

Inquiry into children of imprisoned parents

Organisation Name:
Your position or role:

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

To whom it may concern:

I would like to address the social, emotional and health impacts on children affected by parental incarceration, providing evidence from my own lived experience.

Parental incarceration has been something I have had to deal with for more than half my life. My father was arrested when I was 8 years old, and is still in custody as I am a young adult.

The impacts this has had on my development, health, and wellbeing are insurmountable, and the experiences I am about to share scarcely reach the surface of how deeply this has impacted my life.

Remembering back to when the arrest occurred, no adult explained to me what was going on. I had to piece together everything from overheard conversations and the way my family reacted to the news. I instantly felt I had the duty to protect my younger sibling from the news (aged 6). I saw my mother reading articles on how to explain to children incarceration, but I do not recall any conversations happening. I could read, so I knew what was going on when we visited the prison for the first time, but I worked hard to distract my sibling from learning the truth. Gradually, I stopped seeing members of my one-close extended family, and I have only recently heard that this reason is because family didn't like how irresponsible and suddenly cold I was to them. No professionals ever sat me down, or offered any support. No adult explained what was going on, and at an extremely young age I was put into a position where I could no longer be a child. This is a fact that I deeply resent and still unsettles me to this day. I feel I was completely abandoned, an afterthought. This has permanently altered my sense of trust in others.

School was very challenging. Kids would talk about the case in front of me and even make jokes about it, not knowing that I was directly involved. My mother spoke to our school principal, but instead of ever reaching out to support or contact me, I simply felt more isolated. On Father's Day and the like I was always singled out and told that I didn't have to make anything if I didn't want to, that I could make something for a grandparent. This confused and upset me, because my father was still very much in my life, and he meant a lot to me. Eventually, in the years following his arrest, I became detached and isolated. I lost all my friends. These emotional changes were simply attributed to social anxiety and puberty.

Today, I struggle with mental health challenges, such as obsessive compulsive disorder, generalised anxiety disorder, and major depression. While I cannot comment on whether such conditions may have manifested without the impact of my father's incarceration, I believe it has greatly contributed to it. While not directly related, I also struggle with endometriosis, which research has found has greater prevalence rates in individuals who have experienced trauma. Furthermore, while I have not received a diagnosis, I believe I may be struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder. I have not been able to access a diagnosis for this as, due to the weight of the situation, I have not been able to discuss anything to do with the case, incarceration, or how it impacts me to any mental health professional (or anyone besides family, for that matter). As no one explained to me what was going on, it has always been drilled into me that in order to protect my family, it needs to be kept a secret. Every time I am asked about my father, I am not able to speak and I instinctively make any attempt available to divert or escape the conversation. I become 'triggered' and experience severe

anxiety if anything even mildly adjacent to the case or even incarceration is mentioned. When I was fifteen, I had a psychologist who did keep asking about my father, wondering why I never mentioned him. This psychologist recommended that I see a psychiatrist, the first one I have ever saw. My mother attended this session, and she did mention the incarceration to the psychiatrist. Notes were taken and given to my psychologist, but she never mentioned my father in any way ever again.

As part of my obsessive compulsive disorder, I have had obsessions about my own morality — I worried whether I was inherently ‘evil’ for supporting my father, or even being related to him. I would obsess over the case, and the incarceration. If I had not heard from my father for a while, my obsessions and compulsions would revolve around keeping him safe, and making sure he would call.

As aforementioned, I have severe problems trusting others. Of heightened importance, however, is my sense of severe mistrust of police and others involved in law enforcement. As stated, no one explained to me what was going on, police included. I have been treated extremely rudely on visits to see my father, including having to undergo a strip-search at eighteen years old when a drug-detection dog indicated a false-positive (which was followed by an officer's comment to ‘watch out for the kinds of people you get involved with’). I also have a great mistrust in media organisations. My career often involves interactions with the media, though I often have unprecedented anxiety attacks when getting interviewed in fear that my ‘words would be twisted’ and out of my control — an experience reported by my family.

Finally, while I have not been a ‘child’ as such during COVID-19, the impacts have greatly affected me. Not being able to see my father in person has increased my levels of anxiety. Once restrictions were eased, being able to see him but not being able to give him a hug or hold his hand almost hurt worse. A common topic of discussion for our family during this time was how families with a large number of children would have to ‘pick’ a child to visit, due to the limit of two visitors per prisoner.

While I highly admire and appreciate the work some organisations do to support children in situations such as mine, it is simply not enough. I was devastated to learn about the 40 year anniversary for Shine For Kids, for example, as I have lived my entire childhood and teenage years completely unaware that such support was available to me.

I believe considering lived experience is of paramount importance when considering how such supports and services are to be improved. Such an experience is incredibly unique, and I believe some form of consultation with individuals who know what it’s like is the only way forward. I would recommend new (preferably young people themselves, if available), and that young people with lived experience should be consulted with for any major decisions to be made. I would also like to recommend the creation of resources for psychologists and other mental-health professionals to access in order to effectively treat children undergoing such situations. Additionally, considerations on the appropriateness of support for children with parents who have shorter sentences versus long-term sentences needs to be considered. I grew up beside my father (talking to him every day on the phone, and visiting him), but not with him. I am unsure what life and our relationship would be once he is released, which is an anxiety that has only grown as his release gets closer.

As this is something deeply personal that I have never talked about beyond the scope of my family, [REDACTED].

Thank you,
[REDACTED]

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1:

File2:

File3:

Signature:

