

The Voice of a Child

Introduction

Forcibly separating children from their primary carer, particularly their mother, can cause severe distress and leave permanent emotional scars (Bowlby, 1951; Brown et al 2001). The Howard League for Penal Reform estimates that more than 17,000 children under 18 years in England and Wales were forcibly separated from their mother in 2010.

In the 1990s, the Howard League first brought the issue of prisoners' children to public attention. We aimed to give these forgotten children a voice and a profile that would enable decision makers and opinion formers to understand more about these previously faceless children. This was the first time that the children themselves had been asked what they thought about having their mother in prison. Now, nearly twenty years later, the Howard League revisited this research. Women's imprisonment rates have remained at around 5% of the prison population. A burgeoning number given that the current prison population is over 85,500. This means that there has been a threefold increase in the number of children affected by the imprisonment of their mother than when the original research was published.

A full version of this report can be found at www.howardleague.org

The Children's Stories

Michelle¹

Michelle is 16 years old. She had two sisters aged 20 and 7 years. Michelle split her time between her own home and her parent's home. Michelle took most of the caring responsibility for her younger sister, as well as caring for her own baby: *I have got a little girl of my own, I mean, I honestly don't mind doing it, but I'm in two places at once and trying to lead two lives at once as well – it's pretty hard.*

Michelle thought that the separation from her mother was particularly hard for her younger sister: *...my little sister's ... really, really close to my mum and it's her that's finding it really difficult now, as well as me, with my mum being here, 'cos she's never been parted from my mum since she was a baby ... she [her younger sister] finds it very difficult when she goes to school, 'cos my mum used to always take her to school and everybody keeps asking her where her mum is ... and we've got to lie to my little sister 'cos we don't want her knowing where her mum is and why*

¹ All names used are pseudonyms

Michelle kept the fact that her mum was in prison to herself: *I've only told one of my friends but she's the closest person to me ... I don't really like telling people what's happening to mum because they might think she's a bad person...*

When asked what she is looking forward to most when her mum came out of prison, she simply said: *Just being with her.*

Mark

Mark was a 14 year old boy of mixed race from south London. He had one sister and a step brother and sister. His mother had been in prison on remand for four months when we spoke to him; in that time he had moved twice. First he lived with his sister until they were thrown out of that accommodation. Mark was living with foster parents. This was not the first time that Mark has been separated from his mother, in the past he had lived with his grandmother.

Mark as unhappy at school. He still attended the same school as he did before his mother went to prison. This he found difficult and he wanted to change schools: *... I'm always getting picked on ... people cuff me one and I end up having a fight ... then end up being on report ... Quite a few people know [that his mother is in prison] in school ... some of them happened to find out and I told one person and they've obviously told other people ... I don't really mind as long as they don't start saying things about her*

Mark did not say much throughout the interview – many of the questions were answered in a few quietly spoken words, often interrupted with tearful sniffs.

When Mark was asked what he missed most about his mum not being with him, he said: *Love, getting things and stuff like that, and playing stuff.*

Chloe and Tony

Chloe was 17 years old and brought her own young daughter to the visits. Tony was 11 years old. They had two older sisters. The family lived together in south-east London in their mother's home which was being repossessed: *We're all just trying to keep hold of the house at the moment, trying to keep the house for mum so when she comes out she can still live in her house, I think, like, if anything, we owe her that ... for all that she's done for us all ...*

Chloe told us: *I think everyone is finding it really hard at the moment but the hardest is Tony because he's got his big sisters there but I still think he finds it hard that mum's in here, 'cos sometimes we are so busy on our own things, we don't get time to give him enough attention ... he sees us as "big sister" not as mum [who] he can go to and cuddle ...*

This was the first time that they could remember being separated from their mum for any period of time longer than that of a summer holiday; but they had pulled together with the older sisters caring for Tony: *We've just got to do it for mum really. Just so she can be proud of us...*

Chloe's mother has been in prison nine months and she commented on their changing behaviour: *I suppose we behave a lot more responsible ... we've all had to grow up quickly ...*

Chloe wanted to: *... sit down and talk to her and tell her my problems [laughs] boyfriend problems* when her mum came home.

Denise

Denise was 20 years old. She lived in Norfolk, she could not visit her mother in Holloway very often because of work commitments and travelling costs. Denise had a younger sister, Debra, who was 16 years old. They did not live together as Debra lived with her father just south of London.

Denise's mum had been in prison for 14 months. She lived with her aunt but she had plans to move out and live on her own. This was not proving to be easy: *I think they should help people more when this happens. 'Cos I mean, I'd still be living at home with my parents if this hadn't happened and it's not my fault. I think they should have some sort of scheme for young kids that want to move out of the house and things like that ...*

When Denise's mother was taken into custody she remembered: *... it was horrible ... I blamed everybody ... I was blaming my dad. I was always rowing with my dad ... 'cos me and my mum had always been really close, she's, well I always turn to my mum, I've never been able to turn to my dad. Debra's like "daddy's girl" ... You can't sit down and talk to nobody about it because they don't understand, I don't think nobody can understand until they've been in the situation themselves...*

Denise believed that her behaviour had changed since her mother's imprisonment becoming more secretive, bottling up her problems because she did not want to burden her mother. She summed up the change: *I've done ten years of growing up in a matter of months ...*

Denise was frightened for her mum. She worried that she would never return home from prison.

Gina

Gina was 18 years old. She had a younger brother and an older sister who no-one was in contact with. Gina lived in Suffolk where she had lived with her mum but now lived with her fiancé but she was not happy: *We've had too much trouble and that. I just want to move.*

Gina did not feel that she had to tell anyone where her mum was or what had happened: *... living in a small city, like we do, everyone knows anyway. And you have people coming up to you asking, "How long did your mum get?" and it's really embarrassing and that. But I'm not embarrassed of her or anything. She's my mum. She only done what she did to support us ... I find that I haven't got as many friends as I thought I had, nor has my mum.*

Gina felt a gap in her life since her mother's imprisonment: *I've always relied on my mum ... she's always been there for support and that, and I've needed her a lot in*

the last few months and it's been really hard – she's all I've got. I don't know who my father is or anything. So, like she's been a mother and father to me.

We asked Gina if she'd changed: *I've got into a bad habit of drugs. I'm only coming off them now. All through her imprisonment I've been doing them I tend to be more closed in and that ... I don't communicate as well as I used to – hard hearted, sort of thing ... can't talk to anyone other than my mum, you see. Sometimes I really want to talk to her but ... I don't send my letters I write. But I write to her and although I'm not talking to her, it helps. I just throw them away afterwards.*

Gina hated that: *She's locked up, my brother's in care and, it might sound selfish, but the fact that she's not with me when I need her. I just want to help her now ... 'cause she needs me now.*

Lauren and Charmaine

Lauren was 11 years old and her sister, Charmaine, was six. Lauren lived with their father and Charmaine lived with their grandmother. They both lived in south London. They always came to visit their mum together.

Lauren remembered feeling sad and lonely when her mother left. She said that she missed her mother's "cuddles" and: *Mum's dinners ... just being with her ...*

Charmaine said: *I want to sleep with mummy ... and I want to stay with her ... I want her to come home and I miss her a lot ... I want her to come home...*

Key issues

As the children's stories illustrate, a child's life can be affected in many ways: the loss of their primary carer; reduced family income; moving home and school; disrupted relationships; stigma; shame; and diminished social support (Action for Prisoners, 2003; Glover, 2009):

Caring for prisoners' children: Five per cent of female prisoners' children remain in the family home, contrasting with 90% of male prisoners' children (Caddle and Crisp, 1997). Nine per cent of children are cared for by their father following their mother's imprisonment (Corston, 2007). An estimated 6,000 children are cared for by other family members, usually the parents/parent-in-law (Hamlyn and Lewis, 2000) or friends/ 'kinship carers' (Prison Advice and Care Trust, 2011). Twelve per cent of children go into the care system (Corston, 2007).

A large proportion of imprisoned mothers are single parents (Catan 1988; Casale 1989; Carlen 1983, Hansard 2011). Large numbers of children could be described as effectively rendered 'parentless' (Woodrow 1992) when their mother is imprisoned.

These children cope with separation from their mother as well as significant changes to and the *collapse of family structures as they were known* (Brown et al, 2001). Children are no longer in their normal family and they may also be separated from their siblings.

Emotional and mental wellbeing: Almost 30% of children with parents in prison suffer mental health problems compared with 10% of the general population (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

Low self-esteem, guilt and confusion: Some children have been shown to display emotions of anger or defiance (especially against authority figures) and attention-seeking or self-destructive behaviour (Action for Prisoners, 2003).

Financial limitations: Brown et al (2001) found that 75% of young people with a parent in prison interviewed experienced fewer treats and activities due to time and money constraints.

Grieving: Children may mourn the separation from their mother in the same way as one would grieve after a death of a loved one (Richards 1992; Boswell and Wedge 2002; King, 2002). Murray and Farrington (2005) claimed it was more damaging to a child to be separated from their parent through imprisonment than separation through divorce or death. It is rare that parental imprisonment generates the same level of emotional support as a parental death (Robertson, 2007).

Engagement in crime or anti-social behaviour: Research has suggested it is more likely that children with parents in prison will end up offending themselves (Murray 2003; Dallaire, 2007), or committing anti-social behaviour (SCIE, 2008).

Stigmatised: As women make up a relatively small proportion of the total prison population it is relatively unusual to have a mother in prison. The potential stigma attached to these children is heightened (Raikes and Lockwood, 2011) which may make them vulnerable to judgmental remarks and derision from peers in particular.

Costs: 34% of children affected by the imprisonment of their mother are under five years (almost 6,000 children last year) and further 40% were aged between five and ten years (Hamlyn & Lewis 2000). The fact that so many under 5s are affected during this formative period of their life led Baroness Corston (2007) to comment that the effects on children of having their mother imprisoned were '*...so often nothing short of catastrophic*'.

The New Economics Foundation found that "*imprisoning mothers for non-violent offences carries a cost to children and the state of more than £17 million over a ten-year period*" (NEF 2007, eg the increased probability of these children becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training)).

There are also financial costs; NEF suggested that, '*For every pound invested in support-focused alternatives to prison, £14 worth of social value is generated to women and their children, victims and society generally over ten years.*' (*ibid.*)

The innocent punished

The legal system is based on the concept of an individual being punished for their own individual law breaking activity. It may be argued that in sending a mother to prison this principle is overlooked.

Separation, induced by a mother's imprisonment also punishes the child, causing emotional, social, material and psychological damage. These children, illustrated in their stories, are missing out on the qualitative things in life, the love and attention, which most children expect and get from their mothers every day. But they are also missing out on the quantitative things too: reduced access to financial resources and perhaps diminished potential as well.

The research

In 1992 the Howard League was granted permission to interview children whose mothers were in London's Holloway prison. Semi structured interviews were undertaken in the course of the all-day children's visits that were then available. Questions were asked about: separation from their mothers; their feelings when they see their mother and information about them and their living circumstances. All interviews were recorded. Younger children were interviewed with their older siblings although most were on a one-to-one basis.

It was not a matched sample. The children mainly lived in Southern England as the main catchment area for Holloway prison. Seventeen children aged between 4 and 20 years were interviewed.

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