

A hidden population of young carers: children with a parent in prison in the UK

Dr Caroline Leeson and Dr Julia Morgan
Plymouth University, UK



Who is a young carer?

Any person under 18 who provides or intends to provide care for an adult' (Clause 63 (6) Carers Act 2014, UK).



What do young carers do?

- household chores and errands
- personal care or administering medication

(Tuffney, 2012)



What do young carers do?

There are various negative consequences of significant caring responsibilities:

- Poor educational attainment resulting in a loss of employment options,
- Lack of social opportunities leading to isolation and frustration;
- Emotional distress and fatigue
- Potential physical damage from lifting and carrying heavy objects
- Distorted relationships between parent and child



Services for young carers

Young Carers should be able to learn, achieve, develop friendships and enjoy positive, healthy childhoods; just like other children. Where services are working with families we should try to ensure that the needs of children in the family, including those who may be assisting with caring, are recognised. This means taking account of their hopes, aspirations, strengths and achievements; and the need for advice and support for all the family.



Who is not a young carer?

Children with a parent in prison are unlikely to be regarded as a young carer:

- Parent they live with may not have a disability
- Parent they live with may not have a recognised physical or mental illness
- Parent they live with may not have certified drugs or alcohol problems
- Any distress caused by incarceration of partner is likely to be treated by medication and not meet stringent criteria



Research

2011-12: research looking at support services available for children with a father in prison in the South West of UK

Interviews:

- 6 children, aged 8-13 with their mothers
- 10 stakeholders; psychologists; youth workers; prison charity workers
- 10 head teachers
- 3 school nurses

+

- 75 questionnaires sent to schools

A thematic analysis of data exposed a recurrent and strong theme of caring responsibilities



Caring for their mother

'I have to help my mum a lot and school don't know all that I have to do'. (Interview, child aged 10)



Caring for siblings

- 'My daughter has taken the role of mum at times' (Parent 4)
- '.....this particular young man is he's actually quite grown-up for his age because he's had to become the father figure, and so he's done everything for mum at home, everything for the little ones. Trying to run in and do his exams. Go back home and make sure everything's fine, so he's taken that role on because...'
(Head Teacher 5)
- 'He is now the man of the house....I say to him you must look after your brothers and be the man of the house'
(Parent 3)



Caring for their father

- A number of the children were worried about their fathers health and well being in prison
- Some expressed their frustration at not being able to visit regularly to check out how their father was coping
- Others were anxious once their father had returned home that he might go back to prison:

'sometimes when I got back from school and he was not there, I thought he had gone back and I would be worried all over again'



Practical
care

Emotional
care

Anxiety





Structural inequality and concentrated disadvantage

- Inequalities that are systemic, rooted in the normal operations of social institutions such as health, education and social care (Dani and de Haan, 2003)
- Disadvantage that is geographically or community situated isolating inhabitants from resources, limits usefulness of neighbourhood connections and allows the development of adverse social conditions (UAAA, 2009)



Structural inequality

'Where an unequal status is attributed to a category of people in relation to one or more other categories of people, a relationship that is perpetuated and reinforced by a confluence of unequal relations in roles, functions, decision rights, and opportunities.' (Dani and de Haan, 2005, p. 3)



Issues for leadership

Using Axford's typology of service delivery (2009), local and national leaders should:

- Improve awareness of the needs of children with a parent in prison
- Develop far reaching strategy drivers that privilege quality of life and sustaining social ties
- Better funding or access to a wider range of funding mechanisms
- Improved information sharing
- Adoption of a strategic lens that sees children as positive social actors rather than victims or threats
- A more inclusive definition of young carers