's Office should fund research into the needs and concerns of children whose parents are in prison, in order that they be properly consulted about the development of any services aimed at assisting them.

8.8 Effects of imprisonment on children's behaviour

Most of the prisoners and the caregivers stated that their children's behaviour had changed in some way since the start of the sentence. Among the most frequently mentioned changes were the following:

- Hyperactivity;
- Becoming quiet and withdrawn;
- "Acting up" with caregivers as a result of the parents' absence;
- Shyness with parents during visits; and
- Depression.

The responses are similar to those discovered by research carried out in other countries, as outlined in Chapter 2. One cause of such changes may be the fact that the prison sentence has not been discussed with children, so they are unable to discuss it with their parents or with others. The establishment of support groups for children may create a safe environment where they could talk about any problems they may have with others, and show them that there are other children in a similar situation.

8.9 Stigma as a result of parental imprisonment

Several of the caregivers stated that they would worry about how people would react to their children if they heard that their father was in prison. In particular, two mentioned that their children might be stigmatised if people heard what their parents were in prison for. However, several also stated that they had received enormous support from the communities in which they lived, and that they would not worry at all about how their children would be treated. One said that she worried that her children would see the prison sentence as a good thing that made their father a hero. Two respondents stated that they were concerned that their children would be stigmatised when they got older, but that they were still too young to feel the effects.

Several of the prisoners stated that they were concerned about how people would react to their children as a result of their imprisonment. In particular, they mentioned the fact that children could be bullied by their peers or hear about the sentence in a disparaging fashion from people in their community. The issue of parental imprisonment needs to receive more attention in Irish society. The recognition of problems that may arise for children would lead to greater openness about the issue and help to stimulate debate as to how best to cope with the effects, thereby lessening the chance that children will be discriminated against because of their parents' actions or status. Several of the recommend-

ations outlined above could help to address the lack of debate that has taken place about the topic to date, including the development of a code of practice for service providers on informing children about a parent's prison sentence, and the introduction of training for prison staff, teachers, and other service providers. The implementation framework set out in the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement (2000: 63) could also be used as a means of ensuring that the concerns of the children and families of prisoners are given wider consideration. It calls for regular reviews of progress in implementing the objectives of the Strategy. The inclusion of representatives from groups that work with the children and families in any such review would help to guarantee that their situation is given more consideration and that the important role they can play in supporting offenders throughout a sentence is recognised.

Recommendation for increasing debate about the needs of prisoners' children:

- *Recommendation for the Irish Prison Service:* A group representing the interests of children and families affected by imprisonment should be consulted in any future reviews of the progress of the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement, 2001-2003.

Chapter 9

Recommendations

Chapter 9:

Recommendations

The recommendations referred to in the previous chapter are divided here into the following four groups for the purpose of clarity: policy recommendations, recommendations for the Irish prison service, recommendations for the Mountjoy Prison complex, and recommendations for future research.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **A code of practice for all service providers should be developed on informing children about a parent's prison sentence.** The code of practice should be drawn up and published by the Irish Prison Service, as part of efforts to promote positive sentence management by supporting families throughout a prison sentence.
- **The introduction of counselling services and support groups for caregivers is necessary in order to provide them with support throughout the sentence.** Funding for such services could be made available through the Family Support Agency. Counselling and support groups could constitute another aspect of positive sentence management, through the provision of support for prisoners' families.
- **The children of prisoners need to be given attention as a specific target group of the NAPs.** The establishment of a Working Group on Prisoners' Children, composed of representatives from the voluntary and statutory sectors, could help to advance their needs and concerns at the national level.
- **Representatives from voluntary and statutory groups working with prisoners' children should be involved in developing initiatives to support the children, in collaboration with the National Children's Office.** This would help to ensure that the children's needs are considered throughout the implementation of the National Children's Strategy.
- **In-service training should be introduced for teachers who work with the children of prisoners.** The Department of Education and Science should offer training for teachers who work with children affected by parental imprisonment,

particularly in areas where it is known that there are high levels of parental imprisonment. Such areas could be identified through collaboration with the Irish Prison Service.

- **Support groups and counselling services that cater for the children of prisoners and that are accessible through schools should be established.** Pilot schemes could be operated initially in schools where it is known that students are affected by parental imprisonment. The service could be introduced through the National Educational Psychological Service Agency, which could work with the Irish Prison Service to ensure that services are being directed towards schools in relevant areas.
- **Consideration should be given to establishing visitors' reception centres in all prisons in the state.** The Mountjoy Visitors' Centre could provide a possible model for reception facilities for visitors, subject to evaluation. Voluntary organisations and community groups already working with prisoners and their families would be well placed to set up such services, in collaboration with the Irish Prison Service.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IRISH PRISON SERVICE

- **A system for monitoring the parental status of prisoners needs to be established.** It would enable records to be kept about the total number of children affected by parental imprisonment, which would facilitate the effective planning and delivery of services to ensure that contact is maintained between prisoners and their children, where appropriate
- **The amount of time allotted to prisoners for phone contact on a daily basis should be extended from the 6 minutes that they are currently allowed.** An extension of the time allowed for phone calls would help to enhance the frequency and quality of contact parents in prison have with their children. Parents in prison should therefore be allowed to have one ten-minute phone call to their children on a weekly basis, in addition to the other calls they are allowed.
- **Prison staff should receive specific training on working with prisoners and their families.** In-service training should be made available for staff who work in the visiting areas in prisons, in order to help foster a more family-friendly environment for children who are visiting prisons.

- **The caregivers of prisoners' children should be put in touch with MABS.** This would help to ensure that they are assisted to maximise their income and manage their finances as effectively as possible.
- **Greater efforts must be made to encourage the maintenance of contact between prisoners and their children throughout the sentence.** The children's visit schemes and family visit schemes that are operated in some British prisons provide one possible model for encouraging meaningful contact between prisoners and their families and could be introduced by the Irish Prison Service on a pilot basis. Concerns about the passing of drugs during visits could be addressed through the introduction of urine samples for all prisoners who are allowed physical contact with their children.
- **Parenting courses should be made available in all prisons, where appropriate.** In keeping with Strategy 11 of the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement, 2001-2003, it is recommended that parenting courses be made available in all prisons, where appropriate. The parenting course run in Mountjoy men's prison received very positive reviews from participants and could be used as a model for future programmes, subject to evaluation.
- **Consideration should be given to the publication of a leaflet for visitors that contains details about prison visiting arrangements.** Such a leaflet could also set out Social Welfare entitlements for the families of prisoners and provide contact information for any visitors' reception facilities that are available.
- **A group representing the interests of children and families affected by imprisonment should be included any future reviews of the progress of the Irish Prison Service Strategy Statement, 2001-2003.**
- **A play area for children should be introduced into the visiting facilities in the men's prison.** This would both enhance the overall atmosphere and help to relax the children.
- **The introduction of parenting courses into the Dochas Centre should be accompanied by pre-course counselling.** In certain circumstances, such as in the Dochas Centre, parenting courses may need to be augmented by pre-course counselling to ensure that participants are comfortable discussing the topics that are raised.
- **Prisoners in Mountjoy men's prison should be entitled to receive 15-minute visits on Saturdays, in order to encourage the maintenance of contact with their children.**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- **Further research into the financial effects of parental imprisonment should be carried out.** The research, which could be funded by the National Children's Office, could identify specific measures that could be introduced to assist families affected by incarceration.
- **Before any counselling or support services are set up for children, research should be undertaken into what they would like to see such services providing.** Consultation with children is one of the primary objectives of the National Children's Strategy. Research into their needs and concerns could be funded by the National Children's Office, to ensure that their opinions are given due consideration.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOUNTJOY PRISON

Changes need to be made to the visiting area in the men's prison. The visiting facilities in the Mountjoy men's prison need to be reviewed as part of the Redevelopment Plan, in order to facilitate the maintenance of contact between prisoners and their children. An immediate change that could be made would be the removal of the barrier that separates prisoners from their visitors, which constitutes a physical obstruction to any contact they can have with their children. Any such changes would have to be accompanied by measures to address security concerns, eg, urine samples for prisoners and searches for visitors.

Appendix 1

Connect Project

Appendix 1 – Connect Project

The first stage of the Connect Project began in February 1998, and the programme was introduced into the Dochas Centre at the start of 2000. It is an action-research project run by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in collaboration with the National Training and Development Institute of the REHAB Group. It focuses on offenders' transition from custody through the use of training, and aims to help them with reintegration into the community and the labour force after release. The project is divided into the following categories:

- The Options programme, which provides offenders with an opportunity to explore career options and take part in personal development modules, including parenting courses
- The Individual Programme Planning Process, which sets long- and short-term social, personal, and vocational goals for each participant
- Certified training programmes

The Connect programme in the Dochas Centre did run a parenting course in the past. However, the course was not as successful as the one run in the men's prison. Many of the female participants found it traumatic because they related it to incidences of abuse that took place in their own childhood. The course facilitator thought that it was raising too many issues that there was neither the time nor the opportunity to deal with, and so it was discontinued. However, if such a course were run in another context (eg, on its own, and with knowledge of the issues that could arise), there is a possibility that it could be successful.

In the men's prison, fathers who have participated in the Options Programme of the Connect Project are given the possibility to take part in a parenting morning once every three months. On this occasion, the auditorium in the prison is turned into a play area, where fathers can spend two hours with their children. The parenting day has been very successful and is open to every parent who has taken part in the programme.

Appendix 2

The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children

Information Sheet

Appendix 2 – The effects of parental imprisonment on children – information sheet

What is the project about?

A survey is being done about the effects on children of having one of their parents in prison. Information is being collected about children who are between ages 3 and 12 and about their parents and families. The information is being collected for the Management Committee who run the Visitors' Centre in Mountjoy. The person who is collecting the information (Dervla King) will be visiting prisons in July and August. Anything that she is told will be kept private, so that no-one else will know who said it.

Why is the information being collected?

The information is being collected so that people can get a better idea about any problems that children have when their parents are in prison. A report will be written based on the information that is collected from parents, children and close family members. **No-one has to take part in the survey unless they want to.**

How will the information be collected?

Information will be collected from children who use the play area in the Visitors' Centre. The researcher will talk to the children about how they feel about their parent being away from home. Parents will be asked to give their permission before any information is collected. **All the information given will be confidential and no names will be used.**

Parents and close family members will also be asked if they want to join in the survey. If they do, they will be asked some questions by the researcher. The questions will be about their children and about any problems they face because their mother or father is in prison. **Everything they say will be kept private and confidential.**

Who will collect the information?

The Centre for Social and Educational Research (also called the CSER), which is part of the Dublin Institute of Technology, has been asked to collect the information. The people who work with the CSER have done a lot of research work with families and young people. Dervla King, who works with the CSER, will be speaking with the people who are involved with the Visitors' Centre, with parents and with children.

Why should I take part?

Because your experiences are very important. Hearing what you have to say about the effects of prisons on children is one of the most important parts of the survey. You have information about it that no-one else does.

If you would like to know anything about the survey, please phone Dervla King at (01) 402 7846.

Appendix 3

Questionnaire for Parents in Prison

Appendix 3:

Questionnaire for Parents in Prison

		Col/ Code	Skip To:		Col/ Code	Skip To:
1	Gender	Male (1) Female (2)				
2	Age Group	18-24 (1) 25-34 (2) 35-44 (3) 45+ (4)				
3	What was your country of birth?	Ireland (1) Other (2)				
4	How many children do you have?	One (1) Two (2) Three (3) Four (4) Five or more (5)				
5	What ages are the children?	0-3 (1) 4-6 (2) 7-9 (3) 10-12 (4)				
6	What is your marital status?	Co-habiting (1) Married (2) Widowed (3) Divorced (4) Separated (5) Single (6)				
7	How long is your prison sentence from beginning to end?	Remand (1) Three months or less (2) More than 3 mths/less than 12 mths (3) One to three years (4) More than three years (5)				
8	How long have you been in prison on this sentence/remand?	Remand (1) Three months or less (2) More than 3 mths/less than 12 mths (3) One to three years (4) More than three years (5)				
9	Have you had any previous sentences?	Yes (1) No (2)				11
10	If yes, how many?	One (1) Two (2) Three-five (3) Six + (4)				
11	Did you live with your child/ren prior to admission?	Yes (1) No (2)				13
12	If not, how often did you have contact with your children?	Daily/almost daily (1) At least once a week (2) At least once a month (3) Less than once a month (4) Never (5)				
13	Was the fact that you are a parent recorded when you were admitted into prison?	Yes (1) No (2)				
14	If applicable, were you given time to get someone else to take care of your child/ren before you were taken into custody:	Yes (1) No (2) N/A (3)				
15	Who is the child's current care-giver?	Child's other parent (1) Child's grandparent (2) Other relative (3) Friend (4) Foster care (5) Other-specify (6)				

Semi-Structured, In-depth Interviews with Imprisoned Parents.

Visits from children:

How does your child behave when s/he comes to visit you, eg, is s/he comfortable, bored, etc?

Do you think you get a chance to talk to him/her properly?

Children's Behaviour:

Do you think that your child's attitude towards you has changed since your sentence began, eg, more clingy, easily upset, quieter, louder...?

Does the person who is looking after your child say that his/her behaviour has changed? In what ways?

Attitudes:

How do you feel about being a mother/father in prison, eg, no different to outside, frustrated with being in prison, helpless, try not to think about it...?

Appendix 4

Questionnaire for Caregivers

Appendix 4: Questionnaire for Caregivers

		Col/ Code	Skip To:		Col/ Code	Skip To:
1	Gender					
	Male	(1)				
	Female	(2)				
2	Age Group					
	18-24	(1)				
	25-35	(2)				
	36-45	(3)				
	45 +	(4)				
3	What was your country of birth?					
	Ireland	(1)				
	Other-specify	(2)				
4	What is your relationship to the prisoner you visit?					
	Partner	(1)				
	Ex-partner	(2)				
	Son	(3)				
	Daughter	(4)				
	Friend	(6)				
	Other-specify	(7)				
5	How many children do you bring to visit the prison?					
	One	(1)				
	Two	(2)				
	Three	(3)				
	Four	(4)				
	Five or more	(5)				
6	What ages are the children?					
	0-4	(1)				
	4-6	(2)				
	7-10	(3)				
	10-13	(4)				
	12 +	(5)				
7	What is your relationship to the child/ren you bring to visit?					
	Own child/ren	(1)				
	Partner's child/ren	(2)				
	Grandparent	(3)				
	Other relative	(4)				
	Friend's child/ren	(5)				
	Other-specify	(6)				
8	Have you always been the main caregiver for the child/ren you bring to visit?					
	Yes	(1)			10	
	No	(2)				
9	If not, did you take over the role when the child/ren's parent was imprisoned?					
	Yes	(1)				
	No	(2)				
10	How often do you see the person you are visiting?					
	Once a week or more	(1)				
	At least once every two weeks	(2)				
	At least once a month	(3)				
	At least once every three months	(4)				
	Less than every three months	(5)				
11	How often do you bring the prisoner's children to visit?					
	Once a week or more	(1)				
	At least once every two weeks	(2)				
	At least once a month	(3)				
	At least once every three months	(4)				
	Less than every three months	(5)				
12	How often do the child/ren have phone contact with the prisoner?					
	Daily/almost daily	(1)				
	At least once a week	(2)				
	At least once a month	(3)				
	Less than once a month	(4)				
	Never	(5)				
13	How often do the child/ren have contact with the prisoner through cards/letters?					
	Daily/almost daily	(1)				
	At least once a week	(2)				
	At least once a month	(3)				
	Less than once a month	(4)				
	Never	(5)				

	Col/ Code	Skip To:		Col/ Code	Skip To:
14 Did the child/ren that you bring to the Centre live with his/her parent before their imprisonment?					
Yes	(1)		Yes	(1)	
No	(2)		No	(2)	22
			N/A: child is too young	(3)	
15 Is the child/ren you bring to the Centre aware that his/her parent is in prison?					
Yes	(1)	17	Very supportive	(1)	
No	(2)		Supportive	(2)	
			Unsupportive	(3)	
			Very unsupportive	(4)	
16 If not, why does the child/ren not know?					
caregiver unsure how to explain situation	(1)				
caregiver worried that child might get upset	(2)				
caregiver worried about what other people might think	(3)		Yes	(1)	
caregiver worried that child would think it's ok to go to prison	(4)		No	(2)	24
caregiver thinks child is too young to understand	(5)				
other - specify	(6)				
17 How far do you have to travel to get to the prison?					
0 - 3	(1)				
4 - 6	(2)				
7 - 9	(3)				
10+ miles	(4)				
18 How do you get to the prison?					
Car	(1)				
Bus	(2)				
Walk	(3)				
Other - specify	(4)				
19 Since the parent's sentence began, do you think the child/ren's financial situation has:					
Got a lot worse	(1)				
Got a little worse	(2)				
Stayed the same	(3)				
Improved a little	(4)				
Improved a lot	(5)				
			20 Is the child's teacher aware that the parent is in prison?		
			Yes	(1)	
			No	(2)	22
			N/A: child is too young	(3)	
			21 If yes, how supportive do you think s/he has been?		
			Very supportive	(1)	
			Supportive	(2)	
			Unsupportive	(3)	
			Very unsupportive	(4)	
			22 Do you have any links with any agencies/ organisations to help you and your children during and after release?		
			Yes	(1)	
			No	(2)	24
			23 If yes, please list:		
			Staff of Visitors' Centre	(1)	
			Prison Officers	(2)	
			Probation and Welfare Officers	(3)	
			Support groups - specify	(4)	
			24 On release, do you expect the prisoner to:		
			Live at home with child/ren	(1)	
			Keep in touch but not live with children	(2)	
			Other- specify	(3)	

Semi-structured, In-depth Interviews

Children's reactions to visiting the prison

Does your child/ren enjoy using the play area?

Does s/he behave differently in the visiting area in the prison?

Does s/he get a chance to talk to mother/father properly during visits?

Children's behaviour – general

Has the child's behaviour changed since the parent was imprisoned, eg, has s/he become more moody, clingy, easily upset, withdrawn, having problems in school...

Has the way the child behaves with the parent changed since s/he was imprisoned, eg, does the child/ren act in a different way towards the parent when visiting than before?

Children's behaviour - health

Have you noticed any changes in the child's health since the parent was imprisoned? Eg, nightmares, bed-wetting, stomach pains or headaches, anxiety

Children's behaviour with others

Does the child talk about the parent's absence with others, eg, members of the family, friends, teachers?

If yes, how do they respond, eg, helpful and listen to the child, supportive, unhelpful, bad reactions....

If not, do you have any ideas about why the child doesn't like to discuss it?

Appendices 5 – 7

(5) Consent form for parents in prison

(6) Consent form for Carers

(7) Parental Consent Form

Appendix 5: Consent form for parents in prison

Date: _____

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER: _____

About this Interview – For Your Information

The aim of this interview is to collect information about the effects on children of having a parent in prison. Information is being collected from parents in prison and from caregivers whose children use the play area in the Mountjoy Visitors' Centre.

For the interview, you will be asked questions about how many children you have, the kinds of contact you have with them, what it's like when they visit, and any changes you have noticed in their behaviour.

- Participation in the interview is entirely voluntary
- You can stop the interview any time you want
- **All the information collected from the interview will be kept anonymous and no names will be used when the report is being written**

Thanks for taking part in the interviews.

Consent Agreed: Yes No

Signature of researcher: _____

The Centre for Social and Educational Research is an independent research agency within the Dublin Institute of Technology

Appendix 6: Consent form for caregivers

Date: _____

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER: _____

About this Interview – For Your Information

The aim of this interview is to collect information about the effects on children of having a parent in prison. Information is being collected from parents and from other caregivers whose children use the play area in the Mountjoy Visitors' Centre.

For the interview, you will be asked questions about how many children you bring to visit in the prison, your relationship to the children, how often you and the children have contact with the person you are visiting, your views on the Visitors' Centre, and any of the ways that the children's behaviour has changed since their parent's sentence began.

- Participation in the interview is entirely voluntary
- You can stop the interview any time you want
- **All the information collected from the interview is strictly confidential and no names will be used**

The Centre for Social and Educational Research is an independent research agency within the Dublin Institute of Technology

Thanks for taking part in the interviews.

Consent Agreed: Yes No

Signature of researcher: _____

Appendix 7: Parental Consent Form

Date: _____

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

For Your Information

The aim of this interview is to collect information about the effects on children of having a parent in prison. Information is being collected from parents in prison, from caregivers whose children use the play area in the Mountjoy Visitors' Centre, and from the children themselves.

If you give your consent, the researcher will ask your child/ren some questions about who they are coming to visit, how often they come, what they think of the play area, and whether they enjoy their visits. No mention will be made about prison, unless the child is aware of the situation.

- The interview will not take place unless both you and your child/ren agree to it
- You or your child/ren can stop the interview at any time
- **All the information collected from the interview will be kept confidential and no names will be used when the report is being written**

Thanks for your help.

Consent Agreed: Yes No

Signature of researcher: _____

The Centre for Social and Educational Research is an independent research agency within the Dublin Institute of Technology.

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