



## Children with a Parent in Prison England and Wales: A Hidden Population of Young Carers

Caroline Leeson & Julia Morgan

To cite this article: Caroline Leeson & Julia Morgan (2022) Children with a Parent in Prison England and Wales: A Hidden Population of Young Carers, *Child Care in Practice*, 28:2, 196-209, DOI: [10.1080/13575279.2019.1680531](https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2019.1680531)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2019.1680531>



Published online: 18 Nov 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 737



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 3 View citing articles [↗](#)



# Children with a Parent in Prison England and Wales: A Hidden Population of Young Carers

Caroline Leeson<sup>a</sup> and Julia Morgan<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Education, York St John University, York, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, Social Work and Counselling, Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich, London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

## ABSTRACT

There are over 200, 000 children in the UK who are affected by parental imprisonment [Barnardo's, 2014. Children affected by parental imprisonment. [http://www.barnardos.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/our\\_work/children\\_of\\_prisoners.htm](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/what_we_do/our_work/children_of_prisoners.htm)]. Children with a parent in prison are expected to engage in a great deal of physical and emotional caring to support their family, work which often has a negative impact on their own physical and emotional well-being as well as their academic achievement. In this paper, the caring experiences of children with a parent in prison are explored using Dani and De Haan's [2007. Structural inequalities and inclusive Institutions. In A. Dani, & A. De Haan (Eds.), *Inclusive states: Social policy and structural inequalities* (pp. 3–38). Washington, DC: The World Bank] model of structural inequality to argue that the stigma and isolation experienced by children with a parent in prison is the consequence of a lack of political will to acknowledge the needs of a highly vulnerable group of children. It is contended that extending the eligibility criteria for young carers to include this group of children would significantly help to raise awareness, reduce stigma and offer effective support, thereby creating a more inclusive state. Whilst there is recognition of substantial deficits in the support offered to young carers, nevertheless, as a community, young carers are perceived more positively by society, meaning they have more constructive regard and fewer barriers to services than currently experienced by children with a parent in prison.

## KEYWORDS

Prison; young carers

## Introduction

Children with a parent in prison are rarely eligible to be regarded as young carers as most often the parent with whom they live does not meet the established criteria; they do not have a disability, a recognised physical or mental illness or certified drugs/alcohol problems (Gill, 2009; Sexton, 2016). Having a family member in prison can be distressing for everyone involved and a partner's struggle to cope and manage everyday life is well documented (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Gill, 2009; Sexton, 2016). Partners may seek help from their GP, but the family is unlikely to meet the ever-stringent criteria for additional support

**CONTACT** Caroline Leeson  [c.leeson@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:c.leeson@yorks.ac.uk)  School of Education, York St John University, Lord Mayors Walk, York, YO 31 7EX, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

© 2019 The Child Care in Practice Group

services, leading to a lack of awareness of the caring responsibilities of the child(ren) (Leeson & Morgan, 2014). Furthermore, there are often few community resources available, especially if the partner, now in prison, was involved in crime(s) that had direct local impact (for example, fraud causing local company to close) or invokes strong negative feelings such as sexual or violent crimes (Gill, 2009; Morgan, Leeson, & Carter Dillon, 2013). Thus, stigmatisation is a very real experience for families of prisoners and many families keep their problems quiet for fear of being rejected, scapegoated or looked down upon (Gill, 2009; Lanskey, Losel, Markson, & Souza, 2015; Morgan, Leeson, Carter Dillon, Wirgman, & Needham, 2013). Furthermore, the risk of stigmatisation leads many children to create a cover story as to where their parent is, which isolates them further, preventing them from confiding in friends or seeking help as they cannot tell the truth (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016; Phillips & Gates, 2011). The consequence of trying to avoid any negative attention means a lack of visibility enabling policymakers to continue to ignore their situation and perpetuate the inequalities they experience as a result of having a parent in prison (Lanskey et al., 2015). In addition, any family fortunate enough to have some support often receives that help from a charity or community group dependent on local or national funding (Morgan et al., 2013). In times of financial austerity, such provision is vulnerable, likely to be impermanent and thus not reliable enough for families to trust (Lansley & Mack, 2015). Thus, the parent at home finds that they have to rely on their child(ren) to get them through; a set of circumstances that are only recognised and or detected when there are difficulties such as poor school attendance or disruptive behaviour (Gill, 2009; Morgan et al., 2013). In many situations, the child's caring responsibilities may have life-altering impact; they may leave school early without qualifications; they can become stressed and anxious causing them to seek solace in unfortunate relationships, drugs or alcohol (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Lanskey et al., 2015; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010;).

An examination of key journals in health, social work education and justice, shows a burgeoning interest in the welfare and rights of families with a member in prison, but very little research focus on the caring responsibilities held by the children. Thus, there is limited awareness of the issue with the result that there is little or no impetus to address this inequality (Children heard and seen, 2019). Furthermore, looking at websites of organisations established to support those who fit the criteria of being a young carer, there is no discussion of the caring responsibilities of this particular group of children.

## **Structural inequality**

Structural inequality is articulated through mechanisms that regulate the behaviour of society towards agreed and socially determined goals as well as those that redistribute wealth and services through taxation, usually to the benefit of those regarded as deserving (Gough, 2007). The lack of voice or political power of those regarded as undeserving gives further, fertile soil for policies that ignore or minimise their plight (Dani & De Haan, 2007). Dani and De Haan go on to argue that only through transparency, voice and accountability will this situation be reversed, and a more equitable situation reached; when states become inclusive rather than exclusive in their institutional structures, laws and policies. Thus, structural inequality is closely linked with social exclusion as certain groups or individuals are denied access to resources, deprived of meaningful participation in civil life and consequently experience a limited quality of life:

Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole. (Levitas et al., 2007, p. 25)

Work done by the authors with prisoners and their families' has consistently exposed experiences of social exclusion and the negative impact of structural inequality meaning that the children, especially, have become a hidden population of need.

### **Children as young carers**

The Carers Act (2014) which came into force 1/4/15, defines a young carer as "A person under 18 who provides or intends to provide care for an adult" (Clause 63 (6) Carers Act 2014). The legislation further identifies young carers as children who are caring for a parent or sibling with a disability or illness that requires considerable daily support, not met by other services. Such support tasks may be practical in terms of household tasks and errands or may be more intimate such as personal care, administering medication or supporting therapeutic interventions (Tuffney, 2012). In addition, young carers are recognised as providers of significant emotional support to the person in need of the care and many other members of their family, often to the detriment of their own well-being (Children's Society, 2013). Historically, there has been considerable concern for the well-being of children with significant caring responsibilities (i.e. Thomas et al., 2003) with a number of high profile campaigns to raise public awareness and develop policy initiatives to support them (Children's Society – "Hidden" campaign, 2015–2017; Barnardos "Still Hidden, Still Ignored" report, 2017; BBC Children in Need fundraising event – each November). There has been a consistent and increasingly vociferous message that children should not be expected to take on such onerous caring responsibilities;

We should not expect children to be relied upon to undertake caring which affects negatively their own development, well-being and education – Saul Becker, Children Society, 2013, p. 3.

This message is underpinned by an extensive literature on the needs of young carers (Children's Society, 2013; Leu & Becker, 2017; Smyth, Blaxland, & Cass, 2011; Tuffney, 2012) that highlight the negative consequences they face. For example; poor educational attainment resulting in a loss of employment options; lack of social opportunities leading to isolation and frustration; emotional distress and fatigue as well as potential physical damage from lifting and carrying heavy objects (Kavanaugh, Noh, & Studer, 2015; Kennan, Fives, & Canavan, 2012; Sharratt, 2014; Smyth et al., 2011). This research resonates with that which looks at the consequences for children with a parent in prison and appears remarkably similar, especially when looking at the requirement to provide significant emotional support (Children's Society, 2013; Leu & Becker, 2017) and the risk of distorted relationships (Smyth et al., 2011; Tuffney, 2012).

In this paper, the tasks required of children with a parent in prison are identified, focussing particularly on the emotional work they engage in as an argument is created that their situation should be included in the definition of a young carer. The concept of structural inequality (Dani & De Haan, 2007) is used to fully comprehend the

impact that the current situation has on a potentially vulnerable group of children and the institutional constraints which the children frequently encounter as they try to cope with the situation they find themselves in are explored. The concluding argument is that children with a parent in prison are indeed a hidden population of children with significant caring responsibilities and should be included in the definition of young carer. It is contended that only then might the UK be regarded as an inclusive state (Dani & De Haan, 2007) providing fair access to support services for those in need.

## Methodology

This paper is based on two qualitative research projects which took place during 2011–2015; one with a focus on the support offered to children of prisoners by schools in one local authority in the South West of England and the other focused on the experiences of children visiting their parents in prison. In the first instance, between January and July 2011, 12 semi-structured interviews were carried out with stakeholders such as Probation; Youth Workers; Educational Psychology; Local Authority Children Services; Youth Offending Teams; Education Welfare and identified local and national charities involved in caring for children with a parent in prison. Ten head teachers were also interviewed as well as six children/young people and their mothers (Morgan et al., 2013a). The six families, who took part in the interviews, were recruited via advertisements at the local prisons and relevant charity groups on an opt-in basis. The children who took part in the interviews were aged 8–13 years old: three boys and three girls. There were additional children within the 6 families, but consent was either not given by the child themselves or their mother felt that the child was too young to take part in the interview and hence did not give her consent for the child to take part in the interviews.

As well as semi-structured interviews, questionnaires were sent to 75 schools (primary, secondary, independent, pupil referral unit and special schools) in the local authority with a covering letter explaining the purpose of the research. The questionnaires were completed online or returned in a Freepost envelope and were anonymous. A total of 19 questionnaires were returned with the majority having been completed by either the Head Teacher or Deputy Head. Other members of staff who completed the questionnaires were Parent Support Advisors, Head of Teaching and Learning, Teachers and Head of Health and Safeguarding. It was not specified who should complete the questionnaire, being left to the discretion of the school. As much as possible, schools that were invited to take part in interviews were not the same schools that completed the questionnaires.

In the second piece of research, conducted 2013–2015, 45 prisoners who were parents (both male and female) as well as 22 prison officers and 8 members of visiting centre staff were interviewed in five prisons in England and Wales about children visiting their parents in prison. Contact was made with 15 prisons across England and Wales and an offer to participate in the research was made to the Governor. Five prisons agreed to take part. Three prisons were in the South West of England, one was in London and one was in Wales. Four of the five prisons had male inmates whilst one housed female inmates. The semi-structured interviews ranged from 1 hour to 2.5 hours long. Three focus groups with 25 different imprisoned mothers also took place and, just as in the first piece of research, the caring responsibilities of children became evident in the narratives of all the mothers and fathers involved in the research. It should be noted that it is not

uncommon for children whose mothers are imprisoned to be cared for by grandparents or the state, whereas children whose father is in prison are most usually cared for by their mother (Raikes, 2016). These two pieces of research were typical of this finding with all the children in the first piece were cared for by their mothers and, in the second, the children were cared for by a variety of relatives including grandparents (7), fathers (4), step-fathers (5) and 5 were in the care of the local authority.

Full ethical approval for both projects was obtained from the University and the purpose of the interviews was fully explained to all participants before they took place along with a copy of an information sheet detailing the research aims and objectives and their role in the process. In addition, ethical approval from NOMS (National Offender Management Service) was given for the second piece of research as it concerned interviewing prisoners. As children's rights were at the forefront of this research, only children who gave consent themselves took part in either research project (Leeson, 2007) and support was arranged for any participant in the research who felt that they needed it; this offer was taken up by just one child.

Once all the data was collected, thematic data analysis was used to identify emerging and recurrent themes and both researchers independently agreed the themes (Bryman, 2012). Although the interviews were intended to explore three things: the quality of existing support mechanisms for children with a parent in prison; what further support was required and experiences of prison visiting, it was inevitable that data was gathered about their daily routines and what the children were expected to cope with. Thematic analysis enabled the emergence of a strong theme of the children having caring responsibilities that seriously impacted their sense of well-being.

## Findings

Three main themes related to the caring responsibilities of children with a parent in prison were identified in the data. Firstly, how children care for their non-imprisoned parent; secondly, how they care for their siblings; and, thirdly, how they care for their imprisoned parent. Below, each theme is explored using the concept of structural inequality to expose the consequences of failing to provide effective support services for a group of children that have been hitherto ignored by politicians.

### Caring for their non-imprisoned parent

Caring for a non-imprisoned parent, (in this research, their mothers), included being anxious about her well-being and mental health as well as supporting her with household chores including shopping, cooking and cleaning. The emotional caring required of children in these situations was described as complex and often painful, isolating them from usual support mechanisms as they sought to manage their own problems and those of the people around them in a landscape full of stigma and negative judgement. For example, one child talked about making a conscious decision not to tell her mother about things that were going wrong in her life and any trouble at school, as she did not want to hurt or worry her mother any further. She felt there was no one else she could talk to, as she was very aware of the stigma attached to having a parent in prison and feared ostracisation and bullying from her community. Another child talked about it being his responsibility to

help his mum as much as possible so that she was not too tired, given that she worked full time as well as having the family to care for. Parents were, however, well aware of what their children were doing; as one imprisoned father said;

He won't talk to his mum about me at all as he thinks that she will get upset ... she says she tries to talk to him about me but she gets upset and then he gets angry and tells her that he doesn't want to talk about me. (Imprisoned father)

Some children with a parent in prison are therefore experiencing living with an adult with significant coping and health issues of their own (Souza, Lanskey, Markson, & Lösel, 2019). There is substantial evidence of serious and debilitating feelings of loss and bereavement for the remaining parent; sometimes leading to drug and alcohol dependency and/or the onset of mental illnesses such as depression and severe anxiety as well as physical manifestations of stress (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011; Manby, Jones, Foca, Bieganski, & Starke, 2015) much of which remains undiagnosed;

My partner is not coping well with me being in here ... she is crying and not coping ... but she has fallen out with her parents because of me and she doesn't have many friends so she relies too much on our 12 year daughter ... telling her things that she shouldn't. (Imprisoned father)

The corollary of this set of circumstances often means that, if there are no other support mechanisms available; either formal (statutory services) or informal (extended family) then the child *has* to take on a significant emotional caring role, take a measure of control and work to return some normality and routine to their family life. A number of children will already have good problem-solving skills and will be able to seek social support for their role, therefore being more likely to cope with the situation they find themselves in (Gillespie, Charboyer, & Wallis, 2007). By disengaging with the emotion of the situation and becoming more problem focussed, they will be able to navigate the complexities and pain of their lives skilfully:

I have to help my mum a lot and school don't know all that I have to do. (Interview, child aged 10)

Many children, however, do not have these skills or become exhausted with the effort required and thus need significant support, especially if their incarcerated parent is away for a long time. Throughout our discussions, we found that those children who exhibited an initial capacity to cope would fare worst, as any underlying or subsequent need would be undetected because the adults around them (teachers, friends, parent and extended family) assumed they are okay until there was serious, concrete, external evidence that this was not the case. Most commonly, evidence that the child was not coping was picked up via indicators of poor attendance or behavioural issues within school for which there are clear protocols and processes, rather than through any more subtle signs that all was not well. Thus, those who keep their circumstances and their struggle to themselves often experience significant cost to their own well-being (Morgan et al., 2013a). Furthermore, many will refuse offers of help should they be forthcoming as they have shouldered the responsibility and feel it is their duty to support their parents:

We've got a young lady that I was going to add on to this is a young lady who is very seldom in, she very seldom attends, and when she's here she's very agitated. She never goes into any

particular lesson and stays in the lesson even though they're timetabled. She wants to go to the toilet all the time, and the reason for that is she normally secreted her telephone on her somewhere and she's anxiously phoning home to see if mum's okay, because mum's disabled, mum's on her own, mum has abused alcohol and drugs in the past, and is still trying to get round that, and dad was in prison, just recently come out, started to buy presents for the daughter but by doing that he's trying to buy her affection and also taking her out of school when she is here. (Head Teacher, 3)

What was clearly demonstrated was the ambivalence that children, their families and the professionals around them felt about how they might ask for help and how that help might be offered. In terms of structural inequality, the teaching professionals identified there was very little guidance or policy structure to assist them compared with the systems available for other groups of children such as those with special educational needs or those who raise safeguarding concerns. Furthermore, it was clear that the children felt that the stigma and possible ostracisation they may experience were too great a penalty to risk talking about their situation and that they were significantly disadvantaged as a consequence (Children heard and seen, 2019). It was a consistent theme amongst professionals interviewed that the only structural way forward in terms of supporting children with a parent in prison was where the child could be assessed as having academic or behavioural problems or when there were child protection concerns. The lack of access to resources and services experienced by children with a parent in prison fits with the working definition of social exclusion developed by Levitas et al. (2007) and is evidence of structural inequality (Dani and De Haan, 2007), with a lack of policy direction and poor provision of services for children with a parent in prison as a consequence of a pervasive, negative view of those who offend. This situation is further compounded by the knowledge that people dealing with so-called achieved stigma attempt to conceal their circumstances for fear of meeting rejection and being regarded negatively (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016, p. 18). Thus, the structural inequality experienced by prisoners and their families means that not only are there few services available to them, but also any existing provision is unreachable as they try to "identity manage" (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016, p. 18) the stigma they experience or fear experiencing.

According to Dani and De Haan (2007), structural inequalities can be evidenced through cultural norms and this was certainly the case when listening to the stories we were told by the children and their families. Already well established in the UK is the powerful discourse related to those who most deserve societies help (most recently the rhetoric of hardworking and/or just about managing families – Gabb & de Jong, 2017) and those who do not (the rhetoric of idle, workshy, feckless). It has been argued that this discourse has been normalised and now proliferates an increasingly neoliberal social policy landscape (Pantazis, 2016; Wiggan, 2012). Thus, the way social and material power is distributed creates the circumstances for structural inequality; it is not the "fault" of the individual (Royce, 2009) yet that is the way it is increasingly portrayed and experienced (Gabb & de Jong, 2017; Lansley & Mack, 2015). Families with a member in prison are characteristically subjected to significant negative discourses; for example, that they are guilty by association and therefore unworthy of help, leading to a lack of political will to improve their circumstances (Morgan & Leeson, 2015). Furthermore, families with a member in prison are commonly seen either in terms of their capacity to avoid recidivism by reintegrating a prisoner following release or as a cause for concern regarding

generational criminal activity (Ministry of Justice, 2017; Will, Whalen, & Loper, 2014) rather than having support needs and rights separate to those of the offender.

## Caring for their siblings

Children reported that they were often heavily relied upon to support their younger brothers and sisters with tasks such as homework, taking and collecting them from school or nursery, bathing and putting them to bed – generally behaving as parents themselves, experiencing a role reversal that was hard to undo when no longer required. Parents were aware of what their children were doing and expressed gratitude for their support during a very difficult time:

My daughter has taken the role of mum at times. (Parent 4)

Parents were also saddened that their child was in this position, but could see no other way forward as their own struggle with the emotional impact of their partner's incarceration had left them emotionally unavailable for their children and unable to cope with the rapid change in circumstances, the stigma and practicalities of their situation:

This experience has changed my family and not for the better. (Parent 2)

There appeared to be little alternative to relying on this support and although the children saw it as the most useful thing that they could do to help their parent, there was no doubt it could be an onerous task often meaning their own studies became a secondary or minor concern. Schools were also well aware of what children with a parent in prison had to deal with; despite the families often making a great effort to keep their difficulties to themselves:

... this particular young man is he's actually quite grown-up for his age because he's had to become the father figure, and so he's done everything for mum at home, everything for the little ones. Trying to run in and do his exams. Go back home and make sure everything's fine, so he's taken that role on because ... (Head Teacher 5)

He is now the man of the house ... I say to him you must look after your brothers and be the man of the house. (mother)

I tell him that he is the oldest and he must look after his younger brothers and sisters and make sure that they are doing what they should be doing ... I don't want them to get into trouble as my mother lives in a sh\*t area and I am not there to look after them ... there is a lot of pressure on him to ensure that all is well with his brothers and sisters. (Imprisoned mother talking about her 14-year-old son who lives with his 6 siblings at his grandmothers)

School staff described themselves as powerless or limited in their capacity to support these children, as, once again, unless the child was causing a safeguarding or academic concern there was little that could be offered because children with a parent in prison are not an identified or priority group for service provision (Morgan et al., 2013b):

When we know about it we try and do what we can, but again it is a bit limited to be honest. (Head teacher, interview)

I'm sure if I brought my PSA on to it I'm sure she might be able to scrubble round and find something but I wasn't aware there was a statutory duty to anything. (Head teacher, interview)

When asked what access they had to resources to support them in working with children with a parent in prison, virtually all school staff replied there was nothing available for families separated by imprisonment although they did have resources to support families experiencing other forms of separation such as bereavement, divorce or military activity. The inappropriateness of trying to use such resources was clearly articulated by one of the children spoken to, who recalled reacting badly to a well-intentioned teacher who tried to empathise with their situation using a book designed for families experiencing divorce:

I told my teacher because I thought it would be good for school to understand and my teacher gave me booklet about parents who split up – MY MUM AND DAD HAD NOT SPLIT UP (child raises voice). The teacher gave it to me in front of my class all in the open – I had to tell them about my dad because of this. (Child; aged 12)

One teacher spoke about using the internet to look for his own resources and reported that this had been difficult to achieve, leaving him feeling frustrated and powerless to support the children in his care. Had these children been regarded as young carers, there would have been much greater empathy for their situation and more resources for school staff to use in supporting the child in his/her efforts to care for their family. Whilst it is noted that, in many local areas, services for young carers are poor (Aldridge, Cheesbrough, Harding, Webster, & Taylor, 2016), nevertheless there are more than for those with a parent in prisons, who are being asked to fulfil the same or similar caring tasks. The lack of clear institutional and policy structures to support children and their families, compound the powerlessness they feel and make it even less likely that they will seek help. Where there are systems to support children in terms of their studies, these are so poorly resourced that they are unlikely to offer much respite or help (Morgan & Leeson, 2019). Dani and De Haan (2007) talk about how the labels and categories used in policy frameworks serve to reinforce inequality and that is visible here; children bereaved through military action, divorce or death have resources and services to help them cope that are enshrined in policy, because their circumstances are socially acceptable and invoke positive emotions such as sympathy and empathy. Children with a parent in prison, on the other hand, are not regarded in the same way, the “achieved” stigma of offending behaviour (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016) means there are fewer services; piecemeal and often dependent on the attitudes, priorities and capacities of those that deliver them (Leeson & Morgan, 2014). This is an untenable situation of inequality, especially when the United Nations Commission on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, Unicef, 1989) is considered. There are several Articles such as Article 8, the right to a family life and Article 12, the right to express their views, where children with a parent in prison should have their voices heard and their needs acknowledged. However, as Codd (2019) states; children with a parent in prison are less likely to have the wherewithal to make their views known because of the stigma attached to their situation, thus ensuring the perpetuation of structural inequality – a system that gives rights, but only to those who are regarded as deserving them or who have the articulacy or support to be able to demand them.

## Caring for their imprisoned parent

There was a clear thread running through the data of the children expressing deep concern for their parent in prison and their extreme frustration that they could not address these anxieties by regularly visiting and seeing how they were for themselves:

My dad has no-one to talk to – he worries – he has depression. (Child, aged 12)

It doesn't even mean that he's going to be local because even though we've got 3 prisons down here he could well be put anywhere within the UK, in which case that becomes an issue in terms of visiting, because you don't have that regular contact, and you won't necessarily be seeing them every weekend. (Head teacher)

she worries about me and thinks that I will be hurt or that I am upset ... she cries and tries to be brave but won't say how she is feeling as she doesn't want to upset me ... her focus is on me. (imprisoned mother taking about 8-year-old daughter)

Visits are an important aspect of the reality of having a parent in prison; the capacity to connect and reassure themselves that all is well is important and all the children spoke to emphasise this. However, the provision of a visiting service is fraught with ambivalence. Prisoners are reluctant to have their children experience the intrusive search procedure and the sight of their parents in an alien environment. Children and parents spoke about the restrictions on visiting in terms of time allocated and activities engaged in;

I don't like that we can't just go and play, he just sits there and can't move. I don't talk to the staff because I'm there to see my dad, not them and there isn't enough time. (Child aged 13)

Only did it once but was made to feel bad for doing it. (Parent)

Both children and schools spoke of the difficulty of allowing children time off school to visit their parent as it is disruptive to their education and frequently not encouraged by education officials:

I can't see my dad much as most visits are in school time and the prison is miles away so I would miss lots of lessons. School gets cross when my mum asks them if I can go so now I only go in holidays. (Child aged 10)

Basic visits (twice a month) are enshrined in law, yet only last an hour and may not be suitable or possible for children to attend, usually because they are held during the school day and it can be complex to extricate children from their lessons to attend a prison that could be many miles from home (Morgan et al., 2013b). Standard visits (three times a month) and the highly prized enhanced visits (four or five times a month) are often used as privileges that the prisoner has to earn, usually as rewards for good behaviour, and can be removed should their conduct deteriorate without regard for the impact on families (Barnardo's, 2014). Thus, a child who needs that visual reassurance of seeing their parent misses out, often at the last minute, with the subsequent negative impact on their own health and well-being. The Farmer Review (Ministry of Justice, 2017) called for visits to be a right rather than a privilege; it is clear that this change will be slow to implement as it requires a substantial shift in perspective by both policymakers and the wider society; offenders fit the Moral Underclass Discourse (Levitas et al., 2007) and are therefore regarded as less than others. Once a group of people is "othered" in this way, it could be argued that structural inequality is facilitated and legitimised (Dani & De Haan, 2007).

Without liaison with education authorities, it is likely to still be an issue for a child to visit their parent regularly as schools remain reluctant to allow children time off from their studies (Morgan & Leeson, 2019). The consequence of regarding those who break the law and given custodial sentences as inferior or unequal to the rest of society is that their unequal status is conferred to their children by association. When a prisoner is denied a visit because of his/her actions within the prison, the power and control exercised by the prison authorities further underline the disadvantage felt by the child and further embeds inequality. Levitas et al. (2007) identify a close link between social inequality and social exclusion and this is clearly played out when considering services and support for children with a parent in prison. At a recent event organised by Children Heard and Seen (2/7/19), children with a parent in prison called for visits to be a right not a privilege – it remains to be seen if their voice is heard.

## Conclusion

Structural inequality has featured in debates about race, gender, education, health and housing issues (Dani & De Haan, 2007), but there has been limited exploration when looking at the lives of children with a parent in prison. It is evident from the above discussion that children who have a parent in prison experience structural inequality first-hand as they are consistently ignored by politicians and policymakers when making decisions about the ways to deal with those who offend. It has been argued that the way in which offenders are regarded – as bad people with unhealthy relationships who should be incarcerated – is too simplistic in terms of the consequences for their families (Turanovich, Rodriguez, & Pratt, 2012). The extension of stigma to the family of offenders (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016; Goffman, 1963) ensures the perpetuation of structural inequality through the attribution of unequal status in terms of rights and opportunities (Dani & De Haan, 2007). The perceived need to punish offenders and to control their activity within the prison environment ensures that the well-being of prisoners' children is very low on the list of priorities, despite a number of initiatives identified, such as those in the Farmer Review (2017). Furthermore, there continues to be a lack of awareness of how children suffer emotionally when they are unable to reassure themselves that their parent is coping.

It is clear from this work and that of others (Barnardo's, 2014; Manby et al., 2015; Raikes, 2016) that a large proportion of children with a parent in prison suffer significant emotional harm whilst their parent is away and this paper has shown the significant caring responsibilities that are added to their burden by a society that appears to show a lack of interest in their well-being when compared with other vulnerable groups of children. For example, the voices of children with a parent in prison have been absent from any debate about the needs of children identified as young carers, with the consequence that their service provision is limited or non-existent.

Dani and De Haan (2007, p. 22) argue that a society has to facilitate transparency, voice and accountability with an equality of agency in order to be considered inclusive. What has been shown through this paper is that there is a long way to go to achieve any of these for children who experience having a parent in prison. There has been little public debate as to the needs of children who find themselves in this situation, little opportunity at a national, political level for their voice to be heard and no single body has been made accountable for their welfare meaning that there are several competing agendas and little political will to diminish the social exclusion of a large number of vulnerable

individuals. There is still a concentration on the improvement or maintenance of prisoners' connections with their family in order to prevent or inhibit recidivism, rather than on acknowledging/addressing the substantial caring responsibilities of the child him/herself. Indeed, the Farmer report only mentions caring three times and only in the context of the parent in prison maintaining *their* caring responsibilities. It has to be acknowledged that there is some, limited movement; there are instances of good practice that support children with a parent in prison such as those identified in the Farmer Review (Ministry of Justice, 2017) and the work of organisations such as Children Heard and Seen (2019) are helping to push that agenda, but it would seem that a sustained, national framework providing services for the child who has a parent in prison is still a long way off.

This paper demonstrates that children with a parent in prison *are* young carers and argues that the current eligibility criteria should be amended or extended to allow their work to be recognised and their needs met in a non-judgmental, non-stigmatised environment. There is a high degree of social acceptance and value placed on a child who cares for a parent or sibling with a disability, thanks to the hard work of those who have raised our awareness of their existence. The same should be accorded to children with a parent in prison; they have done nothing wrong (Morgan & Leeson, 2019) yet find themselves in a situation where they have to do a great deal of emotional and physical hard work to keep their family intact. As it stands, the absence of national, effective support systems; the consequence of a lack of political or social will is having a deleterious effect on children and families of prisoners. Children with a parent in prison experience, first-hand, systematic structural inequalities which should be interrogated, challenged and reformed.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes on contributors

**Dr Caroline Leeson** is Associate Professor in Early Childhood Studies at York St John University. Her research interests are in social justice; children with a parent in prison; children who go missing and/or are vulnerable to sexual exploitation as well as the involvement of children in decision-making processes. Before working in HE, she was a social worker in child protection, fostering and adoption and also led a family centre for a period of time. This experience proved particularly profound as this is where she learnt the importance of good communication, effective collaboration and the joy of spending time in the home corner making stone soup!

**Dr Julia Morgan** is a Senior Lecturer in Public Health and Wellbeing at Greenwich University. Her research interests focus on marginalised children both in the UK and more globally. She has carried out research with children whose parents have been imprisoned, children who live and work on the street, nomadic children in Mongolia, children who live in informal settlements, children who have been identified as being at risk of behavioural issues and missing children. Before working in HE, she worked as a health professional, a researcher on a child development study, a community development worker for Sure Start and was the manager of a family support service.

### References

- Aldridge, J., Cheesbrough, S., Harding, C., Webster, H., & Taylor, L. (2016). *The lives of young carers in England omnibus survey report: Research report*. London: Department for Education. Department for Education Research Report; DFE-RR636.

- Barnardo's (2014) *Children affected by parental imprisonment*. [http://www.barnardos.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/our\\_work/children\\_of\\_prisoners.htm](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/what_we_do/our_work/children_of_prisoners.htm)
- Boswell, G., & Wedge, P. (2002). *Imprisoned fathers and their children*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cherney, A., & Fitzgerald, R. (2016). Efforts by offenders to manage and overcome stigma: The case of employment. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 28(1), 17–32.
- Children heard and seen. (2019). *Seven calls to action, 2/7/19*, <https://childrenheardandseen.co.uk/news/seven-calls-to-action/>
- Children's Society. (2013). *Hidden from view; the experiences of young carers in England*, [www.childrenssociety.org.uk/young-carers](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/young-carers)
- Codd, H. (2019). The rights of children of imprisoned parents. In M. Hutton & D. Moran (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of prison and the family* (pp. 365–384). Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dani, A., & De Haan, A. (2007). Structural inequalities and inclusive Institutions. In A. Dani & A. De Haan (Eds.), *Inclusive states: Social policy and structural inequalities* (pp. 3–38). Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Gabb, J., & de Jong, S. (2017). *Focus: Families and relationships across crises*. Discover Society, 44. Open University; <http://oro.open.ac.uk/50244/3/50244.pdf>
- Gill, O. (2009). *Every night you cry: case studies of 15 Bristol families with a father in prison*. Ilford: Barnardo's South West.
- Gillespie, B., Charboyer, W., & Wallis, M. (2007). Development of a theoretically derived model of resilience through concept analysis. *Contemporary Nurse*, 25(1), 124–135.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New Jersey, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Gough, I. (2007). European welfare states: Explanations and lessons for developing countries. In A. Dani & A. De Haan (Eds.), *Inclusive states: Social policy and structural inequalities* (pp. 39–72). Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.
- Kavanaugh, M., Noh, H., & Studer, L. (2015). It'd be nice if someone asked me how I was doing. Like, 'cause I will have an answer: exploring support needs of young carers of a parent with Huntington's disease. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies: An International Interdisciplinary Journal for Research, Policy and Care*, 10(1), 12–25.
- Kennan, D., Fives, A., & Canavan, J. (2012). Accessing a hard to reach population: Reflections on research with young carers in Ireland. *Child and Family Social Work*, 17, 275–283.
- Kjellstrand, J., & Eddy, J. (2011). Parental incarceration during childhood, family context, and youth problem behavior across adolescence. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 50(1), 18–36.
- Lanskey, C., Losel, F., Markson, L., & Souza, K. (2015). Re-framing the analysis: A 3-dimensional perspective of prisoners' children's wellbeing. *Children & Society*, 29, 484–494.
- Lansley, S., & Mack, J. (2015). *Breadline Britain – the rise of mass poverty*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Leeson, C. (2007). Going round in circles: Key issues in the development of an effective ethical protocol for research involving young children. In A. Campbell & S. Groundwater-Smith (Eds.), *An ethical approach to practitioner research* (pp. 129–143). London: Routledge.
- Leeson, C., & Morgan, J. (2014). Strategic planning for support services for children with a parent or close relative in prison. *Social Policy and Administration*, 48(7), 848–863.
- Leu, A., & Becker, S. (2017). A cross-national and comparative classification of in-country awareness and policy responses to 'young carers'. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(6), 750–762.
- Levitas, R., Pantazis, C., Fahmy, E., Gordon, D., Lloyd, E., & Patsios, D. (2007). *The multi-dimensional analysis of social exclusion*. Bristol: University of Bristol.
- Manby, M., Jones, A., Foca, L., Bieganski, J., & Starke, S. (2015). Children of prisoners: Exploring the impact of families' reappraisal of the role and status of the imprisoned parent on children's coping strategies. *European Journal of Social Work*, 18(2), 228–245.
- Ministry of justice. (2017). *The importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime (Farmer Review)*. London: Government Publications.
- Morgan, J., & Leeson, C. (2015). How can schools support children who experience the imprisonment of a parent or close relative? *Every Child Journal*, 5(1), 20–26.

- Morgan, J., & Leeson, C. (2019). School experiences of children of prisoners: Strengthening support in schools in England and Wales. In M. Hutton & D. Moran (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of prison and the family* (pp. 503–518). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morgan, J., Leeson, C., & Carter Dillon, R. (2013b). How can schools support children with a parent in prison? *Pastoral Care in Education*, 31(3), 199–210.
- Morgan, J., Leeson, C., Carter Dillon, R., Wirgman, A., & Needham, M. (2013a). A hidden group of children: Support in schools for children who experience parental imprisonment. *Children and Society*, 28(4), 269–279.
- Pantazis, C. (2016). Policies and discourses of poverty during a time of recession and austerity. *Critical Social Policy*, 36(1), 3–20.
- Phillips, S., & Gates, T. (2011). A conceptual framework for understanding the stigmatization of children of incarcerated parents. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 20(3), 286–294.
- Raikes, B. (2016). Unsung heroines: Celebrating the care provide by grandmothers for children with parents in prison. *Probation Journal*, 63(3), 320–330.
- Royce, E. (2009). *Poverty and power; the problem of structural inequality*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Sexton, T. (2016). Incarceration as a family Affair: Thinking beyond the individual. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, 5(2), 61–64.
- Sharratt, K. (2014). Children's experiences of contact with imprisoned parents: A comparison between four European countries. *European Journal of Criminology*, 11(6), 760–775.
- Shlafer, R., & Poehlmann, J. (2010). Attachment and caregiving relationships in families affected by parental incarceration. *Attachment & Human Development*, 12(4), 395–415.
- Smyth, C., Blaxland, M., & Cass, B. (2011). 'So that's how I found out I was a young carer and that I actually had been a carer most of my life'. Identifying and supporting hidden young carers. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 14(2), 145–160.
- Souza, K., Lanskey, C., Markson, L., & Lösel, F. (2019). Partners of incarcerated men: Questioning caring stereotypes. In M. Hutton & D. Moran (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of prison and the family* (pp. 203–228). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thomas, N., Stainton, T., Jackson, S., Wai Yee, C., Doubtfire, S., & Webb, A. (2003). Your friends don't understand: Invisibility and unmet need in the lives of young carers. *Child and Family Social Work*, 8, 35–46.
- Tuffney, C. (2012). Children as carers. *Archive of Disease in Childhood*, 97(2), 93–95.
- Turanovich, J., Rodriguez, N., & Pratt, T. (2012). The collateral consequences of incarceration revisited: A qualitative analysis of the effects on caregivers of children of incarcerated parents. *Criminology; An interdisciplinary Journal*, 50(4), 913–959.
- UNICEF. (1989). *United Nations convention on the rights of the child*. [www.unicef.org.uk](http://www.unicef.org.uk)
- Wiggan, J. (2012). Telling stories of 21st century welfare: The UK coalition government and the neo-liberal discourse of worklessness and dependency. *Critical Social Policy*, 32(3), 383–405.
- Will, J., Whalen, M., & Loper, A. (2014). From one generation to the next: Childhood experiences of antisocial behavior and parental incarceration among adult inmates. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 53(3), 190–210.