



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH, DOCUMENT

Improving wellbeing and educational outcomes for children in Wales affected by parental imprisonment (summary)

This report presents findings from research undertaken to consider how future support for children affected by parental imprisonment could be improved in Wales.

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Research aims and methodology

In July 2023, the Welsh Government commissioned the ASPIRE Team (Actioning a Schools and Prisons Independent Research Evaluation) for a period of 12 months to:

- review existing literature and practices relating to support for children affected by parental imprisonment
- consider the extent to which the ‘school zone’ model in HMP and YOI Parc represent good practices and how it operates
- consider what a national model of support for children affected by parental imprisonment in Wales could look like

Imprisonment of a household member has been identified as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) that can negatively impact on children’s future health and wellbeing (Felitti et al., 1998; Kincaid et al., 2019; Brown, 2020). As well as a significant sense of loss, many children experience stigma, social isolation, shame, and fear (Jones et al., 2013). While numerous studies have highlighted the potentially devastating impact of parental imprisonment on children (Condry and Scharff Smith, 2018; Jones et al., 2013; Kincaid, Roberts and Kane, 2019; Robertson, 2011), limited literature is available regarding what works in improving outcomes for children.

The Invisible Walls School Zone model provided the impetus for the Welsh Government’s commissioning of the ASPIRE project and consideration of a pan-Wales model of support.

The ASPIRE team is a collaboration led by Families Outside (a national Scottish charity that supports families affected by imprisonment) and supported by the University of Huddersfield, Cardiff University, two independent consultants specialising in policy and practice related to children affected by imprisonment, and two research assistants.

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ASPIRE was delivered over five key phases from July 2023 to June 2024:

- phase one: scene setting and foundations
- phase two: review of HMP and YOI Parc School Zone model
- phase three: foundation-building for a comprehensive model of support
- phase four: final gathering of evidence to develop the model
- phase five: presentation of the model within the final report

An expert advisory group representing key stakeholders, including HMPPS, third sector organisations delivering specialist support, and family members with experience of imprisonment, supported and informed the project throughout.

Phase one: scene setting

Literature, policy, and practice

A review of literature, policies, and existing practice relevant to children affected by parental imprisonment was undertaken and further informed by an expert advisory group and online survey completed by respondents from prisons, probation, education, third sector, health, young people with lived experience and Welsh Government.

Phase two: review of HMP and YOI Parc School Zone model

The ASPIRE team used a cross-sectional, case study-based review to explore how this model relates to the evidence gathered through the literature review and baseline assessment, and to identify lessons learned to inform development of a national model of support in Wales. The team made a two-day site visit to HMP and YOI Parc to:

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- review descriptive statistics
- observe delivery of a School Zone event
- undertake interviews
- facilitate focus groups with fathers in prison, children, and carers

Phase three: foundation-building

This phase of the project consisted of a pan-Wales multi-agency stakeholder event, hosted by Cardiff University and facilitated by the ASPIRE team. The event engaged with 44 key stakeholders (prison officers and governors, teachers and head teachers (mainly from primary schools), policymakers, third sector service providers, and people with lived experience of imprisonment or of having a parent in prison). The event provided an opportunity for delegates to discuss the needs of children affected by parental imprisonment, the barriers to supporting them currently and how support could be improved in the future.

Phase four: final gathering of evidence

Phase four built on the knowledge developed through the previous phases and aimed to develop a more detailed understanding about how a pan-Wales model could meet the needs of all key stakeholders.

Thirty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted online or in person with a range of participants selected as a cross-section of personal and professional perspectives and geography. These included prison staff from a range of designations from prisons not currently operating the School Zone model ^{[footnote 1} (<https://www.gov.wales/pdf-optimised/node/67039#footnote-1>); education staff from different roles; Welsh policy stakeholders; children and young people with experience of a parent's imprisonment other than in HMP and YOI Parc; and carers and imprisoned parents of children and young people with a parent in prison other than HMP and YOI Parc.

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An online survey was also circulated to young people who have experience of a parent's imprisonment. To encourage participation, they were invited to share their views online. This method elicited the target of ten responses.

Findings

Analysis of the findings from phases one to four of the ASPIRE project identified nine key priorities for development of a pan-Wales model, summarised as follows.

A strengths-based, children's rights approach

Both schools and prisons can play a unique role in upholding the rights of children impacted by parental imprisonment and recognising their potential. Children affected by parental imprisonment often become defined within a deficit model; a strengths-based approach focuses on a child's abilities, positive characteristics and relationships, and potential. Rights-based practice recognises children as having a distinct set of rights rather than passive objects subject solely to decisions made about their parents.

Policy and resourcing that supports a pan-Wales model

While some education and criminal justice policies mention children affected by parental imprisonment, few consider their needs or how these needs should be supported. How services are commissioned and resourced impacts on the nature, availability, sustainability, consistency, and quality of support available to children affected by imprisonment.

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Centralised access to information and resources

Throughout the research, a centralised resource hub was suggested as a valuable resource for professionals and for children, young people, and families to access the support they needed. This could be an online resource alongside a champions network, delivering specialist training to identified ‘champions’ in organisations across Wales. ^{[footnote 2} (<https://www.gov.wales/pdf-optimised/node/67039#footnote-2>)]

Multi-agency working

Participants in the research believed comprehensive, pan-Wales support requires full collaboration between prisons and schools, as well as a wide range of agencies supporting children and families, including public health, social care and third sector organisations.

Training

All stakeholders agreed that training was an important element of any pan-Wales model of support. Multi-disciplinary training sessions available to a wide range of practitioners would serve to support collaborative working, consistent understanding, and shared learning.

Sensitive identification of children when a parent goes in prison

Throughout all discussions regarding identification, respondents highlighted that relationships are key: families must feel confident that the motive is to offer

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support rather than punish or further discriminate. A balance must always be in place between the need for support and the right to non-disclosure.

Including all children in support

Children in Wales are not a homogenous group, and not all children in Wales with a parent in prison are in school or are visiting their parent. Therefore, a 'one-size fits all' approach will not work. Development of a pan-Wales model must also recognise that not all imprisoned Welsh parents reside in Wales: all mothers, and a significant proportion of fathers, are in custody in English prisons. Whatever their circumstances, all children need a kind, sensitive, and trauma-informed approach and tailored care and support that recognises them as children first.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is integral to all work with families and must be a priority in collaboration between schools and prisons. Any model of support should have the wellbeing of children at its heart and should not cause any unintended harm. Safeguarding is a dynamic and ongoing process that relies on a child-centred approach with a whole-family focus, effective multi-agency working, and transparent information sharing.

Monitoring and evaluation

Both UK-based and international research describes the significant and ongoing impact of parental imprisonment on children and young people. However, evidence about what works in improving outcomes for children and young people remains patchy, particularly in terms of their education and wellbeing. Furthermore, limited evidence is available about the impact on, and what works

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for, specific groups of children. Consideration should be given as to whether quality assurance and inspection frameworks across Criminal Justice, Education, and Public Health should recognise children affected by parental imprisonment as a distinct group.

Recommendations

The priorities borne from the findings provide a clear roadmap to developing a more comprehensive, pan-Wales model of support, creating 16 recommendations and associated actions. In addition to these recommendations, a number of suggested actions are included alongside each recommendation within the full report.

Recommendation 1

Ensure the rights of children and young people are considered at all stages of a parent's journey through the justice system, recognising that children with a parent in the criminal justice system deserve support in and of their own right and not as a means of influencing their parent's rehabilitation.

Recommendation 2

Establish a consistent, visible, pan-Wales commitment to children affected by parental imprisonment, including a Welsh Government commissioning model for the provision of support for children affected by parental imprisonment that promotes collaboration, sustainability, and nation-wide support.

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Recommendation 3

Ensure that all children and families in Wales affected by imprisonment have access to consistent and appropriate support.

Recommendation 4

Encourage a culture of collaboration for support for children affected by parental imprisonment.

Recommendation 5

Develop a detailed understanding of the current training landscape in Wales around children affected by parental imprisonment.

Recommendation 6

Raise awareness about the impact of parental imprisonment across all agencies working with children and families in Wales, ensuring that all Welsh Government-funded or Welsh Government approved training programmes regarding children affected by parental imprisonment provide consistent messaging; are underpinned by common principles (trauma-informed, destigmatising, children's rights-centred, and strengths-based); are accessible to all professionals working with children and families across Wales; and are evidence-based, monitored against a common set of learning outcomes.

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Recommendation 7

Ensure that ongoing discussions about the identification of children with a parent in prison avoid perpetuating stigma and do not negate the six key elements of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural consideration crucial to trauma-responsive practice (Welsh Government, 2022). Sensitivity to the methods, purpose, and use of identification is paramount.

Recommendation 8

Support schools to create environments in which families and children feel safe to disclose and staff feel confident in knowing how to respond to that disclosure and provide appropriate support.

Recommendation 9

Support prisons to create environments in which parents in custody feel safe to disclose that they have children and staff feel confident in knowing how to support parents in prison to engage with their child's school if that is appropriate.

Recommendation 10

Ensure that the support offered to children with a parent in prison is consistent across Wales, but flexible enough to allow for a diverse range of needs.

Recommendation 11

Recognise that support for children with a parent in prison cannot rely solely on

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in-prison provision and that schools, nurseries, youth services, and colleges, as well as universal, statutory and third sector services, have a vital role to play in supporting children.

Recommendation 12

Ensure that any pan-Wales model provides support for parents and carers of children affected by parental imprisonment.

Recommendation 13

Ensure that all agencies working to support children with a parent in prison have robust child safeguarding policies in place and that these are clearly communicated to all partner organisations.

Recommendation 14

Develop an improved understanding of the number and needs of children affected by parental imprisonment across Wales.

Recommendation 15

Ensure that outcomes are central to any pan-Wales model of support for children affected by parental imprisonment.

Recommendation 16

Ensure that children and young people have the opportunity to define what their

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needs are, so that progress is monitored against outcomes that are informed by their unique needs.

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Footnotes

[1 (<https://www.gov.wales/pdf-optimised/node/67039#1>)] As the project progressed, more prisons introduced the Invisible Walls School Zone model, which meant that some prison staff we interviewed were now familiar with that model in their prisons.

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[2 (<https://www.gov.wales/pdf-optimised/node/67039#2>)] 'Champions' are trained individuals who champion the rights and needs of children affected by parental imprisonment within their organisations.

Contact details

Report authors: Nancy Loucks, Sarah Beresford, Polly Wright, Ben Raikes, Alyson Rees, Freya Kenny, and Sylvia Stevenson

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

For further information please contact:
Public Services and Local Government Research
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ

Email: Research.PublicServices@gov.wales
(<mailto:Research.PublicServices@gov.wales>)

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