



NIACRO is a voluntary organisation which has been working for more than 40 years to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities. We work with adults, children, young people and families, and also work to influence policy.

The Issue: The families of people in prison are a forgotten group. There is very little support for partners, children and other family members when someone enters custody, despite a wealth of evidence which shows effective support at this stage results in better outcomes for the family, the person in prison, and the wider community. Providing support for families affected by imprisonment not only improves the mental health and financial capability of that family, but can also have a positive impact on the mental health of the person in prison and contributes to effective resettlement when they re-enter the community – thereby greatly reducing the risk of re-offending and helping to create safer communities. Worryingly, there is no statutory responsibility for the children of people in prison; this is in spite of the UN and others identifying this group as particularly vulnerable with complex needs, as they are more susceptible to bullying, isolation, poor mental health and anti-social behaviour. Statistically, children who have had a parent in prison are more likely to offend during their lifetime; they are also more likely to develop mental health problems and suffer academic underachievement. There is often a cyclical nature to offending behaviour: without family support, people who come out of prison are more likely to offend again; moreover, the children of these people are also more likely to offend too.

Key Facts (*more overleaf*):

- It is estimated that at any moment, **1,500 children** in Northern Ireland have a parent in prison.
- Of the approximate 120,000 visitors to NI prisons every year, an estimated **36,000** are children.
- The number of children affected by parental imprisonment in the UK is more than the number of children who are affected by parental divorce, in care, or are on the child protection register.
- Children affected by parental imprisonment suffer poorer mental health compared to other children.
- Articles 2, 3, 9, 12, 16 and 19 of the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** are relevant to the rights, safeguarding and wellbeing of children of people in prison.
- The work of NIACRO's Family Links directly contributes to several Executive commitments, including: reducing the level of serious crime; reforming the prison service; safeguarding vulnerable children; and tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Our Work in this Area:

The NIACRO project **Family Links** is an effective intervention in this area, providing practical and emotional support to approximately 1,500 families across Northern Ireland every year. The project's objectives are to: reduce the risk of re-offending by contributing to effective resettlement; contribute to the diversion of young people from offending behaviour; ameliorate the impact of imprisonment on families through holistic support services; and contribute to the safer custody agenda by helping to maintain good mental health in prison.

Since 1987, NIACRO has provided invaluable support to families affected by imprisonment, who can be faced with unprecedented financial and emotional stress while coming to terms with the often alien and intimidating environment of the prison system. The project aims to improve the life chances of families affected by the imprisonment of a loved one by: providing information about visiting and contacting their family member in prison; advising on money management and accessing benefits; and supporting parents to engage with their children, school and community to overcome stigma or bullying and prevent social isolation. It also helps families to support their relative in prison to improve their mental health and promote desistance and effective resettlement upon release, as well as diverting the children of people in prison from engaging in offending behaviour, breaking the cyclical nature of intergenerational offending.

Family Links also signposts to other appropriate services, both within and outside of NIACRO, to meet the needs of those families and individuals identified as requiring more intensive support

However, funding for this project is constantly at risk and we are concerned that without statutory recognition of the vulnerable mental, financial and social situation of families affected by imprisonment, critical resources and funds will continue to be diverted from this important service and our reach will be at best restricted and, at worst, terminated.

What Needs To Happen:

- We call on **the Assembly and the judiciary** to recognise the needs of this forgotten group and protect them from the 'silent sentence' handed down to the innocent families of people in prison.
- The **new Department of Education with lead responsibility for children (post 2016)** and the recent Children's Services Co-operation Bill provide an opportunity to close this gap in statutory provision by capturing and responding to the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment.
- Judges should be required to **consider the impact of a custodial sentence** on a child and, if custody is appropriate, signal to the relevant authorities to provide support to that family and child.
- We believe this could be done at a **pre-sentence report stage** and that the Courts Service or Probation could play an important role in assessing the impact of a sentence on children and families and capturing needs for onward referral for support in the voluntary and community sector.

Contact: For more information please contact Julia Kenny, Policy and Research Co-ordinator, NIACRO on 028 9032 0157 or email julia@niacro.co.uk. To find out more about NIACRO, please visit www.niacro.co.uk.



Families and Children Affected By Imprisonment: In Figures

1,500

The approximate number of families NIACRO's Family Links works with in a year

3

Children of people in prison suffer from mental health problems up to three times the rate of other children
(Families Outside, 2009)

More than
2,400

The estimated number of children in Northern Ireland who have a parent in prison
(Children of Prisoners Europe, 2014)

6

The number of children affected by parental imprisonment is six times the number of children on the child protection register
(Glover, 2009)

Every Year

More children are affected by parental imprisonment than parental divorce
(Pact et al, 2007)

2.5

The number of children affected by parental imprisonment in the UK is two and a half times the number of children in care
(Glover, 2009)

120,000

The number of visitors to Northern Ireland prisons every year
(Moore, Convery and Scraton, 2011)

6

Six articles of the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** are relevant to the rights, safeguarding and wellbeing of children of people in prison:
Articles 2, 3, 9, 12, 16 and 19

45%

Of people in prison in the UK lose touch with their families
(Glover, 2009)

36,000

The number of children visiting Northern Ireland prisons every year
(Moore, Convery and Scraton, 2011)

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