Paying the Price:

The Cost and Impact of Imprisonment on Families in Ireland

Irish Penal Reform Trust

The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) is Ireland's principal independent non-governmental organisation working for systemic penal reform and change. Our vision is a just, humane Ireland where prison is used as a last resort. We advocate for a progressive criminal justice system that prioritises alternatives to prison, upholds human rights, and champions reintegration.

This report has been externally commissioned for publication by IPRT. The research was led by Dr Sara Singleton of TASC (Think Tank for Action on Social Change).

The views, findings, and conclusions expressed in the main body of the report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of IPRT. While IPRT has provided guidance and feedback at various stages of drafting, neither IPRT nor its staff authored any of the content in the report. The recommendations, however, were shaped in partnership between the author and IPRT.

While the author and IPRT have made efforts to ensure that the information contained herein was correct at the time of publication, neither the author nor IPRT assumes any liability for any damage or disruption caused by errors or omissions, whether such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident, or any other cause.

This report is presented in good faith to inform and stimulate wider debate and reform on this topic.

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Foreword

For years now, IPRT has sought to shine a light on an overlooked group of families and children in Irish society – those with a family member in prison. Not only do very many families in this situation face ongoing stigma, but there is also a very real impact on their everyday lives. This report seeks to highlight the challenges these families and children face. What is clear from the research findings is that they regularly struggle to make ends meet and experience high levels of poverty and deprivation, often without access to dedicated or adequate support.

We know that parental imprisonment can have an extremely detrimental and disruptive impact on a child or children as well as their partner and wider family. While previously IPRT estimated that more than 5,000 children had a parent in prison daily with over 10,000 children affected each year, with the current record prison overcrowding levels this number is likely to be much higher. In the absence of concrete and up-to-date data, it is much more difficult to identify the scale and type of issues that these families face. It also makes it harder to design and introduce policy solutions or interventions that could make a significant difference.

Recent commitments in *Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028* to improve the reliability and accessibility of data on parental imprisonment, improve visiting conditions and put in place a policy as well as prison staff undertaking child-rights training, are all very welcome. The recruitment by the Irish Prison Service (IPS) of a dedicated Family Connections Officer is a step in the right direction. However, the IPS is not solely responsible for families and children impacted by imprisonment. This is a much wider issue that requires a whole-of-government response and commitment.

Very many of the children impacted will already be counted in the child poverty statistics as we already know that households headed by single parents experience the highest rates of poverty and deprivation. Yet, the connection is not always made that the reason for someone parenting alone is that their co-parent has been imprisoned and that these families have lost an essential income. At the same time, they are having to adjust to life without their partner. The cost is not only financial; imprisonment takes an emotional toll on a person's family and affects everyone's mental health and wellbeing. Lives are turned upside down. This is very clearly seen in the responses from the people who were so generous with their time to share their experience for this report.

Usually when a family suffers the loss of a parent, their extended family and community network rally around and support them, ask them how they are and see how they can help. However, the people who took part in this research tell us how they were treated differently – they were ignored, unfriended and no help was forthcoming. This is also evident at an official level – bereaved partners are able to avail of exemptions from some of the more stringent criteria to apply for social welfare support (and rightly so) but the same rules do not apply for families who lose a parent to prison even though they face the same drop in income, the same costs and a similar sense of loss.

I often think of the young mother who emailed me late at night while her toddler slept and she was feeding her newborn. Her partner had just been sentenced for a number of months when he wasn't expecting to get a custodial sentence. She shared her fear of losing the roof over their heads, the worry that she had no family support and that without her husband's income, she wouldn't be able to afford rent, childcare, or the basics to care for and feed her children. While her partner was the one sentenced, she was the one left behind trying to hold it all together. She didn't know where to turn and I felt I could offer her little comfort as all I could do was signpost her to services that could potentially help but there was no certainty. This report, while only a snapshot, demonstrates that she is not the only one in this position and there are families all over the country feeling the strain without any recognition of the hardship they experience.

We hope this report will serve to raise greater awareness of this important issue and generate a better understanding of the challenges people go through. We also hope the findings and recommendations will encourage policymakers to take concrete action to provide tailored practical support for these families and ensure that they do not continue to pay the price for their family member's imprisonment.

IPRT would like to express our gratitude and appreciation to the participants who were so generous and open in their contributions, despite what is likely a challenging topic for some people.

We would also like to extend our thanks to Families Outside in Scotland and NIACRO in the North for being so generous with their time and sharing their expertise in conducting similar research, which ultimately informed our own.

We also want to extend our sincere thanks to TASC, and in particular to Dr Sara Singleton and her team, who undertook this important research project and handled it with sensitivity and compassion.

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Saoirse Brady

Executive Director

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Executive Summary

The imprisonment of a child's primary carer is recognised as a profoundly damaging experience and one of the ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) with lasting effects into adulthood. Previous estimates from the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) indicated that over 5,000 children had a parent in prison on any given day, affecting more than 10,000 children annually.[1] However, with record numbers of people currently in prison, this number is likely to be far higher.

To address the significant challenges faced by children and families affected by imprisonment, IPRT commissioned TASC (Think Tank for Action on Social Change) in December 2024 to undertake comprehensive research exploring the financial impact of familial imprisonment on families with children. This research seeks to address significant gaps in knowledge regarding the relationship between poverty and the challenges faced by families affected by imprisonment, with a particular focus on parents, carers, or siblings in prison.

This report involves a review of national and international studies on poverty and imprisonment, analysis of existing datasets to identify gaps related to families impacted by imprisonment and references the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) data, which sets out the goods and services needed for a dignified minimum standard of living in Ireland. The study examined the role of social systems, including social welfare, childcare, housing, transport and digital access, highlighting additional challenges for these families.

Primary research includes eight in-depth interviews with individuals who have lived experience of having a family member in prison and a survey that gathered 30 responses. This qualitative and quantitative data provided detailed insights into the economic burdens faced by families, including loss of income, increased expenses, housing instability, childcare difficulties, and the costs associated with maintaining family ties through prison visits.

When considered against the MESL benchmark, these findings indicate that many affected families are living below the level required for a socially acceptable minimum standard of living, with imprisonment amplifying financial strain and deepening deprivation. The research also revealed the social and emotional costs of having a family member in prison, and how these have complex and compounding effects on economic disadvantage in the short, medium and long term.

Finally, the research identified strategies from both domestic and international contexts that have effectively mitigated the financial impact of imprisonment on families. Based on these findings, the report presents evidence-based recommendations to inform policy and practice aimed at better supporting children and families affected by imprisonment.

1 Estimates vary: IPRT (2024) over 5,000 children in Ireland have a parent in prison on any given day, affecting 10,000+ annually. The Council of Europe estimates 5,492 such children (5,288 with an imprisoned father, 204 with an imprisoned mother) (Piecing it Together, COE Recommendation).

Summary Recommendations

- **Embed a children's rights approach in developing policy and in decision-making about children with a parent in prison** by creating a child rights impact assessment tool adaptable across justice, welfare, education and community systems. Accompany this with robust training for relevant staff and frontline workers. (Department of Children, Disability and Equality; Tusla, the Child and Family Agency)
- **Recognising children of imprisoned parents as a distinct group in need of tailored supports**, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and Young Ireland Advisory Council should establish a time-limited subgroup to review policies, identify gaps and make recommendations to strengthen *Young Ireland* commitments. This includes improving data on imprisoned parents, publishing a policy on visiting conditions, and ensuring child-friendly visiting spaces in every prison, with interdepartmental buy-in for implementation. (Department of Children, Disability and Equality)
- **Ensure access to financial and social welfare supports for people parenting alone when the other parent is imprisoned** by revising eligibility rules, updating guidelines and removing the six-month waiting period for the One Parent Family Payment. Align supports with those available to families who experience bereavement. (Department of Social Protection)
- **Ensure kinship carers with responsibility for a child or children with a parent in prison can access a guardianship payment or alternative payment** without having to declare parental abandonment or end parental contact. Review and amend the process to ensure timely, appropriate access. (Department of Social Protection)
- **Reduce travel costs by establishing an Assisted Prison Visits Scheme** to help low-income families meet travel costs through fuel vouchers or transport reimbursements. Recognise overseas visits as qualifying expenses under Additional Needs Payments and ensure consistent approval by CWOs. (Department of Social Protection)
- **Explore developing a national support service** to provide clear, plain-language information on entitlements and supports for families of imprisoned relatives, potentially through the Citizens Information Service or Family Resource Centre network. (Department of Social Protection)
- **Commission further research on the impact of imprisonment on children and families**, linking findings to the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) and consulting with affected families. (Department of Social Protection)
- **Modernise visit booking systems** with online and phone options offering real-time confirmation, dedicated assistance, and consistent procedures across prisons. (Irish Prison Service)
- **Improve visiting conditions** by ensuring all prisons provide child-friendly, safe, welcoming spaces designed with input from children and families, with minimal security procedures and child-friendly staff training. (Department of Justice; Irish Prison Service)
- **Expand family contact opportunities** through family-friendly visiting times (evenings, weekends), shuttle buses from key transport points, expanded video call options, longer phone calls, and early implementation of in-cell incoming calls. (Department of Justice; Irish Prison Service)
- **Update the internal prison complaints system** to include a standardised, user-friendly process for visitors, with an accessible version for children and young people. (Department of Justice; Irish Prison Service)
- **Develop sentencing guidelines for general application that treat imprisonment as a sanction of last resort** and prioritise the best interests of the child. Judges should consider non-custodial alternatives where appropriate and receive ongoing training on the impact of imprisoning primary caregivers. (The Judicial Council)

1. Contextualising Family Imprisonment in Ireland

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In July 2025, the total prison population in the Republic of Ireland stood at 5,378, equating to a rate of 98 per 100,000 people.[2] Of this population, 17.9 per cent (960 individuals) were on remand or awaiting trial. There are currently 12 prison establishments across the country,[3] with an official capacity of 4,672 places. The system is significantly overcrowded, running at 115.3 per cent occupancy.[4] The daily average prison population has risen steadily, from 3,718 in 2016 to 4,941 in 2024, highlighting a continuing upward trend in the use of imprisonment.[5]

The age distribution of the imprisoned population shows a concentration among younger adults. Just over 81 per cent of male committals to prison are aged between 18 and 44, with the overall average 35 years old; female committals in the same age range also account for slightly over 81 per cent, averaging 36 years old.[6] Imprisonment is heavily concentrated in certain counties, with over one third of committals in 2024 listing Dublin as their county of residence. Cork, Limerick, and Kildare also represent significant proportions, while almost 12 per cent of committals reported no fixed address at entry, illustrating the strong connection between homelessness and imprisonment.[7]

Ireland's prison population also reflects significant ethnic and social inequalities. Non-Irish citizens make up about 12 per cent of the general population,[8] but represent just under 20 per cent of those in prison.[9] This overrepresentation can, in part, be attributed to a range of structural and systemic factors, including language barriers, limited access to legal supports, precarious employment, and immigration-related vulnerabilities. Non-citizens may also be less likely to receive non-custodial sentences due to weaker ties to the community or housing instability, making them more susceptible to imprisonment even for lesser offences.[10]

The overrepresentation of the Irish Traveller community is particularly notable. Travellers comprise less than one per cent of the national population yet account for an estimated eight per cent of the male prison population, 16 per cent of the female prison population, and 21 per cent of detained children.[11] Traveller women face Imprisonment rates estimated to be 18 to 22 times higher than the general population, substantially exceeding the rates for Traveller men.[12] This overrepresentation reflects a complex interplay of socio-economic exclusion, racial and ethnic marginalisation, and institutional bias. For Travellers in particular,

2 World Prison Brief, 'Ireland (Republic)' (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, Birkbeck, University of London, updated 1 July 2025) https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/ireland-republic accessed 12 May 2025.
3 Irish Prison Service. Prison Service – List of Institutions. Government of Ireland, updated 29 April 2025. Available at: https://www.irishprisons.ie/prisons/ Listed institutions: Arbour Hill Prison, Castlerea Prison, Cloverhill Prison, Cork Prison, Dóchas Centre, Limerick Prison, Loughan House, Midlands Prison, Mountjoy Prison, Portlaoise Prison, Shelton Abbey, Wheatfield Prison accessed 20 February 2025.
4 World Prison Brief, 'Ireland (Republic)' (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, Birkbeck, University of London, updated 1 July 2025) https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/ireland-republic accessed 12 May 2025.
5 Irish Prison Service, Annual Report 2024 (Irish Prison Service 2025).
6 ibid.
7 ibid.
8 Central Statistics Office, Census 2022 Summary Results (CSO 2023).
9 Irish Prison Service, Annual Report 2024 (Irish Prison Service 2025).
10 M F Aebi, M M Tiago and C Burkhardt, Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics: SPACE I – 2015 Prison Populations (Council of Europe 2015).
11 Traveller Justice Initiative, Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community (24 September 2024) https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7482/tji_input_jckit_sep_2024.pdf accessed 10 May 2025.
12 Irish Penal Reform Trust, Maternal Imprisonment in Ireland: A Scoping Study (IPRT, Dublin, March 2023) https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7194/maternal-imprisonment_in_ireland-_a-scoping-study_-_edited_-_web.pdf accessed 20 February 2025.

longstanding discrimination and a lack of trust in state institutions further hinder access to fair legal representation and rehabilitative supports. Early school leaving, unemployment, and insecure housing significantly contribute to these disparities.[13]

People in prison in Ireland are 25 times more likely to originate from, and return to, socioeconomically disadvantaged areas than from more affluent communities.[14] Many individuals from minority backgrounds face multiple disadvantages from an early age, including poverty, lower levels of educational attainment, unstable housing, and limited access to healthcare. These conditions increase the likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system.[15] Research also indicates that members of these groups are more likely to be over-policed, more frequently prosecuted, and receive harsher sentencing outcomes.[16]

Cycles of poverty, criminalisation, and imprisonment can become self-reinforcing, with parental imprisonment placing an additional burden on already vulnerable families and communities.[17] Children in these groups are more likely to experience multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), further entrenching inequality across generations.

Previous IPRT research has highlighted the considerable impact imprisonment has on families and children. Key studies such as *Picking Up the Pieces* (2012), *Piecing It Together* (2021), and *Maternal Imprisonment in Ireland* (2023)[18] reveal emotional, educational, financial, and practical challenges faced by children of imprisoned parents, though the lack of systematic data collection means the full scale is unclear. Estimates from the Council of Europe suggest that over 5,400 children are separated from a parent in prison at any one time in Ireland, mostly due to paternal imprisonment.[19] Children affected by parental Imprisonment often experience anxiety, grief, behavioural difficulties, school absenteeism, financial strain, and housing instability.[20] Parental imprisonment is recognised as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), linked with increased vulnerability to further adversity and long-term developmental challenges.

Children of imprisoned mothers face particular challenges. Mothers are frequently the primary carers before imprisonment, yet research on their children remains limited because the female prison population is small and difficult to access.[21] Some prisons, including the Dóchas Centre, provide visitor centres and play areas to support family contact.[22] Children nonetheless report strong emotional attachments to both parents and describe similar feelings of loss regardless of which parent is imprisoned.[23] Financial strain is common. Families often face substantial travel expenses to visit prisons, sometimes more than €100 per week, while also coping with lost income and the ongoing need to support the imprisoned relative. These combined pressures significantly heighten family hardship.[24]

13 Traveller Justice Initiative, Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community (24 September 2024) https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7482/tji_input_jckit_sep_2024.pdf accessed 10 May 2025.

14 Children of Prisoners Europe, 'Statistics Ireland' (2022) https://childrenofprisoners.eu/facts_and_figures/statistics-ireland/ accessed 28 April 2025.

15 LC Walt and LA Jason, 'Predicting Pathways into Criminal Behavior: The Intersection of Race, Gender, Poverty, Psychological Factors' (2017) 2(1) ARC Journal of Addiction 1.

16 F Croux, D Brosens, L De Donder, B Claes and S Vandevelde, 'Foreign National and Ethnic Minority Prisoners' Participation in Formally Organized Prison Activities: A Scoping Review' (2020) 27(4) Journal of Occupational Science 474; L Fekete and F Webber, 'Foreign Nationals, Enemy Penology and the Criminal Justice System' (2010) 51(4) Race & Class 1.

17 LC Walt and LA Jason, 'Predicting Pathways into Criminal Behavior: The Intersection of Race, Gender, Poverty, Psychological Factors' (2017) 2(1) ARC Journal of Addiction 1.

18 Irish Penal Reform Trust, Picking up the Pieces: The Rights and Needs of Children and Families Affected by Imprisonment (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2012); Irish Penal Reform Trust, Piecing it Together: Supporting Children and Families with a Family Member in Prison in Ireland (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2021); Irish Penal Reform Trust, Maternal Imprisonment in Ireland: A Scoping Study (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2023).

19 Irish Penal Reform Trust, Piecing it Together: Supporting Children and Families with a Family Member in Prison in Ireland (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2021).

20 ibid.

21 Irish Penal Reform Trust, Picking up the Pieces: The Rights and Needs of Children and Families Affected by Imprisonment (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2012).

22 Irish Prison Service, Annual Report 2024 (Irish Prison Service 2025).

23 Irish Penal Reform Trust, Maternal Imprisonment in Ireland: A Scoping Study (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2023).

24 Irish Penal Reform Trust, Piecing it Together: Supporting Children and Families with a Family Member in Prison in Ireland (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2021).

In response to the urgent need for focused support, the Action for Children and Families of Prisoners Network was established and in 2022, IPRT recruited a project coordinator to lead a three-year Children and Families initiative. Although the inclusion of children of prisoners in *Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023 to 2028* recognises their specific needs, further research is required to deepen understanding of how imprisonment intensifies child poverty and to inform policies and services that effectively respond to these challenges.

2. Literature Review

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ireland's International Obligations

Framework of International Human Rights Instruments

Ireland's national and international obligations to reduce child poverty and ensure an adequate standard of living provide a comprehensive framework for addressing the complex challenges faced by families affected by imprisonment. These obligations encompass a broad spectrum of international human rights instruments, regional treaties, and national policies that collectively aim to safeguard the rights and well-being of children and their families.

Central to Ireland's international commitments is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which sets out the fundamental rights of children and the State's duties to protect these rights without discrimination (Article 2), prioritise the best interests of the child (Article 3), ensure the right to survival and development (Article 6), and respect the views of the child in all matters affecting them (Article 12).[25] Ireland's periodic reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, along with civil society shadow reports and the Committee's concluding observations, highlight concerns regarding child poverty, social exclusion, and the compounded vulnerabilities experienced by children with imprisoned family members.[26]

Complementing the UNCRC, Ireland is bound by the European Social Charter, which guarantees social and economic rights including the right to social protection, adequate housing, and protection against poverty and social exclusion.[27] While the Charter does not address imprisonment specifically, its provisions apply to all individuals and families, including those affected by imprisonment. It obliges states to take measures to ensure an adequate standard of living for all, with particular attention to vulnerable groups such as children. Ireland's compliance is periodically reviewed by the European Committee of Social Rights, which has highlighted the need for improved social support systems and poverty reduction strategies that take into account the needs of families impacted by the criminal justice system.[28]

National Policy Frameworks and Interagency Cooperation

At the domestic level, Ireland's commitment to upholding these international obligations is reflected in key policy frameworks such as *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020*, and its successor, *Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028*.[29] While *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* made only a specific commitment to ensure adequate access by children to an imprisoned parent in a child-friendly setting, *Young Ireland* takes a broader approach, explicitly recognising children affected by parental imprisonment as a vulnerable cohort requiring targeted supports to mitigate social and economic disadvantage. Both frameworks emphasise the importance of interagency cooperation to provide holistic care, including access to health, education, social protection, and community services.

25 United Nations General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989) 1577 UNTS 3 (entered into force 2 September 1990).

26 Government of Ireland, Ireland's EU Child Guarantee National Action Plan (2022) https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/irelands-eu-child-guarantee-national-action-plan.pdf accessed 15 August 2025 accessed 12 June 2025; Ombudsman for Children's Office and Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, Report Title (2023); United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on Ireland (2023).

27 Council of Europe, European Social Charter (Revised) (adopted 3 May 1996, entered into force 1 July 1999) ETS No 163.

28 Council of Europe, European Committee of Social Rights, Conclusions XXI-4 (2023) – Ireland (Council of Europe 2023) https://rm.coe.int/rap-rcha-irl-xxi-4-2023/1680aa08f0 accessed 9 May 2025.

29 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Young Ireland: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028 (2023) https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/campaigns/young-ireland/ accessed 15 April 2015.

The Minimum Essential Standard of Living and Financial Vulnerability

The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) methodology, developed by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, provides an evidence-based framework for determining the minimum income required for households in Ireland to achieve an adequate standard of living. MESL measures the actual cost of a basket of goods and services essential to meet basic needs, including food, clothing, housing, transport, healthcare, education, and social participation. This approach, based on research and consultations with diverse groups, reflects the real living standards expected in contemporary Irish society.

MESL serves as a benchmark to assess whether household incomes are sufficient for a dignified quality of life. For families affected by imprisonment, MESL highlights financial burdens beyond general poverty. These include loss of income due to the imprisonment of a primary earner or caregiver, increased costs to maintain contact with the imprisoned family member, and additional housing or childcare expenses. These factors heighten the risk of poverty and social exclusion, making these families more economically vulnerable than the general population. MESL thus offers crucial insight into the specific financial challenges faced by households with imprisoned relatives, emphasising the need for targeted social supports and policies to address their increased disadvantage.[30]

European Child Guarantee and Council of Europe Guidelines

In 2021, the European Union adopted a Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing effective access to key services such as early childhood education and care, healthcare, nutrition, housing and education. The Recommendation identifies children in precarious family situations as a group "exposed to various risk factors that could lead to poverty or to social exclusion", explicitly including children with an imprisoned parent.[31] Ireland's National Action Plan to implement the Guarantee,[32] however, contains no targeted actions for children of prisoners and highlights the lack of data on this group as a barrier to effective policy-making.

Complementing this, the Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec (2018)5 on children with imprisoned parents urges member states to provide financial and social supports to families and to recognise the specific rights of children affected by parental imprisonment.[33] These European instruments reinforce Ireland's obligations to address the economic and social disadvantages faced by children of imprisoned parents and to develop targeted supports within national strategies.

Additional International Human Rights Obligations

Further relevant international obligations include the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which enshrines the right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing, housing, and continuous improvement of living conditions.[34] Ireland ratified the ICESCR in 1989 and is required to take progressive steps to realise these rights for all citizens, including children and families affected by imprisonment. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has emphasised the importance of addressing systemic inequalities and ensuring social protection mechanisms that effectively support vulnerable groups.[35]

30 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) 2022 (Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 2022) https://www.budgeting.ie/publications/mesl-2022/ accessed 20 February 2025.

31 Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee [2021] OJ L 214/22 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reco/2021/1004/oj accessed 15 April 2025.

32 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Ireland's European Child Guarantee National Action Plan (15 June 2022) https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/irelands-european-child-guarantee-national-action-plan/ accessed 15 April 2025.

33 Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States concerning children with imprisoned parents https://edoc.coe.int/en/children-s-rights/7802-recommendation-cmrec20185-of-the-committee-of-ministers-to-member-states-concerning-children-with-imprisoned-parents.html accessed 20 August 2025.

34 United Nations General Assembly, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 3 January 1976) 993 UNTS 3 https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights accessed 5 July 2025.

35 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Ireland (8 July 2015) UN Doc E/C.12/IRL/CO/3 https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/802336 accessed 12 August 2025.

Moreover, Ireland is a party to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which, among other commitments, requires the State to address the specific challenges faced by women, including those who are caregivers in families impacted by imprisonment.[36] Given the disproportionately high rates of imprisonment among Traveller women and the intersection of gender and ethnic disadvantage, this convention is particularly pertinent. Recent analysis by UNICEF also underscores the importance of supporting primary caregivers affected by imprisonment, highlighting the need for child-centred justice responses and coordinated social supports.[37]

Intersectional Marginalisation and Specific Vulnerable Groups

Finally, international human rights jurisprudence and scholarly commentary stress the importance of recognising and addressing the intersectional marginalisation experienced by children and families affected by imprisonment. This includes particular attention to marginalised ethnic groups such as Travellers and Roma, as well as LGBTQ children, who face compounded barriers in accessing rights and services.[38]

Together, these international and national legal frameworks and policy commitments provide a robust foundation for developing policies and interventions that address the heightened risk of poverty and social exclusion among children and families affected by imprisonment, ensuring their rights to an adequate standard of living, protection, and participation are realised in practice. IPRT emphasises the need for legal recognition of children of imprisoned parents as a vulnerable group deserving of specific rights and protections.[39] The Council of Europe also highlights the importance of recognising these children's economic rights, including addressing the financial instability caused by parental imprisonment and ensuring that children's needs are met regardless of their family's economic situation.[40]

2.2 Links Between Poverty and Imprisonment

Parental Imprisonment places immense financial pressure on families, often triggering a cascade of economic instability that deepens existing poverty. The loss of an income-earning parent, often the primary breadwinner, immediately disrupts household finances and forces families to rely on social welfare support that is frequently inadequate. In Ireland, child poverty has increased to affect over one in seven children, a trend exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis.[41]

The financial toll extends beyond income loss. Families incur numerous hidden costs related to imprisonment, including legal fees, phone calls, and travel for prison visits, which can be particularly burdensome for those living far from prisons. Ireland's cost-of-living crisis has led to surging electricity and fuel prices,[42] with increases surpassing the EU average. Since Irish prisons are concentrated in major cities, families of imprisoned individuals bear significant transportation expenses to visit their loved ones. Fuel poverty affects nearly 25 per cent of the Irish population,[43] with transport and energy poverty closely linked to economic inequality. A nationwide study

36 United Nations General Assembly, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (adopted 18 December 1979, entered into force 3 September 1981) 1249 UNTS 13.

37 UNICEF, Reimagine Justice – Technical Brief 3: Primary Caregivers (June 2025) https://www.unicef.org/media/171566/file/Reimagine per cent20Justice per cent20- per cent20Technical per cent20Brief per cent203 per cent20- per cent20Primary per cent20Caregivers.pdf.pdf accessed 5 August 2025.

38 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, Ireland and the Convention on the Rights of the Child: Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (IHREC 2022) https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2022/11/IHREC-Parallel-Report-to-the-UNCRC-2022.pdf accessed 5 August 2025.

39 Irish Penal Reform Trust, Piecing it Together: Supporting Children and Families with a Family Member in Prison in Ireland (IPRT 2021).

40 Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States concerning children with imprisoned parents https://edoc.coe.int/en/children-s-rights/7802-recommendation-cmrec20185-of-the-committee-of-ministers-to-member-states-concerning-children-with-imprisoned-parents.html accessed 20 August 2025.

41 Central Statistics Office, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023 (Statistical Release, 7 March 2024) https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/ accessed 15 June 2025.

42 TASC, The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2025 (TASC 2025) https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_the_state_we_are_in_2025.pdf accessed 21 October 2025.

43 Pillai A, Reaños MT and Curtis J, Fuel Poverty in Ireland: An Analysis of Trends and Profiles (ESRI Working Paper No 729, Economic and Social Research Institute 2022) https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/WP729_0.pdf accessed 15 May 2025.

found that 14 per cent of people experience energy poverty, and 18 per cent face transport poverty.[44] These conditions disproportionately impact low-income households and those with limited access to public transportation. This is a particularly significant issue in rural areas, as a study conducted by Social Justice Ireland found that 47 per cent of respondents did not have access to public transport including local links.[45]

Families affected by imprisonment face a significantly heightened risk of falling into debt. According to a study by Families Outside in Scotland, more than half of families with a member in prison reported taking on debt during the sentence, with one-third of respondents explicitly stating they had taken out loans to make ends meet, many of which led to increased financial hardship.[46] These pressures often force families to rely on crisis loans, support from extended family, or borrowing from high-interest lenders, creating a cycle of financial vulnerability. In the absence of robust welfare support or access to emergency funds, this debt burden can become entrenched, contributing to long-term poverty and economic exclusion.[47]

Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Risk of Imprisonment

Parental Imprisonment (PI) not only affects families during the period of imprisonment but also reflects deeper intersections between imprisonment and pre-existing socioeconomic disadvantage. Research consistently shows that poverty, economic marginalisation and social exclusion are key drivers of imprisonment, with men disproportionately affected. In Ireland, one study found that men in prison were overwhelmingly drawn from communities experiencing persistent unemployment, low educational attainment and limited access to stable housing, reflecting deep-rooted structural inequalities.[48] Socio-economic disadvantage both increases the risk of offending and is exacerbated by the consequences of imprisonment, creating a cycle of poverty and imprisonment that extends to prisoners' families.[49] International evidence similarly demonstrates that men from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those in insecure or low-wage employment and in socially marginalised communities, are significantly more likely to experience imprisonment, with imprisonment itself further entrenching social and economic exclusion.[50] These patterns are not unique to Ireland, but part of a broader global challenge, underlining the need for policy reform to alleviate the financial hardship experienced by families affected by imprisonment. However, little research has been conducted on this issue specifically within the Irish context.

Financial Hardship During Imprisonment

The financial burden on families of imprisoned individuals extends beyond the immediate loss of income. Rising transportation and fuel costs in Ireland disproportionately affect low-income families, with fuel poverty impacting nearly 25 per cent of the population.[51] As Irish prisons are concentrated in either major urban centres or very remote rural locations, families from other parts of the country often bear substantial travel costs to maintain contact through visitation.[52] These hidden expenses exacerbate economic hardship and reinforce structural inequalities.

44 C Lowans, 'What Causes Energy and Transport Poverty in Ireland? Analysing Demographic, Economic, Social Dynamics, and Policy Implications' (2023) 174 Energy Policy 113442 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2022.113442 accessed 20 April 2025.

45 Social Justice Ireland, Improving Transport Options in Urban and Rural Areas (Social Justice Ireland 2023) https://www.socialjustice.ie/article/improving-transport-options-urban-and-rural-areas accessed 14 May 2025.

46 Families Outside, Paying the Price: The Cost to Families of Imprisonment and Release (2022) https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2022/11/Paying-the-Price-October-22022.pdf accessed 10 June 2025.

47 D Braman, Doing Time on the Outside: Imprisonment and Family Life in Urban America (University of Michigan Press 2004); D Dickie, The Financial Impact of Imprisonment on Families (In Brief No 8, Families Outside 2013) https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2013/10/financial-impact-imprisonment-families.pdf accessed 21 March 2025.

48 Paul O'Mahony, Mountjoy Prisoners: A Sociological and Criminological Profile (Stationery Office 1997).

49 Rebecca Smith, Roger Grimshaw, Richard Romeo and Martin Knapp, Poverty and Disadvantage among Prisoners' Families (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2007).

50 Christopher Wildeman and Bruce Western, 'Incarceration in Fragile Families' (2010) 20 The Future of Children 157.

51 A Pillai, M T Reaños and J Curtis, "Fuel Poverty in Ireland: An Analysis of Trends and Profiles" (ESRI Working Paper No 729, Economic and Social Research Institute 2022) https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/WP729_0.pdf accessed 15 May 2025.

52 Irish Penal Reform Trust, Picking up the Pieces: The Rights and Needs of Children and Families Affected by Imprisonment (IPRT 2012); Irish Penal Reform Trust, Piecing it Together: Supporting Children and Families with a Family Member in Prison in Ireland (IPRT 2021).

Parental imprisonment leads to increased household poverty, reliance on welfare payments, and housing insecurity. The cost-of-living crisis has pushed child poverty in Ireland to affect more than one in seven children.[53] Long-term exposure to poverty has well-documented negative effects on cognitive development, educational achievement, and mental health.[54] Studies further show how poverty negatively influences emotional well-being, academic performance, and future employment prospects.[55]

The imprisonment of a family's main caregiver or primary earner typically leads to a substantial loss of household income, often pushing families into financial precarity. Families in this situation may become increasingly reliant on social welfare supports while simultaneously experiencing housing instability. Such economic and residential disruption has been shown to negatively affect children's emotional, social, and overall well-being.[56] The ongoing cost-of-living crisis has intensified these challenges, with child poverty continuing to rise.[57]

Housing Insecurity and Financial Vulnerability

Housing insecurity is another major consequence of parental imprisonment. The loss of income and the stigma associated with imprisonment often force families into cheaper, temporary, or overcrowded accommodation, disrupting children's lives and undermining their sense of stability. As of 2023, over 235,000 people in Ireland, including 92,000 dependent children, had an "ongoing need" for housing.[58] According to the July 2025 Monthly Homeless Report, published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, there were 5,014 children under 18 living in emergency accommodation in that month.[59] These conditions further increase a family's dependency on additional welfare support such as Fuel Allowance, Working Family Payment, Medical Cards, and rent assistance, all of which may not fully compensate for the financial loss caused by imprisonment. Insecure housing is strongly patterned by household income and social disadvantage, both of which are frequently linked to parental imprisonment. Families in the lowest income quintiles are significantly more likely to live in inadequate housing, homes that are too small, poorly maintained, or not child-friendly, and to do so for extended periods.[60] Lone-parent households, overrepresented among families affected by imprisonment, are particularly vulnerable, spending more time in social housing or private rentals, in homes that are harder to heat, and in areas with lower social capital.[61]

These housing challenges are not just a consequence of low income or imprisonment-related disruptions but may also act as compounding stressors that worsen family instability, parental mental health, and parent–child relationships. This dynamic reinforces the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage,

53 Central Statistics Office, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023 (CSO 2024) https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/ accessed 30 April 2025.

54 D Watson, B Maître, CT Whelan and J Williams, Growing Up in Ireland: National Longitudinal Study of Children – Review of the Literature Pertaining to the Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014) https://www.growingup.gov.ie/pubs/BKMNEXT284.pdf accessed 3 May 2025.

55 Duncan G J, Brooks-Gunn J and Klebanov P K, 'Economic Deprivation and Early Childhood Development' (1994) 65(2) Child Development 296; Duncan G J, Ziol-Guest K M and Kalil A, 'The Importance of Early Childhood Poverty' (2012) 108(1) Social Indicators Research 1 https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9867-9 accessed 17 April 2025; Williams G M, Najman J M, Hayatbakhsh M R, Heron M A, O'Callaghan M and Bor W, 'The Impact of Episodic and Chronic Poverty on Child Cognitive Development' (2009) 154(3) The Journal of Pediatrics 284 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2008.08.052 accessed 12 June 2025.

56 Watson D, Maître B, Whelan C T and Williams J, Growing Up in Ireland: Dynamics of Child Economic Vulnerability and Socio-Emotional Development — An Analysis of the First Two Waves of the Growing Up in Ireland Study (Infant & Child Cohorts Research Report No 1, Department of Children & Youth Affairs, Dublin 26 Nov 2014) https://www.growingup.gov.ie/pubs/BKMNEXT284.pdf accessed 3 May 2025.

57 Central Statistics Office, Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2023 (CSO 2024) https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/ accessed 30 April 2025.

58 Parliamentary Budget Office, Social Housing – Ongoing Need 2023 (PBO / Oireachtas 2024) https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2024/2024-08-16_social-housing-ongoing-need-2023_en.pdf accessed 21 October 2025.

59 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Monthly Homeless Report: July 2025 (DHLGH 2025) https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/homeless-report-july-2025/ accessed 21 October 2025.

60 R Grotti, H Russell and I Privalko, Understanding Childhood Inequality in Ireland: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland Study (ESRI Research Series No 183, Economic and Social Research Institute 2023) https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS183_1.pdf accessed 12 April 2025.

61 ibid.

particularly for children of imprisoned parents, by undermining their social and emotional development and limiting access to stable, secure environments necessary for healthy growth.[62]

Using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) as an indicator of psychological adjustment at age nine, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) found that children who spent more time living in homes that were too small or difficult to heat reported significantly higher levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties.[63] These negative outcomes were compounded for children living in neighbourhoods with high levels of social and physical disorder or low levels of social capital.

Post-Release Challenges and Reintegration Barriers

Post-imprisonment, financial insecurity often persists or worsens, as reintegration into the workforce is highly challenging for individuals with a criminal record. The presence of a conviction can severely limit employment opportunities, with IPRT research *The Secondary Punishment: A Scoping Study on Employer Attitudes to Hiring People with Criminal Convictions* highlighting this as a form of "secondary punishment" that extends beyond the prison sentence and undermines family stability after release.[64]

Housing insecurity is another significant post-release challenge. While Irish research directly linking family imprisonment and homelessness is limited, there is strong policy recognition of the connection. The Lisbon Declaration commits member states to ensure that "no one is discharged from any institution (e.g. prison, hospital, care facility) without an offer of appropriate housing," underscoring the role of stable accommodation in reducing reoffending and social exclusion.[65]

Ireland has attempted to address this through targeted initiatives such as the Criminal Justice Housing First Project, a joint Irish Prison Service and Probation Service scheme launched in October 2020 under the *Housing First National Implementation Plan 2018–2021*. The project assists people leaving prison or under Probation Service supervision to secure and sustain tenancies, providing wraparound housing and health supports. Official data provided in January 2024, between its inception and that date the scheme had received 117 expressions of interest from people on release from prison, 69 of whom were accepted, with 40 tenancies created (21 of these active). The pilot phase concluded in May 2024, at which point it was integrated into the mainstream Housing First Service.[66]

Despite these measures, housing need remains acute: by the end of 2023, over 235,000 people in Ireland, including 92,000 dependent children, had an "ongoing need" for housing.[67] The number of children experiencing homelessness has risen sharply, increasing from 3,028 in May 2022 to 4,775 in April 2025, a rise of almost 58 per cent over three years.[68]

Ireland's social welfare system also frequently fails to offer adequate support to families affected by parental imprisonment. For example, the One-Parent Family Payment (OFP) is means-tested and attaches strict conditions: the imprisoned spouse or civil partner must have received a sentence of at least six months or spent six months in custody without sentence; the applicant must have the main care and charge of the child, a status which may be verified by a Social Welfare Inspector,

62 ibid.
63 James Laurence, Helen Russell and Emer Smyth, Housing, Health and Happiness: How Inadequate Housing Shapes Child and Parental Wellbeing (ESRI Research Series No 183, May 2024) https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS183_1.pdf accessed 21 October 2025.
64 Irish Penal Reform Trust, The Secondary Punishment: A Scoping Study on Employer Attitudes to Hiring People with Criminal Convictions (Irish Penal Reform Trust 2024) https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7336/the_secondary_punishment_a_scoping_study_on_employer_attitudes_to_hiring_people_with_criminal_convictions_report_web.pdf accessed 1 September 2025.
65 European Commission, Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (21 June 2021) https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=24120&langId=en accessed 21 October 2025.
66 Dáil Éireann, Written Answers: Criminal Justice Housing First Project (24 April 2024) PQ No 188 https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2024-04-24a.349 accessed 21 October 2025.
67 Parliamentary Budget Office, Social Housing – Ongoing Need 2023 (PBO/Oireachtas 2024) https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2024/2024-08-16_social-housing-ongoing-need-2023_en.pdf accessed 15 June 2025.
68 Children's Rights Alliance, Child Poverty Monitor 2025 (Children's Rights Alliance 2025). https://childrensrights.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Child-Poverty-Monitor-2025.pdf accessed 1 September 2025.

and they must not be cohabiting with another partner.[69] These criteria are rigid and, while they disproportionately impact women, they also affect fathers and male carers in single-parent roles. Because many sentences in Ireland are short, these conditions often exclude children of incarcerated parents entirely.[70]

In practice, many such children are cared for by kinship carers, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, or older siblings, who frequently struggle to access adequate state support.[71] The main welfare payment available to informal kinship carers is the Guardian's Payment, but the operational guidelines require applicants to demonstrate that both parents are dead, unknown, or have "abandoned and failed to provide for the child".[72] This creates an impossible choice for families who wish to preserve the child's contact with their imprisoned parent while also securing essential financial support.[73] Advocacy groups such as Treoir and Kinship Care Ireland have highlighted that informal kinship carers, who provide crucial stability for children, are often excluded from recognition and supports available to foster carers.[74] Housing instability, combined with financial strain and barriers to employment, frequently forces such families to relocate, disrupting children's education, friendships and wider support networks.[75]

The Gendered Burden of Financial Insecurity

The gendered impact of poverty following imprisonment is striking, with women disproportionately carrying both the financial and emotional consequences. Research from the United Kingdom and the United States highlights how imprisonment increases economic instability for female partners and children. Recent data from Scotland confirms that these burdens endure: families supporting someone on remand face average annual costs of around €4,729, with some paying as much as €15,767, while families of those serving longer sentences incur median annual costs of €2,836 (figures converted from GBP).[76]

In addition to lost income, families face added costs such as travel for prison visits, phone calls, and legal fees, which place further pressure on already limited resources. Debt is common: one third of families affected by imprisonment in the United Kingdom reported taking out loans to cover essential living expenses, often leading to prolonged financial insecurity.[77] Women are especially affected, often taking on full responsibility for childcare and earning an income with little state support. Studies by the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice[78] and the Financial Fairness Trust[79] show that women living in urban poverty bear the greatest burden, managing employment, care responsibilities, and financial pressures with limited institutional assistance.

69 Department of Social Protection, Operational Guidelines: One-Parent Family Payment (updated 2025) https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/da80a3-operational-guidelines-one-parent-family-payment/ accessed 21 October 2025.

70 I O'Donnell, 'The Short Prison Sentence: An Obituary?' (2024) 4(2) Irish Judicial Studies Journal 121. https://www.ijsj.ie/assets/uploads/images/2024%20edition%202/8%20Ian%20O'Donnell.pdf accessed 21 October 2025.

71 Treoir, Pre-Budget 2025 Submission (June 2024). https://www.treoir.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Treoir-Pre-Budget-Submission-2025.pdf accessed 21 October 2025.

72 Department of Social Protection, Operational Guidelines: Guardian's Payment (Contributory) (DSP 2024). https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/publications/operational-guidelines-guardians-payment-contributory/ accessed 21 October 2025.

73 Citizens Information, Guardian's Payment (Non-Contributory) (updated 2024). https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social-welfare/social-welfare-payments/death-and-bereavement-payments/guardians-payment-non-contributory/ accessed 21 October 2025

74 Kinship Care Ireland, Call for Policy to Fully Recognise Kinship Care within Ireland (Kinship Care Ireland 2024). https://www.treoir.ie/call-for-policy-to-fully-recognise-kinship-care-within-ireland/ accessed 21 October 2025.

75 Parliamentary Budget Office, Social Housing – Ongoing Need 2023 (PBO/Oireachtas 2024) https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2024/2024-08-16_social-housing-ongoing-need-2023_en.pdf accessed 15 June 2025.

76 Families Outside, Paying the Price: The Cost to Families of Imprisonment and Release (2022) https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2022/11/Paying-the-Price-October-22022.pdf accessed 21 October 2025.

77 D Dickie, The Financial Impact of Imprisonment on Families (In Brief No 8, Families Outside 2013) https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2013/10/financial-impact-imprisonment-families.pdf accessed 21 March 2025.

78 Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, The Ripple Effects of Imprisonment on Prisoners' Families (JCFJ 2008) https://www.jcfj.ie/article/the-ripple-effects-of-imprisonment-on-prisoners-families/ accessed 6 April 2025.

79 Financial Fairness Trust, 'Women Spending More Than Half Their Income Supporting Someone in Prison' (2023). https://www.financialfairness.org.uk/en-gb/news-and-views/all-news-articles/families-outside accessed 2 May 2025.

2.3 Evidence of Impacts of Imprisonment on Children and Families

Parental imprisonment introduces a series of compounding challenges for children and families, with lasting impacts on emotional well-being, financial stability, social inclusion, and family relationships.

The Impact of Imprisonment on the Stress and Well-Being of Family Members

Research increasingly shows that the repercussions of imprisonment extend far beyond the individual serving the sentence, affecting those left behind. These effects are most acute in family relationships, where loss of physical presence, emotional support, and financial stability can generate chronic stress and mental health challenges.

Drawing on nationally representative data from the United States, a 2021 study found that adults with a parent, sibling, partner, or child in prison were significantly more likely to report poor mental health than those without such experience.[80] In particular, the imprisonment of a parent or sibling had the strongest association with adverse psychological outcomes. This relationship appears to be mediated by a combination of stigma, economic hardship, and disrupted family dynamics. The sudden absence of a loved one, especially in supportive or caregiving roles, can lead to feelings of grief, anxiety, and helplessness, often compounded by social isolation and financial strain.

Parental stress is also heightened by the challenges of navigating legal processes, arranging prison visits, and managing the household with reduced income. These pressures can lead to deteriorating mental health, increased risk of depression, and a reduced capacity to provide emotional support to children.[81] The cumulative effect is often a decline in overall family well-being that persists well beyond the period of imprisonment.

Emotional and Social Impact on Children

Parental imprisonment has profound emotional, social, and developmental consequences for children and families, many of which extend beyond the period of imprisonment. Research consistently identifies parental imprisonment as a major contributor to economic hardship, social exclusion, and instability in family life.[82]

Children separated from an imprisoned parent often face increased levels of anxiety, depression, and behavioural challenges. The trauma associated with imprisonment can have lasting psychological effects, contributing to emotional instability and stress.[83] The stigma linked to parental imprisonment isolates children and intensifies their emotional distress.[84] These children frequently experience bullying, discrimination, and strained peer relationships, which reinforce social isolation and limit access to educational and extracurricular opportunities.[85]

The trauma experienced by children is further compounded by financial instability. The intersection of economic hardship and emotional loss can significantly affect children's mental health, school performance, and overall life satisfaction. As Luk highlights, children living under economic stress report

80 K Turney, 'Family Member Incarceration and Mental Health: Results from a Nationally Representative Survey' (2021) 15 SSM – Population Health 100002.

81 D Bradshaw, A M Creaven and O T Muldoon 'Parental Imprisonment Affects Children's Emotional and Behavioral Outcomes: A Longitudinal Cohort Study of Children Aged 9 to 13 Years' (2021) 45(3) International Journal of Behavioral Development 234 https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/628573660/Parental_incarceration_affects_children_s_emotional_and_behavioral_outcomes.pdf accessed 21 October 2025.

82 J Murray, 'The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children' (2005) 37(1) Crime and Justice 133.; J Murray, C-G Janson and DP Farrington, 'Crime in Adult Offspring of Prisoners: A Cross-National Comparison of Two Longitudinal Samples' (2007) 34(1) Criminal Justice and Behavior 133 https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854806289549 accessed 4 April 2025.

83 D Bradshaw, A M Creaven and O T Muldoon 'Parental Imprisonment Affects Children's Emotional and Behavioral Outcomes: A Longitudinal Cohort Study of Children Aged 9 to 13 Years' (2021) 45(3) International Journal of Behavioral Development 234 https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/628573660/Parental_incarceration_affects_children_s_emotional_and_behavioral_outcomes.pdf accessed 21 October 2025.

84 Duncan G J, Brooks-Gunn J and Klebanov P K, 'Economic Deprivation and Early Childhood Development' (1994) 65(2) Child Development 296; Duncan G J, Ziol-Guest K M and Kalil A, 'The Importance of Early Childhood Poverty' (2012) 108(1) Social Indicators Research 1 https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9867-9 accessed 17 April 2025.

85 Murray J and Farrington D P, 'The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children' (2008) 37(1) Crime and Justice 133 https://doi.org/10.1086/520070 accessed 28 April 2025.

lower levels of happiness and greater emotional difficulty.[86] The stigma surrounding parental imprisonment contributes further to emotional alienation. Children may be bullied, excluded, or avoid social interactions out of fear of judgment, internalising a sense of shame that can lead to a deviant self-concept.[87] This internalised stigma is a powerful mechanism by which cycles of intergenerational imprisonment are reinforced.

Prison visitation itself can be a source of additional emotional strain. The often harsh, intimidating, and expensive nature of visiting Irish prisons creates barriers to maintaining parent–child connections, especially for low-income families.[88] Long travel distances, security procedures, lack of child-friendly environments, and the emotional toll of brief, controlled interactions with a parent can leave children distressed rather than comforted. The financial burden associated with prison visits, covering transport, time off work, and communication costs, only worsens emotional challenges.

Moreover, the experience of social exclusion often limits children's access to resources and social opportunities that could otherwise buffer the effects of emotional hardship. Stigma, combined with poverty, restricts participation in school events, extracurricular activities, and access to necessities such as school supplies and suitable clothing. Swords et al. found that even among low-income Irish children, a percentage lacked access to what they themselves deemed basic needs for well-being, highlighting the direct relationship between financial strain and emotional disadvantage.[89]

International research suggests that strong social group membership and community belonging can help mitigate some of the negative effects of parental imprisonment.[90] Robust social support networks not only ease financial strain by offering informal assistance but also provide a psychological safety net that supports children's resilience. As Thorne notes, children's capacity to cope with imprisonment-related stigma is shaped by their family's financial stability.[91] Resilient family structures with economic security are more likely to offer consistent care, emotional support, and stable routines, all of which are essential in helping children adapt to the trauma of parental imprisonment.

The emotional and mental health consequences of parental imprisonment are not only profound but long-lasting. While some literature has suggested a link between parental imprisonment and intergenerational offending,[92] many academics emphasise that it is not a matter of children following parents into crime but rather the persistence of the same structural disadvantages, such as poverty, inadequate housing, and lack of social supports, that lead both generations into contact with the criminal justice system.[93] According to Hagan and Dinovitzer, parental imprisonment is one of the most severe threats to a child's development and future social outcomes. In Ireland, research consistently reveals that individuals in prison, especially young men from urban centres like Dublin, come from backgrounds marked by deep social disadvantage.[94] O'Mahony's 1997 study of inmates in Mountjoy Prison documented

86 M S K Luk, 'Physical and Psychosocial Impacts of Parental Imprisonment on Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Review Differentiating Age of Exposure' (2022) 31 Journal of Child and Family Studies 1583 https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-022-00182-9 accessed 16 May 2025.

87 Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD), The Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (University of Cambridge, Institute of Criminology 2023) https://www.crim.cam.ac.uk/files/cambridge_study.pdf accessed 19 March 2025.

88 The Journal, 'Children Don't Deserve This: Visiting an Imprisoned Parent is "Traumatising"' (23 November 2023) https://www.thejournal.ie/calling-time-children-trauma-visiting-prisons-6236113-Nov2023/ accessed 25 May 2025.

89 L Swords, S Greene, E Boyd and B O'Neill, All They Want is the Same as Everyone Else: Children's Views of What They Need to Do Well in Life (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs 2011).

90 D Bradshaw, I Bornica, S M Griffin, G McMahon and O T Muldoon 'Sins of Their Fathers: Social Groups, Parental Imprisonment, and Positive Psychological Outcomes across Time in the US and UK' (2024) 34(2) Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology 267 https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2769 accessed 25 May 2025; J Murray, DP Farrington, I Sekol and RF Olsen, 'Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Child Antisocial Behaviour and Mental Health: A Systematic Review' (2009) 5 Campbell Systematic Reviews https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2009.4 accessed 2 April 2025.

91 M C Thorne, 'What are the Factors of Parental Imprisonment that May Increase Risk of Poor Emotional and Mental Health in Children of Prisoners?' (2023) 19(4) International Journal of Prisoner Health 421 https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPH-05-2022-0031 accessed 27 May 2025.

92 The Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD) found that parental imprisonment during early childhood is one of the strongest predictors of antisocial and offending behaviour later in life.

93 S Minson, Beyond the Barriers (University of Oxford Centre for Criminology 2024) https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-09/Beyond%20the%20Barriers%202024.pdf accessed 21 October 2025.

94 J Hagan and R Dinovitzer, 'Collateral Consequences of Imprisonment for Children, Communities, and Prisoners' (1999) 26 Crime and Justice 121 https://www.jstor.org/stable/1147685 accessed 30 March 2025.

histories of unemployment, poverty, addiction, and family breakdown, reinforcing the cyclical nature of marginalisation and imprisonment.[95]

These findings reinforce the need for early intervention and comprehensive support systems that recognise the multifaceted impact of parental imprisonment on children's emotional development.

The Disruption to Family Relationships

Imprisonment places significant strain on family relationships, particularly between children and their parents. Prison visits are often costly, logistically complex, and emotionally taxing, making sustained contact difficult. Children may experience heightened insecurity when communication with their imprisoned parent is disrupted.[96]

Parental imprisonment is associated with broader familial instability, including increased divorce rates and the weakening of parent–child bonds.[97] Factors contributing to this disconnect include geographical distance, gang-related threats, and challenges associated with reintegration.[98]The importance of maintaining family contact during imprisonment has been recognised as a critical protective factor for both rehabilitation and child well-being.[99]

Children of imprisoned parents face particular vulnerability when the parent was not living with the family prior to imprisonment. In such cases, contact is often lost, not due to legal barriers, but because the custodial parent may be unwilling or unable to support the continuation of the relationship. This absence of contact can lead to emotional distress, feelings of abandonment, and identity disruption. Murray and Murray highlight that maintaining family ties during imprisonment can act as a protective factor, reducing psychological harm and behavioural difficulties.[100]

In Ireland, the IPRT found that children frequently encounter both practical and emotional barriers to staying connected with an imprisoned parent, especially in the context of prior separation or family conflict.[101] Families from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately affected by logistical challenges such as long travel distances, the absence of child-friendly visiting environments, and a lack of state-supported contact mechanisms. These barriers exacerbate the breakdown of family bonds and disproportionately impact children's right to family life, as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Irish authorities currently have no formal obligation to facilitate contact between children and their imprisoned parents, a gap that contributes to emotional instability and potential long-term relational difficulties.[102]

Reintegration of Imprisoned Parent

The reintegration of a formerly imprisoned parent into the family unit presents both economic and emotional challenges that significantly affect children's well-being and long-term outcomes. O'Dwyer highlights how the post-release period can be an emotionally turbulent time for families, particularly children, as they attempt to re-establish disrupted bonds while coping with the uncertainties that accompany a parent's return.[103]

95 Paul O'Mahony, Mountjoy Prisoners: A Sociological and Criminological Profile (Department of Justice 1997).

96 The Journal, 'Children Don't Deserve This: Visiting an Imprisoned Parent is "Traumatising"' (23 November 2023) https://www.thejournal.ie/calling-time-children-trauma-visiting-prisons-6236113-Nov2023/ accessed 25 May 2025.

97 SE Siennick, EA Stewart and J Staff, 'Explaining the Association between Imprisonment and Divorce' (2014) 52(3) Criminology 371; J Murray and DP Farrington, 'The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children' (2008) 37(1) Crime and Justice 133.

98 Murray J and Farrington D P, 'The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children' (2008) 37(1) Crime and Justice 133 https://doi.org/10.1086/520070 accessed 28 April 2025

99 L Farmer, The Farmer Review: The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime (Ministry of Justice 2017); Centre for Social Justice, The Golden Thread: Putting Family at the Heart of the Criminal Justice System (CSJ 2022).

100 J Murray and L Murray, 'Parental Imprisonment, Attachment and Child Psychopathology' in ME Lamb (ed), The Role of the Father in Child Development (5th edn, Wiley 2010) 446.

101 Irish Penal Reform Trust, Piecing it Together: Supporting Children and Families with a Family Member in Prison in Ireland (IPRT 2021) https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6958/piecing_it_together_supporting_children_and_families.pdf accessed 21 May 2025.

102 J Fagan, Children of Imprisoned Parents: A Study of the Experience and Impacts of Prison on Children in Ireland (Maynooth University 2016); C Kenny, Children of Imprisoned Parents: European Perspectives on Good Practice (Children's Rights Alliance/Eurochips 2012); J Murray and L Murray, 'Parental Imprisonment, Attachment and Child Psychopathology' in ME Lamb (ed), The Role of the Father in Child Development (5th edn, Wiley 2010) 446.

103 K O'Dwyer, Prisoners Returning Home: Prisoners and Family Reintegration (Childhood Development Initiative 2019) https://www.cdi.ie/app/uploads/2024/04/CDI-Prisoners-Returning-Home-min.pdf accessed 7 April 2025

Reintegration is rarely straightforward. Many released parents face significant barriers to employment, secure housing, and social reintegration, challenges which place continued financial stress on already vulnerable households. For parents with a criminal conviction, the stigma attached to their record can have an enduring effect, restricting access to stable employment and further limiting a family's ability to recover financially.[104] These barriers to work are often most severe for those with lower educational qualifications and limited prior work experience, and they contribute to sustained poverty in families already disadvantaged prior to imprisonment.

Stable housing is another significant concern. Without targeted supports, families can face prolonged insecurity, which undermines both children's stability and parental efforts to reintegrate. The Lisbon Declaration commitment to ensure that no one is discharged from any institution, such as prison, without an offer of appropriate housing.

Children frequently encounter both practical and emotional barriers to staying connected with an imprisoned parent, especially in the context of prior separation or family conflict.[105] Families can be affected by logistical challenges such as long travel distances, the absence of child-friendly visiting environments, and a lack of state-supported contact mechanisms. These barriers exacerbate the breakdown of family bonds and disproportionately impact children's right to family life, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[106] Irish authorities currently have no formal obligation to facilitate contact between children and their imprisoned parents, a gap that contributes to emotional instability and potential long-term relational difficulties.[107]

A positive recent development is the recruitment of a Family Connections Officer by the Irish Prison Service in July 2024, intended to strengthen and coordinate supports for maintaining parent–child relationships.[108] In addition, Shelton Abbey open prison has piloted a "kids' camp" programme, launched in November 2023, which allows children to spend several days with their fathers in a setting adapted to reduce anxiety and support family bonds before release.[109] These initiatives represent important steps toward addressing the structural barriers that prevent children from maintaining meaningful contact with an imprisoned parent.

Cross-national studies reveal that the impact of imprisonment varies by context. In England, research has highlighted that poor family contact and a lack of community supports can increase the likelihood of negative outcomes for children, while in Sweden, broader welfare provision and policies that support family relationships during imprisonment have been shown to mitigate some of these effects.[110] In Ireland, the absence of a coordinated support framework, combined with limited use of community-based sentencing, means that the negative consequences of parental imprisonment are more likely to persist.

Long Term Educational and Career Impacts of Parental Imprisonment

Parental imprisonment has been consistently linked to adverse long-term outcomes for children, particularly in relation to education and future career opportunities. Children with a parent in prison face a significantly higher risk of later involvement with the criminal justice system. Murray and Farrington note that these children are between two and six times

104 Irish Penal Reform Trust, Piecing it Together: Supporting Children and Families with a Family Member in Prison in Ireland (IPRT 2021) https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6958/piecing_it_together_supporting_children_and_families.pdf accessed 21 May 2025.

105 Ibid.

106 United Nations General Assembly, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 3 January 1976) 993 UNTS 3 https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights accessed 10 June 2025.

107 K Fagan, Children of Imprisoned Parents: A Study of the Experience and Impacts of Prison on Children in Ireland (Maynooth University 2016); C Kenny, Children of Imprisoned Parents: European Perspectives on Good Practice (Children's Rights Alliance/Eurochips 2012); J Murray and L Murray, 'Parental Imprisonment, Attachment and Child Psychopathology' in ME Lamb (ed), The Role of the Father in Child Development (5th edn, Wiley 2010).

108 Irish Prison Service, Irish Prison Service Appoints First Family Connections Officer (Press Release, 10 July 2024) https://www.irishprisons.ie/family-connections-officer-july-2024 accessed 15 May 2025.

109 Conor Gallagher, 'Kids' camp in prison aims to restore family bonds before dads' release' Irish Times (online, 1 November 2023) https://www.irishtimes.com/crime-law/2023/11/01/kids-camp-in-prison-aims-to-restore-family-bonds-before-dads-release/ accessed 15 May 2025.

110 J Murray, 'The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children' (2005) 37(1) Crime and Justice 133; J Murray, C-G Janson and DP Farrington, 'Crime in Adult Offspring of Prisoners: A Cross-National Comparison of Two Longitudinal Samples' (2007) 34(1) Criminal Justice and Behavior 133 https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854806289549 accessed 4 April 2025.

more likely to come into contact with the justice system themselves, with the likelihood heightened by parental offending, family disruption, and exposure to trauma.[111]

Such children often endure overlapping forms of disadvantage, including poverty, social stigma, emotional insecurity, and unstable caregiving arrangements. These circumstances frequently result in behavioural challenges and difficulties in school, which can increase the risk of disengagement during adolescence and contribute to long-term educational underachievement.[112]

In the Irish context, although research remains limited, existing studies confirm that children of imprisoned parents face notable obstacles in both education and mental well-being, key protective factors against later offending.[113] IPRT has identified a lack of targeted, child-focused support within the penal system, such as facilitated family contact, community-based alternatives to prison, and joined-up service provision. This systemic failure reinforces cycles of disadvantage and marginalisation.[114] The stigma surrounding parental imprisonment in Ireland can also contribute to social isolation and emotional distress, which further undermines educational engagement and performance.

The impact of imprisonment on children's academic outcomes is particularly concerning. Studies show that children with an imprisoned parent are more likely to experience delays in cognitive development, reduced school readiness, and lower achievement throughout their educational journey.[115] Wildeman, Turney, and Goodsell emphasise how trauma, instability, and shame associated with imprisonment contribute to behavioural difficulties and problems adjusting to school life, often resulting in absenteeism, exclusion, and early school leaving.[116]

Economic hardship following parental imprisonment, caused by the loss of income and increased financial strain, further compounds these educational challenges. Families already experiencing disadvantage may struggle to provide stable housing, adequate nutrition, and access to learning resources. Inconsistent parental support during important developmental stages may hinder educational achievement and access to higher education, reinforcing existing patterns of social and economic inequality.[117]

111 J Murray and DP Farrington, 'The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children' (2008) 37(1) Crime and Justice 133 https://doi.org/10.1086/520070 accessed 28 April 2025.

112 C Wildeman and B Western, 'Imprisonment in Fragile Families' (2010) 20(2) The Future of Children 157 https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2010.0006 accessed 9 April 2025.

113 J Fagan, Children of Imprisoned Parents: A Study of the Experience and Impacts of Prison on Children in Ireland (Maynooth University 2016).

114 Irish Penal Reform Trust, Piecing it Together: Supporting Children and Families with a Family Member in Prison in Ireland (IPRT 2021) https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6958/piecing_it_together_supporting_children_and_families.pdf accessed 21 May 2025.

115 G Guo, 'The Timing of Influences of Cumulative Poverty on Children's Cognitive Ability and Achievement' (1998) 77(1) Social Forces 257; GM Williams and others, 'The Impact of Episodic and Chronic Poverty on Child Cognitive Development' (2009) 154(3) Journal of Pediatrics 284; J Murray and DP Farrington, 'The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children' (2008) 37(1) Crime and Justice 133.

116 C Wildeman, K Turney and R Goodsell, 'Parental Imprisonment and Child Well-Being' (2023) 149 Children and Youth Services Review 106584 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106584 accessed 18 June 2025.

117 D Poehlmann-Tynan, 'A Developmental Perspective on Children With Incarcerated Parents' (2021) 15(3) Child Development Perspectives 123. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12392 accessed 21 October 2025.

3. Methodology

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design and Data Collection

This study draws on survey data collected between March and April 2025 using both in-person and online methods; 32 participants completed the survey, which followed a structured format incorporating both closed and open-ended questions. The design aimed to capture quantitative information on caregiving responsibilities and socioeconomic impacts, alongside qualitative accounts of the emotional, logistical, and financial challenges faced by families. Participants represented a range of family relationships, including parents, siblings, and children of the imprisoned person. Caretaking arrangements also varied, with some siblings and grandparents assuming primary care of children, and several respondents describing the need to negotiate co-parenting relationships with the non-imprisoned parent. The experiences of survey respondents and interviewees varied widely in their relationship to the imprisoned family member. Some described close and supportive bonds, where the person in prison had been an anchor of the household and their absence was deeply felt. Others reported turbulent or difficult relationships, often linked to addiction or previous incidents of domestic abuse. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix I.

3.2 Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through the IPRT network, organisations that support prisoners overseas, and through social media promotion by members of the project's advisory committee. Individuals were eligible to participate if they had a family member imprisoned within the past two years.

3.3 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The majority of respondents (76 per cent) identified as female and 24 per cent as male. Most (90 per cent) reported Ireland as their country of origin, with the remaining 10 per cent from England, and 43 per cent were based in Dublin. All participants reported English as their first language.

3.4 Housing and Family Relationships

More than half of respondents (57 per cent) lived in local authority housing or received public housing support. Half reported that the imprisoned family member was their current or former partner, and 93 per cent of the imprisoned individuals were male. Nearly three-quarters had been imprisoned for more than one year, and almost 95 per cent for more than six months.

3.5 Children Affected

In this study, over half of respondents with children had more than three children, and 30 per cent reported that some no longer lived in the household. A notable pattern emerged: children with special educational or developmental needs outnumbered those without. The most commonly reported challenges concerned mental health, followed closely by additional learning needs.

3.6 Limitations

The small sample size of 32 participants limits the generalisability of the findings. Recruitment through advocacy and support networks may have led to a sample that is more engaged with services than the wider population of families affected by imprisonment. In addition, all participants reported English as their first language, and most identified as Irish, meaning the sample does not reflect the ethnic diversity of the Irish prison population. Notably, 28 per cent of participants had a family member serving a sentence overseas. The inclusion of these cases may have influenced the overall findings, as families with relatives imprisoned abroad typically face greater logistical and financial challenges in maintaining contact, including higher travel costs, more complex visitation arrangements, and additional emotional strain. To reflect these differences, results are presented in Section 4.1 *Financial Impact of Imprisonment* with findings from overseas respondents reported separately, while Section 4.2 *Effects on Children and Daily Life* covers the full sample.

4. Findings

4. Findings

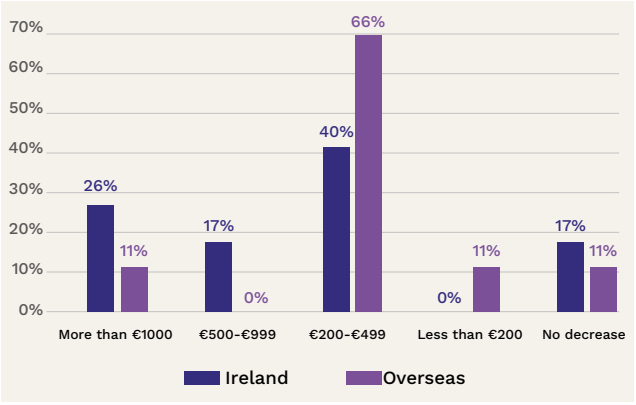
4.1 Financial Impact of Imprisonment

The findings indicate a significant financial burden experienced by families affected by Imprisonment. A substantial 83 per cent of all respondents reported a decrease in household income following the imprisonment of a family member.

Among respondents with a family member imprisoned in Ireland, 83 per cent reported a decrease in household income. Of these, 40 per cent experienced a monthly income reduction of between €200 and €499, 17 per cent reported a decrease of between €500 and €999, and 26 per cent reported a reduction of more than €1,000.

Among respondents with a family member imprisoned overseas, 89 per cent reported a decrease in household income. Of these, 13 per cent experienced a monthly income reduction of less than €200, 66 per cent reported a decrease of between €200 and €499, and 11 per cent reported a reduction of more than €1,000.

Figure 1: Decrease in Household Income



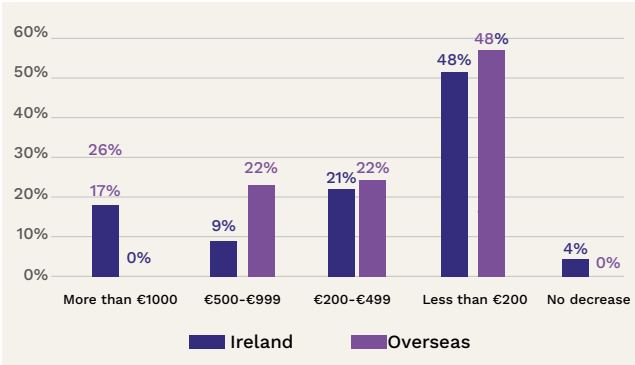
Qualitative accounts illustrated the financial strain these families faced. One interviewee explained that travelling to visit her father in another county in Ireland could require "€40 in the tank going down and on the way back... you still have to top it up a bit," noting that this was before factoring in the cost of food and other essentials for him. Another described spending "hundreds" on travel to the UK for visits, adding that rejected bookings or short visiting times often meant some trips were wasted, further intensifying the financial loss.

The ability to work was also impacted for 57 per cent of all respondents, with 33 per cent of respondents with a family member overseas and 18 per cent of respondents with a family member in Ireland reported that they had reduced their working hours. One interviewee explained that she avoided certain public places and reduced her work hours for fear of people discovering her sister's imprisonment, which indirectly affected her ability to earn.

Childcare responsibilities increased for many families. Among all respondents with children, 21 per cent reported taking on more caregiving duties themselves, while 25 per cent said they had to change their childcare arrangements. One interviewee explained that she had become "the only one to depend on" following her partner's imprisonment, describing how even a brief delay in traffic while collecting her child caused intense anxiety because there was no one else to turn to.

Financial support for the imprisoned family member also emerged as a notable strain, with 53 per cent of all respondents spending over €200 per month to provide for their relatives in prison.

Figure 2: Amount spent monthly on supporting the imprisoned family member?



Transport costs associated with prison visits varied considerably. Nearly 80 per cent of respondents reported no spending on public transport, and 86 per cent did not use taxi services. Among those with a family member imprisoned overseas, 33 per cent used taxi services while 67 per cent did not. Of those who did, 67 per cent spent between €100–€200, and the remaining 33 per cent spent approximately €300 per month.

Just over half (52 per cent) of respondents reported no spending on petrol for prison visits. Among those who did, 20 per cent spent around €50 per month, 10 per cent spent €300, and another 20 per cent reported spending over €150 monthly. For those with a family member imprisoned overseas, 87 per cent did not spend on petrol, while 13 per cent did, spending approximately €50 per month on average.

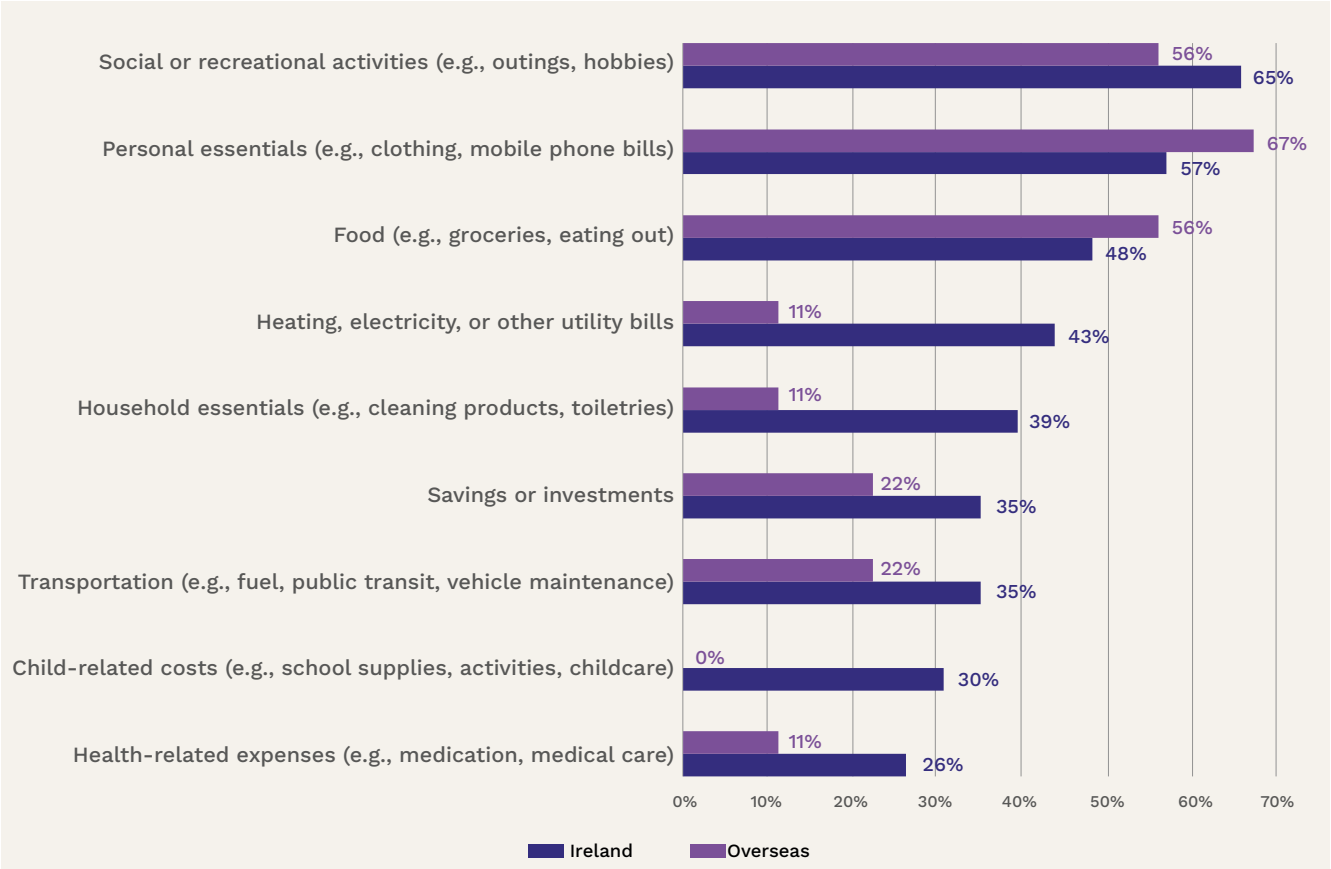
Communication expenses were generally low. Almost 70 per cent of respondents did not spend anything on staying in contact, while 25 per cent spent less than €30 per month. Among those with a family member overseas, 56 per cent did not spend on communication, 22 per cent spent approximately €20–€50, and another 22 per cent spent between €200–€300 per month.

However, **postage costs** were more substantial for some. While 34 per cent reported no spending on sending letters, 41 per cent of those who did spent €50 or more per month. (One respondent did not provide an answer to this question.) Among those with family members imprisoned overseas, 78 per cent spent money on sending letters and personal items. Of these, 71 per cent spent between €20–€50, 14 per cent spent around €100, and 14 per cent spent less than €200.

Qualitative insights further illustrated these financial pressures. One interviewee noted that the cost of maintaining contact with her brothers abroad was not only financial but also logistical, as poor online booking systems often led to wasted travel costs. She explained that, in her case, financial support from the Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas (ICPO) had been "an absolute godsend" in enabling visits, but the inconsistency of state support left her reluctant to apply again after being refused once.

Financial coping strategies were widespread, with 96 per cent of respondents reporting that they had cut back on spending in response to financial pressures. Most reduced their expenditure on social activities, food (including groceries and dining out), and personal essentials, while reductions in child-related costs, healthcare, and transport were less common.

Figure 3: How respondents reduced their household spending

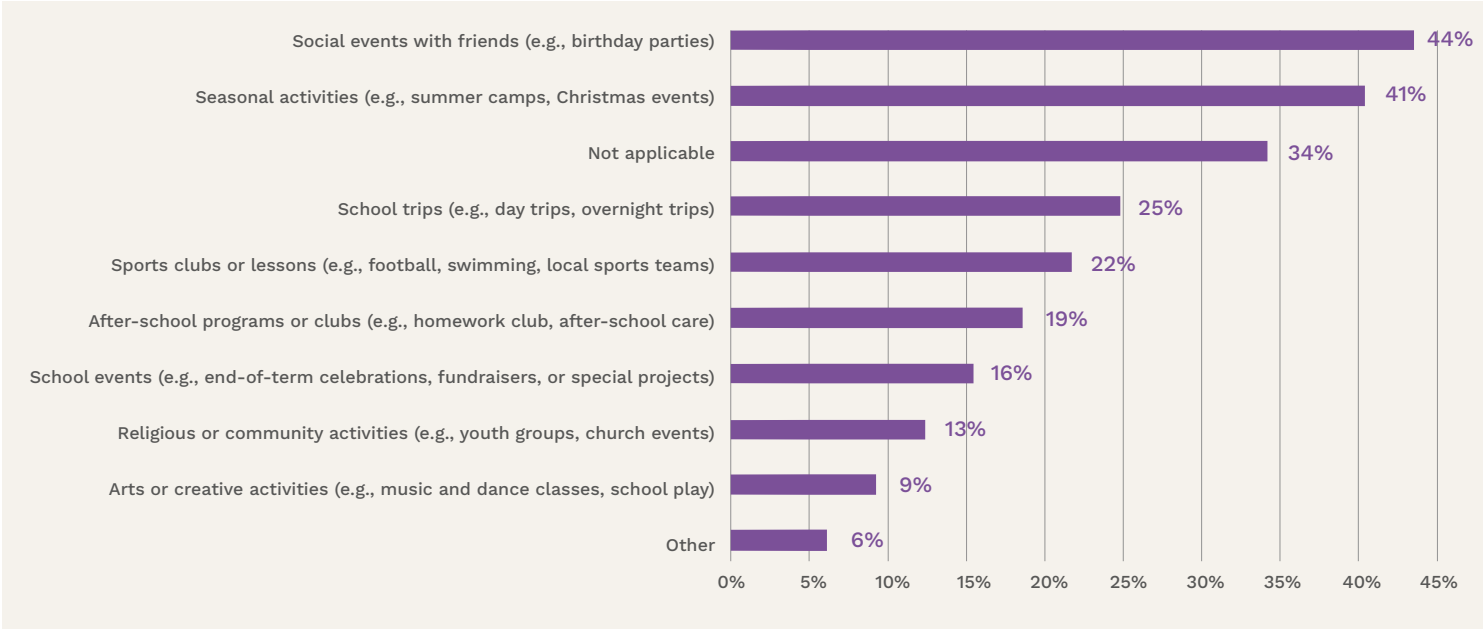


4.2 Effects on Children and Daily Life

Financial Strain and Children's Daily Lives

Among respondents with children, 86 per cent reported that financial strain due to imprisonment had negatively affected their children's participation in everyday activities. One interviewee described how her children had to stop extracurricular activities entirely, and another noted that seasonal events like Christmas outings had been cancelled due to cost, with children aware of "missing out" compared to peers. The figure below shows the responses to a question on what activities parents had reduced spending on, respondents could select multiple answers. Financial constraints most commonly limited children's participation in social events with friends and seasonal activities, while school trips, sports clubs, and after-school programmes were also frequently affected.

Figure 4: Children's Activities Most Affected by Reduction in Household Spending



Children's Emotional and Physical Health

Children's emotional health emerged as a major concern, with 80 per cent of respondents reporting that imprisonment had affected their child's mental well-being. Of respondents 64 per cent said their child had been *significantly* affected.

Physical health was also impacted, with 36 per cent reporting some level of effect, including 20 per cent of those describing the impact as *significant*.

One mother linked these emotional and physical effects to the loss of routine and contact with the imprisoned parent, saying her son's emotional development "stopped dead" after the imprisonment. Another interviewee described how her nephew's behaviour changed dramatically when his mother was in prison, including increased withdrawal and anxiety.

Case Study 1:
Adult Child Coping with Distance and Family Disruption

Aoife* is in her late twenties and was very close to her father, who was the central figure in their extended family and the only person who drove. Following his conviction, he was transferred to a prison on the opposite side of the country.

Aoife does not own a car and public transport to the prison is limited, requiring an expensive combination of train and bus journeys that take most of a day each way. Weekend visits involve overnight stays and high travel costs. Without her father, routine family tasks such as transporting elderly relatives, attending medical appointments and maintaining the family home have become much harder.

Aoife describes a profound sense of loss, saying it feels as though "the heart of the family has gone." She worries about her father's well-being but also about the strain on her own finances and mental health. The distance has made regular visits difficult, increasing her feelings of guilt and helplessness.

*Name changed

Children's School Participation and Social Relationships

Forty-eight per cent of respondents indicated that the imprisonment of a family member had affected their children's **participation in school**, and within this group, 24 per cent of respondents reported a *substantial* impact.

Similarly, 60 per cent reported negative effects on their children's **friendships and social interactions**, with 24 per cent describing the disruption as *significant*.

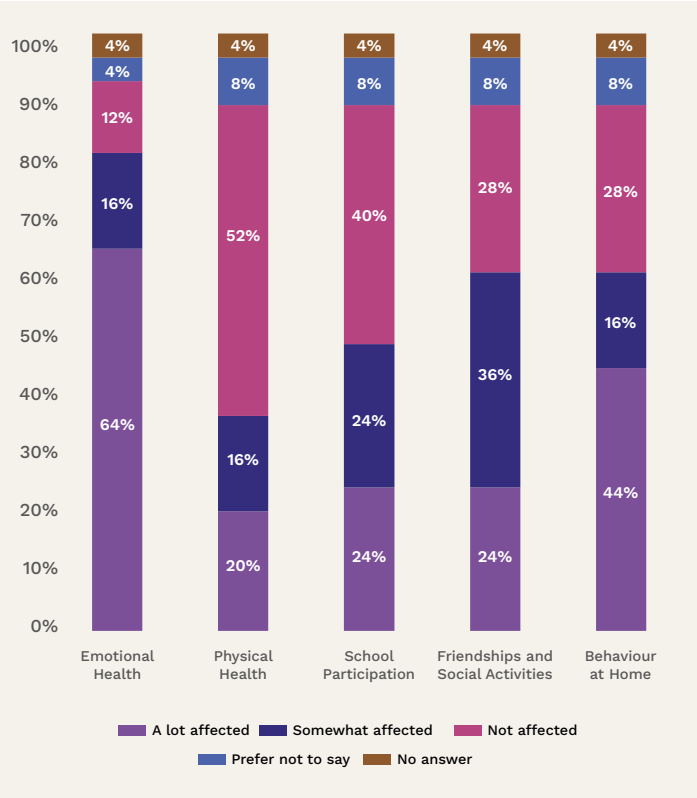
An interviewee described her nieces and nephews being teased at school when classmates learned about their two uncles being in prison. Another reported that her children became isolated when they moved to a new area after leaving the family home, losing contact with long-term friends.

Children's Behaviour at Home

Changes in behaviour at home were observed by 70 per cent of respondents. One parent interviewed noted increased aggression and emotional outbursts in her children, while another interviewee described her niece becoming more withdrawn and "not herself" during her mother's imprisonment.

Figure 5: Effects of Imprisonment on Children

How has the imprisonment of a family member affected your children in the following areas?



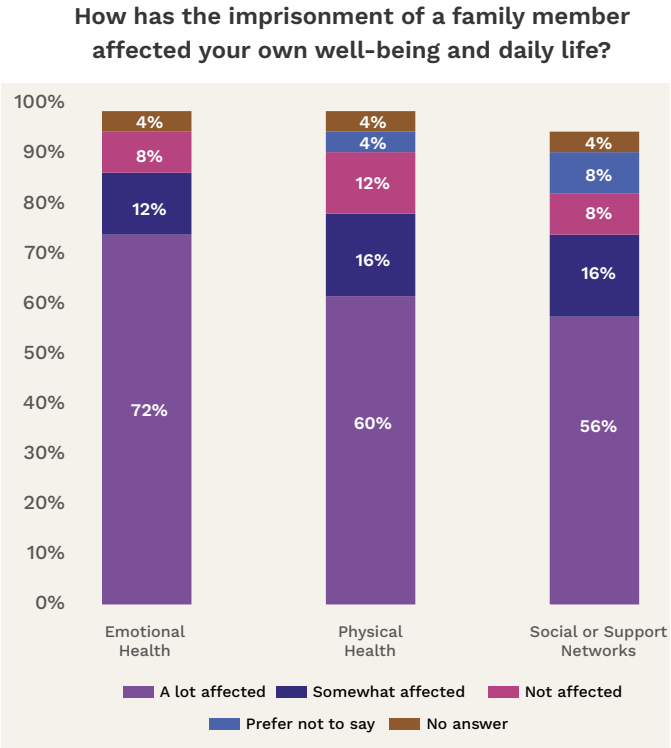
Respondents' Emotional and Mental Health

Eighty-four per cent of respondents reported that their **emotional health** had been affected, with 72 per cent of respondents describing the impact as significant. Several interview participants described the mental toll as constant and draining. One adding said she felt "always on guard" when discussing her partner's imprisonment, while another described the emotional rollercoaster of visiting: excitement on arrival followed by sadness on leaving.

Seventy-six per cent of respondents reported an impact on their **physical health**, 60 per cent of all respondents describing the effects as *significant*. Interviewees linked these physical effects directly to stress and poor sleep following the imprisonment of a family member, attributing them to ongoing anxiety and financial pressure.

Seventy-two per cent of respondents reported disruption to their **social or support networks**, with 56 per cent of respondents describing the impact as *significant*. In interviews, it was noted that people felt themselves 'pull away' from community activities due to stigma and fear of judgment. The interviewees with a family member in prison overseas highlighted the value of support groups and the ICPO network, which offered non-judgmental spaces to share experiences and practical advice.

Figure 6: Effects of Imprisonment on Family Members' Own Well-being and Daily Life



Stigma, Disclosure, and Social Navigation

Participants frequently spoke about the difficulty of deciding whether to tell others about a family member's imprisonment, describing it as one of the most stressful aspects of their experience. Many explained that choosing to conceal this information was a deliberate strategy to protect themselves and their children from anticipated judgement, gossip and social exclusion. Several participants said they offered deliberately vague explanations when questioned about an absent partner or relative, using phrases such as "he is not involved" or "she is away for a while" to avoid disclosing the truth. Others altered their daily routines to minimise situations where the topic might arise. One parent explained that they no longer walked their children to school for fear that someone might link their surname to court reports in the local media. This constant self-monitoring was described as mentally exhausting and emotionally draining. As one interviewee said, "You do not ever feel that anyone knows you properly... you are constantly minding your P's and Q's, thinking, what did I say now?" Several participants noted that the vigilance required to maintain secrecy limited their ability to form meaningful friendships and support networks, leaving them feeling isolated and misunderstood.

For some, the decision to keep the imprisonment private was not only about avoiding casual gossip but also about safeguarding critical aspects of their lives. Participants worried that disclosure could harm employment opportunities, complicate new relationships or damage their children's social standing at school and in the community. In this way, the stigma surrounding imprisonment extended well beyond the prison walls, shaping daily choices and constraining opportunities for both adults and children.

Visiting Experiences and Practical Barriers

Visiting family members in prison was described as both essential and emotionally taxing. The anticipation of seeing a loved one often brought excitement, but leaving at the end of a visit could be deeply upsetting. Travel distance was a major factor in how often visits occurred. Participants with relatives imprisoned in another county in Ireland faced significant challenges, including the cost of travel and the time required. One interviewee described the

complications of coordinating her work hours with children's school schedule and the time it would take to travel to a different part of the country without private transport. Families travelling overseas highlighted problems with booking visiting hours, reporting that it could take several days to receive confirmation, increasing the stress and cost of travel. This delay made it difficult to coordinate with other relatives or to secure affordable travel.

Several participants explained that the booking systems themselves created obstacles to maintaining contact. Visits had to be scheduled at specific times, which often clashed with irregular work hours and children's school timetables. Aligning visiting times with limited and complex public transport arrangements occasionally led to missed visits. Even when visits were arranged, the physical environment of visiting rooms could present challenges. Some facilities lacked child-friendly spaces, and one participant described the rooms as plain and unwelcoming. This discouraged some parents from bringing their children, as they felt the environment did not support positive family contact. Others spoke about the cumulative cost of repeated visits, including petrol, tolls, public transport and meals during travel days, which placed further strain on already limited household budgets.

Support Services: What Helped and What Did Not

Participants described positive experiences with support services, particularly those run by non-governmental organisations, religious groups and women's refuge networks. These supports ranged from practical help with welfare forms and repatriation applications to the provision of emotional reassurance. One parent described the community within a refuge as "a great bunch of women" who encouraged one another, helped with appointments and shared knowledge about services. Informal connections, such as online coffee mornings or family events organised by charities, were also valued for reducing isolation and providing a safe space to speak openly.

Despite these positive accounts, other participants reported barriers or outright refusals when trying to access support. Several, including those with family members in Ireland and overseas, were denied welfare assistance for the cost of travelling, despite having been advised that such supports existed. Negative experiences with statutory services were also common, with some families feeling interrogated or judged rather than helped. In one case, a parent who sought help from a child-protection service felt their situation was treated with suspicion, leading them to disengage from services entirely. The perception that certain needs, such as travel costs, would "never be covered" discouraged people from applying again, even when circumstances became more difficult.

Post-Release Gaps and Risks of Reoffending

A number of participants expressed concern about the lack of structured post-release support, particularly for women. While some men leaving prison were offered workshops or skills training, women often returned to the same environments and influences that had contributed to their imprisonment. Without secure housing, employment opportunities or ongoing monitoring, some were at risk of reoffending. For those with multiple convictions, the prospect of finding work was viewed as almost impossible. One interviewee noted that repeated rejection left their relative convinced they would "never get a job again". Others highlighted that without targeted interventions, such as addiction support, many people released from prison faced the same challenges that had led to their imprisonment.

Vicarious Punishment and the Impact on Families

Participants repeatedly described feeling as though they were being punished for someone else's crime, a situation they referred to as *vicarious punishment*. In simple terms, this meant that the stigma and practical consequences of imprisonment extended beyond the person serving the sentence to their entire family. Several interviewees said they were treated with suspicion or hostility by neighbours, employers, and even professionals, as if they shared responsibility for the offence. One mother explained, "People look at you like you must have done something too. It is as if the whole family is guilty." Another participant recalled being questioned by a housing officer who "kept asking if I was sure I wasn't involved", which left her feeling "like I was on trial myself".

The emotional strain of public exposure was also common, particularly when cases had been covered in local media. “It felt like everyone knew our business,” one parent said. “I could feel people whispering when I walked into the shop.” Another described how friends stopped calling round once the court case was reported: “It was like we had a disease.” This sense of being “marked” by association had practical consequences. Families reported difficulties finding housing or accessing services, not because of their own actions but because of their connection to someone in prison. One participant summed it up: “Once one person in the family is in prison, the rest of us are serving a sentence too.” Others spoke of the ongoing financial and emotional toll, including reduced income, increased caregiving responsibilities and social isolation.

For many, this experience of shared punishment created a deep feeling of injustice. As one interviewee put it, “We didn’t do anything wrong, but our lives have changed forever.”

Case Study 2:
Rebuilding After Domestic Abuse

Leanne* separated from her partner after years of domestic abuse. When he was later sentenced to a long prison term that will last for the remainder of their children’s childhood, she moved with her two young children to another part of the country to start again.

Relocating meant leaving her job, her extended family and the informal childcare network that had supported her. The move was necessary for safety but resulted in higher housing costs and a long wait for local school places.

Leanne wants her children to maintain a relationship with their father and is committed to facilitating contact for as long as her children wish it. She previously had a close relationship with her in-laws and relied on them for childcare support, but this relationship has since broken down.

The children have found the separation difficult and display signs of complex grief: sadness, anger and confusion about their father’s absence. Leanne also reports feeling isolated in her new community and struggles to rebuild a support system. The stress of protecting her children, managing visits and living on a low income has affected her mental health.

*Name changed

5. Discussion

5. Discussion

5.1 The Multi-Dimensional Impact of Imprisonment on Families

The research demonstrates that the imprisonment of a family member produces wide-ranging and enduring effects on those left at home. Quantitative and qualitative evidence show that these effects are not confined to a single domain but cut across economic stability, emotional health, children's development and access to essential services.

Economic Strain

Families typically experience a sudden and significant drop in income. Survey data revealed monthly household losses that in some cases exceeded €1,000. At the same time, families incur new expenses directly linked to imprisonment, including travel to prisons, accommodation for overnight visits and the cost of sending money or goods. These combined pressures mirror previous Irish and international studies showing that imprisonment can drive already marginalised households deeper into poverty and dependence on welfare supports that are often difficult to access or insufficient to meet need.

Emotional and Social Consequences

Interviews highlighted the heavy emotional toll borne by partners, parents, siblings and children. Participants described persistent stress, stigma and the mental effort required to maintain family life while supporting the imprisoned person. Children were reported to experience complex trauma, difficulty regulating emotions and deterioration in friendships and school engagement. Many families spoke of **vicarious punishment**—the sense of serving a sentence alongside the imprisoned relative. This was expressed through experiences of stigmatisation, social isolation, disrupted relationships and even intrusive questioning when applying for prison visits or encountering restrictions on physical contact.

Impact on Children

For children, the effects extend beyond immediate distress. Caregivers linked the absence of a parent to behavioural difficulties, anxiety and long-term developmental risks. The disruption of stable routines and the need to adjust to new caregiving arrangements—sometimes with grandparents or siblings stepping in—added further instability. Such experiences increase the likelihood of intergenerational disadvantage.

Barriers to Support and Services

Access to help is inconsistent. While some families benefited from dedicated NGOs, supportive school staff and women's refuges, others faced bureaucratic hurdles or outright refusals when seeking financial or practical assistance. Participants described a lack of clear information about available supports and a sense of being judged rather than helped. Rural families were particularly affected by the scarcity of local services and the cost and complexity of travelling to prisons.

Weaknesses in System Coordination

The research also points to systemic shortcomings in cross-agency cooperation. Families often had to navigate the Irish Prison Service, the Department of Social Protection, Tusla – the Child and Family Agency, schools and voluntary organisations without clear pathways or coordinated support. This fragmented approach resulted in duplication, delays and additional stress at critical stages such as sentencing, changes in prison regime or post-release transitions.

5.2 Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) and Families of Imprisoned People

The 2025 Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) report provides a detailed benchmark of the goods and services required for individuals and households in Ireland to live with dignity.[118] Developed through deliberative public focus groups and expert review, the MESL captures not only basic physical needs such as food, housing and transport but also the social and psychological requirements necessary for full participation in Irish society. The 2025 findings show a national increase of 1.8 per cent in core MESL costs since 2024 and a cumulative rise of 18.8 per cent since 2020. Social-welfare-dependent households with children continue to meet only 81–99 per cent of their minimum needs, leaving many families below the income required to maintain an acceptable standard of living.

The results of this study indicate that families affected by imprisonment are likely to fall even further below that threshold. Survey data show a significant drop in household income following a family member's imprisonment, in some cases exceeding €1,000 per month, while qualitative interviews describe additional expenses directly linked to imprisonment. These include travel to prisons, accommodation for overnight visits, childcare during long journeys, and money or goods sent to support the imprisoned relative. For the 30 per cent of participants whose family member was imprisoned overseas, costs were even higher, with families describing flights, accommodation and lost work hours that created extreme financial strain. Such realities highlight how the standard MESL baskets may underestimate the income required for these households to live with dignity.

The 2025 MESL review places strong emphasis on children's social inclusion, budgeting for items such as team jerseys, streaming subscriptions and funds for birthday parties so that children can "fit in" with peers. Findings from this research show that families coping with imprisonment often sacrifice these very items. Parents reported cancelling extracurricular activities, reducing celebrations and struggling to provide even small treats because resources were diverted to prison visits and legal expenses. Children interviewed or discussed in the survey described feelings of exclusion and embarrassment when unable to participate in the social life of their peers, demonstrating how imprisonment directly undermines the social participation that MESL identifies as essential for a dignified childhood.

Differences between rural and urban households highlighted in the MESL report are also amplified in this context. Rural participants in this study frequently reported long journeys to prisons with limited public transport and higher fuel and maintenance costs. These findings echo the MESL conclusion that rural households face higher transport and energy costs and show how imprisonment adds further pressure to already stretched rural budgets.

Health-related contingencies, another key MESL theme, are equally relevant. Families supporting a relative in prison reported stress-related illnesses, mental health difficulties and the need for emergency childcare or travel, all of which generate additional, unpredictable expenses. The 2025 MESL recognises the necessity of a health contingencies budget to cover unexpected costs such as emergency transport and dental care, yet many families in this study said they had no capacity to build such a buffer because day-to-day expenses consumed all available income.

Viewed through the MESL framework, the families in this study face a double disadvantage: their incomes decrease sharply at the very time when essential costs rise. This places them well below the minimum income needed to secure a life with dignity, even when compared to other low-income households. Any policy response to child poverty and social exclusion must therefore incorporate the specific financial and social pressures created by imprisonment, using MESL benchmarks to guide adequate income supports, targeted travel assistance and child-centred services. Without such measures, children and families affected by imprisonment will remain at acute risk of falling far short of the Minimum Essential Standard of Living.

118 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2025 (Department of Social Protection 2025).

5.3 Learning from International Best Practice to Support Families

The Scottish report *Paying the Price: The Cost to Families of Imprisonment and Release* highlights how imprisonment creates, sustains and deepens poverty for children and families, while setting out a range of measures that other jurisdictions have adopted to reduce this financial harm. Its analysis and recommendations provide important lessons for Ireland as it seeks to strengthen protections for families affected by imprisonment.

Examples of Positive Practice Abroad

Through its international networks, Families Outside identified a series of targeted supports that go beyond basic welfare provision and directly reduce the financial impact of imprisonment on families:

- **Albania** – The Diakonia programme offers low-income families practical help such as repairing homes, supplying seeds and greenhouses, paying for children's bus fares to school, and providing livestock to start small businesses. It also delivers food and heating fuel to hundreds of families during winter.
- **Catalonia** – Financial aid is available to people in prison and their families for essential needs such as food, housing, health products, school costs, clothing and travel. Support can be initiated by the imprisoned person, their family or prison social workers, and includes pocket money, phone cards, medicines and help with school expenses.
- **Cyprus** – Prisons provide free clothing, shoes and hygiene products, supermarket vouchers for children, and at least six annual family events with gifts for children. Free telephone cards and Skype calls help families maintain contact across long distances.
- **Norway** – Families receive a universal child benefit of about €100 per month per child, with an additional €100 per family when a parent is imprisoned for more than six months. Travel costs for visiting imprisoned children aged 15–18 are also covered.
- **France and the United Kingdom** – Regional and national schemes assist with travel expenses for prison visits, with the UK's Help With Prison Visits Scheme reimbursing public transport or mileage costs and, in some cases, overnight accommodation.

These initiatives share common features: they treat the family as a unit of support; they make financial assistance automatic or easy to claim; and they ensure that contact between children and imprisoned parents is maintained without imposing additional costs. The Scottish report also stresses that such measures should be embedded in policy and law rather than left to local discretion or the goodwill of individual officials.

Considerations for Ireland

The findings of this Irish study show families experiencing severe financial strain, including significant travel costs, loss of income and the expense of maintaining contact with relatives in prison or overseas. Current Irish provisions are limited: while the One-Parent Family Payment can assist some caregivers, it requires that a partner be imprisoned for at least six months and is subject to means testing. Beyond this, families rely largely on general social welfare supports and the uneven assistance offered by voluntary organisations.

Drawing on the international examples identified in *Paying the Price*, Ireland could consider:

- **Dedicated travel and contact supports**, such as a national scheme to cover the full cost of prison visits, including digital access and video calls, for low-income families and those travelling long distances.
- **Targeted child allowances** for households where a parent is in custody, recognising the heightened risk of child poverty and social exclusion.
- **Automatic provision of basic necessities** (for example, free phone credit or hygiene products for the imprisoned person) to reduce the financial demands on families.

- **Integration with community services**, ensuring that prison-based social workers work closely with local social protection and child welfare agencies, as recommended in Catalonia.
- **Statutory guarantees** so that supports are secure, transparent and not dependent on discretionary decisions.

Adapting these measures to the Irish context would help prevent the "secondary punishment" of families documented in this report and align with Ireland's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Social Charter to protect children from poverty and ensure an adequate standard of living.

Case Study 3:
Travelling Abroad to Maintain Contact

Siobhán* is the primary carer of her four young grandchildren after her eldest son received a lengthy sentence in the UK. The children's mother is not involved in their care, so Siobhán has full parental responsibility.

To preserve the children's relationship with their father, Siobhán arranges visits twice a year. Each trip requires ferry tickets, train tickets, accommodation for at least two nights and meals while abroad. Even with careful planning, each visit costs more than €800.

Because she relies on a part-time income and a modest social welfare payment, these expenses mean going without other essentials and seeking help from local charities. Travel planning is further complicated by school timetables, childcare costs for younger grandchildren and the need to coordinate with the overseas prison's visiting schedule.

Siobhán worries constantly about the children's sense of loss and their awareness of the father's absence. She described the pressure of "keeping everything normal" while also shielding them from stigma in their community.

*Name changed

6. Conclusion

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This study demonstrates that the imprisonment of a family member in Ireland creates wide-ranging and long-lasting consequences for children and caregivers. Quantitative data show substantial losses of household income, increased living costs and disrupted childcare arrangements. Qualitative testimony adds depth to these findings, describing the emotional strain, stigma and complex family dynamics that imprisonment produces. Families often experience what participants called a "sentence of their own", facing social isolation, intrusive questioning and a constant need to conceal their circumstances to protect employment prospects and children's social standing.

The research highlights particular vulnerabilities. Caregivers frequently shoulder the dual burden of emotional support for the imprisoned person and the practical work of sustaining the household. Children endure grief, anxiety and educational disruption, especially when a parent is serving a long sentence or is imprisoned overseas. Some families, such as those of Traveller background or those already living in poverty, face additional structural disadvantages and higher costs in maintaining contact.

Analysis using the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) framework underscores the scale of financial hardship. Even before imprisonment, many families struggle to meet the costs of a dignified life; the loss of income, increased travel expenses and the need to fund prison visits or overseas travel push them further below the MESL threshold.

International evidence reinforces these findings and offers practical guidance. Examples from Norway, Catalonia and other jurisdictions show how targeted child benefits, dedicated travel funds and free communication supports can reduce financial strain and protect children's right to family life. These measures are embedded in policy and law, ensuring families are not dependent on local discretion or charitable goodwill.

To meet its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Social Charter and the EU Child Guarantee, Ireland should develop a coordinated national response. This should include statutory supports for family contact, recognition of children of imprisoned parents as a distinct vulnerable group, and income measures that reflect the true cost of maintaining dignity during and after imprisonment. Without such action, the economic, social and emotional penalties of imprisonment will continue to be borne not only by those convicted, but by the innocent families left behind.

7. Recommendations

7. Recommendations

- **Embed a children's rights approach in developing policy and in decision-making about children with a parent in prison** by developing a child rights impact assessment tool for children with a parent in prison which can be adapted and applied across justice, welfare, education and community systems and services. This should be accompanied by robust training of relevant staff and frontline workers in these sectors who routinely work and support these children and families. (Department of Children Disability and Equality; Tusla, the Child and Family Agency).
- **Recognising children of imprisoned parents as a distinct group in need of tailored supports, the Department of Children Disability and Equality and the Young Ireland Advisory Council should establish a time-limited working subgroup to focus on the unique needs of children with a family member in prison.** This group should proactively review existing policies, identify any policy gaps and make clear recommendations on how to deliver and expand existing Young Ireland commitments which include improving the reliability and accessibility of data on the number of parents in prison and publishing a policy on visiting conditions in consultation with children and families and establishing child-friendly visiting spaces in every prison in Ireland. The Council should ensure that there is interdepartmental buy-in to implement its recommendations. (Department of Children Disability and Equality)
- **Ensure access to financial and social welfare supports for people parenting alone when the other parent of their child (or children) is imprisoned** by reviewing eligibility rules, updating operational guidelines and streamlining social welfare applications. This includes removing the six-month waiting period for access to One Parent Family Payment and aligning supports with the approach used for families with children who lose a parent to bereavement. (Department of Social Protection)
- **Ensure kinship carers with responsibility for a child or children with a parent in prison can access a guardianship payment or alternative payment in a timely and appropriate way.** The application process should be reviewed and amended in these cases to ensure that a family carer does not have to declare that a parent has abandoned their child or the parent has to cease contact with the child when they go to prison in order for the carer to be eligible for a payment. (Department of Social Protection)
- **Reduce travel costs by establishing an Assisted Prison Visits Scheme**, similar to that in the UK, to support low-income families to meet the travel costs of visiting a family member in prison through fuel vouchers or vouched transport reimbursements. For people with a family member in a prison in another jurisdiction, support travel costs by recognising overseas prison visits as a qualifying expense under Additional Needs Payments. Community Welfare Officers (CWOs) should consistently approve these applications. (Department of Social Protection)

- **Explore developing a national support service to specifically provide information and clear, plain-language guidance** on entitlements and supports available to families who have a family member in prison, both in Ireland and overseas. Additional funding could be provided to an existing national service like the Citizens Information Service or the Family Resource Centre network to provide this type of support and information. (Department of Social Protection)
- **Commission further research** on the impact of imprisonment on children and families, ensuring linkage to the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) in consultation with children and young people and families impacted by imprisonment (Department of Social Protection)
- **Modernise visit booking systems** with online and telephone booking options with real-time confirmation, dedicated call-in times to speak with a dedicated staff member who can assist with the booking, and ensure consistent procedures are implemented across all prisons. (Irish Prison Service)
- **Improve visiting conditions** by ensuring that all prisons provide child-friendly visiting spaces in a safe, welcoming environment designed in consultation with children and their families. This should include minimal, non-intrusive security procedures for children and young people ensuring that all interactions with children, including search procedures, are carried out in a child-friendly manner. To this end all prison staff should undertake child rights training. (Department of Justice; Irish Prison Service)
- **Expand family contact opportunities** by ensuring that families can access in-person visits at family-friendly times including in the early evening and at weekends where this is the preferred option. Shuttle buses should be made available from key pick-up points and public transport hubs closest to the prison. In addition, the availability of secure video calls should be increased using dedicated video booths on each landing across the prison estate and the duration of phone calls beyond the current six-minute limit should be extended to allow for longer calls. The proposal to provide in-cell incoming calls should be implemented as soon as feasible. (Department of Justice; Irish Prison Service)
- **Update the internal prison complaints system**, currently under review, and include a standardised and user-friendly complaints procedure for all prison visitors with an accessible version designed for children and young people. (Department of Justice; Irish Prison Service)
- **Develop sentencing guidelines for general application that treat imprisonment as a sanction of last resort and give due weight to the best interests of the child as a mitigating factor where a parent is being sentenced**. When considering the length or severity of a sentence and the impact it may have on a person's children, there should be a presumption for non-custodial and community-based alternatives – where appropriate and proportionate – to reduce family disruption and avoid long-lasting and negative impacts of parental imprisonment on children. The Judicial Studies Committee should provide mandatory, ongoing training to all judges on the social, emotional, and developmental impact of imprisoning a primary caregiver on children. (The Judicial Council).

Appendices

Appendices

Appendix I – Survey Questionnaire

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF IMPRISONMENT ON FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

This project is organised by the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) and supported by Think-tank for Action on Social Change (TASC). It aims to understand how having a family member in prison affects families.

Your answers will inform a report on the challenges families face, such as financial strain, childcare, and the effects on children's education, health, and wellbeing. The goal is to use this information to push for better services and policies for families with a loved one in prison.

All responses are confidential and your personal details will not be shared.

For more information, please contact Sara Singleton, Head of Public Education at TASC, at ssingleton@tasc.ie

By continuing, you agree to provide anonymous feedback that will be used in the final report.

Thank you for your time and support.

SECTION 1: ABOUT YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

1. I am:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other

2. My family member who is in prison is:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other

3. What is your country of origin?

4. What is your first language?

5. What type of accommodation do you currently live in?

- ☐ Owned outright (no mortgage)
- ☐ Owned with a mortgage
- ☐ Rented (private landlord)
- ☐ Rented (local authority or public housing)
- ☐ Living with family or friends (not paying rent)
- ☐ Temporary accommodation (e.g., shelter, hostel)
- ☐ Supported accommodation (e.g., group home, assisted living)
- ☐ Homeless or without stable accommodation
- ☐ Other (please specify):

6. What county in Ireland do you live in?

7. What prison is your family member in?

- ☐ Mountjoy Prison
- ☐ Dóchas Centre
- ☐ Cloverhill Prison
- ☐ Midlands Prison
- ☐ Portlaoise Prison
- ☐ Wheatfield Prison
- ☐ Arbour Hill Prison
- ☐ Limerick Men's Prison
- ☐ Limerick Women's Prison
- ☐ Cork Prison
- ☐ Loughan House
- ☐ Shelton Abbey
- ☐ Other (please specify):
- ☐ My family member is in prison overseas

8. Relationship to the person in prison:

- ☐ Partner (spouse or significant other)
- ☐ Previous Partner
- ☐ Child
- ☐ Parent
- ☐ Other (please specify):

9. Number of children in your family:

- ☐ No children
- ☐ 1 child
- ☐ 2 children
- ☐ 3 children
- ☐ 4 or more children

10. Number of children in your household (living with you):

- ☐ No children
- ☐ 1 child
- ☐ 2 children
- ☐ 3 children
- ☐ 4 or more children

11. What are the ages of the children in your family?
(Select all that apply)

- ☐ 0–2 years
- ☐ 3–5 years
- ☐ 6–9 years
- ☐ 10–12 years
- ☐ 13–15 years
- ☐ 16–18 years
- ☐ 19 years or older

12. Do you have a child with a disability or additional needs?
(If yes, please indicate the type(s) of disability or additional needs. Select all that apply)

- ☐ No, my child does not have a disability or additional needs
- ☐ Yes, my child has a physical disability
- ☐ Yes, my child has a developmental disability (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability)
- ☐ Yes, my child has a sensory disability (e.g., hearing, vision)
- ☐ Yes, my child has a learning disability (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD)
- ☐ Yes, my child has a mental health condition (e.g., anxiety, depression)
- ☐ Yes, my child has a chronic medical condition (e.g., epilepsy, diabetes)
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other (please specify):

13. Length of time your family member has been in prison:

- ☐ Less than 3 months
- ☐ 3-6 months
- ☐ 6 months to 1 year
- ☐ More than 1 year

SECTION 2: FINANCIAL IMPACTS

14. Has your household income gone down because of imprisonment?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, approximately how much per month?

- ☐ Less than €200
- ☐ €200 - €500
- ☐ €500 - €1,000
- ☐ More than €1,000

15. Has your ability to work been affected by the imprisonment of a family member?

- ☐ Yes, I had to work fewer hours
- ☐ Yes, I had to work more hours
- ☐ Yes, I had to stop working
- ☐ No change to my work situation
- ☐ Other (please specify):

16. Has the imprisonment of a family member affected your childcare responsibilities or arrangements?

- ☐ Yes, I had to change childcare arrangements (e.g., find alternative care, reduce care hours)
- ☐ Yes, I had to take on more childcare responsibilities myself
- ☐ Yes, I had to pay for additional childcare support
- ☐ No change to my childcare situation
- ☐ Other (please specify):

17. How much do you spend each month to support your family member in prison?

- ☐ Less than €50
- ☐ €50 - €100
- ☐ €100 - €200
- ☐ More than €200

18. How much do you spend monthly on:

(Please estimate an amount for all that apply)

- Public transport for prison visits: € ☐
- Taxi travel for prison visits: € ☐
- Petrol for prison visits: € ☐
- Communication (phone calls, internet access): € ☐
- Sending letters (postage): € ☐
- Sending personal items (clothing, books, etc.): € ☐

19. Have you reduced spending on any of the following to support your loved one in prison?
(Select all that apply)

- ☐ Food (e.g., groceries, eating out)
- ☐ Heating, electricity, or other utility bills
- ☐ Household essentials (e.g., cleaning products, toiletries)
- ☐ Personal essentials (e.g., clothing, mobile phone bills)
- ☐ Child-related costs (e.g., school supplies, activities, childcare)
- ☐ Health-related expenses (e.g., medication, medical care)
- ☐ Social or recreational activities (e.g., outings, hobbies)
- ☐ Transportation (e.g., fuel, public transit, vehicle maintenance)
- ☐ Savings or investments
- ☐ Other (please specify):

SECTION 3: EFFECTS ON CHILDREN AND DAILY LIFE

20. Has lack of money affected your children's ability to participate in:
(Select all that apply)
School trips (e.g., day trips, overnight trips)
Sports clubs or lessons (e.g., football, swimming, local sports teams)
Social events with friends (e.g., birthday parties, social gatherings)
After-school programs or clubs (e.g., homework club, after-school care)
School events (e.g., end-of-term celebrations, fundraisers, or special projects)
Arts or creative activities (e.g., music lessons, dance classes, school play)
Religious or community activities (e.g., youth groups, church events)
Seasonal activities (e.g., summer camps, local festivals, Christmas events)
Other (please specify):

21. How has the imprisonment of a family member affected your children in the following areas?

Emotional Health:

- ☐ Not affected
- ☐ Somewhat affected (e.g., increased sadness, anxiety)
- ☐ A lot affected (e.g., frequent mood changes, withdrawal, depression)
- ☐ Prefer not to say

School Participation:

- ☐ Not affected
- ☐ Somewhat affected (e.g., difficulty focusing, absenteeism)
- ☐ A lot affected (e.g., significant decline in performance, frequent absence)
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Friendships and Social Activities:

- ☐ Not affected
- ☐ Somewhat affected (e.g., less interaction with peers, social withdrawal)
- ☐ A lot affected (e.g., difficulty maintaining friendships, avoiding social events)
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Behaviour at Home:

- ☐ Not affected
- ☐ Somewhat affected (e.g., acting out, increased arguments, withdrawal)
- ☐ A lot affected (e.g., noticeable behavioral issues, anger, frustration)
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Physical Health:

- ☐ Not affected
- ☐ Somewhat affected (e.g., difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite)
- ☐ A lot affected (e.g., frequent headaches, stomach issues, physical illness)
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Other (please specify):

22. How has the imprisonment of a family member affected your own well-being and daily life?

Emotional Health:

- ☐ Not affected
- ☐ Somewhat affected (e.g., stress, anxiety, sadness)
- ☐ A lot affected (e.g., severe emotional strain, depression)
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Physical Health:

- ☐ Not affected
- ☐ Somewhat affected (e.g., fatigue, stress-related physical issues)
- ☐ A lot affected (e.g., chronic illness, significant physical health issues)
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Social or Support Networks:

- ☐ Not affected
- ☐ Somewhat affected (e.g., reduced socializing, feeling isolated)
- ☐ A lot affected (e.g., loss of friends, withdrawal from social activities)
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Other (please specify):

SECTION 4: SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

23. Do you receive any help from:
(Select all that apply)

- ☐ Government benefits
- ☐ Charities or organisations
- ☐ Family or friends
- ☐ Other (please specify): [Open text field]

24. What types of support would be most helpful for you and your family?
(Select all that apply)

- ☐ Financial help for basic needs
- ☐ Help with travel costs for prison visits
- ☐ Mental health support for children
- ☐ Educational support for children
- ☐ Peer support groups
- ☐ Other (please specify): [Open text field]

25. Is there anything else you would like to share about how imprisonment has affected you or your family?

26. Would you be happy to be contacted regarding a future focus group on this project?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, please give your email address:

Appendix II Interview Questions

General

1. **What challenges have you faced as a family member of someone in prison?**
    - Example prompt: “Has your daily routine changed? How do you feel about it?”
2. **How has your relationship with the person in prison changed?**
    - Example prompt: “Do you communicate differently now?”

Financial Strain

3. **How has the imprisonment affected your finances?**
    - Example prompt: “Have you had to cut back on spending?”
4. **What financial help would have made a difference for you?**
    - Example prompt: “Would extra support for travel or bills have helped?”

Children’s Well-being

5. **How have your children been affected emotionally or socially?**
    - Example prompt: “Have they had trouble with school or friends?”
6. **How do you manage changes in your children’s behaviour or health?**
    - Example prompt: “Have you noticed any changes in how they act or feel?”

Daily Life & Support

7. **How has your daily life changed since your family member went to prison?**
    - Example prompt: “Has your routine or social life been impacted?”
8. **Do you feel you have enough support from family, friends, or groups?**
    - Example prompt: “Is there anything you need that you’re not getting?”

Resources and Services

9. **What type of support would be most helpful for you and your family?**
    - “Would you like more mental health support, or help with school?”
10. **Are current services easy to access, or do you face barriers?**
    - Example prompt: “Have you struggled to find help for yourself or your children?”

Future Outlook

11. **What changes would you like to see in support for families of prisoners?**
    - Example prompt: “What would make life easier for families like yours?”

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