



COPING **Children of Prisoners:** ***Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health***

Using a **child-centred positive-psychology** methodology, COPING investigated the wellbeing, vulnerability to mental health problems and resilience of children who are impacted by parental imprisonment. The first and only Pan-European study of its kind, COPING involved a survey of over 1000 children of prisoners (CoP) and interviews with over 300 CoP, caregivers, and parents in the UK, Germany, Romania and Sweden. A mapping of available services across the four countries was also carried out. These different countries reflect diverse incarceration levels, welfare policies and mental health interventions.

Research shows that CoP experience:

- Feelings of shame and stigma
- Anti-social/delinquent behaviour
- Low self-esteem
- Mental ill health
- Poverty
- Intergenerational criminal behaviour
- Weakened family relationships
- Poor school performance

Public health priorities COPING addresses:

- *preventing child depression and promoting resilience*
- *improving access to mental health services*
- *mental health in schools.*
- *providing community based mental health services.*
- *developing integrated governance approaches.*

We explored:

- ← **Resilience and coping strategies**
- ← **Family strengths and limitations**
- ← **Children's views**
- ← **Networks of support**
- ← **Shame and stigma**
- ← **Role of schools**
- ← **Availability of appropriate services**
- ← **What works**

Project led by Professor Adele Jones, School of Human and Health Sciences, The University of Huddersfield and involved a consortium of 10 partner agencies from 6 countries

<http://coping-project.hud.ac.uk/>



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Some findings

- CoP are a vulnerable group for increased mental health problems, social disadvantage and the impact of stigma and family disruption
- 25% of CoP were at high risk of mental health problems, rising to near 50% children in Romania.
- Important roles of care giving parent and extended family (particularly in Romania).
- Key support role of schools, particularly in Sweden, Germany and UK.
- Most agency support is via NGOs in Sweden, Germany and UK. Absence of support services in Romania. CoP invisible within mainstream child and adolescent mental health services
- Many children are initially traumatised at the point of parental arrest and imprisonment – this is a key stage for providing support
- Child-centred visiting and contact arrangements essential for children's well-being.
- Children missed fathers as much as mothers but there were differential impacts (e.g. living arrangements more disrupted if mother imprisoned, poverty increased if father imprisoned)
- Overall children do better if they are able to maintain good quality contact with imprisoned parent

Some recommendations

Recommendations centred on 5 areas:

- **Child-friendly Criminal Justice Systems**
- **Maintaining relationship with parent in prison**
- **Access to services and support for CoP and families**
- **The role of the school**
- **Public awareness & policy recognition**

Mental health & social welfare professionals must be made aware of the needs and vulnerabilities of CoP and provide appropriate support to them and their caregivers at several points: parental arrest, remand, conviction, imprisonment and release – all of these are major points of stress for children.

Schools provide a source of stability but need to address stigma and bullying

Limit the trauma for children of witnessing arrests:

- Know in advance if children likely to be present
- Plan to limit violence & use of handcuffs during arrest
- Explain the arrest & home search to the child
- Allow arrested parent time to say 'goodbye'
- Ensure good care arrangements if needed
- Direct the family to information and support

Security should not inhibit a child's ability to interact with an imprisoned parent

Visits should be a child's right not an earned privilege for prisoners

Prisons should provide age-appropriate activities for children to encourage parent/child interaction



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