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Brookes, L and Daly, A (2024) “Picture this, picture me”: community based peer-to-peer and family support for children impacted by parental imprisonment. *Journal of Children's Services*. ISSN 1746-6660

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Citation

Brookes, L. and Daly, A. (2024), "'Picture this, picture me': community based peer-to-peer and family support for children impacted by parental imprisonment", *Journal of Children's Services*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-04-2023-0022>

Title

'Picture This, Picture Me': Community based peer-to-peer and family support for children impacted by parents in prison.

Structured Abstract

Design/methodology/approach

Children's experiences are explored through expressive and creative research methods informed by photovoice research including taking and responding to photos and caption writing, short conversational interviews and curation of artefacts.

Purpose

The 'Picture This, Picture Me' research project enabled young people who have experience of a parent in prison to challenge the narrow narrative of 'prisoners' children' by sharing their wider sense of identities and their needs.

Findings

Children's perspectives are presented: what matters to them, what makes them happy, how do they perceive themselves beyond the label of 'a prisoner's child', how do community-based support services help and what they would like people to know about children who have been impacted by parental imprisonment.

Research implications

This research contributes to an emerging research area on the role of services from the community and voluntary sector and non-formal educational organisations that support children impacted by parental imprisonment at a personal and family level.

Practical implications

The research offers useful knowledge to professionals, including those in education, children's services and non-formal community-based services, with an interest in holistically supporting children and families with a relative in prison.

Social implications

Children's insights are offered on the value of peer-to-peer and community-based interventions that support them holistically including articulating their self-identity, life and educational aspirations and practical issues for families.

Originality

There is minimal research on including and hearing the voices of children who have a family member in prison and their perspectives are invaluable.

Keywords children with parents in prison, community-based support, photovoice informed research

Introduction

This paper contributes to an emerging area of research into community-based support for children who are impacted by parental imprisonment. The paper presents findings from a small-scale study in which a group of children with lived experience reflected on their identities, aspirations, and experiences of parental imprisonment through a 3-day creative 'photovoice' and personal journalling inspired school summer holiday project, led by a specialist community and voluntary sector organisation, Time-Matters UK. Child and practitioner insights for other community-based interventions that also aim to support children and families impacted by parental imprisonment are thus, proffered.

Time-Matters UK (TMUK) (<https://www.timemattersuk.com>) is an organisation based in the north-west region of England supporting children whose parent is in prison. TMUK offers a range of supportive early interventions from one-to-one school-based mentoring to community support groups in the school holidays, to peer support where children who have attended for some time, might train to help newer children who join the service. Currently TMUK is a local project serving residents in Merseyside in the UK, although some children from outside of the area do accept online help. Sessions focus on feelings around having a parent in prison and aim to help the child realise that what happened was not their fault and that they are not alone in their experience. Sessions are always child-led. Some children want help preparing or discussing prison visits; some might wish to discuss feeling embarrassed that friends or teachers know what happened, some might be worried about release and so forth. Giving children the opportunity to meet other children who also have a parent in prison, and explore feelings and experiences without judgement, is a core component of the TMUK service.

Literature Review

In the UK, data is not routinely collected on the number of children impacted by parental imprisonment, yet it has been estimated that there are 312,000 children who have a parent in prison, and thus far, are only beginning to be recognised as a distinct group with particular needs (Brookes and Frankham, 2021; Kincaid *et al.*, 2019; Lord Farmer, 2017). There is no doubt that having a parent in prison is likely to bring a multitude of challenges to the impacted child and wider family. Negative media attention and community backlash (Condry, 2011); social isolation, anxiety, depression, eating and sleeping problems especially in the early stages when the family are in shock (Cunningham, 2001); loss of education (Hanlon *et al.*, 2005), experiences of bullying (Brookes & Frankham, 2021), and worry about the imprisoned parents wellbeing or them returning to prison post release (Loureiro, 2010) are just a few of the most common problems that this cohort faces.

Research into negative and positive school experiences is evident in the UK, the US and through a Europe-based comparative project (Cunningham, 2013; Raikes, 2013). Interestingly, children's experiences of support in school is mixed (Brookes and Frankham, 2021; Kjellstrand, *et al.*, 2018;

Raikes, 2013). Some children report finding school a safe haven, where trusted relationships with school staff who have a general understanding of parental imprisonment as well as their own particular story is valued highly (Thurman *et al.*, 2018; Raikes, 2013). However, many other children report the school environment to be a source of much stress where they encounter hurtful words and actions from other pupils or even members of staff; a place where they feel judged, 'othered' and fundamentally unsafe leading to a decrease in attendance and attainment (Morgan and Leeson, 2019, Kahya and Ekinici, 2018)

The last decade has seen a surge of community-based support services emerge across the UK. However, local provision for *all* UK children impacted by parental imprisonment remains a post-code lottery with patchy coverage of local services. Some organisations have been established for much longer including Prisoners and Children Together (PACT) based in London (<https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk>) who call for and offer support to families and run the national prisoners' family helpline. Families Outside (<https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk>), is an organisation providing for support to for families in Scotland affected by imprisonment. Out There in Manchester (<http://www.outtherecharity.org>) and Sussex Prisoners Families in Brighton (<https://www.sussexprisonersfamilies.org.uk>) offer community based support. Other projects such as Together A Chance, evaluated by Cardiff University, consider the needs of mothers in custody, in relation to the needs of their children (Rees *et al.*, 2022; 2023). Notably, there is an international advocacy movement calling for support for children and families who have a relative in prison through non-formal education and community-based services including the International Coalition for Children of Incarcerated Parents (<https://inccip.org/>) and the Prison Reform Trust (<https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk>).

As practice develops, there is an emerging body of research into the intersectional space filled by dedicated services located in the community and voluntary sector and non-formal educational organisations that support children impacted by parental imprisonment at a personal and family level, and in relation to school and educational experiences, and their everyday wellbeing (Kjellstrand, *et al.*, 2018). Related research into community health and family supports for children with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) suggests social interventions, including talking and social integration with peers, and youth work can support resilience and later life health outcomes (O'Neill *et al.*, 2021). However, whilst there is a growing body of research into the *experiences* of children of prisoners which reflects the increased understanding and interest in ACEs, learning about what really helps, and the role of 'safe' project spaces, must now arise from the perspectives of those children and young people who are, or have been, helped and supported.

This paper offers a contribution to research focussed on voices of children and young people, from those engaged in a support organisation, Time-Matters UK summer holiday project.

Research Approach

Two research questions for this project were established:

RQ1: To what extent do children view their experiences both in relation to, and beyond, being a 'child whose parent is in prison'?

RQ2: What are the key messages from children and families about experiences of being impacted by parental imprisonment for non-formal support organisations, teachers, communities and supporting stakeholders?

Ten children were recruited as part of an opportunity sample. Time-Matters UK offered a comprehensive 4-week summer programme of support activities, and ensured that the children, parents and guardians were aware that this particular 3-day event was a research project (different than a typical support group) and required formal consent and assent. Information sheets were therefore shared in advance along with the summer timetable so that the children and families were fully informed about the parameters of the research and could choose to opt in as they wished. In addition, three mothers who were support mentors (known as 'mentor mothers') took part in the research, facilitated by the two authors of this paper who were two co-volunteers in the context of a summer project. All are familiar with the context of children's lives and have worked with /volunteered with support organisations such as TMUK over several years. The research project received research ethics approval from the co-authors' University Research Ethics Committee.

The research project 'Picture This, Picture Me' employed expressive and creative research methodologies to enable children to share and discuss their experiences in relation to and beyond being 'a child whose parent is in prison' (RQ1). Data collection was over the three days of the summer project and involved creative workshops informed by photovoice and journaling that involved selecting, taking and responding to photos and reflective caption writing (Photovoice UK <https://photovoice.org/about-us/>). In addition, positive psychology cards (<https://metafox.eu/collections/training-workshop/products/coaching-postcards-positive-psychology>) were used as stimulus for reflection and discussions of their experiences. Further positive psychology activities over the three days included by writing personal notes of hopes and dreams and creating 'little book of confidences'. Additionally, short conversational 'interviews' enabled us to capture how young people reflect on their identities and messages they would like professionals and wider society to hear (RQ2).

The participatory methods used in this research was envisaged to be an enabling process for participants. Enabling research methods includes seeking ways to engage those affected by issues to offer their perspectives (Foster-Fishman, 2023; Community Tool Box, 2023; Daly, 1999). Both photovoice-informed and positive psychology approaches are complementary to Freirean methods used in social research to enable those often without a voice to be heard, by means of reflecting on their circumstances and experiences and to identify opportunities for positive change (Freire, 2017). Our approaches to data collection via creative methods created conditions for conversations to surface on the experience of having a parent in prison, to challenge the narrow narrative of the label 'prisoners' children' and to enable participants to share their wider sense of identities and their needs.

The methodological approach, situating creative methods in research as part of a summer project, supported children articulate their views in a relaxed and thoughtful way. Being in a place of trust is central to this research approach and ethical research practice (Daly, 2011). By taking a creative and narrative approach (Cole, 2022; Daly, 2011; Riessman, 2008) children's and mentor mothers voices are present in this paper, to set the scene and illustrate key moments and conversational insights related to the research questions. Thematic analysis was applied to data to by sifting and sorting ideas in order to surface key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Initial themes and summary recommendations were considered by participants for clarity and representation of perspectives and experiences. Findings are presented below as four themes. These voices bring together individual perspectives that challenge deficit views and assumptions in wider research about children with a parent in prison, and promote the richness of a shared, yet unique lived experience.

Findings

This research project took place over three hot summer days in 2022. A diverse group of children aged 6 to 16 years attended; 7 children had been supported by Time-Matters UK for many years; for 3 of the children, it was their first day. To set the scene, a research note (below) by one of the authors on the first day of the project, captured the special space created by this group. The importance of trust, being in a special mutually understood space, and care for peers is evident as described in a researcher reflection below.

Children who know each other greet each other warmly like an extended family. New parents and caregivers chat with project workers and mentor mothers, while their smaller children cling to their waists and legs and look up shyly around the room. The beaming smiles of welcome from the wider group are irresistible, and the newer children gradually peel away to join them. This small band of ten children relax into each other's company. Their composure grounds the space and gives confidence to the parents/caregivers now leaving. These children are each other's safe hands; for this is no ordinary group of young people. Each child in this group shares a 'secret', a trauma, a major life-changing experience. They all have been traumatised by the impact of having a parent in prison. (Researcher's note on first day of the project).

The conversations with children and mentor mothers that took place over the 3-day event unearthed 4 key themes; (1) Family; (2) Safety; (3) Reflections and Memories and (4) Hopes for increased understanding.

Theme 1: Family.

An overarching theme that emerged was the importance of family - family on the inside and family on the outside. For some children there was a longing for the family member in prison.

"I can't wait till Christmas! I'll see my dad at Christmas" (Boy, 6yrs).

"It's hard to control your anger, because you miss them" (Boy, 9yrs).

There was also a huge appreciation for the non-offending parent / caregivers. Children proudly articulated their appreciation and respect for those caring for them at home.

"My mum is good, she has determination" (Girl, 10yrs).

"I admire my mum because she works very hard making special oils for your skin" (Boy, 10yrs).

Notably, some children either could not have contact with their parent in prison (for safety reasons) or did not want contact through choice.

"We don't see my dad. It's better that way. He brings too much stress. I've got a good mum and she fills the role of both parents really. I'm fine with that" (Boy, aged 15yrs).

"It's been a long time since I've seen my dad. I think he lives down South or somewhere now. He just got out of prison, but I haven't seen him. I'm not allowed" (Girl, aged 11yrs).

Time-Matters UK as a sense of family was also noted in conversations with the children and mentor-mothers.

"I've been coming since I was 8. I'm 14 now. I met one of my best friends through here when we were much younger and now we go to the same drama club together. It's funny looking back on our memories of things we did together in this group when we were younger. We've kind of grown up together in this group. Like sisters really" (Girl, 14yrs).

"Everyone here is just like us, and just like everyone else - we're like a family" (Mentor Mother 2).

Theme 2: Safety.

The organisation Time-Matters UK, in which this research project took place, offers a safe space for both children and their non-offending parents / caregivers where they share their knowledge and coping strategies informally with one another. Listening to discussions between the mothers, they stressed the importance of a safe space both for themselves, and their children.

"I've learnt so much from (names another mother). She told me how to cope with day-release visits. It was a life saver. I wouldn't have known so many things of what to do without her help" (Mentor Mother 1).

"I never thought I would find somewhere where they (the children) can just be themselves, be with other kids who are the same and they don't even have to talk about it, they understand each other" (Mentor Mother 3)

Participants also raised the importance of safe spaces. School was brought into discussions as a place where they sometimes felt vulnerable.

"Being in a good school is important. I mean being SAFE in school. Sometimes I don't feel safe" (Girl, 11yrs).

"I want teachers to take it easy with those kids [with parent in prison] and don't give them a hard time" (Boy, 15yrs).

"They can't get this in school; they need a special place like this" (Mentor Mother 2).

In contrast to feelings of being unsafe in a school environment, the young people felt comfortable enough at Time-Matters UK to be able to openly praise themselves in front of this group which they attribute to the support and understanding of the friends they make here.

"I am kind and smart. I love being here, I can be myself and everyone is ok with it (having a parent in prison) and understands" (Girl, 12yrs).

Theme 3: Reflections and Memories.

Opportunities for reflection occur naturally in the safe space of the group. An early exercise conducted as part of this research project was to place a collection of pre-bought positive psychology picture cards (a range of images from beautiful sunsets to flowers, mountains to open roads, waterways to rainbows etc) on tables around the room and ask the children to choose any picture they liked or were drawn to and then think about what feelings the image might provoke for them. These could be current feelings or memories, and about any subject whatsoever. Some spoke about their experience of parental imprisonment; others did not.

Children commented that their daily feelings and thought processes are complex and interchangeable when you have a parent in prison. Whilst some feelings did and do drift to

experiences of parents in prison, other thoughts are on comparatively 'normal' everyday activities that any child is likely to relate to such as school and sports.

"I chose this picture. A series of colours gradually getting more intense and bright creating a simple abstract image... I chose this to show the different emotions in life. We have different feelings at different times. We can remember things that make us sad, or things that we might be worrying about, like visits (to prison), but we can, on the same day be happy doing sport or going to school. We all have a lot of emotions. By using an image that means something to you, it can become art!" (Girl, 13yrs).

Others remembered happy times with an imprisoned parent before their arrest.

"It reminds me of when my dad used to take us to the park before school and gets us hypo!" (Girl, 10yrs)

"My dad is silly, and funny and he makes me feel happy. His hugs are squashy." (Boy, 6yrs).

The young people liked hearing other people's perspectives, their thoughts, and feelings. Some were pleased they 'spoke publicly' (standing up and presenting to the group) and liked writing captions alongside images as a starting point for group discussion. Sitting in a semi-circle around the pictures and quotes now tacked and presented in a display on the wall, the group reflected on overcoming life's challenges and being happy in spite of the struggle.

"I chose this photo because the dog looks happy, and you could interpret the dog. Pushing through the water is like overcoming problems in life" (Boy, 15yrs).

"I like the silhouettes in this photo (picture of two people sitting together while the sun sets). The sparkles feel like togetherness. Like friends I've made here" (Girl, 16yrs).

One of the mentor mothers shared her appreciation of friendship to help her through hard times.

"I like that different points of view can influence the photo, and how I see it and how the audience sees it. It is timeless, two old friends talking. They've talked and laughed and shared all their lives since school" (Mentor Mother, 1).

Children also expressed their appreciation for nature through their chosen images. One said:

"This picture with cleaning tools on the beach reminds me a lot of how oceans need to be cleaned because of pollution. We need to look after the beach and parks" (Girl, 8yrs).

Supporting the group to write creatively by thinking about how all their senses might be provoked by an image was a new idea for many, that unearthed emotive and beautiful results. One child described how her two-dimensional image might feel and taste.

"In mine the sky and tress feel rough and smooth. The air tastes fresh and clean" (Girl, 11yrs).

Another reflected on the process.

"I like that I can do creative writing, like in this project. I learned that I could use my senses to help my creative writing. Even when you are looking at a picture you can think about your senses" (Girl, aged 14ys).

Others were equally enthused, and their writings included,

“A fabulous flower, floral taste and pattern” (Girl, 13yrs).

“I am seeing colours that sound like an autumn day that tastes like the future, smelling like home, feeling like paper” (Girl, 16yrs).

“I see glowing red colours, it feels like softness, and tastes of freedom, I hear silence and smell the green” (Girl, 14yrs).

After considering the positive psychology photo cards, the children moved into a photo-voice informed exercise and considered what they themselves might want to photograph that represents an aspect or aspects of their lives, interests, and identities. Each child was given the task to bring an item from home with this exercise in mind. Disposable cameras were then handed out to each child; a novelty in the modern age of the smart phone, but an item that provoked much curiosity and laughter amongst the group. Learning to use ‘old-fashioned technology’ was a source of much amusement to the children who all agreed to have a go of this ‘archaic’ way of taking photographs. The children were then invited to share with the group the item they had chosen to photograph and why they had chosen it. One girl held up some tiny shoes, now way too small for her, and reflected on memories she had of her father before he went to prison.

“These are my special sparkly shoes. My dad got them for me, and they remind me of all the travelling we did, all around with my dad driving. I wore my shoes on these days out. We laughed and looked at everything out the windows and we had fun. I keep the shoes as my special memory. I have good memories of my dad before he went away. I remember. I’ve brought them in to photograph them. They are so small now” (Girl, 10yrs).

The items that the children chose to photograph were wide ranging. Some had relevance to experiences of parental imprisonment, and some did not. Through this research, these young people showcased their many interests, skills, and hobbies. One boy brought in a basketball boot to highlight his aspiration to become a professional basketball player (he was already playing at a competitive level); another brought in a toy dinosaur and spoke of his passion and knowledge for the subject; one child showed some much-coveted jewellery, another a drama medal she had won at a local festival. After the children had taken their disposable cameras home and had the chance to take more images of things that mattered to them, the processed films unearthed many pictures of much-loved pets, a girl's football kit from the team she supported (she also played in a local league), photos of already framed photos of family members (some but not all were photos of their relative in prison); people they live with including siblings, photos of i-phones, make-up, and there was even a photograph that one child had taken of items she had acquired from a local children's hospital where she had recently had surgery.

This three-day project culminated in a mini exhibition they called ‘Picture This, Picture Me’ to showcase, to one another and their parents and caregivers, their creativity. The exhibition included their creative writing pieces attached to the images they chose on the first day, in addition to a favourite photograph they had taken with their disposable camera, and any explanation they wished to assign to this. Deciding which one photo they liked best was, however, sometimes a hard choice.

“This is a picture of my brother; he is very clever and knows a lot about dinosaurs. And this is one he took of me. We are good friends. I took a picture of my favourite cat. I love cats and care so much for them” (Boy, 10yrs).

The final exhibition showcased this group of 10 young people, all of whom who were impacted by parental imprisonment, as talented, creative, motivated and open-minded young people who had

numerous thoughts, interests and experiences outside of and beyond their experience of having a parent in prison. Whilst the theme of missing, or worrying about, or even feeling anger or disappointment towards the imprisoned parent did indeed emerge, this was not the only theme nor the dominant theme. The final exhibition was, quite simply, an exhibition of children; children who love pets, sports, nature, and one another; children who have hopes and dreams, talents and emotions, like any other child their age.

Theme 4: Hopes for more understanding.

At the end of the three-day project the children were asked the question “What do you want other people in society to understand about children with a parent in prison?”. A key theme that emerged from this segment of the research was how frustrated the children felt about being seen as a potential future offender and perceived by society as a child who might be ‘bad’.

“We are not the same as our parents. Especially lads can have this... some girls thinking you are like your dad. We are not!” (Boy, 15yrs).

“It’s not the child’s fault what happened” (Boy, 10yrs).

“We are great kids!” (Girl, 12yrs).

Other children commented on how hard it can be to have a parent in children. One simply said,

“It is hard” (Girl, 11yrs).

And another stressed;

“They should be nice (people in society) to children because they are having a hard time.” (Boy, 9yrs).

Equally a protective element towards family emerged; regardless of how these children felt about what their offending parent might have done there was also a plea for compassion. They did not want to be judged, and they did not want their family members, inside or outside of the prisons to be judged either.

“Not everyone in this situation are bad people... there is too much judgement” (Girl, 14yrs).

Another complained,

“The parents and kids are not all bad. We get stereotyped which is not fair” (Girl, 16yrs).

Ultimately these children wanted to be seen like any other child in society. The labels (perceived or real) were oppressive to these children. Whilst they did want an understanding that it is not easy to have a parent in prison, at the same time the children did not want to be seen as victims. Talking together, one reflected,

“Some people have worse problems than us” (Boy, 10yrs).

and another expressed a similar sentiment:

“Kids are not victims. They can achieve their goals in spite of what happened” (Girl, 12yrs).

Similarly, another stressed

“I’ve learnt that whatever happens it doesn’t have to affect your life in a bad way” (Boy, 15yrs).

Finally, another child simply said:

“Remember...we are just normal kids!” (Girl, 14yrs).

Discussion

This research set out, through participatory and creative methods, to understand how children who are impacted by parental imprisonment see themselves and the world that they live in. In addition, this research sought to understand what children who are impacted by parental imprisonment want others to know and understand about them. As highlighted in the findings above, and through the key themes that emerged from the reflections of 10 children (family; safety; reflections and memories, and hopes for more understanding), their views can be summarised as follows.

Children impacted by parental imprisonment see and experience themselves far beyond the stigma and labels that are often associated with children in their position. Instead, they see themselves as capable, good, and kind individuals who have wide ranging interests and positive aspirations for their futures. The presence of caring adults in children’s lives is unquestionably vital (Turney, 2019; Luther, 2015). All of the children in the group expressed love and respect for their non-offending caregivers, and it was clear there was love and care also for one another. Butler et al., (2022) highlights the protective effect of peer support on mental well-being, and it was clear that in this project, young people caring for and looking out for one another was a particular strength in the group, creating a sense of belonging to a community that often felt like an extended family.

Whilst some of the children expressed much love for their incarcerated parent who they missed, a number of them did not have, nor want, contact with their parent in prison, demonstrating the non-homogeneous nature of the group. The Farmer Review (2017) for the Ministry of Justice, UK Government, stressed the importance of strengthening prisoners’ family ties to improve prisoner outcomes and reduce re-offending (Lord Farmer, 2017). However, it is important to balance this narrative with children and families right to refuse contact and not to feel pressured to have contact for the benefit of the offender. For some families, severing contact is healthy and a relief. Jardine (2014) in her briefing entitled ‘The role of family ties in the desistance from crime’ highlights that “families affected by imprisonment often experience a range of negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger, loneliness, isolation, jealousy, shame, or guilt which may leave little emotional energy to direct towards supporting the returning prisoner” and further stresses that “many families may have good reasons for not wishing to continue these relationships, particularly if they have been negatively affected by the prisoner’s offending or have been subject to domestic abuse” (Jardine, 2014, p3).

Furthermore, the needs of children are often only discussed in relation to the prison estate and management of access such as quantity and quality of family visiting, telephone time and compassionate spaces for parents who are prisoners (Baldwin, 2018). However, support for children where they live, in their communities, away from the prison environment, remains limited which reflects the scarcity of funding for community-based projects. This research contributes to the importance of being cognisant of children’s experiences in order to mitigate the many wider impacts ‘on the outside’, including stigma, social isolation and trauma, and disruptions to education arising from their everyday experience of having a parent or relative in prison.

Unquestionably, these children were frustrated by negative views they have absorbed and shouldered around children in their position and were keen for others to realise they are not 'bad

kids' despite having an offender in the family who has gone to prison. Stigma was, however, clearly an everyday feature in many of their lives. Kahya and Ekinici (2018) note the importance of non-judgemental spaces for children to discuss their concerns, and to feel safe which directly aligns with the group's experience that Time-Matters UK was an essential place of safety which increased their ability to cope and thrive. This experience exists in parallel to some children claiming that school was not always an easy place for them to be. Indeed, research into the role of schools suggests they can be negative as well as potential positive spaces for children (Shaw et al., 2021; Morgan et. al., 2013).

Indeed, formal community-based services that support wide ranging impacts on children of parental incarceration, including impacts on children's education, are more likely to be in the voluntary sector and run as self-help and early intervention support groups. Where formal interventions exist, they tend to focus on issues such as safeguarding and social service family support, itself a deficit model fraught with suspicion and tension. In addition, some research puts forth the 'certainty of association' of children of prisoners with later involvement in the criminal justice system. However, this is being criticised as research that lacks focus on what might best support children, and families, during their adjustment to the realities of having a relative in prison (Flynn, 2013). Community-based informal interventions, albeit less documented and under-researched, does focus on interventions such as peer group support and mentoring and community development approaches to working with children and families (Kincaid et al., 2019; Laakso and Nygaard, 2012).

Our research indicates children have a bigger story to tell about their interests and identities, beyond the label of 'prisoners' children'. The creative activities enabled these 10 children to express themselves, not solely about their experience of parental imprisonment, but feel free to share other aspects of their lives; a love for sports, animals, nature, and acting being just a few things that emerged strongly as what mattered in this group. These children wanted the wider community to know that parental imprisonment might be in their story but is certainly not their whole story and may even play a minor role in the rich tapestry of their life. They did not want to be seen as a child of prisoner with the weight of ACEs tainting their futures. Whilst community-based support as a safe space was welcomed, the children also wanted their supporters to see them as full of potential, just like any other child.

Conclusion

This research project explored to what extent and in what ways do children engaged with a specialist support organisation express their likes, interests, and identities as, and beyond, being a 'child whose parent is in prison'. Narratives from the children and mentor-mums clearly demonstrate that children impacted by parental imprisonment are not one homogenous group. Despite the clear trauma that children and families experience when a parent goes to prison, this research challenges the narrative that affected children are likely to follow in the footsteps of offending. On the contrary, this study finds that children in this position are highly aware of negative judgements and societal stigma. They do not want to be 'written off' but instead seen as they are; as hard working, engaged in their passions and interests, ambitious, and as compassionate and caring individuals.

This research also sought to understand from children's perspectives key messages for non-formal support organisations, teachers, communities and supporting stakeholders. In addition to not wanting to be unfairly judged, these children and their parents and caregivers stress the value of non-formal early intervention safe spaces. Whilst support in school for some is helpful, non-formal and non-statutory community-based organisations are considered to be a lifeline for impacted families. A place to go, and a place to be where they can be themselves; free of judgement, free of labels, free to praise and believe in themselves and uplift one another. Ultimately, this research finds

there is real need for specialist organisations that help children with a parent in prison through early intervention. Such organisations that provide non-formal therapeutic help through supportive conversations, creative enrichment activities, games and even days out, build a safer community and a safer world for these children providing a much-needed antidote to the ACEs they have suffered.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by a grant from the QR Research Fund, Liverpool John Moores University. Thanks to Bethany Davies for research assistance. Thanks are due to mentor-mothers and project workers who gave their time to support this project. Special thanks to the young people who shared their achievements and dreams, challenges and insights for practice to this research.

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