Growing Up with Parental Imprisonment: Children's Experiences of Managing Stigma, Secrecy and Shame

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Each year, parental imprisonment affects approximately 27,000 children and young people in Scotland. Research that focuses on the views and experiences of the children and young people affected by parental imprisonment has highlighted the dominance of stigma, secrecy and shame in the lives of such children. This paper reports the findings of a small-scale qualitative study which sought the accounts of six young people aged between 13 and 26 whose biological father was, or had been, imprisoned. The paper explores the impact of stigma on day-to-day experiences in childhood and on the emotional and social well-being of young people. Young people described this in terms of growing up too fast and revealed ways in which they managed these adversities. Overwhelmingly the young people displayed considerable resilience in the face of extreme challenges and were able to identify positive outcomes of parental imprisonment such as personal growth. In order to promote resilience, we identify a need for public education to challenge social stigma; training for families in selective disclosure and supportive relationships for children.

Keywords: parental imprisonment; children of prisoners; stigma; shame; family secrets

Introduction

Parental imprisonment affects approximately 27,000 children and young people in Scotland each year (McGillivray 2016). Moreover, there are approximately 7,600 children who have a parent in prison in Scotland each day (Loucks 2012). In Scotland, the average daily prison population has increased from just below 2,700 in 1900 to approximately 7,700 in 2015/2016, demonstrating a threefold increase (Allen and Watson 2017). The Scottish Government (2012) suggested that prison population projections will increase again to approximately 9,500 prisoners by 2020—2021. As the prison population continues to increase, so too do the number of families and children affected by parental imprisonment (Dawson et al. 2013; Murray et al. 2009; Robertson 2007; Snyder 2009). In

Scotland alone, it has been estimated that children who have a parent in prison are approximately twice the number of those affected by divorce per annum (Loucks 2012). The needs of children of prisoners have been acknowledged within the law recently with the expectation being introduced through the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2016 that all prisoners will be asked for details of any children who are dependent on them.

Children and young people who are affected by parental imprisonment have, thus far, remained a 'hidden group' in society (Gill and Jacobson Deegan 2016; Morgan et al. 2014). This means that there is little accurate knowledge or reliable statistics on children of prisoners (Murray and Farrington 2008). Fee (2015, 3) states that children and young people affected by parental imprisonment are a 'group of children who are being let down' by society.

Research which reflects the experiences of children and young people affected by parental imprisonment internationally is beginning to emerge and the perspectives of children and young people affected by parental imprisonment in Scotland, have received some attention through the work of Loureiro (2010) and the Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCCYP). Still, though, more needs to be done to support children and young people affected. This paper reports the findings of a small-scale study conducted as part of an undergraduate dissertation exploring children and young people's experiences of parental imprisonment.

Background Literature

Findings from early research identified a lack of information on the situation of children affected by parental imprisonment, as well as the availability and efficacy of services to meet their needs (Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Ministry of Justice 2007). More recent research indicates that children and young people face daily challenges associated with their parents' imprisonment (Brookes 2014). Manby (2014) found that for many children and young people, the loss of their parent is sudden and ambiguous. Loucks (2012) recognises that the trauma of a parent going to prison can be compared to bereavement, but for the child or young person, their community does not show sympathy, understanding or recognition in the same way they would if someone had died. Loucks (2012) suggests that children and young people can react to grief by isolating themselves. Stigma and fear are also reported to be frequently experienced by children of prisoners (Murray and Farrington 2008) which can also lead to isolation (Loureiro 2010) or even bullying (Action for Prisoners' and Offenders' Families 2017). Stigma has been associated with negative views of the criminal justice system (Loureiro 2010) which can come from misrepresentations of prison in the media, especially in newspapers, films and television programmes (Marsh 2009).

In 2015, the Scottish Youth Parliament reported that the children of prisoners may often feel ashamed due to their parent's imprisonment (Fee 2015).

The way in which society responds to parental imprisonment can foster feelings of hostility and shame (Condry 2007; Gaston 2016). Children and young people have expressed 'being judged' as one of the most difficult aspects of stigma (Gill and Jacobson Deegan 2016; Robertson 2007). Families Outside (2016) found that children whose parent is convicted of a sexual offence are the children and young people who face the most exclusion.

Jones et al. (2013) suggest that stigma can make a child or young person feel like they have to 'hide' the fact their mother or father is in prison, in turn, increasing their risk of mental health problems. Some children and young people fear stigmatisation so much that they do not tell friends or classmates in school about their parent's imprisonment to avoid the risk of being bullied or singled out (Jones et al. 2013; Poehlmann et al. 2013). At the same time, indiscriminate openness of children regarding parental imprisonment can also have a negative effect on children's well-being (Hagen and Myers 2003). Therefore, a burden is placed on children to make decisions regarding what to disclose and to whom, depending on their level of maturity.

Murray and Farrington (2008) suggest that children and young people have different levels of understanding and have been told different reasons for their parent's imprisonment. Parents may believe that they are protecting the child by shielding the truth from them or may be concerned that the child will be bullied because of their parent's imprisonment (Jones et al. 2013). Families often keep secrets from children and young people to hide their situation from the local community including friends, neighbours and particularly from social services (Glover 2009). However, Roberston (2007) suggests that if a child or young person discovers that a significant person within their life has lied to them, it may lead to a loss of confidence or mistrust in those around them. Families of prisoners have been known to 'clench' on to secrets; secrets kept by 'parents from children; parents from the world; children from the world' (SCCYP 2011, 8). The culture of secrecy between families can prevent the child or young person from receiving the support they need to cope (Manby 2014). Fear of stigma, isolation, keeping their parent's imprisonment a secret, indiscriminate disclosure outside the family, avoiding talking about their parent being in prison within the safety of a supportive relationship and telling lies about the situation can, therefore, all impact on a child's ability to function (Johnson and Easterling 2015; Nesmith and Ruhland 2008).

Despite wanting to do things on their own, children and young people have suggested that they would want services that understood their needs and did not make them feel ashamed for having a parent in prison (Saunders and McArthur 2013). Saunders and McArthur (2013) reported that services which are located within the prison, and universal services, are preferred where these focus on the needs of the children and not on shaming them. It is also important that environments in which services are provided are child-friendly (Sharratt 2014).

Loureiro and da Vinci Fellow (2009) found that if children and young people keep their parents imprisonment a secret, this could potentially reduce the

effects of separation. However, Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) found that while children and young people may keep their parent's imprisonment a secret as a general rule, they will sometimes disclose the truth to close friends who they believe they can trust. They suggest that selective disclosure can lead to supportive and affirming relationships with other children in similar circumstances.

It has been suggested that where resilience can be instilled in children and young people affected by parental imprisonment, this can help to alleviate some of the struggles they face (Legel 2011). Little research has been undertaken on resiliency among children of prisoners specifically, but initial findings from the Social Care Institute for Excellence (2008) suggested that children may be protected from adverse effects of parental imprisonment by higher levels of hopefulness, increased social support (Murray and Farrington 2008) and stable care (Farmer 2017).

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPING) have examined mental health and well-being among children of imprisoned parents in four countries, with the aim of understanding how the imprisonment of a parent affects children and young people (Jones et al. 2013). The COPING project adopted a 'positive psychology' orientation in order to focus on the coping mechanisms and resilience of children, as well as the problems that they may experience (Jones et al. 2013). COPE recognises that when a child is able to open up about their experiences, it reduces their anxiety levels and lessens feelings of isolation associated with parental imprisonment (Jones et al. 2013). The study reported here adopted a similar focus on resilience and coping strategies.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to explore young people's experiences of being the son or daughter of a prisoner. A convenience sample of young people was recruited through two Scottish agencies, one working with young people who are socially excluded and the other with families of people involved in the criminal justice system. Children and young people were recruited who were between 12 and 26 years old, whose father or mother had at some point been imprisoned. This age range was chosen as it allowed young people to reflect on their recent experiences when growing up and avoided some of the ethical and methodological challenges related to interviewing younger children.

Young people willing to take part in the research were identified initially by staff working within the agencies. When a young person expressed an interest in participating in the research, they discussed participation in the first instance with their support worker. If the young person then wished to find out more details and the support worker felt this would not present any risk to the young person, the support worker would contact the researcher directly to set up a meeting with the young person. Potential participants were provided with information about the nature of the study and its purpose before making a

decision about whether to proceed. Consent was sought from parents when participants were under 16 years old, in line with Scottish legislation. Ethical approval was granted by the authors' University Ethics Panel. A total of six young people were recruited.

In-depth individual interviews were undertaken with young people. These predominantly took place within the premises of the service supporting the young person. This created a sense of safety for both the young person and the researcher. It also ensured that the young people had access to support before and after the interview. An agreement was in place with recruiting agencies that a key worker would be available to offer support to a participant following an interview if needed.

The interviews covered a number of topics including learning about the parent's imprisonment, changes in family life, visiting a parent in prison, concerns and supports and disclosing to others. Questions were phrased as open questions in order to allow the young person to tell their story in their own way (Tisdall, Davis, and Gallagher 2009). The interview moved from less sensitive to move sensitive questions as trust was built. Participants were made aware that they could refuse to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable answering, though none did.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 min. These were audio-recorded and then fully transcribed and anonymised before audiorecordings were destroyed. After data were collected and transcribed, it was analysed using thematic analysis to identify cross-cutting themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Transcriptions were read several times, first to identify and then to refine themes. The themes and issues generated within this research study from the analysis of data were fully anonymised before wider dissemination. Participants in this research study highlighted that building a trust-based relationship with them was one of the most significant aspects involved in the recruitment process.

Findings

The six participants were aged between 13 and 26 years old. Two were under 16 years old and there were five female and one male participant. All had a biological father who was either currently ($n = 4$) or had in the past ($n = 2$) served a prison sentence. In addition, one young person's mother had also been convicted of a crime and imprisoned. Participants were not asked within the interviews about their parent's offence but sentences ranged from a year in length to life in prison. Four out of six participants visited parents regularly whilst imprisoned, while two had little or no contact with their fathers. One of these disclosed that he had experienced violence within his home whilst growing up. All participants spoke articulately about their experiences. This may be a reflection of the support services with which participants were in contact and the retrospective nature of the interviews.

Consequences of Parental Imprisonment for Childhood

Managing Stigma and Shame Through Secrecy

Participants felt that stigma and shame were amongst the most difficult chal-lenges of parental imprisonment. A participant, talking about her experience of visiting prison, said:

> it was quite intimidating and like shameful I guess. (Female Participant, Age 18)

Participants reported that feelings of shame were compounded when they were told by teachers, social workers, police and other family members that they would 'turn out like [the imprisoned parent]'. One young woman reported that her father was wrongly convicted of sexually assaulting a child and described her experiences of shaming:

> It was just a total shock. I didn't believe it. They shout names like paedo and that at me. I felt more like the victim. (Female Participant, Age 15)

Children and young people reported that being personally judged for their par-ent's crime was one of the most painful aspects of stigma.

The main way of managing shame and stigma used by young people was to maintain a level of secrecy. Some participants did not tell friends or class-mates in school about their parent's imprisonment to avoid the risk of being bullied or singled out. Participants who chose to partially share their story of parental imprisonment with their friends expressed feeling uncomfortable and said it was 'normal' to tell lies to cover up the truth about their family. As one participant put it:

> When you have this situation at home, you don't really want to let everyone else know about it … you just get used to telling lies, like "white lies" you could call them and hide the fact that your dad is away in prison … (Female Participant, Age 18)

All participants said that they felt they had to keep their parent's imprison-ment a secret to a greater or lesser extent, often choosing not to disclose any information to people other than family. One even said that in her family, prison was something that no one ever spoke about.

The Impact of Secrecy on the Grieving Process

Loss of a parent was, for most participants, a major life event. One participant said:

> My life completely changed just through one phone call … it's just like your dad is being ripped away from your home but he's still there … I have always

been a daddy's girl, always will be …I didn't have a sibling to confide in and didn't know anyone in my situation. (Female Participant, Age 21)

The loss and grief described by participants, though, went beyond loss of a parent and included loss of friends, family members, financial income and a sense of belonging and identity. The need for secrecy and silence made it difficult for children to process their sense of loss.

Growing Up too Fast

One common concern expressed by young people was their sense of having to 'grow up too quickly' and having maturity 'forced upon them' as a result of their experiences. For some participants, particularly those exposed to violence, this process of accelerated responsibility began before their parent's imprisonment. Participants described how they often put other people's emotions and needs before their own. One participant said:

I didn't start realising it was bad for my dad to hit my mum until I was 5 and my little brother was only 2. To protect him, I used to lock him in the room and tell my dogs to protect them with everything they had. I had to go through and help protect my mum from my dad. (Female Participant, Age 21)

As well as protecting younger siblings, growing up in a violent household meant that participants had to manage high pressure situations at a very young age. Another participant stated:

He attacked people in front of us all the time … he broke in to my house with a lot of weapons on him. It was survival mode, at 8 years old I was doing the shopping, cooking and cleaning. I had no choice. (Male Participant, Age 26)

Childhood Trauma and Mental Wellbeing

These experiences pre- and post-parental imprisonment inevitably had a negative effect on children's emotional and social well-being. Talking about the legacy of secrecy, one participant said:

… the way I see it is sweeping everything under the carpet and that's going to grow mould and fester and come back with more of a problem in the future. (Male Participant, Age 26)

Participants were asked if anyone asked how they felt at the time of their parent's imprisonment. One participant responded by saying:

No social worker did. No birth family did. My foster family certainly didn't. My brothers didn't. No, no one asked. (Male Participant, Age 26)

Five out of six participants identified that they felt they had no one to talk about their feelings or answer any questions they may have had, with one participant saying:

> I didn't have a sibling to confide in and I didn't know anyone in my situation. It was just all very bizarre and I felt quite alone. (Female Participant, Age 21)

Achieving Personal Growth Through Adversity

While the young people interviewed have clearly faced immense challenges, narratives of resilience and personal growth were also told by participants. Participants described how they have graduated from University, taken on peer mentoring roles and been in leadership roles including, in one case, a nationally funded Future Leaders programme. One participant explained how she sat through her father's court case at 12 years old. She explained that she knew 'everything' about the court case as her family had always kept her informed, although the Social Work Department believed that she was 'too young to understand'. This participant, at 15 years old, spoke eloquently about how her experiences of the criminal justice system influenced her desire to study Law when she leaves school and to make a difference for other families.

Coping Strategies Used by Children and Young People

Participants described a number of coping strategies they developed to help them with the enormous challenges they faced. These included using euphemisms to maintain privacy and avoid shame, finding a trusted individual who can provide support and, to a greater or lesser degree, self-reliance.

Use of Euphemisms

Participants all had euphemistic terms for the prisoner or the prison where they were staying. This helped to disguise conversations in public. One participant explained:

> his inner city living apartment … then he moved … so that was the countryside abode and now he's in Premier Inn. It just depends which one he was in. (Female Participant, Age 21)

These names were given to the prison depending on what the prison was like and where it was situated, with the 'Premier Inn' being the open prison where he could 'check in' and 'check out'. Other participants used terms like 'graduating' from 'school' meaning the prisoner would be getting released from prison. One participant explained:

> We stopped calling him dad and we all started calling him Him. Like capital H, Him. (Male Participant, Age 26)

In this case, this appeared to allow the child to distance himself from a painful history.

Finding a Trusted Individual

The need for support was identified by all six participants in order to overcome the challenges they faced. Four out of six participants had support from friends, teachers, family support workers and family throughout the process of imprisonment, while two did not. It was participants' experience that if just one person was able to establish a connection and promote honesty, then they felt more comfortable expressing their feelings. Participants valued having one consistent person in their life with whom they could build a trusting relationship. However, there was a general view that support was not robust enough. Participants linked this to well-being. One stated:

> If someone had asked how I felt, it might have helped to get it out my system. I probably would have been less violent. (Female Participant, Age 21)

The importance of timeliness of support was also stressed. The common theme between all participants was that they all needed more help than what was available.

Self-reliance

Given that participants could not always rely on their family members and friends for support, as the imprisonment could have affected them too, three out of six participants said they had to become self-reliant. One participant described it like this:

> I kind of had to just deal with it myself. I look back on it now and think that's pretty awesome but … it's hard to always see it positively at the time. (Female Participant, Age 21)

While this young woman was able to take something positive from her experience of being self-reliant, it is clearly concerning if this is the only or main strategy available to some children affected by imprisonment. Another participant stated:

> It would have been easier in a situation to have someone consistent to speak to and rely on … it would have been nice not to have felt that real responsibility I felt during those patches. (Male Participant, Age 26)

Young People's Views on Promoting Wellbeing

Participants were asked if they had any recommendations for supporting the well-being of children and young people affected by imprisonment. Participants recommended ways in which secrecy and shame could be lessened and stereotypes challenged through education and information. One participant said:

> Children need to know what prison is and ask the questions they need to ask. (Male Participant, Age 26)

The importance of optimism and hope was also seen as important. One participant stated:

> … have a child friendly way of saying you're not destined to do this. It needs to be very genuine and non-patronising … support and encouragement is really important but also open conversations and inspiring open conversations. (Male Participant, Age 26)

Discussion

There have been recent positive policy developments in Scotland relating to children and young people affected by parental imprisonment. The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 aims to increase and strengthen children's rights, and develop the services that help support children and families (Scottish Government 2014). In addition to this, The Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2016 aims to establish more significant duties on Scottish ministers which means that all prisoners will be asked for details of any children who are dependent on them (Scottish Government 2014, 2016). Both these Acts offer potential to raise the visibility of children affected by parental imprisonment so that their needs can be identified and addressed. The implementation of the Support for Children (Impact of Parental Imprisonment) (Scotland) Bill within the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2016 is also a crucial step in improving support, assessment and recognition of the needs of children and families of prisoners (Fee 2015; Scottish Government 2016).

This study confirms many of the challenges faced by children affected by parental imprisonment. These include feelings of stigma, shame and fear of being ostracised (Murray and Farrington 2008; Robertson 2007), feelings of isolation (Loucks 2012) and a lack of individuals in whom children could confide and seek support (Loureiro 2010). The way these adverse circumstances and experiences interact and their consequences for mental well-being and development through childhood and into adulthood are only just beginning to be recognised (Jones et al. 2013) and more research is needed to turn policy goals into reality. While this study is limited in its scale and its use of a convenience

sample, it provides some interesting avenues for future research and policy and practice developments.

Reducing Social Stigma

It has been evident throughout this research that children and young people have experienced feelings of hostility and blame for their parent's offence. Public education to reduce stigma is vital to create a more supportive environment for families experiencing the challenge of imprisonment (Burke and Parker 2007). The European COPING project found that primary caregivers in the UK were less open with their children than those in Germany and Sweden and shame was an important factor in the non-disclosure of information (Jones et al. 2013). This suggests that any public education initiatives to address stigma must take into account cultural differences within particular jurisdictions.

Strengthening Family Resilience Through Education in Selective Disclosure

One issue of importance relates to children and young people's desire to keep their parent's imprisonment a secret (Martynowicz 2011; Sutherland and Wright 2017) and the nuances of disclosure or non-disclosure. This emerges from the research as a complex process. The study suggests that disclosure can introduce risks such as shaming and bullying, and so in some circumstances non-disclosure can be protective and a form of resilience. However, secrecy and an absence of opportunities to discuss parental imprisonment and seek support can also negatively affect well-being. It has been found that children and young people affected by parental imprisonment 'normalise or minimise' their situation in an attempt to decrease what could be a potentially negative psychological response (Johnson and Easterling 2015). This too can have positive and negative consequences. There is a need to empower children with skills to manage selective disclosures to safe, supportive individuals (Lockwood and Raikes 2016). Children are also resourceful, for example, using euphemisms to protect their confidentiality. This creativity should also be harnessed to ensure that a child-centred approach to such interventions is achieved. That said, one of the consequences of parental criminality and imprisonment for children included accelerated maturity. It will be important to match conversations about prison to the child's developmental stage and understanding. Good family support to allow children to be children is also important (Gill and Jacobson Deegan 2016). Morgan et al. (2014, 10) helpfully remind us that 'it is important to recognise the competencies of children and young people in this situation and support their endeavours rather than seeing them as a problem'.

As well as empowering children with skills in selective disclosure and opportunities to talk, there is value in offering information and advice to parents and other family members in order to enable them to provide information in a sensitive and appropriate way to children and to support families to discuss concerns (Jardine 2017). Manby (2014) suggests that stability at home is closely linked to being able to cope with parental imprisonment. Promoting a supportive family environment is, therefore, highly important (Arditti 2015). Sharratt (2014) also suggests that opportunities for good quality contact on a frequent basis can potentially protect the child's mental health and can strengthen the relationship that they have with the imprisoned parent.

Supporting Children to Develop Positive and Appropriate Relationships Outwith the Family

Children and young people affected by parental imprisonment need to be able to ask questions and express their emotions (Loureiro 2010). Hagen and Myers (2003) study showed that children at highest risk of behavioural difficulties were those who reported low levels of social support and who also scored low on the secrecy measure. Participants in this study highlighted the importance of maintaining relationships and trust, and of having one person in the child or young person's life who can provide consistent care, understanding and empathy. This is consistent with emerging evidence from studies of adverse childhood experiences (Bellis et al. 2017). While family support is a crucial aspect of this, professionals also have an important role to play in supporting children affected by imprisonment in humane and non-stigmatising ways (Featherstone, White, and Morris 2014). Oldrup (2017) found that there are difficulties of synchrony between the child's world and the prison. The culture of 'us' and 'them' is damaging for the child or young person who must be reassured that services and professionals are there to work together to help them to develop and grow (Phillips and Gates 2011). Children and young people need professionals, especially those who contribute positively to their lives, to be available so that they can have their questions about prison answered (Sutherland and Wright 2017). Teachers are particularly well placed to provide consistent support given their regular contact with children (Clopton and East 2008; Jones et al. 2013). There would be value in educating teachers about parental imprisonment so that they are better able to support children affected.

Promoting Personal Growth

Thulstrup Heinecke and Karlsson (2017) contend that too often children and young people affected by imprisonment have their potential diminished by people in their lives. This was reflected in the data generated by this study. For children affected by imprisonment, it is important for practitioners to

focus on understanding a child's history, present environment and opportunities for agency (Lanskey et al. 2015) in order to promote a positive sense of self and create the conditions for future ambitions to be realised. Shaprio, Meyers, and Toner (2011) highlight the importance of emphasising the achievements of children and young people and encouraging self-reflection and self-affirmation.

Conclusions

This research highlights the importance of giving children and young people the opportunity to build resilience throughout their experience of parental imprisonment. It is the responsibility of policy-makers, academics and legal and social care professionals to work together to address the needs of children and young people affected by parental imprisonment. This will require a concerted effort to develop evidence around children's views and experiences, as well as what works when supporting children of prisoners to thrive. In particular, there is a need on the part of society to listen to children and young people so that they know they are not alone throughout the process of parental imprisonment. There are at least 27,000 voices of children and young people in Scotland affected by parental imprisonment who have a story to tell (Criminal Justice Family Support Network 2015) and much can be learned from reflecting on these stories.

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