



European Journal of Parental Imprisonment

Moving beyond stigma for
children affected by parental imprisonment





Children of Prisoners Europe

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7-year-old boy, Switzerland
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Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) is a pan-European network of organisations and individuals working with and on behalf of children affected by parental imprisonment. The network encourages innovative perspectives and practices to ensure that children whose parents are, or have been, in prison fully enjoy their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and that action is taken to enable their well-being and development. The *European Journal of Parental Imprisonment* is a publication that seeks to broaden the study of issues relevant to children affected by parental incarceration and meet a burgeoning interest in the development, implementation and evolution of entitlements, policies and practices that promote their well-being. With a view to fostering new perspectives for children, the journal features contributions by eminent scholars and experts in the fields of child rights, child welfare, criminal and social justice, psychology, penal affairs and other disciplines. Published articles do not necessarily represent COPE's opinions. Selected articles are editorial screened but not peer-reviewed. The editors are committed to reasoned ideological diversity and welcome suggestions for special issues and contributions.

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Agents of change: reclaiming our childhood from the shadow of parental imprisonment

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection of criminal justice, child rights and parental imprisonment: an area too often overlooked in policy and practice. It interrogates the language we use, the myths we perpetuate and the narratives we default to when discussing children affected by the justice system. Rather than framing these children through lenses of tragedy and deficit, it proposes a shift: toward narratives of power, potential and hope. Drawing on reflections from core members of the Parental Imprisonment Collective,¹ Evie Mae and Jemmar, this article re-centres lived experience as a form of expertise. Their insights challenge dominant assumptions and offer a blueprint for justice systems that are not only trauma-informed, but dignity-led. The authors argue that children affected by parental imprisonment are not passive recipients of harm: they are active agents of change, deserving of visibility, respect and rights. This article is not just an academic contribution, it is a call to action. To lawmakers, officials, service providers and community justice champions: the authors invite you to listen differently, to act boldly and to reimagine justice through the eyes of those most impacted — because when children and young people are seen, heard and empowered, justice becomes not only possible, but transformative.

Reimagining dignity through pain and power: a reflection

Evie Mae, S.

Dignity is not a static concept, it is legal, philosophical and deeply relational.² Within the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), dignity emerges not only through protection, but also through participation: Article 12 boldly concludes that all children must have the right to express their views freely, on matters affecting them.³

Yet contemporary discourse surrounding children affected by parental imprisonment continues to be dominated by frameworks that privilege vulnerability and victimhood. Whilst driven by a desire to protect, safeguard and support, these narratives can advance a singular and reductive framework of harm.⁴ This is not to dismiss the real challenges these children face. Parental imprisonment is associated with increased risk of mental health difficulties, educational disruption and social exclusion.⁵ However, children who do not conform to “traditionally” expected standards of trauma frequently fall through the cracks of recognition and support. I was one of those children.

Following our presentation at the conference organised by Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) in 2025, I increasingly felt that advocacy efforts, policy design and therapeutic interventions had become narrowly focused, with the overrepresentation of one type of experience creating a toxic platform in which certain stories are amplified at the expense of others. Children whose resilience manifests quietly through overachievement, emotional suppression and hyper-independence are often overlooked, their needs rendered invisible by systems that equate trauma with visibility. Within this context, COPE emerges as a critical site for reimagining how children’s experiences are understood and represented. By bringing together researchers, practitioners and individuals with lived experience, COPE offers a platform for challenging dominant narratives and exploring alternative ways of knowing. It is within this space that the potential for narrative transformation and dignity becomes most visible, not through abstract theorising, but through the embodied reflections of those who have lived the reality of parental imprisonment.

¹ The Parental Imprisonment Collective (PIC) are a group of young adults with lived experience of parental imprisonment during childhood, standing united against the dehumanisation of any person with this lived experience. We affirm the equal value of our dual identities, both professional and lived to create change, and with deep care and kindness, we aim to tackle some of the complex issues and barriers these young people face. By gifting society a better understanding of what it is to be a child of an imprisoned parent, we hope to energise the change around stigma towards these children and young people, providing them with the support they deserve.

² Harrison, S. (2024). Towards a political concept of dignity. *Political Research Exchange*, 6(1).

³ United Nations General Assembly (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

⁴ Children’s Commissioner for England (20 September 2021). The Big Ask: Voices of vulnerable children. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/the-big-ask-voices-vulnerable-children/>

⁵ Beresford, S., Loucks, N., and Raikes, B. (2020). The health impact on children affected by parental imprisonment. *British Medical Journal*, 10;4(1).

Yet lived experience only has the power to transform systems when it is embedded ethically.⁶ Drawing from his own journey of imprisonment, Khalil C., of RESCALED, recently noted, “When lived experience becomes an identity rather than an asset, it can trap individuals in a cycle of self-definition that limits their growth.” When I was first invited to present in Malta, I was torn over how to present my experiences whilst also balancing my strong desire to be recognised as a professional in my own right.

“I was 21 when my dad took his own life in prison.”

The room fell silent. So did I. It was the first time I had spoken publicly about my father’s suicide — an experience that was both cathartic and unsettling. I wanted to puncture the silence surrounding prison suicide, a topic rarely addressed in criminal justice spaces. “Shock means people are listening,” I later reflected. “And listening is the first step to change.”

The response was immediate. Attendees approached me with words like strong, powerful and resilient. I accepted them with grace. But later, alone in my hotel room, guilt crept in. Had I just used my dad’s story to connect? To build credibility? To build a career?

That guilt, I have come to realise, is misplaced. It was there in that hotel room I also came to realise that stigma is not always loud or visible. It is often imagined as bullying, sadness or behavioural disruption in childhood. But I was never that child. I grew up on a council estate in Northern England, where being “tough as nails” and hyper-resilient was not only expected, it was also celebrated. I was the dependable high achiever, the one who never caused trouble. Resilience became second nature. But on that stage, I realised it had also become a defence mechanism: a drive to prove my worth to a British Government that unapologetically spoke of my “far greater risk of being drawn into crime”.⁷

It was that day I realised my stigma manifests in my work ethic and over-performance as proof of value:

- I have a first-class degree.
- I am a researcher.
- I work with young people in prison.
- I feed food-insecure neighbourhoods.

This list empowers me. But it also protects me.

This tension — between personal experience and professional identity — is not unique to me. It reflects a broader issue in how systems engage with children affected by parental imprisonment. Advocacy often centres on trauma, risk and deficit. Whilst these elements are real and must be acknowledged, they should not define the entirety of a child’s identity. For many young people like me, from communities of chronic deprivation, they are also not always culturally relevant.

Overall, children are not simply surviving, they are navigating complex emotional landscapes, forming relationships, expressing creativity and imagining futures beyond the confines of their parent’s imprisonment. As such, it is here that I argue for a paradigmatic shift: from trauma-centric advocacy to one that foregrounds children’s dignity by creating space for their richness of experiences and multiplicities of identity.

This shift requires more than language, it demands structural change. Advocates must move beyond building platforms that assume fragility and instead create spaces where children can articulate their own narratives, on their own terms. Researchers must interrogate their methodologies, ensuring that children’s voices are not filtered through adult assumptions. Policymakers must invest in community-led initiatives that prioritise empowerment as well as intervention. A genuinely child-centred approach must hold space for both pain and power. To privilege one at the expense of the other is to flatten the complexity of childhood and build systems focused on surviving rather than thriving. We must reassert children as narrators of their own lives. Not just as subjects of adversity, but as individuals capable of strength, imagination and hope.

6 Antojado, D. (5 August 2025). Placing lived experience at the heart of systemic change in prisons. Penal Reform International. <https://www.penalreform.org/blog/placing-lived-experience-at-the-heart-of-systemic/>

7 British Association of Social Workers (1 October 2024). Government urged to avoid ‘stigmatising’ children of parents in prison. *BASW Professional Social Work Magazine*. <https://production.basw.co.uk/about-social-work/psw-magazine/articles/government-urged-avoid-stigmatising-children-parents-prison>

From prison to deportation: what about the children?

Jemmar, S.

At the time of writing this, it has been three years since my stepfather was released from prison and three years since I began engaging with the issue of parental imprisonment as someone with lived experience. We are now entering the third week of waiting to hear whether or not he will be deported back to Jamaica. Under the UK Borders Act 2007, foreign nationals sentenced to more than 12 months in prison are subject to automatic consideration for deportation by the Home Office.⁸

My lived experience of parental imprisonment has been far too life-changing for me not to spend an obscene amount of time contemplating the problem, the impact and the solutions. This article is supposed to focus on parental imprisonment — and it will — but allow me to digress. The rise of the far right in Europe and the so-called “immigration issue” are important case studies for understanding why collective action is required to dismantle the stigma surrounding parental imprisonment and to confront the deeper, intersecting roots of harm: class inequality, poverty and racial discrimination.

At COPE’s 2025 conference in Malta, my first, I found myself in deep observation and thought — about who was present, which organisations they came from, the schedule and even the order of the sessions, as well as their politics, not just on crime and punishment, but on migration, xenophobia and racism. For someone like me, with lived experience of all these things, directly or indirectly, attendees are not just professionals: they are practitioners, policymakers, service providers, funders, activists, academics and affected communities. Together, they represent the key players who determine what change can happen, when and why, not just on the matter of parental imprisonment.

We all know that children whose parents are imprisoned face a wide range of harms and disadvantages, both immediately and in the long term. We all know those of us with lived experience are at increased risk of poor health, poor educational outcomes, poverty and stigma. And we all know children and young adults must no longer be the victims of a system that overlooks their

realities and reinforces their silence — “The Secret Sentence.”

Collaborative, compassionate and justice-driven change must override organisational silos and centre children and young adults. I say this as someone who has to decentre parental deportation in spaces for parental imprisonment while trying to navigate how migration spaces can be inclusive of those whose parents/loved ones are facing deportation after imprisonment. This goes beyond providing support to those currently experiencing parental imprisonment or platforming those with past experience. It requires honest conversations about prevention.

During our tour of the Malta prison, it was shared that over fifty per cent of prisoners were foreigners. The follow-up question was about managing language barriers. For me, that was when the elephant entered the room — and stayed. Did no one not question why that is the case, over fifty percent? That seemed normal to everyone?

As the Parental Imprisonment Collective (PIC) outlines in our policy paper, any strategy must include a deep dive into the cultural changes needed to shift public perceptions. This is not just about crime and punishment — it is also about race and migration.

In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Jon Henley notes that far-right parties could soon become the largest force on the right in Europe, while conservative parties copy their hardline agendas, especially on immigration, in an attempt to win back votes.⁹ Whether or not this works, the normalisation of anti-immigration narratives is becoming increasingly dangerous. It is no longer just about “the boats” or asylum seekers; it extends to people who migrated legally decades ago and now even to people like me. I was born here, and so was my biological father (this matters in the eyes of the law) — yet I am being told I do not belong.

8 UK Home Office. (n.d.). Deportation on conducive grounds: Immigration Act 1971 and UK Borders Act 2007. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/deporting-non-eea-foreign-nationals/deportation-on-conducive-grounds-immigration-act-1971-and-uk-borders-act-2007-accessible>

9 Henley, J. (1 February 2025). ‘Vicious cycle’: Far-right parties across Europe are inspiring imitators. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/01/vicious-cycle-far-right-parties-across-europe-are-inspiring-imitators>

The frustrations of people across Europe are very real, but they are misdirected. As Ian Bremmer explains, voter anger is fuelled less by rising immigration itself and more by economic stagnation, high prices and the long-term presence of migrants amid toughened policies. Yet the public narrative insists that fewer migrants equals fewer problems.¹⁰

So what does this have to do with parental imprisonment? Last summer in the UK, we saw far-right anti-immigration protests and riots. As a young Black woman, I feared for my life. But I also held another fear: that children and young people would now face parental imprisonment as their loved ones became part of the more than 700 arrests and 302 charges linked to those riots.¹¹ I hated that more children would live what I had lived — even knowing some of them might hate me if we ever crossed paths. How do I build community with people who don't even see me as a person?

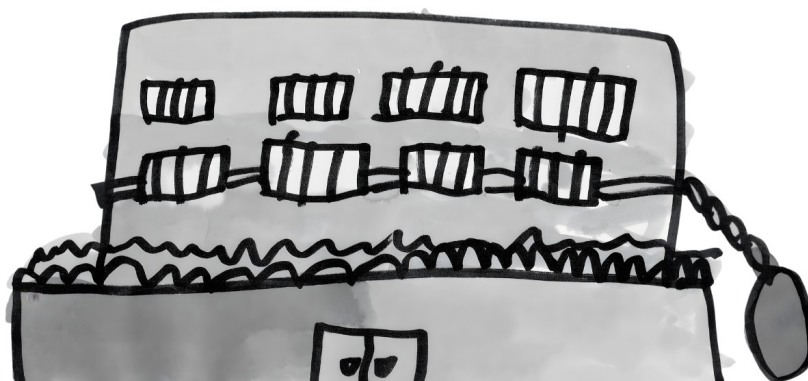
Across Europe, far-right rhetoric has normalised exclusionary attitudes and fuelled over-policing and disproportionate criminalisation of migrant communities, particularly Muslims and Black people. These groups face harsher sentences and the added threat of deportation. Will our “wrap-around care” for children affected by parental imprisonment include those of us who must also confront parental deportation? There is no single story of a child with an imprisoned parent and there doesn't need to be one in order for us to be seen, heard and supported.

Evie Mae reminds us that overrepresentation of one type of story creates a toxic platform, where certain narratives are amplified at the expense of others. That not only excludes those caught up in last summer's riots — it excludes me. Solutions to parental imprisonment must acknowledge all of us.

Real dignity requires recognising that parental imprisonment is bigger than we thought. Solutions must challenge assumptions and create justice systems that are not only trauma-informed, but transformative, not only of justice systems but all systems.

As PIC argues, and as Evie has noted, children affected by parental imprisonment are not passive recipients of harm: they are active agents of change, deserving of visibility, respect and rights. My own experience of parental imprisonment and the added layer of parental deportation as the child of a migrant underscores why listening differently matters. For children like me, justice is not abstract — it is lived in silences, absences and systems that fail to see us.

A genuinely child-centred approach must hold space for both pain and power. Only then can we reimagine justice — not just for some children, but for all who call Europe home.



10 Bremmer, I. (11 July 2025). Why Europe Can't Tame The Far Right?. *TIME*. <https://time.com/7301526/europe-far-right-momentum/>

11 Dodd, V. (9 August 2024). More than 700 arrests made and 302 people charged over riots in England. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/09/uk-riots-arrests-made-and-about-people-charged-say-police>

Stigma and children with a parent in prison: a child rights perspective

H.E Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca
President of Malta (2014-2019)

Abstract

Across Europe, millions of children live with the emotional and social consequences of parental imprisonment. Despite growing recognition of the collateral effects of incarceration, children affected by parental imprisonment remain largely invisible within policy frameworks and welfare systems. This article examines the phenomenon of stigma as experienced by these children, with a focus on Malta and comparative insights from other European states. Drawing on recent research and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), it argues that stigma is not only a psychosocial burden but a structural violation of children's rights. It explores how stigma is socially produced, how it can affect children's mental health and participation and how systemic, intersectional and rights-based approaches can dismantle its effects. Ultimately, recognising and addressing stigma represents both a moral imperative and a legal obligation under international child rights law.

Introduction

Across Europe, hundreds of thousands of children live with the invisible weight of stigma because a parent is or has been in prison. Their stories are rarely told, their needs often overlooked and their rights frequently compromised. The Council of Europe estimates that approximately 2.1 million children across its member states currently have a parent in prison.¹ Within the European Union, the figure is around 800,000.² In Malta, Children of Prisoners Europe estimates around 1,000 children.³ This is about 1.2% of the national child population who have a parent in prison. Though numerically small, this proportion aligns with European averages and is significant within Malta's close-knit social fabric.

Despite these figures, children affected by parental imprisonment remain largely invisible in law and policy. Their vulnerability is seldom acknowledged, and the stigma surrounding imprisonment continues to be one of the most pervasive barriers to well-being. This article explores how stigma operates at multiple levels, the way it can harm children's development and their access to rights, and how a child-rights-based approach can challenge it across European contexts.

Understanding stigma in the context of parental imprisonment

Sociologist Erving Goffman defined stigma as an attribute that is "deeply discrediting", reducing a person from a whole and accepted individual to one who is tainted and devalued, and introduced the concept of "courtesy stigma", or stigma by association.⁴ Children whose parents are in prison, according to Meek (2001), experience this courtesy stigma, discrimination or exclusion arising from their association with a parent who has been criminalised.⁵

Stigma operates at three interrelated levels across Europe:

1. *Institutional stigma* arises when systems such as education or welfare fail to identify or support children with imprisoned parents.
2. *Community stigma* manifests through gossip, bullying and ostracisation by peers or neighbours.
3. *Internalised stigma* occurs when children absorb negative stereotypes, leading to shame and secrecy.

1 Council of Europe. (2018). New Policy Guidelines to Protect Children of Imprisoned Parents. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/-/new-policy-guidelines-to-protect-children-of-imprisoned-parents>

2 Children of Prisoners Europe. (2023). The Issues: Facts and Figures. <https://childrenofprisoners.eu/the-issues/facts-and-figures/>

3 Ibid.

4 Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

5 Meek, R. (2001). The impact of parental imprisonment on children. *Probation Journal*, 48(4), 195–202.

Belgian research and practice highlight that schools often avoid discussing imprisonment, leaving children to cope in silence.⁶ In Sweden, research has shown that secrecy often becomes a coping mechanism, yet it increases isolation.⁷

The psychological toll of stigma

Stigma not only influences how society perceives children with imprisoned parents but also shapes how these children perceive themselves. Across the United Kingdom, Germany and Romania, children with incarcerated parents exhibit elevated risks of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and trauma.⁸ Children often internalise guilt, believing they are partly responsible for their parent's incarceration. A Maltese educator interviewed in a 2024 NGO study explained: "Children who carry this burden learn to edit themselves. They become quiet, careful, and protective of their secret."⁹

This self-silencing leads to systemic invisibility. Teachers, counsellors and social workers rarely identify children with imprisoned parents as a group in need of specific attention. Consequently, their psychosocial needs go unaddressed, perpetuating the stigma that caused their silence in the first place. The cycle is self-reinforcing: stigma breeds silence; silence breeds invisibility; invisibility ensures that stigma remains unchallenged.

Behaviour and resilience: rethinking children's responses

Children's responses to stigma often manifest as behavioural challenges, which are too easily pathologised. Aggression, withdrawal or even self-harm may reflect not maladaptation but an assertion of control or a plea for recognition. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation report notes that "stigma is

never passively accepted by those it is impressed upon."¹⁰ Resilience can take the form of defiance, protectiveness toward siblings or a premature sense of responsibility. However, resilience-led responses can be double-edged: while they help children survive, they can mask underlying distress. In Malta, where social networks are compact and anonymity is limited, resilience often appears as discretion, a quiet determination to carry on. Yet this stoicism, while culturally admired, can prevent children from seeking psychosocial support and perpetuate the cycle of hidden suffering.

Stigma as a structural and political force

Stigma is not only a personal experience but also a political and structural phenomenon. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report emphasises that stigma is "socially produced and reproduced", sustained by media narratives, political discourse and institutional inertia.¹¹ Governments rarely confront this stigma because it aligns with punitive approaches to criminal justice.

Resilience-led responses can be double-edged: while they help children survive, they can mask underlying distress. (...) This stoicism, while culturally admired, can prevent children from seeking psychosocial support.

In the United Kingdom, sensationalist reporting on "criminal families" fuels stereotypes that stigmatise both parents and children. In Central and Eastern Europe, austerity-driven welfare models portray prisoners' families as undeserving of public support. In Malta, while media coverage is more restrained, reputational stigma within close communities can

be equally damaging. At a policy level, stigma translates into invisibility and neglect. Because children with imprisoned parents are not formally recognised in legislation or data collection, their needs remain outside mainstream child welfare agendas. Silence, in this context, becomes a form of complicity.

6 See, for example, Albrecht, J. (2024). De onzichtbare noden van kinderen met een gedetineerde ouder. *Fatik*, 2024(182), 26-42.

7 Robertson, O., et al. (2012). Stakeholder perspectives on the needs of children of prisoners in Europe. *Scientific Annals of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași. New Series. Sociology and Social Work Section*, 5(2), 97-114. <https://anale.fssp.uaic.ro/index.php/asas/article/view/80>

8 Murray, J., & Farrington, D. P. (2022). Parental imprisonment: Effects on children's wellbeing and development. *Crime and Justice*, 51(1), 133-180.

9 Azzopardi, C., & Bishop, K. (2016). *Locked out: Families of the incarcerated*. Fondazzjoni Mid-Dlam Ghad-Dawl.

10 Tyler, I. and Campbell, S. (2024). *Poverty stigma: A glue that holds poverty in place*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/power-and-participation/poverty-stigma-a-glue-that-holds-poverty-in-place>

11 Ibid.

A comparative European perspective

Responses to children affected by parental imprisonment vary considerably across Europe, revealing a patchwork of recognition and neglect:

- Sweden and Norway have pioneered family-centred correctional models, providing child-friendly visitation spaces and psychological support.
- The Netherlands operates specialised “child corners” in prisons and community-based counselling schemes.
- France and Spain include children with imprisoned parents in national child protection policies.

These differences reflect broader variations in welfare traditions and interpretations of the UNCRC. While the Council of Europe’s Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)5 calls on member states to uphold children’s rights when a parent is imprisoned, implementation remains inconsistent.¹² Malta’s adherence to the UNCRC is well established in principle, yet practice has lagged. There are no formal child impact assessments in sentencing, and prison visiting environments remain largely adult-oriented. NGO-led initiatives fill some gaps, but structural support remains limited.

A child rights perspective

A rights-based approach frames stigma not merely as a social issue but as a breach of children’s rights under the UNCRC. Specifically:

- Article 2 (Non-discrimination): Children must not suffer due to their parents’ status or behaviour.
- Article 3 (Best interests): Judicial and policy decisions must prioritise children’s welfare.
- Article 9 (Family contact): States should facilitate regular, dignified and stigma-free contact, when in the child’s best interests.
- Article 12 (Participation): Stigma silences children’s voices in decisions that affect them.
- Article 16 (Privacy): Exposure of a parent’s imprisonment breaches privacy and dignity.

Failing to address stigma violates these rights and perpetuates cycles of social exclusion. COPE highlights that children separated from parents through

imprisonment are often denied the recognition afforded to those separated by divorce or migration, revealing systemic inequity within the child rights landscape.¹³

Challenging stigma: policy and practice pathways

To dismantle stigma effectively, responses must be systemic, intersectional and participatory. Five key areas emerge from comparative European experience:

1. Recognition and data collection

Governments must identify and record, confidentially, the number of children affected by parental imprisonment. Visibility is the first step toward accountability.

2. Education and awareness

Schools should be equipped to understand the challenges faced by children whose parents are or have been in prison. Training and awareness campaigns can shift public perception from blame to empathy.

3. Child participation

Empowering children to voice their experiences, whether through creative projects or youth advocacy, promotes agency and counters internalised stigma.

4. Targeted support services

Counselling, mentoring and peer groups help children develop healthy coping strategies. In Malta, collaboration between the Foundation for Social Welfare Services and NGOs could deliver such integrated psychosocial care.

5. Judicial reform and alternatives to custody

Incorporating child impact assessments into sentencing ensures that judicial decisions consider children’s welfare. Non-custodial sentences for minor offences reduce disruption and stigma.

Reframing public narratives

Stigma flourishes in silence and misconception. Reframing public discourse requires shifting from narratives of blame to narratives of belonging. Media and political leaders play crucial roles in this transformation. In Malta, where community and faith

12 Council of Europe. (2018). Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)5 concerning children with imprisoned parents. Strasbourg. <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>

13 Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE). (2024). Child Participation when a Parent is in Conflict with the Law. <https://childrenofprisoners.eu/child-participation-when-a-parent-is-in-conflict-with-the-law/>

are central to identity, there is potential for grassroots empathy movements led by educators, parish groups and local councils. As one Maltese social worker noted, “The best antidote to stigma is connection. When a child feels seen and valued, the label loses its power.” This cultural transformation aligns with the principles of dignity and inclusion at the heart of the UNCRC and the European Social Charter.

Conclusion

Stigma surrounding parental imprisonment is neither inevitable nor insurmountable. It is a social construct that can be dismantled through recognition, participation and rights-based reform. For children affected by parental imprisonment in Malta and across Europe, stigma represents not only a psychological burden but a denial of fundamental rights to equality, dignity and participation. To meet the commitments of the UNCRC, states must address stigma as both a moral and legal imperative. Ensuring that every child, regardless of their parent’s circumstance, can grow up with dignity, belonging and opportunity is a measure of Europe’s true commitment to justice and humanity.

Further reading

Jones, A., Sharratt, K., & Wainwright, L. (2024). Children with imprisoned parents: Stigma, resilience and rights. *European Journal of Criminology*.

Sharratt, K. (2023). Stigma and resilience among children of prisoners in Europe. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 45(2), 123–140.



Inclusive media narratives & visibility: how to empower children with imprisoned parents — lessons from an anti-stigma intervention in journalism education

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Abstract

This article argues that media narratives do not merely reflect social realities but actively construct them. It explores how anti-stigma, rights-based training for journalists can challenge the stigma that children experience related to their parent's imprisonment. Drawing on empirical research and participatory workshops with journalists and students in Greece, it examines how stigma operates through media narratives, framing practices and structural constraints within the journalistic ecosystem. Findings reveal that while journalists recognise ethical challenges, they often lack the tools and institutional support to produce inclusive, rights-based coverage. Building on lessons from these interventions, this article proposes practical strategies for empowering journalists to reframe narratives about marginalised groups — particularly children affected by parental imprisonment — toward visibility, empathy and social justice.

Make an informed guess about how many mainstream media stories have been written in Greece about children with imprisoned parents between January 2025 and today, October 2025, as we write this article. None. And if we look back at the previous year, we will find the same silence, only a handful of rare mentions. And if we look beyond Greece, to other parts of the world, the picture is more or less the same. The issue remains largely invisible everywhere. This absence is not accidental; it reflects a broader pattern of neglect, which is rooted in stigma.

Stigma is a powerful social mechanism that continues to shape how societies perceive and treat marginalised groups. It lives not only in people's attitudes, but also in the stories that define what we believe, stories most often told through the media. In fact, for many audiences, the media serve as the only window into the lives of people they have little or no direct contact with.¹ Journalists, thus, hold the power either to break that silence and shed light on hidden realities or reinforce prejudice and exclusion. Among those left unheard are the children with imprisoned parents, whose lives and struggles are almost entirely missing from media narratives in Greece.

In this article, we begin from the idea that media narratives do not merely reflect social reality but actively construct it. The stories that are told, and those that remain untold, have profound implications for public empathy, policymaking and the

self-perception of stigmatised individuals. Drawing on our research and educational interventions with journalists and students,² we examine how stigma operates within media contexts, the structural and professional constraints that sustain it and the potential of journalism education to reframe coverage of marginalised groups. Building on these insights, our aim is to translate lessons from an anti-stigma intervention in journalism education into practical recommendations for journalists and policymakers, with specific reference to the case of children with imprisoned parents. In doing so, we advocate for a more inclusive media culture that recognises journalists' responsibility in shaping public understanding and empathy.

Why media stigma matters

In his landmark book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Erving Goffman describes stigma as a kind of social "stain" that discredits how a person is perceived and treated in a society.³ It marks individuals as flawed, less worthy or morally inferior, reducing them, as he famously wrote, "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one".

Across diverse contexts, research has repeatedly shown how stigmatising narratives harm marginalised populations. Our own studies on the portrayal of refugees, LGBTQ+ individuals and people facing

¹ As Kotova observes, few people ever step inside prisons, and the media often provide the only source of information about those who live behind bars. See Kotova, A. (2020). Beyond courtesy stigma: Towards a multi-faceted and dynamic understanding of stigma attached to children of prisoners. *Forensic Science International: Mind and Law*. 1(100021).

² For more information and material related to our research project, please visit www.mediastigma.com

³ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

mental health challenges reveal a consistent pattern.⁴ Media narratives often oscillate between threat and victim frames, focusing on “elite” sources such as politicians and officials, while excluding the voices of those most affected. NGOs, experts and international organisations offering alternative perspectives appear rarely. Reporting frequently lacks context, constructive solutions and human-centred stories. Such portrayals reinforce a moral hierarchy: some groups are depicted as threats, others as objects of pity, but few as active citizens with rights.

The same mechanisms of stigma and invisibility can be observed, though much less studied, in media representations of children with imprisoned parents. These children are often affected by courtesy stigma, the social taint that arises from their association with an incarcerated parent. When they appear in the media, it is usually within crime or justice narratives, not as individuals with their own experience. They are often portrayed as passive victims or, worse, as potential future offenders, leaving little space for nuanced, rights-based or empowering storytelling. Despite the growing body of research on the media portrayal of incarcerated individuals, studies focusing specifically on their children remain extremely scarce.

The consequences go beyond symbolism. Stigmatising or neglectful coverage shapes public opinion, which, in turn, affects policy attention, social support and funding priorities. Invisibility in public and media discourse is itself a form of discrimination, as it denies certain groups recognition and voice. As Zhang and Flynn note, *“Ensuring that the voices of children who experience parental imprisonment are heard, and knowing more about the challenges and needs of those children from their own narratives may provide more insightful and accurate guidance to address the negative impacts of this experience.”*⁵

This invisibility often extends to political and institutional agendas, where the needs of marginalised people remain unacknowledged. When the public does not “see” these children, their realities and rights go unaddressed. At the same time, negative media

portrayals can often make families feel stigmatised, even if no one close to them does anything to stigmatise them overtly.⁶ Thus, understanding and transforming media stigma is not only a matter of representation, but also a matter of social justice and children’s rights.

The journalistic ecosystem and its constraints

To change the way that the media cover these issues, we must first ask a fundamental question: why do they cover them the way they do? Media representations are not produced in isolation. They are shaped by an ecosystem that rewards speed, emotion and market appeal over reflection and nuance. Within this system, journalists operate under structural and professional constraints that profoundly influence whether stigma is reproduced or challenged.

At the same time, significant gaps in professional training and ethical guidance add to these structural pressures. Most journalists receive little or no preparation in stigma-sensitive reporting, children’s rights or trauma-informed communication. Where ethical frameworks exist, they are often overly general or inconsistently applied, and in many cases, entirely absent. As a result, many journalists fall back on instinct and personal values rather than engaging in systematic ethical reasoning. So, where do we go from here? Is there room for improvement? Our interventions sought to understand whether reflection, education and collaboration could help journalists reframe their practices toward more ethical and inclusive reporting.

From research to practice: lessons from anti-stigma interventions

Building on earlier research that identified the dominance of threat and victim frames, we designed a series of interventions with journalists and journalism students to test whether anti-stigma education could lead to more ethical and reflective reporting. The interventions unfolded on two interconnected levels.

First, we conducted semi-structured interviews with journalists to explore the broader journalistic culture and ecosystem in which they cover minority

Many journalists fall back on instinct and personal values rather than engaging in systematic ethical reasoning.

4 See, Kalfeli, P., Angeli, C., & Frangonikolopoulos, C. (2024). Victims of a Human Tragedy or “Objects” of Migrant Smuggling? Media Framing of Greece’s Deadliest Migrant Shipwreck in Pylos’ Dark Waters. *Journalism and Media*, 5(2), 537–551. See also: Kalfeli, P., Angeli, C., & Frangonikolopoulos, C. (2025). The Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage in the Greek Media: Political Spectacle over Substance—A Peace Journalism Analysis. *Journalism and Media*, 6(4), 162.

5 Zhang, J., & Flynn, C. (2025). How do children describe their experiences of parental imprisonment: A qualitative scoping review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 169, 1–13.

6 Kotova, A. (2020). Beyond courtesy stigma: Towards a multi-faceted and cumulative model of stigmatism of families of people in prison. *Forensic Science International: Mind and Law*.

issues, their professional practices and the ethical factors influencing their decision-making. As we have discussed elsewhere,⁷ journalists described a media environment that is constantly changing, is unstable and fragile. These conditions have led to shrinking newsrooms, job insecurity and growing dependence on political and commercial interests, while digital metrics increasingly dominate editorial decisions. As one journalist put it, “You need to check Google Trends. Google, whether we like it or not, is an unforgiving editor-in-chief.” Overall, participants depicted a field overwhelmed by continuous information flows, where time pressure and burnout have become relentless enemies. Within this environment, many acknowledged that dominant media narratives, which are often stereotypical and dehumanising, stem largely from what they called “parachute journalism”: reporting that is reactive, episodic and superficial, often marked by linguistic inaccuracies and the marginalisation of minority voices. When asked about possible remedies, journalists frequently emphasised sourcing, that is, the choice of whose voices are included, as both the cornerstone of quality journalism and as a moral act. It was seen as a means to resist dominant frames and challenge stereotypes by allowing minorities to speak for themselves. In this sense, sourcing became a site where journalists could still exercise agency, even within a constrained system. Finally, participants described ethical reporting as operating on three levels: at the union level through professional codes, within media outlets through internal guidelines and monitoring mechanisms and at the individual level. With limited training or oversight at the first two, many journalists said they ultimately relied on their own “red lines”. As one participant put it, “The final line of defense is your own ethics.”

Second, we designed and implemented an anti-stigma intervention by developing educational materials and workshops to assess whether — and how — journalistic practices can be improved in the coverage of minority groups. In these workshops, participants were asked to examine sample stories, identify dominant (stereotypical) narratives and the emotions they evoke (for instance, threat frames were found to provoke anger, fear and sadness), and then reframe them (for example, shifting from victim to resilience perspectives). Through this process, they explored how linguistic choices, such as adjectives and metaphors, can dramatically alter tone and meaning (e.g., refugees described as “weapons” used to breach the European Union), as can the sequencing

of information, as well as visual elements, like the use of a photograph depicting a person with a knife in suicide coverage. The workshops concluded with a focus on sourcing practices, prompting journalists to reflect on whose voices are consistently heard and whose remain absent.

The overall outcome and key lesson from the two stages of our intervention is that journalists are not indifferent to ethical challenges but often lack the resources, training and structural support to act differently. While the political orientation of a media outlet remains one of the major factors shaping the coverage of social issues, it does not entirely determine individual journalistic practice. Some of the journalists we interviewed work within conservative organisations that reproduce stereotypical portrayals of minorities, yet they still seek ways to introduce nuance and inclusivity into their reporting, mainly through careful sourcing. After all, education and self-reflection can help shift mindsets; participants reported greater sensitivity to language, sourcing and framing after the workshops. The challenge now lies in extending these lessons to other underrepresented groups, such as children with imprisoned parents, where stigma and invisibility persist.

Application to the case of children with imprisoned parents

So, what lessons can be drawn from our previous interventions, and how can they be applied to the case of children with imprisoned parents? Our earlier anti-stigma initiatives offer three key insights relevant to this field. First, many journalists respond positively to exposure: once made aware of the ethical and social dimensions of representation, many are willing to reconsider their practices. Second, providing practical tools, such as checklists, framing examples and opportunities for ethical discussion, empowers them to apply these lessons in their daily work. Third, fostering partnerships between journalists, educators and NGOs builds mutual trust and promotes knowledge exchange, ensuring that stories about vulnerable groups are more informed, accurate and respectful.

Building on these insights, the first step for future research should be to examine how the media portray children with imprisoned parents, to better understand existing gaps and challenges in coverage. Studies on this issue remain extremely scarce — almost non-existent — underscoring the urgency of targeted efforts. The

⁷ Kalfeli, P., Angeli, C., & Frangonikolopoulos, C. (2025). Through Their Eyes: Journalists’ Perspectives on Framing, Bias, and Ethics in Media Coverage of Minorities. *Journalism and Media*, 6(3), 98. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia6030098>

next step involves engaging journalists who specialise in social issues and providing them with information on this topic, alongside child-sensitive journalism training on appropriate language use, countering stereotypes and reporting on trauma responsibly. Collaboration with organisations supporting affected families is also crucial, as is the development of ethical frameworks that protect children's privacy while allowing their stories to be told safely. Finally, producing a practical handbook with best practices for media coverage, shared across newsrooms and journalists' unions, could help institutionalise more ethical and informed approaches. Through such efforts, narratives of stigma can begin to give way to narratives of resilience and rights.

Conclusion

Media narratives shape not only how society perceives vulnerability but also how it responds to it. For children with imprisoned parents, whose experiences have long been marginalised or ignored, the implications are profound. By shifting media narratives, we can influence public empathy, policy attention and institutional support in ways that directly affect children's lives.

Our reflection calls for a multi-level response: studying media coverage of children with imprisoned parents, integrating stigma-sensitive training into journalism education, embedding ethical principles into newsroom practices and fostering partnerships with child-rights and advocacy organisations. Together, these efforts can help ensure that coverage of children with imprisoned

parents becomes fairer, more accurate and more humane. As one journalist in our study on minorities poignantly observed: "What we did – and failed at as journalists – was that we didn't introduce these people to our audience. And when we say introduce them, we mean not through the tragedy of their lives, but through their lives.

"What we did – and failed at as journalists – was that we didn't introduce these people to our audience. And when we say introduce them, we mean not through the tragedy of their lives, but through their lives. Who are these people? These people are essentially you and me."

Who are these people? These people are essentially you and me." This sentiment captures the essence of ethical journalism: to tell stories that restore visibility, empathy and shared humanity.



Hearing children in court – shall we change the world?

Paulo Guerra
Judge
Coimbra Court of Appeal

*“It took me four years to paint like Raphael;
a lifetime to paint like a child.”*
— Pablo Picasso, painter



Abstract

This article addresses the absolute necessity of hearing children in court, guided only by their discernment and maturity for this purpose, with age serving merely as a presumptive indicator of such maturity. It should therefore become mandatory to justify the reason why a child is not heard. Hearing a child in court is not an accidental occurrence — it is an inalienable right of every child, a right that does not require representation by a third party in order to be exercised. It's sufficient for courts to affirm this essence and substance in order to declare that the omission of hearing a child who is mature enough for this purpose, when appropriate, undermines the validity of the decision that excluded it — not by reason of some secondary procedural nullity, but by direct application of the fundamental principle of the child's existence: the right to be heard by those who will decide essential aspects of their life.

The hearing of a child should be carried out only by someone with the appropriate scientific and technical knowledge: a psychologist, a child psychiatrist or another qualified professional. This is true for any judicial questioning of children and equally so in cases where their parents are detained and involved in criminal proceedings — all in order to reduce the discrimination children face during the course of such proceedings. The article concludes by affirming that judicial intervention involving children must be guided by the mechanism of affection, viewing the system as a whole. And it is emphatically affirmed that “children do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

1. Children want to be heard

Even if their wishes are not always fulfilled. Until quite recently, it was said that the child “has no desires” — the guiding principle was obedience to those who exercised parental authority. Lígia Andreia Carvalho Abreu Ferreira¹ is clear:

“When a child is understood as an inferior being, he is a puppet of adults. It is true that child psychology does not tell us to accept all of the children's ‘wants,’ but it is essential for the well-being and the development of appropriate behaviors in children to respect and accept some of their ‘wants,’ so that they may learn to manage rules and limits.”

In the Portuguese judicial system we must accept, as indisputable truth, that children must be heard so that we may understand their real “wants”, distinct from the wishes of their parents who so often fail to safeguard their rights. As a judge and advocate for children, I do not wish to serve as a symbol for anyone — I will only uphold the faithful application of the law and the defense of the child's best interests. The CHILD is the main protagonist of judicial proceedings that involve them, directly or indirectly, and I will defend — until my voice fails — their inalienable right to be heard.

¹ Associate Professor at the Faculty of Law and Political Science of the Lusófona University of Porto and holds a PhD in Law from the University of Geneva. See: Abreu Ferreira, L. A. C. (2020). Crianças: os estatutos especiais de proteção [Children: The special protection statutes]. In P. P. D. Albuquerque (Ed.), *Comentário da Convenção Europeia dos Direitos Humanos e dos Protocolos Adicionais* [Commentary on the European Convention on Human Rights and the Additional Protocols] (Vol. 3, pp. 2771–2774). Lisbon, Portugal: Universidade Católica Editora.

2. The principle of hearing the child,² in the words of Rui Alves Pereira,³ means:

- 1) recognition of the right to speak and to express their will;
- 2) the right to active participation in proceedings that concern them, and to have that opinion taken into account;
- 3) fostering a culture of the Child as a subject of rights.

The child therefore has the:

- Right to be informed;
- Right to express their opinions within proceedings;
- Right to be informed about the possible consequences of acting in accordance with their opinion, as well as the consequences of any decision;
- Right to request the appointment of a special representative, when the parents are in conflict of interest with them;
- Right to be assisted by an appropriate person of their choice, to help them express their opinion, possibly a lawyer;
- Right to appoint their own representative;
- Right to exercise, in whole or in part, the rights of the parties.

Some Portuguese courts have, in recent years, created rooms dedicated to hearing children. Yet it is not enough to have a room; one must know how to listen, how to conduct the interview, to dismantle their expectations, to explain their role and to dismantle the misconception that they go to court to decide. This requires specific skills of the interviewer. The courts and CEJ (our Judicial Training School) are increasingly aware of this — providing appropriate training for judges and prosecutors. The law affirms that children have the right to be heard and to express themselves in proceedings that concern them. Courts are seeking both knowledge and guidance.

Failure to hear the child compromises the validity of judicial decisions, for it infringes a substantive principle.

We are speaking of children. Their way of experiencing the world is different from that of adults — not lesser in intellect, but different in meaning-making and understanding. The difference between children and adults is therefore not quantitative, but qualitative: the child does not know less — they know differently. Children see everything in nothing; adults tend to see nothing in everything. Let us rise to their level, by listening to them — and by knowing how to listen well. The hearing of a child should be undertaken only by those with specific scientific and technical expertise: psychologists, child psychiatrists or other qualified professionals.

I maintain that judges and lawyers should confine themselves to proposing questions about facts; but the manner in which those questions are posed should be open. Questioning should therefore be conducted by those who know how to ask, with prior indication of the topics from the Judge, the Public Prosecutor and the lawyers and any subsequent clarifications duly explained. Neither a judge's intuition, nor their more or less extensive reading, suffices to ensure an effective hearing of a child. Nor is it necessary to amend the law to act in this way. We jurists must learn from those who know.

3. In promotion and protection proceedings or civil tutelary measures, it is mandatory to hear the child...

...unless they lack the discernment to do so — age being merely an indication of such capacity. It is therefore mandatory to justify any decision not to hear the child. The child's right to participate and to be heard can be understood broadly: as the right to take part in all procedural acts (including the appointment of counsel), and narrowly: as the right to be heard directly (covering not only evidentiary testimony, but the right to express their opinion). The child's hearing in proceedings concerning them cannot be reduced to a

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- 2 The hearing of the child or young person in proceedings that concern them is therefore a consequence of the fundamental principle of the best interests of the child, and also an obligation under international law, which domestic law has increasingly followed, namely through:
 - Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
 - Articles 3 and 6 of the European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights;
 - Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union;
 - The Council of Europe Guidelines on Child-Friendly Justice (Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe – 17 November 2010);
 - Recommendation 1864 (2009) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe;
 - Recommendation CM/Rec(2012) of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, adopted on 28 March 2012;
 - The Lanzarote Convention (2007) on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, which, in Article 35, sets out provisions on the hearing of the child; and
 - Articles 21, 26 and 39(1)(f) of Council Regulation (EU) 2019/1111 of 25 June 2019, on jurisdiction, recognition and enforcement of decisions in matrimonial matters and matters of parental responsibility, and on international child abduction (Brussels II-B Regulation).
 - 3 Portuguese lawyer specialising in family law and children's rights. See: Pereira, R. A. (September 2015). Por uma cultura da criança enquanto sujeito de direitos: "O princípio da audição da criança" [For a culture of the child as a subject of rights: "The principle of hearing the child"]. Julgar (online). <https://julgar.pt/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/20150924-ARTIGO-JULGAR-princ%C3%ADpio-da-audi%C3%A7%C3%A3o-da-crian%C3%A7a-Rui-Alves-Pereira-v2.pdf>

means of proof; it is their right to have their viewpoint considered in the decision-making process that affects them. This hearing, as a privileged tool for protecting their best interests, depends primarily on their maturity, not merely their age.

Consideration of a child's maturity must be expressly reflected in judicial decisions, and the omission of their hearing can only go unexplained when it is plainly evident that their age makes it impossible or inappropriate. Failure to hear the child compromises the validity of judicial decisions, for it infringes a substantive principle. As Salazar Casanova⁴ wrote, the grounds for hearing a child in court after 2003 are of a "substantive nature" and derive from the child's best interests. Thus, where a procedural step conflicts with such interests, the latter must prevail. To subject a child to cross-examination on the most intimate details of family life is both inadvisable and cruel. Unjustified failure to hear the child therefore constitutes not only a procedural flaw but also a violation of substantive law. Courts must not view this omission narrowly, but rather as an undeniable violation of substantive validity — a general principle of substantive and, therefore, procedural importance.

Children generally lack capacity to exercise their rights in court. Yet here, since they possess the right to be heard, they must be heard whenever appropriate and mature enough to do so. Failing to hear a child is to extinguish one of their substantive rights — a right inherent to their very being. In metaphysics, the essence of a thing consists of its immutable properties, which define its nature. Accidents are those properties that may change. Hearing a child in court is not an accidental occurrence — it is an inalienable right, one that does not require representation by a third party. This belongs to the essence of their rights. Although children generally lack the capacity to exercise rights independently, certain rights tied to their essence can only be exercised personally, in their own voice. It is sufficient for the court to affirm this principle to conclude that omitting the hearing of a mature child undermines the validity of the decision — not by secondary procedural nullity, but by direct application of the essential principle of the child's right to be heard.

4. This applies equally when parents are detained and involved in criminal proceedings

Relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) concerning children with a parent in the criminal justice system include:

- the right not to be discriminated against or punished for acts committed by their parents (Article 2);
- the right to have direct and frequent contact with their parents (Article 9), including the right to information about their whereabouts, unless contrary to the child's best interests (consider the frequent cases where parents are imprisoned for crimes against their children);
- the right to have their best interests be the primary consideration in all judicial decisions (Article 3);
- the right to have their opinions considered, through free expression (Article 12);
- the right to receive special protection and assistance when temporarily deprived of their family environment (Article 20).

Prison Reform Trust's "Guiding principles for supporting children with a parent in the criminal justice system," further affirm:

- Children deserve support in and of their own right, regardless of what their parent has been accused, or convicted, of;
- Children should be listened to without judgment or assumption of what is best for them;
- Where appropriate, children should be meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them;
- Children should be given regular opportunities to revisit decisions and come to different conclusions;
- Children may not be ready to accept support at a particular time and should be given opportunities to change their mind about accessing support;
- Children may have experienced trauma at various times throughout their parent's criminal justice journey, therefore a gentle, trauma-informed approach is essential at all times; and
- Each child within a family group is an individual and may have different support needs, or come to different decisions than their siblings.

4 Retired Judge of the Supreme Court of Justice of Portugal. See: O regulamento (CE) n° 2201/2003 do Conselho e o princípio da audição da criança [Council Regulation (EC) No. 2201/2003 and the principle of hearing the child]. *Scientia Juridica*, LV(306), 236 (April–June 2016).

The most important guiding principle for any work with children with a parent in the criminal justice system is that:

- every child has the potential to flourish.

All of this aims to reduce discrimination against children while their parents' cases are pending, so that in that harsh terrain they may not despair, but instead feel the embrace of the law and the protection of judicial and administrative practices.

5. Albert Camus wrote:

“Do not walk in front of me; I may not know how to follow.
Do not walk behind me; I may not know how to lead.
Walk beside me and be my friend.”

Let us carry this premise into the judicial sphere, striving for child-friendly justice. Protective interventions, civil tutelary measures, the Educational Protection Act and all cases where children must testify should be guided by the mechanism of affection, with the system viewed as an integrated whole. As Myrtha Chockler⁵ observes, affection is the child's anchor of security. The development of abilities such as reasoning, memory, attention and creativity is directly linked to affection. I believe the future will not depend so much on the discoveries of science, but on the discovery of the mechanisms of affection — as António Alçada Baptista⁶ has emphasised. And I hold that “children do not care how much you know until they know how much you care”.

Coimbra, August 2025
(to the sound of Brahms)



5 Argentine speech therapist and psychomotor therapist. See: Chokler, M. (2014). *La aventura dialógica de la infancia* [The dialogical adventure of childhood]. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Noveduc.

6 Portuguese writer, essayist and editor.

A community of care: supporting mothers for the child's early development

Alain Bouregba

President

Relais Enfants Parents

At birth, the human baby is the most immature of all mammals. Gestation is far from enough to give it the autonomy of movement that other mammals achieve after just a few days. During the first months, the infant would not survive without human care and containment.

At the dawn of life, the infant does not distinguish between inside and outside reality. It exists in a monistic state — it does not oppose self and non-self; estranged from itself, it has no sense of object relations. It does not yet conceive of his or her mother as a specific object. The only distinction it can make at this stage is between displeasure and pleasure; adapting to reality therefore means seeking contact and pleasant sensations and avoiding unpleasant ones. It moves toward the former and, through sleep, withdraws from the latter. Human care provides the main source of pleasurable sensations; this is why the infant seeks it and eventually establishes a joyful relationship with it, through which it isolates itself from the rest of reality. Thus begins the first dualism: the child enveloped by human care versus the external world. This is the symbiotic phase described by Margaret Mahler, in which mother and child are united against the world. It should be stressed, however, that the “mother” here is not the real mother; the child does not yet have the psychic capacity for an object relation. As the child becomes able to distinguish between those who provide care and the qualities of that care, it begins to identify itself as the object of care and the mother as its source. What, then, does the child see in the mother's eyes when she looks at them? The infant sees themself, as Winnicott said.

During the first months, the child is introduced to their reality as a subject through what the mother tells them about what they are. This relationship is alienating, since it makes the child dependent on another. At this stage, the child can only partially identify with that image and experiences him or herself as a third person. Their identity conforms to an image — the child seeks to match the ideal image reflected back by the mother — but soon begins to doubt: are they, or are they not, the object of their mother's desire? This question lies at the heart of the depressive position, usually appearing between the eighth and twelfth month, from which the child

escapes only when it substitutes the dialectic of being for that of having — that is, when they access symbolic thought, where an object is defined not by its image but by its properties.

Two objects share an identity if they share a common property, a kind of rallying sign. The symbolon in ancient Greece was a piece of clay broken in two, each half kept by an ally, which when rejoined confirmed the earlier pact. The symbol, then, is a sign of belonging that delimits identity. The child leaves the depressive state — the struggle to be or not be the object of the mother's desire — when they fantasise that it is the father who possesses the desired object. Freed from the imperative of being the object of the mother's desire, the child enters the dialectic of having: having or not having the object of the other's desire. Recall that in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel shows this dialectic to be at the foundation of humanisation: human desire is rarely purely physiological; it is most often desire for what another desires.

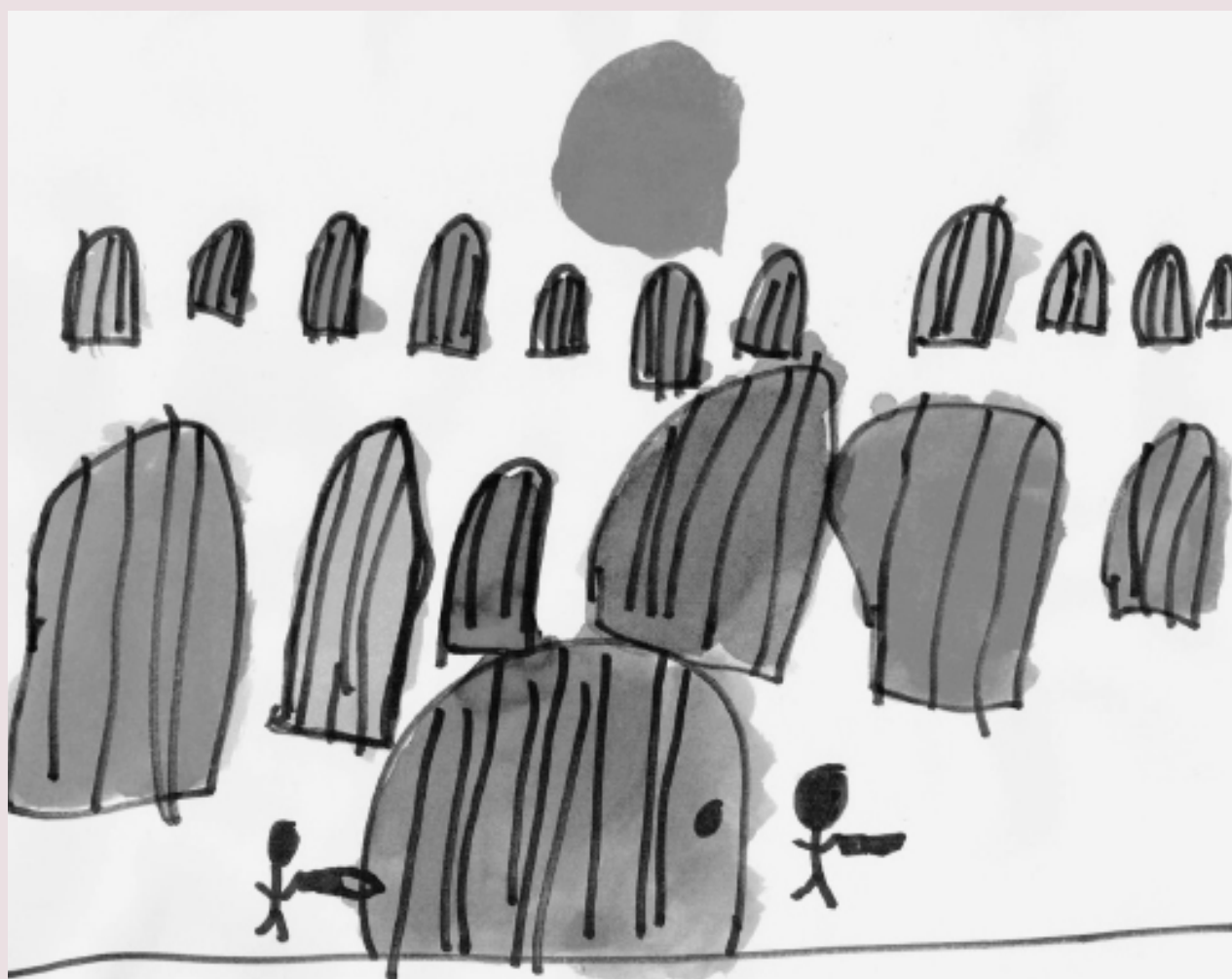
This development depends on the quality of human care. An isolated mother, or one in a hostile environment, cannot sustain the child alone. It is essential that she be supported by others so that care is continuous. Continuity and community of care are the surest guarantees of a child's healthy development. Today, fathers play an important role in this community, supporting the mother and soothing the child. This contribution later facilitates their own psychic function — to help free the child from the need to be the object of the mother's desire.

Children under two whose parent is imprisoned fall into three groups. One group — children under two living with their mothers in prison — has been the subject of much study and attention. The other two are almost entirely neglected, even though, in public health terms, they may be just as, if not more, at risk. These are: (1) children under two whose mother is imprisoned and from whom they are separated, and (2) children under two whose father is imprisoned — the latter being the largest group.

This neglect stems from the matriarchal and patriarchal foundations of our societies, but also from certain features of the prison institution itself, which exacerbate the problem.

Prison staff are often parents — sometimes of young children — and they too face childcare challenges to which their employer offers no solution. Unlike hospitals, which have created flexible childcare facilities for staff working irregular hours, no prison provides similar arrangements. The absence of institutional support for prison staff's childcare needs does not foster empathy toward imprisoned parents of infants. Yet empathy is essential for staff to take part, even occasionally, in the wider community of human care around a child. Tenderness toward the infant is not enough; compassion for the parent's situation is also needed.

A few years ago, the Relais Enfants Parents in France had a project to break the isolation of imprisoned mothers at Fleury-Mérogis, confined all day in their dedicated ward. We proposed that mothers could take their children for a few hours to nearby childcare centres for under-threes. The project met with widespread but quiet resistance — including from prison officers, some of whom cited their own childcare difficulties. Supporting better recognition of the bond between imprisoned parents and their children begins with better recognition of the status of prison officers who are themselves parents, particularly those with young children.



Rooms, routines and records: reducing stigma in maternal custody across six prisons in Maharashtra

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Abstract

Stigma around parental imprisonment is produced by systems, not by children. Between 2023 and 2025, Aangan Trust, with Maharashtra Prisons, implemented Nanhe Kadam crèches, a model of early years care for children living with imprisoned mothers and for children of prison staff at six women's prisons across the state of Maharashtra. The initiative aimed to remove stigma in three ordinary aspects of the prison system: the Room in which it took place; the Routine being implemented; and the Record issued, ensuring that childhood remains ordinary even when maternal custody continues. The Room: nurseries outside custodial enclosures bring together children up to age six so that early childhood remains ordinary, safe and developmentally rich. Mixed enrolment prevents visible status divisions and reduces stigma spillover. The Routine: stigma-free practices include short scripts, Parent Pods (group sessions) and predictable child-centred visit windows (designated family visits that were turned into child-centred time slots within prison visiting hours and are structured around the child's daily rhythm and best interests rather than administrative convenience, though limited by protocol and staff or resource shortages) across mulaqat (family visits), e-mulaqat (virtual contact) and galabhet (in-person meetings). The Record: custody-linked births receive neutral civil documentation, correcting legacy entries. Quality Improvement (QI) records from April 2024–March 2025, to monitor, evaluate and improve the quality of care or support, provided cover data on 693 children living with mothers in custody and children of prison staff and 226 Parent Pods (1,303 incarcerated mother-participants). Early results: Fifty per cent of mothers in custody at any given time received at least two child updates per month; one hundred per cent of all births to mothers while in custody had neutral documents; nurseries averaged about thirty-eight hours per week of child-space availability. The article describes design choices, safeguards and indicators drawn from Quality Improvement (QI) processes to strengthen service quality and offers an adaptation checklist for European contexts.

Introduction

“Hospital or prison?”, the registrar asked. The nurse pointed to the government order in the antenatal file. Five minutes later, a plain birth certificate slid across the desk — no prison line, no label. A small document, a lifetime unmarked. Stigma travels through labels, forms and routine talk. It makes children less visible to the very systems meant to protect them. Aangan Trust's work with Maharashtra Prisons across six women's prisons to implement Nanhe Kadam crèches (2023–2025) aimed to remove stigma from three ordinary aspects of the prison system: the Room in which the initiative took place; the Routine being implemented; and the Record issued, ensuring that childhood remains ordinary even when maternal custody continues. The scale is significant. Some 1,764 children in

India were recorded as living with their mothers on 31 December 2022.¹ The *UN Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty* profiled children living in prisons with a primary caregiver and found that globally, around 19,000 children live inside prisons with a parent, most often their mother; many more are separated and largely uncounted.² In Europe, at least 988 children lived with their mothers in penal institutions in early 2022.³

In terms of methodology and ethics, evidence sources included a 2023 needs and contact-barriers assessment with 144 mothers in two Mumbai prisons; routine records from six sites for April 2024–March 2025 (enrolment logs, Parent Pod registers, counselling notes, birth-certificate liaison sheets and visit

1 National Crime Records Bureau (2023). *Prison Statistics India 2022*. New Delhi: NCRB, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

2 Nowak, M. (2019). *United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty*. Geneva: United Nations.

3 Aebi, M. F. and Tiago, M. M. (2023). *SPACE I 2022: Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics – Prison populations*. Lausanne: Council of Europe and University of Lausanne.

register/ phone registers); and approved Standard Operating Procedures and Government Resolutions on neutral birth registration and room operations. Safeguards followed Aangan's Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy with background-verified staff, informed consent with anonymisation, referrals to the District Child Protection Unit and a "do-no-harm", child-rights language protocol. In India, these measures are consonant with the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, the R.D. Upadhyay (2006) Supreme Court directions on facilities for children of women prisoners, and operational guidance in the Model Prison Manual (2016). Internationally, they reflect the spirit of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 2010 Bangkok Rules and the 2018 Council of Europe Recommendation on children with imprisoned parents. All results arise from service delivery and Quality Improvement (QI) monitoring, not human-subjects research.

Indicators included weekly room-availability hours, the share of mothers receiving at least two child updates per month and confirmation of neutral documentation for custody-linked births. Participation in non-routine activities was voluntary; opting out did not affect access. Vignettes are anonymised composites. Under departmental authorisation, this qualified as Quality Improvement for system strengthening; no Institutional Review Board review was required. No direct contact, interviewing or observation protocols targeted children; all observations directly involving or focused on children were summarised through aggregated operational notes without identifiable details.

Design interventions to reduce stigma exposure

1. Room: Nanhe Kadam prison crèches/nurseries

The goal was to keep early childhood ordinary, safe and stigma-free by dissolving visible status divisions between children living with mothers in custody and children of prison staff. Progress was achieved through mixed enrolment in one shared room outside the custodial enclosure; children of staff and incarcerated mothers attend the same morning circle, share toys, play and snacks and follow a daily plan displayed on the wall. All children wear identical red T-shirts to create a neutral and inclusive environment during nursery hours; and there is a posted day plan and nursery hours separate from visit hours to maintain a calm and neutral environment. Predictable routines such as arrival greetings, inclusive songs, shared snack and rest times, and closing circles help all children anticipate the same rhythm, erasing distinctions between those living inside and those visiting from staff quarters. Together, these routines remove visible status cues, non-discriminatory and inclusion practice.

Box 1. Minimum standards: inclusive early years room (mixed enrolment)

- *Space and safety: child-safe electrics; first aid; fire safety; hygiene routines; child-safe furniture and washable floor mats.*
- *Staffing and day plan: at least one trained caregiver per twenty to twenty-five children; nursery liaison officer; posted plan for arrival, morning circle, free play, snack, rest and outdoor time where feasible.*
- *Training: induction on child protection, stigma-aware language and trauma-sensitive practice; periodic short refreshers.*
- *Language practice: adults use child-first scripts and avoid status terms; model phrases are posted.*
- *Documentation: medical cards, national identity and birth-registration liaison sheets maintained; nursery hours kept separate from visit hours.*
- *Safeguarding: open-door visibility; two-adult rule for intimate care; incident and near-miss register; escalation to the District Child Protection Unit when required.*
- *Health and nutrition: immunisation tracking; growth monitoring; safe-water and snack protocols.*
- *Monitoring: weekly checklist on safety, routines and language; monthly review with the prison focal officer.*

Implementation context. The nursery admits children up to age six who live with mothers in custody and children of prison staff in the same room. Shared routines such as morning circle, songs and story time with neutral materials remove visible status cues. Adults use brief child-first scripts. This is ordinary inclusion: one early-years setting with the same routines for all children. Operating hours are separate from visiting hours, and the space is not used as a visit room. Where feasible, children spend time outdoors each day. Early signals show more regular attendance and fewer distress incidents during visits when routines are predictable and language is child-first.

Indicator clarifier: *About 38 hours per week of child-space availability per site. A reliable weekly window ensures ordinary inclusion and time for shared routines.*

2. Routine: language, visit windows and Parent Pods

Goal. Interrupt shame, silence and labelling during everyday contact so that children experience predictable, respectful connection.

How it is achieved. A short language guide and child-first scripts; simple somatic sequences for high-arousal moments; designated child-update slots in phone and e-mulaqat (electronic/virtual contact); Parent Pods as rehearsal spaces. Before mulaqat (family visit window) or galabhet (in-person visit), counsellors in Parent Pods prompt mothers to focus on school or health updates and on the child's interests ('Let's ask your child about her drawing class today'). Afterward, a short debrief ('What did she say about school?') helps mothers process emotions and separate their own stress from the child's experience, preventing feelings of shame or helplessness from being transferred during conversation.

2.1 Language and somatic curriculum (breathing / music / movement)

A short language guide with preferred and discouraged terms is used by officers, caregivers and visitors. Neutral clothing and materials are maintained, and predictable routines create calm transitions around visit days and calls. Brief breathing, music or movement help children regulate during high-arousal moments such as gate buzzers, frisking or the start of mulaqat (family visit window), prompting child-first speech and ordinary inclusion. Early observations link child-first language and simple somatic sequences with calmer transitions and fewer distress incidents during visits.

2.2 Parent Pods

Parent Pods are small-group sessions with mothers in custody focused on planning child contact, practising child-first language for mulaqat (family visit window) or e-mulaqat (electronic/virtual contact) and mapping a circle of support for each child and for one another. Pods act as rehearsal and support spaces for child-first updates and increase confidence before visit windows. Participation is optional; case particulars are not discussed; individual counselling is offered when needed. Attendance is recorded.

Box 2. Child contact pathways and minimum standard measures

- 1) Reception and Orientation at arrest or admission: the staff and social worker record the child's caregiver details, verify the guardian's phone contact, check immediate safety concerns or risks, and schedule an initial update call within 24–48 hours to ensure that no child remains unlinked and place a first caregiver call.
 - 2) Phone and e-mulaqat slots designated for child updates (not only legal matters).
 - 3) Child-visit windows (mulaqat or galabhet) with brief preparation and debrief.
- Minimum standard: each participating mother receives two or more substantive child updates per month, logged with date, time, source and a short summary. Missed visits are flagged within seven days.

Indicator clarifier: *with respect to child contact pathways, fifty per cent of mothers received two or more monthly updates, supported by fixed child-update slots, Parent Pods rehearsal and a contact register.*

Box 3. Visit-Room Language Charter

Delivery

Introduced in Parent Pods and staff refreshers; sets shared words and conduct for in-person and e-mulaqat contact.

Do say / Avoid

- **Children:** say child/children; **avoid** legal-status labels in any child-audible context.
- **Mother:** say mother; **avoid** accused/convict in the child's presence.
- **Contact and space:** say child-visit window or visit window; say nursery/early-years room; avoid status labels and "jail crèche".

Short scripts

- **Welcome:** "This is your child-contact time; tell us if anything feels uncomfortable."
- **Redirect:** "Legal details are for your lawyer; we are focusing on school and health."
- **Close-out:** "Next contact is on [day/time]; today's update will be recorded."

2.4 Visit-Room Language Charter (operational) Monitoring.

Language adoption is reviewed through structured observation rather than surveillance. Each week, the social worker and focal officer jointly review at least one family contact session using a short observation tool that tracks tone, word choice and interaction comfort. Notes are entered in a supervision log and discussed during monthly refresher meetings where common errors are addressed through short practice exercises. Site-level summaries are shared with the prison superintendent to support consistency across facilities. No audio or video recording is used; only aggregated findings guide training and policy improvements.

2.5 Early signals and routine enablers

Regular access to a dedicated early-years space and predictable contact routines coincided with calmer transitions, improved sleep and feeding reports and fewer distressed behaviours around visit days. Parent Pods and individual counselling were associated with lower anxiety, mutual support among mothers housed in shared dormitory units and clearer visit planning.

Verification

Weekly site checklists and a monthly focal-officer review substituted for a formal audit.

Box 4. Core monitoring

- **Weekly child updates:** share of participating mothers receiving two or more substantive updates per month, logged in a register by nursery liaison / designated officer.
- **Neutral birth certificates:** share of certificates for custody-linked births with no carceral markers.
- **Nursery utilisation:** hours per week recorded in operating logs (seven-hour reference day).

3. Record: administrative de-labelling and neutral civil documentation

Goal. Prevent label carryover across life events by ensuring a child's civil and health documents are standard, neutral and portable.

How it is achieved. A Government Resolution is placed in antenatal files at admission. Birth registration is completed in standard civilian format with the hospital recorded as place of birth and a home or guardian address. No prison identifiers appear on extracts. Same-day checks correct entries where needed.

Vignette (anonymised composite). She asks if "prison" will be printed. The nurse points to the resolution in her file. The registrar enters the hospital as place of birth and the guardian's address. The certificate reads like any other child's.

Indicator clarifier: one hundred per cent cumulative neutral documentation for custody-linked births. All custody-linked births during the period received certificates with no prison identifiers, confirmed through liaison sheets and same-day checks.

Safeguarding was embedded in daily practice, including police-verified staff; the two-adult rule; supervised handovers; visitor logs, and a child-accessible complaint box inside the nursery and accessible to older children, with pictorial labels showing when and how to ask for help. Media access and image capture were not permitted; personal contact details were not exchanged. CCTV was used only for safety with access restricted to the superintendent. Visitor phones kept outside the visit area where policy requires. Participation in Parent Pods or language rehearsals did not influence legal processes. Foreign-national parents were supported through translators and time-zone accommodations. Equity of access was reinforced through scripts that framed the shared room as normalisation rather than privilege.

Progress depended on disciplined language, modest operational commitments and non-blaming feedback loops. Four moves proved decisive, with co-design for both the room and the daily routine: Incarcerated mothers and staff choose and suggest play activities, songs and decorations for festivals, reinforcing ownership; predictable micro-commitments by each agency; transparent, useful monitoring; and rapid course-corrections are made for immediate adjustments after a problem is identified. For example, if attendance drops, the team meets within the same week to modify schedules, ensuring issues are addressed before they become a pattern. This non-blaming feedback loop sustained discipline in language and practice.

Transferability to Europe

- 1) Pilot mixed-enrolment early-years rooms where joint use is feasible, and publish utilisation hours. Consider aligning with the Council of Europe (2018) Recommendation on children with imprisoned parents and national rules on co-residence limits.
- 2) Issue a neutral-documentation circular for custody-linked births with hospital and registrar checklists; enable same-day review and ability to correct existing records which include carceral identifiers or clerical errors issued by municipal authorities.
- 3) Implement Reception and Orientation within 24 to 48 hours of admission to activate child links, nominate caregivers and schedule child-update slots.
- 4) Guarantee child-update windows in visit and phone rules and track a minimum of two updates per month.
- 5) Ensure translator and consular pathways for foreign-national parents and permit verified non-kin contacts for visits and e-mulaqat where appropriate.

Context note for Europe. *In many European jurisdictions, only a small number of children live with their mothers inside prisons; where co-residence is allowed, it is often limited to the very early years. This makes community access essential: predictable child-centred visit windows, child-first language in visit rooms, liaison with schools and local services, and facilitated travel or remote contact for separated children. Where few or no children co-reside, systems can prioritise inclusive early years sessions in community settings linked to the prison, while still adopting neutral documentation and stigma-aware practice inside visit areas.*

Policy recommendations

- Mandate neutral civil documents for custody-linked births; prohibit carceral markers; require same-day review and legacy corrections and publish quarterly compliance rates.
- Institutionalise Reception and Orientation for maternal admissions within 24–48 hours to activate child links and schedules.
- Resource inclusive early-years rooms with published utilization hours/retention and fund Parent Pods and one-to-one support.
- Guarantee translator and consular access, and permit verified non-kin contacts for visits and e-mulaqat.
- Train all adults in stigma-aware language and in child-centred de-escalation in case of situations involving distressed or agitated children. Adopt a visit-room Language Charter with refreshers.

Conclusion

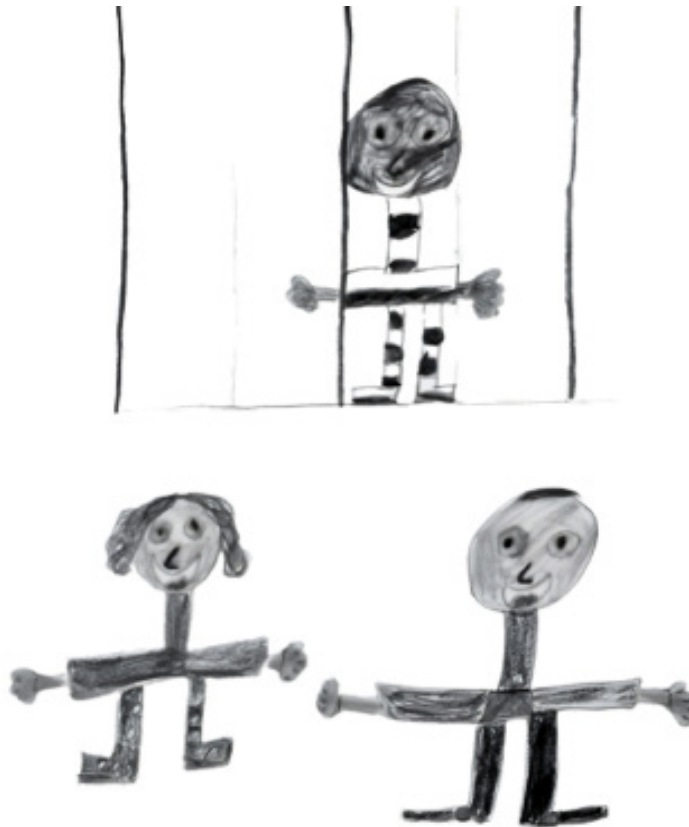
Small, repeatable changes to rooms, scripts and records can design stigma out of everyday custody practice. Inclusive rooms, neutral documentation and predictable contact pathways protect children from labels and support mothers to sustain family ties. The package aligns with international standards and can be transferred with modest adaptation, provided systems are explicit about dismantling stigma and measure what matters for children. This article reports aggregate, de-identified operational indicators collected for Quality Improvement under departmental authorisation. No images, audio or conversational content were recorded; vignettes are anonymised composites.

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Beyond the walls: how visiting-room design shape bonds and stigma

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Abstract

This article examines how visiting room design in Dutch prisons can help shape children's emotional experiences and family bonds while either reinforcing or dismantling stigma. A parent's imprisonment is a known adverse childhood experience and prison environments — typically designed for security and control — often intensify fear, tension and shame for young people visiting a parent. Drawing on environmental psychology and first-hand observations from Dutch prisons, the article shows how architectural features, materials, acoustics and spatial layouts communicate powerful messages about punishment, care and dignity. It argues that thoughtful, child-centred design can help mitigate stress, support child well-being and strengthen child-parent relationships. Warm materials, acoustic comfort, privacy, flexibility and child-sensitive details can transform visits from intimidating encounters into meaningful moments of connection. Ultimately, prison design is framed not as aesthetics or decoration, but as a strong social statement about how societies value children and family bonds.

Have you ever thought about how the physical environment shapes a child's experience when they visit their parent in prison? How they will remember what it looked like, what they felt when they walked through a metal detector? When they heard the sharp sound of a heavy metal door clanging somewhere down the corridor?

I could give countless examples like these to heighten your awareness. This is, after all, a central part of my work as both an interior designer and environmental psychologist: to make people aware of the deep influence that spaces exert on human experience. But let's start at the beginning.

Many children around the world experience parental incarceration in their lives, an adverse childhood event that can affect their relationship with their parents and their overall well-being and development. Some parents may not tell their children they are in prison, instead giving them a small excuse because they feel this will make it less burdensome. In many visits, children might feel tension from the vigilant staff, from parents adjusting to their role behind bars and from their own nerves, among other reasons. Most prison settings tend to exacerbate these tensions. Yet thoughtful prison design can help children in such situations, helping to support their well-being and preserve their relationship with their parent.

How spaces can reinforce stigma

Prisons are designed primarily for security and control, priorities which can — intentionally or not — create environments that feel cold, intimidating and stressful, especially for children visiting a parent. The sense of tension often begins long before reaching the visiting room: high fences around the building, metal detectors,

heavy doors and long, empty corridors communicate restriction and punishment, which can leave young visitors anxious and unsettled.

The materials and design of prisons amplify this effect. Hard surfaces such as concrete and steel, along with echoing sounds, reinforce perceptions of danger. Large, open areas with minimal corners or privacy provide little sense of security, a critical factor for children's comfort and confidence. While oversight is necessary for safety, without small corners or a sense of shelter, children often whisper instead of play with their parent, and the restrictive nature of these environments can subtly weaken the child-parent bond. From entryways to corridors and waiting areas, every design element in a prison contributes to the child's emotional experience. Recognising these effects is essential for creating spaces that support, rather than hinder, meaningful family connections.

Spaces that dismantle stigma

A visiting environment that acknowledges children's emotional needs can begin to counter the negative associations of entering a prison. When children encounter warmth through, for example, soft colours, good acoustics and homey materials, the message subtly shifts from punishment to compassion. Such spaces communicate that family bonds are valued, easing feelings of fear, shame and distance.

Design elements that offer families a degree of choice and flexibility are particularly powerful. Moveable furniture and the ability to choose where to sit allow visitors to shape the space to their needs. This small sense of control contrasts with the rigidity of most institutional settings and helps children feel more confident and at ease. Privacy is another key element: semi-private alcoves or seating arrangements make space for intimacy and quiet interaction without (the feeling

of) constant surveillance. The sensory atmosphere completes this transformation. Warm lighting, natural textures and sound-absorbing materials soften the harshness of steel and concrete, while glimpses of nature, through gardens, plants or even wall art, bring moments of calm. By replacing institutional cues with child-friendly and welcoming details — such as a mascot that guides you through the prison environment or a child-height mailbox where children can post their own drawings instead of handing them to a staff member — makes visits feel less intimidating and more supportive. Design is not decoration, it's communication. Through it, prison spaces can dismantle stigma and create an environment that supports connection and emotional well-being.

A personal perspective

During my visits to prisons across the Netherlands, I have noticed one striking similarity: these spaces are rarely designed with children in mind. Occasionally, well-meaning touches appear, such as a cheerful mural or a corner with toys, but many family rooms feel improvised rather than intentionally created. Spaces meant for families are often afterthoughts, added years after construction, and when they serve multiple functions without warmth, daylight or privacy, they cannot fully accommodate children's needs. This mismatch between environment and users can heighten stress and make child-parent interactions more tense, leaving some children overstimulated, restless or withdrawn, while some parents can struggle to maintain meaningful connection.

Design is not a finishing touch, it's a statement of values. When prisons are built with care in mind, children feel safe, parents feel seen, and families can stay whole.

Watching these visits, I focus on how children use the space and respond to its limitations. Their needs for comfort or safe corners for interaction are often overlooked, while activities like crafts or games are still prioritised, which, of course, are also very important. Yet the environment itself communicates messages about care, safety and dignity, and when it is lacking, children's experiences suffer. Observing these dynamics shows that thoughtful design can create more humane, supportive interactions, highlighting the subtle but powerful role of interior design in children's experiences. Even small interventions, flexible layouts, natural light,

homey materials and child-friendly details can reduce stress, foster connection and transform visits from tense encounters into meaningful moments of care.

Design as a tool for change

Design is not a finishing touch, it's a statement of values. When prisons are built with care in mind, children feel safe, parents feel seen and families can stay whole. Creating these spaces demands cross-sectoral collaboration to meet both safety and emotional needs. Children should never bear the weight of their parents' contact with the justice system. Let that principle live not only in policy, but in the walls themselves. So let it be normal that when prisons are built, design already speaks for care, so my work can be less about raising awareness and more about creation.

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