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COPING Research: Exploring the Emotional Impact of Parental Imprisonment on Children in four European Countries; Qualitative Research Findings

Abstract

COPING[1] (2010-2012), a European funded multi-strand research project exploring the impact of parental imprisonment on children and young people, included 349 interviews with children, care-giving parents and imprisoned parents in Germany, Romania, Sweden and the UK. Each country has its own distinctive criminal justice and welfare systems. Research was carried out by Universities and NGOs. The four countries developed detailed interview guides to ensure consistency, translated into the host language. Building on previous research, the study focused on themes of resilience, attachment, and experiences of stigma. The importance of children's own agency and the support of care-givers, extended families and friends were reinforced for all four countries. Openness and honesty about the prison sentence served children best, related to their age and maturity. The study found that, outside the family, schools were the most important agency to support children. Services responding to children's needs were mainly provided by non-governmental agencies (NGOs), although these were mainly absent in Romania. The ways children handled their situation and levels of stigma and societal disapproval varied between the four countries[2].
Key Words: Parents in Prison, international comparison, imprisonment, resilience, attachment, stigma

1. Introduction

The European COPING Research Project (2010 – 2012) was designed to explore the impact of parental imprisonment on children and young people in Germany, Romania, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The COPING Partnership comprised a University and a Non-Governmental Association (NGO) in each of the four countries, assisted by Eurochips, supporting children of prisoners across Europe, and the Quaker United

1 Children of Prisoners, Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health
2 For a full account of the COPING Project see: Jones AD & Wainaina-Wozna (Eds) 2013: Children of Prisoners: etc. University of Huddersfield

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Nations (Human Rights) Organisation (QUNO). COPING was a multi-strand project, including a survey of children and care-givers (by questionnaire); in-depth interviews with children and young people, parents/carers and imprisoned parents (the subject of this article); consultations with stakeholders including service providers, prison staff and social workers; and service mapping across the four countries.

Sweden is the smallest of the four countries (by population). Fewer people are imprisoned than in the other COPING countries. Sentences are shorter, and more use is made of alternatives to custody. Sweden is a wealthy country with a well-developed welfare system. Children of prisoners in Sweden were well served by Bryggan, an NGO with an explicit children's rights perspective. Prison authorities focussed on ensuring a good quality of visits for children. Home leaves are built in to prison sentences for suitable prisoners. Prisoners are allowed to have their children with them in their early years.

Germany is a populous and wealthy country. Imprisonment rates are lower than in England and Romania, although it has the second highest average imprisonment length. The guiding principle of penal policy is rehabilitation. Prison policy also prioritises maintaining contact with family members. Home leave and conjugal visits can be included in sentence plans depending on Laender (State) policies. Female prisons allow children to live with their mothers until they are aged 3 (up to 6 in open prisons), and Germany's prison system has been described as "child centred".

Romania was by far the poorest of the four countries included in the study. It has the second highest imprisonment rate, and the longest sentences of the four countries. Its prison population, however, has fallen steeply in recent years. Prisons have been neglected; they are mainly old and in disrepair. There are few statutory or NGO services for children of prisoners and their families in Romania. Regular visits, including conjugal visits, are permitted, but there are restrictions in place for higher security prisons. Infants and children are able to stay with their mothers in prison until the age of 1 year.

The **UK (England and Wales)** has the second highest number of children deemed at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the four countries. The prison population has nearly doubled since 1993, and more people are imprisoned than in any other COPING country, with a consequent significant increase in the number of children experiencing parental imprisonment. NGOs provide information and advice for prisoners' families and run visitors' centres. Eligibility to receive visits is linked to incentives and earned privileges. Female prisoners may be permitted to keep an infant with them for the first 18 months.

2. Literature Review

This literature review focuses on main themes illustrated by the COPING research. Attachment and resilience theory, frequently intertwined, are considered, including related concepts such as ambiguous loss and stigma. Evidence about intergenerational

patterns of criminal behaviour, children's and parents' experiences of contact with imprisoned parents, and the role and contribution of schools, are reviewed.

2.1. Resilience

Miller (2007) defines resilience as *'a process of growing from life stressors, or recovery outcome from a traumatic experience or risk'*. Masten & Obradovic (2006) observe that low risk and poor adaptation is much less common than cases of high risk and good adaptation. Individual resilience is closely related to accessible support from the family environment. Coping involves both adapting to the external world of school and community while maintaining internal integration, psychological wellbeing and physical health. Ungar (2005) has stressed the role of children's agency in achieving resilience, describing them as *"the architects of their own experience"* (p437). Miller (2007) also emphasised children's uniqueness in the face of adversity helped by temperament, intelligence, problem solving skills, humour and self-esteem. Resilience theory is strengths based, avoiding a focus on deficits (Hinshaw, 2007). Neenan (2009) emphasises turning adversity into advantage, by focusing on attitudes to adversity rather than succumbing to negative consequences. Rutter (2007) has described the inoculation effect of exposure to environmental hazards for children of prisoners: exposure to risks rather than risk avoidance can have a steeling effect. Masten & Obradovic (2006), however, recognised that there are levels of risk and adversity so overwhelming that resilience cannot occur and recovery is rare or impossible.

2.2. Attachment

Poehlmann (2005) found that attachment problems of children of imprisoned mothers, aged up to 7, were mitigated by secure caregivers. While most children showed signs of insecurity, they were able to develop secure relationships when living in a stable care giving situation. Parke & Clarke-Stewart (2001), reviewing the effects of parental incarceration on young children, found that the key predictor of children's adjustment was the quality of the parent-child relationship, and relationships with extended family and informal social networks, enhanced by opportunities to maintain contact with the absent parent. They found that children were able to form multiple attachments, to fathers and other non-maternal caregivers, as well as to mothers.

Poehlmann (2005) also found that for two-thirds of children in her study representations of attachment were characterised by intense ambivalence, and also disorganisation and violence, following prolonged separation from their imprisoned mothers and changes in caregivers. Ambiguous loss (Boss, 2010) - loss which is unclear, traumatic, confusing and unresolved -, is relevant to the experience of children of prisoners, whose plight can be regarded equivocally by their communities. Those experiencing ambiguous loss have to manage without certainty, needing to become comfortable with ambiguity, concepts which have parallels with cognitive dissonance (Cooper,

2007.) Bocknek et al (2009) elaborate concepts of loss for children of prisoners where loss of a family member results in ambiguity about family boundaries and family membership. Most children in Bocknek's study reported avoiding other people, avoiding their feelings and showed extreme discomfort speaking about their families.

2.3. Information

How much children know about parental imprisonment appears closely connected to stigma about incarceration. Caregivers may overestimate how much children know about parental offences, and the knowledge children have may be vague (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Poehlmann (2005) concluded that "telling children about difficult situations in honest, sensitive and developmentally appropriate ways" (p. 682) affirmed children's trust in caregivers, whereas hidden or distorted information could result in distrust or mental health problems. Bocknek et al (2009) found that children with a greater understanding of their imprisoned relative's whereabouts appeared more comfortable when interviewed; and most children wished they knew more. Children may be afraid of knowing that their parent is a criminal, and may feel that they themselves are to blame. Blaming oneself appears closely related to self-stigma, which is associated with low self-esteem and has been defined as comprising awareness of a stereotype, agreement with it and applying it oneself (Corrigan et al, 2009).

Children and families have to decide with whom information about parental imprisonment can be shared. Some children choose to lie about their parent's imprisonment, perhaps using "working abroad" as a cover story (Chui, 2009). Hagen & Myers (2003) explored secrecy and social support issues for children of female prisoners. More socially skilled children experiencing higher levels of support were more likely to exercise caution about sharing information, restricting this to trusted friends; whereas children with less guidance from caregivers and less social support exercised less discrimination and talked more freely about parental imprisonment. Secrecy was associated with stigma surrounding maternal imprisonment.

2.4. Intergenerational crime

The main emphasis from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (Farrington et al, 2009), (Murray & Farrington, 2005) has been on the increased vulnerability of sons and grandsons of prisoners to mental health problems and anti-social behaviour, part of a powerful argument based on evidence of transmission of crime across three generations (1950's onwards) in the UK. Boys who experienced parental imprisonment during childhood tended to develop anti-social personalities in adulthood independently of other risk factors. Other longitudinal research, (Phillips et al (2006), Great Smoky Mountain research, USA), and Kinner et al (2007), Australia) both placed more weight on socio-economic factors than on parental imprisonment as probable causes of problem behaviours of children of prisoners. Phillips et al (2006)

identified children whose parents become involved in the criminal justice service as an 'at risk' group; however the most prevalent risks impacting on these children were parental substance misuse, mental ill health and lack of education. Kinner et al (2007) also found that parental imprisonment could result in improved outcomes for some children whose parents had provided delinquent role models.

2. 5. Gender differences

Previous research has found few clear gender differences regarding parental imprisonment or effects on children. Parke & Clarke-Stewart (2001), reviewing research in the USA, concluded that evidence about differential impacts of imprisonment on boys and girls is unclear; boys appeared more likely to demonstrate externalising behaviour problems, and girls were more likely to have internalising behaviour problems. Rutter's (2007) review of resilience outcomes did not identify gender as a key variable.

There is also uncertainty about differential effects of maternal and paternal imprisonment on children. Fritsch & Burkhead (1981) reached firm conclusions that the absence of a father in prison correlated with child 'acting out' behaviour; while the absence of a mother in prison correlated with child 'acting in' behaviour, in a study in a single prison in Kentucky, which needs to be updated using a wider sample with international comparisons.

2.6. Cumulative disadvantage and contact with the imprisoned parent

Arditti et al (2010) highlighted evidence of cumulative disadvantage, maternal distress and harsh parenting practices in low income families where fathers had been imprisoned. In an earlier study (Arditti et al, 2003) highlighted the severe financial and health problems of families of prisoners, frequently sending regular and substantial amounts of cash to the imprisoned parent. However, almost a third of participants commented on benefits of imprisonment, including partners tackling drug or alcohol addiction.

The same study identified the high costs of prison visits for poor families and risks of loss of income, confirming findings by Christian et al (2002) including absence of time to supervise children's behaviour. Clopton & East (2008) found that children frequently became excitable or hyperactive before prison visits, but that most were reassured about their imprisoned parent's wellbeing. Nesmith & Ruhland (2008) found that children wanted active relationships with their imprisoned fathers, even when they felt hurt, angry or fearful, and that caregivers acted as gate-keepers for the child-father relationship. Miller (2006) found that continued face to face contact between incarcerated parents and children could enhance children's wellbeing.

2.7. Children's education and schools

Previous research about school support and impact on school performance has been limited, although parental imprisonment is known to be linked to enhanced risks for children (Murray & Farrington (2005); Phillips et al (2006)), including risks to children's education and academic performance (Dallaire et al (2010); Chui (2009)). However, Nesmith & Ruhland (2008) found that most children in their study did well at school. In Dallaire et al's (2010) research, teachers found that children of imprisoned parents showed greater academic related problem behaviours than other students, and they had higher expectations for competency for female than male students. Teachers have to balance their roles primarily as educators while also offering social work support, a much lower priority (Frankel, 2006).

3. Methodology

The four partner countries worked together to design interview schedules to ensure consistency. These were created in English and then translated into Romanian, German and Swedish. They included protocols to ensure that participants were fully informed about the COPING research project and the content of the interview, that they understood their rights as participants, and that they were able to give their informed consent.

Interviews with children and non-imprisoned and imprisoned parents/carers all focussed on the impact of imprisonment on the child, including their welfare and development, family relationships, education, and social life and contact with the imprisoned parent.. Experiences of contact with the imprisoned parent and involvement with support services and interventions were also covered. Where possible, complete triads were undertaken Children and their parents/carers were mainly interviewed in their home, except in Sweden where more children were interviewed in Bryggan's (the Swedish NGO) child friendly offices, while imprisoned parents were usually interviewed at the prison, or as soon after release from prison as could be achieved. NGOs played a key role country in identifying, contacting and interviewing participants.

3.1 The Interviews

Interviewers' first contact with families was usually by telephone, finding out if the family still wished to go ahead with the interviews, and whether children were in agreement. Most parents talked to children about taking part before the interview, although some children were less well prepared. Access to interview imprisoned parents was negotiated through prior contact with the prison.

Overall, most children were interviewed on their own (all children in the case of Sweden). In the UK and in Germany some sibling pairs were interviewed together. Older children frequently provided support to their younger siblings during inter-

views. In the UK a higher proportion of children and young people chose to be accompanied by a parent/carer, a sibling or another adult.

There were benefits and disadvantages to children being accompanied. Where children were accompanied, their parent/carer or sibling was able to offer clarification and reassurance which could prompt more detailed responses from the child. The presence of an adult invariably made a difference to the interview process. When an adult was present children sometimes looked to them to provide guidance, whereas unaccompanied children answered these questions on their own. Adults occasionally interrupted or butted in, although they were asked not to.

Interviews started with a careful discussion about what was entailed in the process, including challenging questions about what it was like having a parent in prison. Questions covered children's interests and included opportunities for age appropriate play. Interviewers were able to engage effectively with children and families in most cases, even though the interview usually provided the one and only opportunity for interviewers and families to meet. The exception was Sweden where more than half the sample stayed in contact with Bryggan for support after interviews. Child friendly techniques were used including play and drawing pictures of family and prison (Pridmoe and Bendelow, 1995). Most interviewees welcomed being involved, although for some this could be distressing.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy by the researchers who conducted the interviews. Transcriptions were not translated except for short extracts or quotations used in reports. Researchers also produced summaries of interviews for factual information, impressions of the family and the child's resilience, and non-verbal behaviour unlikely to have been detected by the recording.

3.2 Coding and Analysis

Interview data was analysed using the qualitative software tool NVivo (QSR 2011) which enabled researchers to code separately and then merge data into a single project file at intervals throughout the analysis process. Coding was done case by case, where a case was a single interview with one respondent.

An initial version of the coding framework was agreed between partner countries. This was predominantly an "*a priori*" framework based largely on the topics included in the interview schedule. This was modified inductively to resolve inconsistencies and consider possible new nodes. Nodes relating to needs were included at the suggestion of Sweden. Multiple coding of text (i.e. where passages were coded at two or more nodes) was used to aid retrieval. As a check on coding consistency in the UK, another researcher, who was not involved in the initial coding, independently checked the coding on a small number of cases. No significant differences were reported in the way the coding frame was used by different team members. In Sweden, a small number of interviews were independently re-coded. Again this showed no significant differences.

The main analysis undertaken for the study report was broadly thematic, based on the coding framework. Key phenomena or patterns in the data were explored. Participants who had similar experiences, for example experiences of support from relatives or schools, were grouped together. Direct quotations from the interview transcriptions have been included to illustrate participants' experiences.

3.3. Sampling

The intention was to interview equal numbers of children for the in-depth interviews falling in the "normal" and in the combined "borderline" and "abnormal" ranges of the Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) which had been included included in the surveys carried out as the first stage of COPING in all four countries. Scores were related to each country's norms. Despite best endeavours, "normal" children were oversampled in Romania, Sweden and the UK, but not in Germany. The intention was to interview an equal number of boys and girls, a spread of children across the eligible age range (7-17), children from different ethnic minority groups, and children with mothers as well as fathers in prison.

3.4. Participants

A total of 349 interviews were conducted across the four countries. Interviewees comprised 161 children, 123 non-imprisoned parent/carers, and 65 imprisoned parent/carers.

Table 1: Number of interviews conducted in the four countries

	UK	**Germany**	**Romania**	**Sweden**	**Total**
Families	47	26	35	27	135
Children	67	27	38	29	161
Non-imprisoned parents/carers	46	25	33	19	123
Imprisoned parents/carers	26	7	20	12	65

The number of children who participated in interviews exceeds that of the number of families, as in some cases siblings from the same family were interviewed, mainly in the UK (67 children from 47 families).

Table 2: Gender of children in the sample

	UK *(n=67)*	**Germany** *(n=29)*	**Romania** *(n=38)*	**Sweden** *(n=29)*	**Overall** *(n=163)*
Gender					
Male	39	12	23	11	85
Female	28	17	15	18	78

A similar number of girls and boys participated in interviews. The mean age of children across all four countries was 11.4 years, with a spread of children across the eligible age range (7 – 17).

In the UK (61 out of 67) and Romania (31/38) most children in the sample were White. Ethnicity data was not kept in Germany and Sweden for legal reasons. Most children were living with their biological mother (128/162, 79%); 19 (11.5%) lived with grandparents; and 5 (3%) with their biological father. Most children had their biological father in prison (111/161, 69%); 24 (15%) had their biological mother in prison (16 of these were in the UK); and 24 had a step father or male partner in prison (11 of these were in Germany).

In all four countries, most (138/161, 86%) imprisoned parents/carers had been sentenced. Parents in Romania received the longest sentences, average 87.14 months, followed by Sweden (57.65 months), Germany (40.56 months) and the UK (31.18 months). In the UK and Germany, drug related offences were the most common reason for the parent's/carers imprisonment (n = 23 and 11 respectively). In Romania this was murder or manslaughter (n = 11).

About half the children in the sample had experienced parental imprisonment previously. Most children had some form of contact with their imprisoned parent/carer either by visits (78%), telephone (76.5%) or letter (76%). Telephone contact was more restricted in Germany.

4. Thematic analysis and Findings

4.1 Family Relationships

Across the four countries a key finding was the importance of relationships between the **caregiver** and the child, confirming earlier research (Poehlmann & Clarke-Stewart, 2001). Sweden found that poorer outcomes were associated with less stable families, frequently where the imprisoned parent had misused drugs. In all four countries, children's resilience was enhanced by close and supportive relationships with grandparents and siblings. Grandparents and the extended family had a particularly crucial role in Romania, including financial and material support.

The Romanian study found that *"close emotional relationship or secure attachment to (the) caregiver is a main resilience factor for children"*. The report emphasised that

the lived experience of the child (including arrest, domestic violence and fights) can lead to increased child empathy ("*acting as a binder that reflects on relationships with others, especially with the mother left alone*"). Grandparents played an important role even where they were not living with the children. Children's role in the family could change: in Romania 7 children were described as "*Adults in miniature, taking on levels of responsibility beyond their years*". Evidence of enhanced levels of responsibility were also noted in the UK.

Continuing relationships and contact with the **imprisoned parent** were important for children's resilience. Through their offences, imprisoned parents often failed to set an appropriate moral example to their children. In Romania and Germany children tended to idealise their imprisoned parent, unless they had reason to be afraid of him/her. Caregivers and the wider family had a key role in promoting contact with the imprisoned parent, confirming findings by Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008, noted above. The UK report found that children missed imprisoned fathers equally as much as imprisoned mothers. In Sweden, descriptions of children's relationships with the imprisoned parents were overall positive, with the imprisonment described as the main problem, although two children reported that the relationship had improved as a consequence of the imprisonment, which allowed more structured time with their parent during prison visits.

Interviews indicated that the parental offence often seemed to be 'the elephant in the room', either painfully discussed, fleetingly mentioned, or avoided altogether. The Romanian report particularly emphasised the significance of the seriousness of the offence committed. Discussion was easier if the offence was not too serious; more heinous offences were a matter for shame and increased stigmatisation for all family members and were more likely to be hushed up in front of the children.

4.2. Family Conflict

Discovery of the offence, subsequent arrest, court proceedings and imprisonment had the potential to lead to conflict between parents and within families. Less evidence about family conflict was obtained in Germany and Sweden although the Swedish report found half a dozen families where the imprisoned parent had a serious drug habit; and there was reference to 2 children in Sweden having witnessed violence in their home.

Levels of domestic violence and alcohol abuse were high in Romania. Domestic violence towards a female partner or towards children was frequently linked with alcohol abuse and dependency, which was widespread or nearly universal in the Romanian sample, impacting on 35 out of 38 families taking part. Drug and alcohol use provided the backdrop to family conflict in half the cases in the UK, sometimes causing extreme arguments, or life threatening situations. Where children had a parent/carer committed to looking after them properly, they frequently seemed able to survive the worst effects of family conflict or parental drug or alcohol use. Children's accounts in the UK

made it clear that they did not like, and usually intensely disliked, parental arguments, whether or not these were related to alcohol or drug use.

4.3. Children's Resilience and Coping Strategies

In Sweden, talking to the care giving parent, to school, friends and NGOs was a main coping strategy. Children in Sweden seemed particularly articulate in describing their feelings about their imprisoned parent. Children could have mixed feelings about how much talking helped, like a 9 year old girl who said: *"I think it is good, then one doesn't have to keep it bottled up, then one gets more sad, so when I talk about this then I don't have to like it"*. A high proportion of children experienced disturbed sleep and nightmares in the Swedish and UK samples. Children in the UK also talked about their absent parent, but tended to put more emphasis on adjusting to their situation, and things getting back to normal. They tended to suppress painful feelings and to feel that they were expected to put a brave face on their situation. Nonetheless, children in a third of UK families needed to access counselling or other support outside the family.

The German report identified talking to others as a helpful strategy, but noted that most children tended to avoid talking about parental imprisonment. The author of the German report observed that children seemed not to allow themselves to share bad or sad feelings, seeming to prefer avoiding difficult subjects and "*whitewashing*" their situation. One German girl, aged 14, commented: *"My sister and me – we are real masters at suppressing things"*. Behavioural or psychological problems were observed for two-thirds of the children in Germany. Children dissociating themselves from the guilt of their imprisoned parent was noted as a positive coping strategy in Germany, and also in the UK.

In Romania, children's resilience was very closely associated with the strength they were able to draw from support from their immediate and extended families. Children in Romania were more likely to experience stigma for having a parent in prison, and seemed to have to rely more on their own strength of character to survive.

4.4. Honesty, Communication and Sharing Information

Most children included in the study had some knowledge about their parent being in prison, although this was often not the case for younger children in Romania who were often told that their father was working abroad. How much children were told varied considerably, depending partly on children's age and maturity. Children appreciated being given accurate information.

Some parents in all four countries recognised the importance of being open with their children, and that this would help them deal with the situation. Most children and carers in the German sample talked openly about the imprisonment within the family. Some parents in Germany and the UK decided to hold back on providing full

details about the offence, or about court processes, to protect children from unnecessary anxiety.

One UK mother (B-PC173) made sure her 2 daughters, aged 10 and 6 years, knew what was happening at each stage: *"…they know that they are loved; they know that they can talk about anything".* A Romanian mother said: *"…it helped that I told the truth as we started talking more".*

Two German care givers emphasised the value of being open and honest with their children.

> *"I've told them. For god's sake, it doesn't make sense to lie to the children. Where would this lead?"*
> *"We have talked openly with the children. It is not easy, but the truth is probably always the best way. You don't have to necessarily talk about the offence, especially if it is very serious. This could burden the children too much. You have to know what the children can take. If they (can) take it, can you (sic) also talk openly with them about it".*

A Swedish parent commented: *"…Well, I think one should try to be as honest as possible, but... one has to take it at the right level".*

A Swedish child aged 13 spoke for many: "*We children are good at imagining when we are not told the truth. The grown ups always say that they don't know, but … they know more than what we do and that is what we want to know".*

There were some differences about openness and honesty between care giving and imprisoned parents. In Sweden and Germany, and to a rather lesser extent in the UK, care giving parents tended to favour being open with their children; they had to live with the consequences of their partner's crimes for their children every day. More variation was observed in the views of imprisoned parents; shame and embarrassment were important factors. In Romania, imprisoned parents were generally the most reluctant to share information with their children, partly for fear of repercussions. One Romanian father told his wife that he did not want the children to know about his crime "*… but everything came out in time … My middle son told me once: 'Dad, you killed someone and you did not say anything about this', and I could not respond anything, I was speechless".* The more serious the offence and the longer the sentence, the more information was described as "*precarious and censored"*; and important facts and details were hidden from children. In the UK, sharing information with children seemed to work best where both parents shared this responsibility.

Children were usually careful about sharing information too widely, and many decided to talk just to their best and most trusted friends. A Swedish 10 year old boy said: "*My best friends know about it … the ones I really can trust".* A 17 year old Swedish young woman commented: "*As a child one can easily be judged for what one's parents have done".* She described how complicated it was when she wanted to explain to her friends that her father, in prison for murder, had himself been subject to abuse for many years. Children expected friends to keep the information to themselves. Talking to children with similar experiences to their own could be particularly helpful and

supportive, for children in the UK, and particularly amongst children supported by Bryggan in Sweden. Children found keeping information secret, or having to tell lies, particularly stressful.

4.5. Schools

Schools in Germany, Sweden and the UK were mainly supportive when informed about parental imprisonment, although there were examples of less sympathetic responses. Evidence from Romania was mixed. In Germany, a high proportion of families participating (about half) decided not to inform schools.

While most children interviewed in Germany kept up their school attendance, in the UK school attendance was adversely affected for a number of children, mainly boys; and there were reports in Sweden of older children frequently missing school, particularly at times close to the arrest of their parent, or when the parent was on home leave. Children's behaviour at school often deteriorated, and a finding from the UK was that schools did not always have the understanding and skills required to help boys with aggressive behaviour caused by parental imprisonment.

In Sweden, where most families informed the school about the parent being in prison, younger children were provided with emotional support by class teachers, and older children could receive more structured support from a school nurse or counsellor. One parent commented: "*When my son has cried, then he has had the teacher that knows, and if he has been low or sad then he has been able to go to her and she has known why".* Support for children from a wide range of school staff in the UK was somewhat less structured, but available (and appreciated). A 9 year old boy commented: "*(My teacher) just said if you come in a bad mood just say 'Miss, I am in a bad mood' and then she will understand".*

Another child in the UK, aged 9, looked after by her grandparents, whose imprisoned mother had split from her father, talked positively about her school:

> *"Say if I wanted my mum, they (teachers) would probably say: 'Calm down because you have been crying, … and carry on with your work. There is nothing to worry about'. The teachers, they aren't nasty, they are nice".*

Overall, evidence about the impact of parental imprisonment on children's performance and behaviour at school was mixed. Children's behaviour in Romania seemed little changed. Rather less than a third of families in Germany thought that children's performance at school had deteriorated, although there was uncertainty about how far this was caused by parental imprisonment. A large majority of care giving parents in Sweden spoke about positive aspects of their children's school performance, while some imprisoned parents in Sweden felt some responsibility if their children were struggling at school.

In the UK the largest group of children performed well at school, linked to their own ability and determination, and to positive relationships with one or both parents. However, other children's (again mostly boys') education had suffered. Problems ap-

peared to be related in these cases to the quality and openness of communication between parents and children; and, for some of the boys, to difficult transitions to secondary school.

4.6. Stigma and Bullying

Reported instances of bullying were higher in the UK sample than for the other three countries. They were less frequent in Sweden, although some Swedish children said that being informed by their parents that imprisonment was something not to be talked about may have enforced a sense of stigma in them. In Romania several children were verbally bullied by teachers. Children in Germany were particularly concerned that there might be repercussions if they shared information about their imprisoned parent with friends at school, although when they did so their fears were not realised. The German data suggests that in most cases the main problem could be some kind of self-stigma. One German mother commented: "*There is stigma, and we women and children suddenly have a flaw, for which we are not responsible. We can't go into public with this flaw. And that's bad. Really bad".*

There was potential for schools in all four countries to contribute to reducing stigma and bullying for children of prisoners. UK families were mainly pleased with positive responses from schools alerted to bullying taking place. Most Romanian parents advised their children not to tell their peers at school about their situation because of fear of bullying and reprisals. About half the German families decided not to inform the school about the imprisonment because of feelings related to shame and stigma. Generally, families had greater concerns about stigma where the parents' offences were more serious, particularly so for offences involving assaults on children.

There was greater potential for adverse repercussions where offences were widely reported during court trials and resulting sentences, as in the UK. By contrast, Sweden operates a strict privacy policy which protects the identity of Swedish offenders from being revealed in media accounts of trials up to the point of conviction..

4.7. Participants' Experiences of Criminal Justice System

More evidence was obtained about experience of the criminal justice system in the UK than in the other countries. Much of the evidence in the UK related to experience of police arrest, with examples of heavy-handed police practice and (rather fewer) instances of higher levels of sensitivity for children's welfare. There were some isolated instances in Germany and Romania of distress caused to participants at the point of arrest.

Other concerns related to stress caused by extended periods of bail for children and families in the UK; children having no opportunity to say "goodbye" to parents when they were remanded into custody (UK); and serious concerns about restrictions on contact with families for remand prisoners in Sweden.

4.8. Contact with the Imprisoned Parent/Carer[3]

For most of the children involved, prompt (very soon after arrest and imprisonment) and regular contact with their imprisoned parent was crucial for their well-being and resilience. A small number of children had either no or infrequent or haphazard contact with their imprisoned parent, and the prior relationships between these children and their parent had often been fraught, frequently linked to alcohol problems and violence (Romania and UK), and to drug misuse (UK and Sweden). Most children visited their imprisoned parent, although visits were much less frequent in Romania. Long journeys were involved, particularly in Sweden and Romania. Visits could be costly, and were often unaffordable in Romania.

Most children adapted successfully to the experience of visiting prison. Saying "goodbye" was difficult for many and the aftermath of visits was often painful. Children's reports in the UK and Sweden were that they mainly got used to the prison environment, particularly in less secure establishments. Children in Germany and Romania found the prison environment more hostile and drab, and lacking facilities for families. Search procedures caused most discomfort for Romanian children. Family days (UK and Sweden) and parent/child groups (Germany) were appreciated where available.

Restrictions on physical contact during visits (Romania's were the strictest, and Sweden's the most liberal) were experienced as unhelpful, particularly by younger children. Opportunities to engage in meaningful activities with the imprisoned parent were limited, which was hard for children of all ages. Special family focussed activities, where available, were more relaxed and widely appreciated.

Telephone contact with the imprisoned parent was very frequent for children in the UK and Sweden, fairly frequent in Romania, and much more restricted in Germany. Costs were high in the UK and often unaffordable in Romania. Where telephone contact was permitted and financially feasible, it was a positive experience for nearly all children, enabling more regular contact with the imprisoned parent. Letters also provided an important link and were particularly important in Germany, as this was often the only means of communication between visits.

In Sweden furlough leaves from prison were enjoyable and beneficial for children (some of whom missed school to be with their parent); while in the UK benefits of home leaves for children were reduced by their anguish at their parent having to return to prison.

3 For a more detailed over-view of the COPING evidence on children's contact with their imprisoned parent, see Sharratt, K. (2014). Children's Experiences of Contact with Imprisoned Parents: A Comparison between Four European Countries. *European Journal of Criminology, 11* (6), pp. 760-775. ISSN 1477-3708

4.9. Services and Interventions

Very few services were available for children of prisoners and their families in Romania. There was more provision to support children and families in the other three countries, mostly provided by NGOs, with more access to psychological support, and a wider range of services generally, in Sweden and Germany.

Statutory services received mixed reports in Germany, Sweden and the UK, with examples of good practice combined with scepticism about Social Services interventions. Recipients of support from NGOs were probably over-represented in German, Swedish and UK samples, where established NGOs played a major part in recruiting research participants. Their support was generally well regarded. In the UK, Partners of Prisoners provided well established visiting support services for families. Treffpunkt e.V's father-child groups, and group and individual therapeutic support for children and parents provided by Bryggan, were examples of high quality services which could usefully be replicated in other countries.

Less stigma attached to services for children of prisoners and their families in Sweden, which seemed more relaxed about identifying and responding to a wider range of needs of these children and families, than the other countries.

5. Discussion

Overall, the majority of children in this study adjusted well to parental imprisonment and absence, and to prison security, with support from family, school and friends. The seriousness of the offence, the length of sentence, and prospects for family reunification were key variables. Some children benefitted from their parent being in prison, for example, where respite from paternal alcohol or drug misuse or violence was welcome. Strained relationships between care giving and imprisoned parents impacted adversely on children's welfare. Grandparents made crucial contributions to children's well-being and resilience in all four countries, especially in Romania where the extended family is particularly important

Most children missed their parent in prison grievously. Help from their care-giving parent was a key factor for their resilience. Ambiguous loss and coping with contradictory feelings, including shame and embarrassment, are key concepts for understanding the impact of parental imprisonment for children, in those cases where they had previously enjoyed a positive relationship.

Honesty, subject to the children's age and maturity, about parental imprisonment served them best and was appreciated by them. Parents were right to advise children to be cautious about with whom they shared information. A difficult subject was made harder if it was avoided or left unclear or made mysterious. Children desperately need information about the whereabouts and the well-being of their parent

Children need advice and opportunities to discuss whom they should talk to, and what they should say about their parent being in prison. The subject is difficult for parents and care-givers because of their own feelings of shame and embarrassment, and

worries about how their family and friends will react. The care-giving parent may feel 'lumbered' with a demanding job if the imprisoned parent offers no help. Usually children benefitted from sharing experiences with trusted friends.

Children in the study experienced widespread stigma, although the degree varied between the four countries. Families felt strongly that they were different from others and were conscious of societal disapproval. Parents in Germany were particularly conscious that parental imprisonment led to stigma and created disorder in their lives. Self stigma could be worse than stigma from others. None of the German children who were worried about their friends' reactions actually experienced problems.

Schools are powerfully placed to confront stigma, and had the potential to be the key agency to support children of imprisoned parents. Deciding whether to tell the child's school is a crucial decision for parents, and involves risks. Swedish and UK parents were most likely to share this information, and German and Romanian parents less so. Where schools were informed, parents and children were usually pleased with their response. Schools can powerfully signal their support, or less often their disapproval, to children when their parent is arrested, a critical juncture for children. When informed, schools could provide extra help with children's school work, emotional support and access to more specialised help if needed.

Our findings about the importance of contact with the imprisoned parent for children's resilience confirmed earlier research, emphasising that early, continuing and open communication with the imprisoned parent is crucial for children's welfare. Children benefitted less where the imprisoned parent was less committed to their welfare or still dependent on harmful substances. The role of care-giving parents was crucial in facilitating contact. While children could be fearful about their parents in prison, they also observed how their parent could benefit from a structured life and access to treatment (for example for drug dependency) and opportunities for education.

COPING data reinforces the importance of improving the prison environment for children's prison visits, and of family based activities in prison.

There were some indications from the study that girls were better at describing their feelings and, in the UK, that boys' behaviour was more likely to get out of hand. The clearest finding in this study about gender differences was from the UK where children were found to miss their fathers in prison equally as much as their mothers. Further research about the differential impact of maternal and paternal imprisonment on boys and girls would be particularly useful.

How far there are real differences between how children dealt with having a parent in prison across the four countries is still an open question. Children in Sweden, and to a lesser extent in the UK, talked more about their distress than those in Germany and Romania, although all children may have had similar feelings. Differences may reflect varying cultural attitudes to imprisonment. Certainly children supported by Bryggan in Sweden had more opportunities to talk about parental imprisonment than, say, children in Romania; and one of the findings from this research is that children need and deserve help to handle the complex emotions they experience.

Limitations

Children not in contact with their parents in prison were under represented in the study. Children in the 'normal' Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire range were over – represented in Sweden, Romania and the UK.

A further issue was that the gravity of offences for which imprisoned parents in the sample had been convicted and sentence length varied considerably, and made inter – country comparisons problematic.Where children could look forward to their parent's release from prison in the foreseeable future, this could impact positively on their resilience.

Lastly, mention should be made of the fairly small numbers of children from black and minority ethnic groups in the UK sample, where the numbers were lower than the representation of Black and Ethnic minority people in the prison system.

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