

## **Executive summary:**

Worldwide, unprecedented numbers of people are being imprisoned and in many countries incarceration is on the increase (Walmsley, 2009); indeed 'more parents than ever are behind bars' (Murray et al., 2012) and each year, an estimated 800,000 children within the newly-expanded European Union are separated from an incarcerated parent. Despite this, the psychosocial impact on children is little known and rarely considered in sentencing even though the evidence to date suggests that children whose parents are imprisoned are exposed to triple jeopardy through break-up of the family, financial hardship, and extremes of stigma and secrecy, leading to adverse social and educational repercussions. Until the COPING study, very little was known about these children and despite a spate of recent publications on the subject, the translation of empirical data into practice and policy remains underdeveloped. Funded by the European Union (Seventh Framework Programme, Health Theme), the COPING Project, launched in 2010, aimed to address this deficiency in knowledge by investigating the mental health needs and resilience of children of prisoners and the most promising policy and intervention responses in four countries: the UK (England and Wales), Germany, Romania and Sweden. Led by Professor Adele Jones (University of Huddersfield, UK), the project was implemented by a consortium comprising six non-governmental organisations and four research institutions from the partner countries.

Using a mixed-methods multi-sequential research design, COPING (see <http://www.coping-project.eu> online) gathered evidence from over 1,500 children and adults from four European countries representing different social and cultural traditions, different incarceration levels and penal policies and different levels of support services. COPING used a child-centred, positive psychology approach to explore the characteristics of children with imprisoned parents, their resilience, and their vulnerability to mental health problems. One of the strengths of the project was its ability to generate insights into the impact of parental imprisonment on children from a number of angles. A clear picture of the effects of parental imprisonment on children's resilience and upon families was produced using an integrated strategy which included different research methods. The project began with a literature review of other studies that had been carried out in relevant areas. This was followed by a survey of children and parents using standardised instruments to measure strengths, difficulties, self-esteem, wellbeing and quality of life. A series of face-to-face interviews was then undertaken with children of prisoners, their carers and the imprisoned parent in each of the four countries. In parallel to this, a detailed mapping exercise was undertaken of the services and interventions for children of prisoners that were currently up and running and these were assessed in relation to their fit with the evidence we had garnered on children's needs. Alongside these activities, stakeholder consultations sessions were carried out, not only in the four partner countries, but more extensively across Europe (with NGOs in Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Netherlands, and Norway) - this was in order to broaden the collection of evidence about the needs of children, the extent to which the findings were more generally applicable and to ascertain views on whether existing interventions, support and criminal justice processes are aligned with children's needs. These different strands of evidence were carefully scrutinised to identify emerging themes and sub-themes and from these, policy and practice implications were distilled.

Children with a parent/carer in prison were found to be at significantly greater risk of mental health problems than their peers in the general population. Children seemed at particular risk of internalising difficulties (emotional problems), rather than externalising problems (hyperactivity and conduct problems). Key factors relating to children's resilience included: children's innate qualities; the importance of family stability and, sustaining relationships with the imprisoned parent. The data confirmed that children's resilience is closely linked to open communications systems and that children need opportunities to discuss their experiences. Despite overall deficiencies in services, which must be a major concern given the mental issues raised, the study found a wide range of good practice examples by NGOs supporting children of prisoners and their families across the four countries. The findings have been converted into a set of actionable recommendations at country and Pan-European levels.

## **Project Context and Objectives:**

In Europe we have about 800,000 children with an imprisoned parent (more children are separated from a parent because of imprisonment than for any other reason) (Eurochips 2007). This group is affected by multiple difficulties resulting from the parental imprisonment through break-up of the family, financial hardship, and stigma and secrecy, leading to adverse social and educational repercussions with higher risk for mental health problems, antisocial behaviour, drug use and poor educational performance (Kjellstrand and Eddy 2011, Murray and Farrington 2008, Murray et al. 2012). There seems no public recognition for the extreme disadvantage experienced by these young people. Support available, for example, in accessing prisons and participating in prison visits is extremely variable and mainly provided through non-governmental organisations. Less is known about the support from the prisons for the children and their families. The relatively few high quality studies on the topic highlight several issues to be considered both at the governmental and the European level; these can be summarised as those pertaining to children's rights and wellbeing, services for vulnerable children and, the dissonance between policy on criminal justice and that concerned with the welfare of children.

Firstly, because of the low profile attached to this work, governments and policy makers have neglected to fully consider the effects of parental imprisonment on children. This is an oversight which runs the risk of punishing innocent victims, and hence children of prisoners have been referred to as the 'forgotten victims' of crime, or the 'hidden victims of imprisonment.' The combination of official disregard and public indifference can be situated within the current moral and political dimensions of punishment, which tend to provoke deeply conflicting interests. As Garland notes, the institutional framework of modern penology has tended to obscure the broader social ramifications of the imprisonment of much larger numbers of offenders. Secondly, there remains no mainstream provision available to this client group, with children of prisoners often finding that they fall between a number of different government departments, such as health, the criminal justice system and child welfare services. Not only does this leave no obvious source of funding or governmental remit, but some authors have argued that the very different organisational cultures and philosophies, and the different institutional priorities of these diverse arms of government have acted to inhibit collaborative working arrangements. As the recent Social Care Institute for Excellence (UK) guide acknowledges, it is left to the voluntary sector to drive the agenda for children of prisoners, and this would similarly appear to be the case in other countries. Because of short term, insecure funding, voluntary sector organisations have struggled to fill the gaps in provision, resulting in patchy provision which falls short of national coverage. Thirdly, there are no accurate figures indicating how many children in Europe are impacted by parental imprisonment since this information is rarely collected and even in Sweden where this information is collected, it is difficult to access and hence we can only estimate the size of the potential problem. This is because registering prisoners' children is not part of the prison reception procedure in many countries, and there appears to be no organisation or statutory body at the respective national levels that routinely monitors the parental status of prisoners. Furthermore, prisoners can be reluctant to voluntarily disclose information which they fear may result in their children being permanently taken away from them. The result is that governments do not know the numbers of children of

imprisoned parents, either at any one point in time or, the numbers of children negatively affected by the imprisonment of their parent over any given period of time. This paucity of research attention and a general lack of public interest in the plight of children of prisoners occur at a time when there are unprecedented numbers of people being sent to prison throughout Western nations. It is therefore likely that the numbers of children experiencing enforced separation from a parent because of imprisonment is also at unprecedented high levels. Where the research is more plentiful is in the area of specific effects of imprisonment on families and children. However, much of this research has focused on child circumstances related to parental offending and few studies have investigated actual children's experiences, emotional or psychological. Furthermore, much of the information was gained from parents rather than from the children themselves.

The primary focus for COPING was to investigate the mental health needs of this large and vulnerable group of children. What is distinctive about COPING is that it adopted an explicitly child-centred approach from the outset and has examined some of the more subtle dimensions of parental imprisonment, including the meanings that children attribute to the event, the experience of stigma and social isolation that may follow parental imprisonment as well as the family dynamics before, during and after parental imprisonment and any impacts these factors may have upon the child's psychological health and wellbeing.

## **2.1 Country Context**

The COPING study was carried out in four different countries with differing criminal justice systems, socio-economic conditions, cultural norms and welfare services:

1. Sweden is the smallest of the four countries (by population). Fewer people are imprisoned than in the other COPING countries. Sentences are shorter and more use is made of alternatives to custody. Sweden is a wealthy country, with a well-developed welfare system. Children of prisoners in Sweden are well served by Bryggan, an NGO with an explicit children's perspective. Prison authorities focus on ensuring a good quality of visits for children. Home leaves are built in to prison sentences for suitable prisoners and prisoners are allowed to have their children with them in their early years; each prison also has an ombudsperson for children
2. Germany is a populous and wealthy country. Imprisonment rates are lower than in England and Romania, although it has the second highest average imprisonment length. The guiding principle of penal policy is rehabilitation. Prison policy also prioritises maintaining contact with family members. Home leave and conjugal visits can be included in sentence plans. Female prisons allow children to live with their mothers until they are aged 3 years (up to 6 years in open prisons), and its prison system has been described as "child centred"
3. Romania is by far the least economically developed of the four countries included in the study. It has the second highest imprisonment rate, and the longest sentences of the four countries. Its prison population, however, has fallen steeply in recent years. Prisons have been neglected; they are mainly old and in disrepair. There are few statutory or NGO services for children of prisoners and their families in Romania. Regular visits, including conjugal visits, are permitted, but there are restrictions in place for higher security prisons. Infants and children are able to stay with their mothers in prison until the age of 1 year

4. The UK (England and Wales) has the second highest number of children deemed at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the four countries. The prison population has nearly doubled since 1993, and more people are imprisoned than in any other COPING country, with a consequent significant increase in the number of children experiencing parental imprisonment. NGOs provide information and advice for prisoners' families and run visitors' centres. Eligibility to receive visits is linked to incentives and earned privileges. Female prisoners may be permitted to keep an infant with them for the first 18 months

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework**

In instigating this major pan-European research agenda for what is a chronically under researched 'at risk' group, the theoretical concepts which underpinned the COPING methodology were:

- a) Use of an explicitly child-centred methodology to investigate the mental health needs of children of imprisoned parents based on the view that engagement with the perspectives of children as active research participants (and not just subjects of study) can enhance the claims of empirical research in studies about children (Fraser et al 2004).
- b) Adoption of a 'positive psychology' approach. Moving away from the predominant focus of previous studies that have been primarily concerned with documenting adverse mental health outcomes in favour of also understanding how children can cope with and survive this experience by investigating resilience at the individual and relational level - this approach is considered to have a vital bearing on designing successful interventions.

The COPING project was innovative in that it departed from mainstay approaches of much previous research, so rather than just focusing upon the psychological and emotional difficulties children may face when a parent is imprisoned, the study explored how some children employ coping strategies and exercise resilience for successfully managing this experience. To date, there is very little research on resiliency processes among children of prisoners, but knowing how some children negotiate and survive through such experiences relatively unscathed, and flourish later, broadens the scope of current research on children of prisoners. It has also provided a theoretical framework to assess the value of these concepts for planning methods and techniques for successful interventions in order to ameliorate any adverse mental health impacts a child may suffer.

Resiliency "combines the interaction of two conditions: risk factors - stressful life events or adverse environmental conditions that increase the vulnerability of individuals - and the presence of personal, familial and community protective factors that buffer, moderate and protect against vulnerabilities. Individuals differ in their exposure to adversity (vulnerability) and the degree of protection afforded by their own capacities and by their environment (protective factors)" (Norman (2000: 3). A key aspect of the COPING study therefore, was an examination of the interaction between children's experiences of parental incarceration and the impact on their lives of separation (risk factors) and the presence of personal, familial and community features/dynamics (protective factors), to determine the extent and contribution of protective factors in enhancing resilience during times of trauma and anxiety.

## **2.3 Project Objectives**

### **The objectives of COPING were to:**

1. Enhance our understanding of the mental health needs of children of prisoners
2. Explore childhood resilience and coping strategies and assess the value of these concepts for planning interventions
3. Bring together European and international perspectives to investigate the nature and extent of mental health problems affecting children in this group
4. Identify relevant and effective policy interventions to ameliorate the mental health implications for affected children
5. Raise the awareness of policy makers to the needs of this under-researched group.

### **2.4 Methods**

Utilizing a mixed-methods multi-sequential design, the study gathered evidence from over 1500 children, care-givers, imprisoned parents and stakeholders across the four EC countries being studied.

Mixed methods research can be defined as an approach or methodology:

- which address research problems by searching for understandings of real-life contexts, diverse perspectives, and socio-cultural influences
- employs rigorous quantitative methods to investigate scale and frequency of factors alongside credible qualitative methods to exploring the meanings attributed to those factors
- uses multiple methods
- integrates or combines these methods to draw on the strengths of each in interpreting results
- frames the study within a clearly articulated philosophical and theoretical position

COPING involved two quantitative methods: survey (Work Package 1) and mapping of interventions (Work Package 4) and two qualitative methods: in-depth interviews (Work Package 2) and stakeholder consultations (Work Package 3). A parallel mixed analytic technique (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009) was used to facilitate independent analyses (individual methods) and also, to facilitate interaction between data sets based on the primary purposes of our multi-sequenced design: triangulation; complementarity; initiation; development (Greene et al. 1989).

A self-reporting survey (WP1) was designed which utilized four scientifically validated instruments against which country norms had been established: the Goodman (1997) Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), the Rosenberg (1965) Self Esteem Scale, the KIDSCREEN-27 Questionnaire (The KIDSCREEN Group Europe, 2006) and the WHO Quality of Life-BREF instrument (WHO, 2004). This was administered to 730 children, aged 7-17 and parent/carers across the four countries in order to ascertain coping strategies and mental health problems for the children surveyed. The results of the questionnaires were compared with normative population samples and purposive sampling carried out to identify a representative cohort of children and parents for in-depth interviews (WP2). A total of 349 in-depth interviews with children and families (161 children, 123 non-imprisoned parent/carers and 65 imprisoned parent/carers) were conducted across the four countries. In addition, simultaneously a multi-method stakeholder consultation strategy was carried out with 122 professionals/groups (WP3) (including face-to-face

interviews, focus groups, telephone interviews and a COPING on-line questionnaire). Questionnaires were standardised and to further ensure consistency, operational guides were developed for each consultation group. Ten groups of stakeholders participated in this aspect of the study: caregivers; staff within children's homes; social workers; prison staff; NGO staff; children of prisoners; imprisoned parents; government staff involved in policy relating to children/families of prisoners; NGO staff involved in policy formulation and, school-related stakeholders. These data analysed locally based on a centralised analytic framework. Alongside these methods a systematic mapping of interventions was undertaken across the partner countries (WP4). The objectives were to identify, map and document health care and community based services and interventions for children of. This aspect of the project was closely dovetailed with other methods so that the children's needs identified in WP1, WP2 and WP3 could be compared against the interventions provided by the services described in WP4 in order to feed the analysis of the fit between interventions and needs (WP5) as discussed below.

## **2.5 Analysis**

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 18 with subsequent analysis carried out using the R, Splus and Mplus statistical packages and qualitative data were analysed using the NVivo software package. The data on needs were subjected to factor analysis in order to extract need dimensions and these were then compared with a theoretical framework derived from the literature on needs.

The needs analysis involved several methods:

- a) need hierarchies were ranked for children and parents,
- b) SDQ and Rosenberg self-esteem variables were correlated with parent-assessed dichotomous needs variables by country,
- c) parent/carer well-being was assessed in relation to national norms, and compared between countries,
- d) variables were entered into logistic regression models to explore possible predictors of need and
- e) service levels in the different countries were juxtaposed against the top three parent-assessed needs identified.

This concluded the data gathering and analysis phase of the study.

## **Project Results:**

Overview reports are available on each of the methods used in the study and these provide a detailed description and discussion of both quantitative results (illustrated by graphs and tables) and qualitative findings (illustrated by themes and quotations). For the purposes of brevity, only a summary of the results is presented here.

### **3.1 Study Limitations**

Given the difficulties in identifying a representative sample of participants, one of the limitations of the research is that sampling bias was inevitable. The impact of this is threefold: firstly, children from minority groups or who experience other forms of marginalisation or social exclusion (e.g. children in care, disabled children, refugee children, children from minority ethnic groups) were largely absent from the COPING study; secondly, as recruitment in all countries (except Romania) was facilitated through NGOs working with prisoner's families, most children were accessing some form of support services and this may mean that these children are more resilient and have fewer needs than children who do not access services and thirdly, the selection of prisons was determined by external factors which meant that imprisoned parents in the study were not representative of the general prison population. In Romania, for example, the prisoners who participated were from high security prisons and had committed serious crimes for which they were serving long sentences and this may have led to false negatives in the overall sample. These limitations aside, the methods were subject to robust quality assurance procedures and results (where appropriate) were validated through comparison with normative data for each country and thus the findings are reliable in terms of the relationship between children and families who participated in the study and those in the wider population. Furthermore, as our findings confirm the vulnerability of children of prisoners we can reasonably speculate that those children who are even more marginalised or do not have access to services at all may be even more vulnerable.

### **3.2 Survey Results**

The content and structure of the child and parent/carer questionnaires are shown in Table 1 Content and structure of child and non-imprisoned parent/carer questionnaires, with individual topics listed in the order in which they appeared in the questionnaires.

### **3.3 Survey Sample**

Our aim was to select a purposive sample of children stratified according to age and gender, and the gender and ethnicity of the imprisoned parent/carers. It was relatively straightforward to recruit roughly equal proportions of boys and girls but proved more difficult to strike a balance in terms of the gender and ethnicity of parents/carers who were in prison. This is due to the fact that the large majority of prisoners in the four countries are male and White (in terms of their ethnicity). We did attempt to boost the numbers of female and Black and Ethnic Minority prisoners who featured in the survey but with limited success. We were able to record the ethnicity of participants in Romania and the UK, but it was not possible, for legal and/or ethical reasons to ask this question of respondents in Germany or Sweden. We encountered considerable practical difficulties in identifying children of prisoners and in the end relied heavily upon convenience sampling to recruit children and their parents/carers into the survey. The initial aim was to recruit 250 children aged 7-17 years in each country however in only two countries - Romania and the UK - did we reach these targets (251 and 291



respectively). In Germany 145 children (and parents) participated and in Sweden (where the prison population is small) 50 children and their parents took part in the study.

### **3.4 Demographic and other Variables**

Demographic variables compared across the four countries, shows summary statistics for the main demographic and background variables in the study, together with summaries of the key predictor variables. Of the 737 children in the study, 54% were boys, with some non-significant variations across the four countries, with Sweden having the smallest proportion of boys (44%). Just over half the children (56%) were 11 years old or older.

- indicates significance at the  $p$  less than 0.05 level

a This refers only to inmates who have been sentenced i.e. not those who are on remand (awaiting trial) or those who have been tried and convicted but are awaiting sentencing.

According to indicator scores on the strengths and difficulties items of the survey questionnaire, children with a parent/carer in prison were found to have a significantly greater risk of mental health problems than children in the general population. This risk is especially large among older children (those aged 11+ years). These problems are manifest, in particular, in terms of emotional and peer problems, however there were significant differences between the four countries in respect of the proportion of children who are at 'high' risk of mental health problems. There were differences, for children in the COPING study, between the mean self esteem scores (SES) for each country, with German children scoring higher (reflecting higher self esteem) than the other countries and Romanian children scoring lower than the others. However, these differences are also reflected in country norms; the German normative data having the highest scores and the Romanian norms being lower overall. There was an indication too that the German and Romanian children in the study score reliably higher than their country norms overall, while the UK children scored reliably lower than their country norm. These potential differences will be explored further in later analyses. With regard to wellbeing and quality of life, scores on the KIDSCREEN-27 in all countries except the UK were lower than the pan-European norms on most of the sub-scales based upon self-reports. This disparity was even greater for parent reports. There were also noticeable differences between countries, with the Romanian children reporting the lowest scores on almost every subscale, whether parent- or child-rated, Swedish children receiving the highest scores, and German and UK children occupying an intermediary position.

The mean scores on the World Health Organisation Quality of Life Scale (WHOQOL) for each of the four countries are shown in table 3. It was clear that there are significant differences between the four countries in the quality of life as judged by the parent/carer not in prison. The total scores across the whole 26 items in the WHOQOL-BREF show Swedish and UK parents/carers judging their quality of life higher than those in Germany and Romania. On the overall quality of life item, Swedish parents/carers score on average much higher than the others (66.7 on the 0-100 scale) and Romanian parents/carers score much lower than those in the other countries (44.6). For the general health item, UK parents/carers score highest and Romanian parents/carers score lowest. Breaking down the total score into the four specific domains also shows major differences between countries. For the physical domain, German,

Swedish and UK parents/carers score quite high, while the Romanian parents/carers score much lower. For the psychological domain, German parents/carers score the lowest, although quite similar to the Romanian parents/carers, with UK and Swedish parents/carers scoring much higher. For the social domain, the Swedish parents/carers score much higher than the others, with the Romanian parents/carers scoring the lowest. For the environmental domain, the UK parents score highest, but not significantly different from the Swedish and German parents/carers, while the Romanian parents/carers score much lower.

A comparison with data from a large international field trial of the WHOQOL-BREF (Skevington, Lofty and O'Connell 2004) is presented in Table 3. Mean (SD) scores for the WHOQOL-BREF Total Quality of Life and Domains across the four countries and comparison with country norms. The field trial comprised 11,830 participants from 23 countries including Germany, Romania and the UK. Sweden was not included in the field trial and so scores were compared against Norway instead. There were notable differences between the overall samples in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics. In particular, non-imprisoned parents/carers were, compared to the norms, younger on average (39 years versus 45 years) and more likely to be female (92% versus 53%).

Tests revealed that scores on three domains for parents in the COPING study fell significantly below the norm in Germany (Physical Health, Psychological and Social Relationships) and Romania (Physical Health, Social Relationships and Environment). In Sweden scores were below the norm on two domains (Physical Health and Psychological), and in the UK on just one domain (Social Relationships). Children in the COPING study also did worse overall than norms in respect of all the health-related quality of life measures that were examined. These comprise Psychological well-being, Autonomy & parent relations, Social support & peers, School environment and Physical well-being. The question to be asked however is whether the generally poorer outcomes for these children are due to parental/carer imprisonment or to some other risk factors correlated with parental/carer imprisonment, such as poverty, mental ill-health or parental substance misuse (Chui, 2010; Kinner et al., 2007). It also has to be recognised that some children of prisoners, both in the COPING research and other studies, have 'average' or even good outcomes, and this is in spite of their having faced one or more risk factors (Sharp and Marcus-Mendoza, 2001). Despite this, these children are under stress and do need support. (For a full analysis and description of all the survey results please see WP1 Overview Report <http://www.coping-project.eu> online).

### **3.5 Findings from In-depth Interviews and Stakeholder Consultations**

A purposive sample of participants was selected for in-depth interviews. The target in each country was to obtain an equal proportion of children falling within the normal and the borderline-abnormal ranges of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, thus representing children with a range of difficulties.

Total Difficulties scores are classified according to UK normative data. For the child self-report 0-15=normal; 16-19=borderline; and 20-40=abnormal. For the parent rating 0-13=normal; 14-16=borderline; and 17-40=abnormal.

The Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) elicits perceptions of children's conduct, concentration, emotions and social

relationships. The SDQ comprises of 25 items which load onto five dimensions: Emotional Difficulties; Conduct Problems; Hyperactivity; Peer Problems; and Pro-social Behaviour. Scores on the first four dimensions can be summed to produce a 'Total Difficulties Score' Potential scores range from 0-40, with higher scores indicating greater difficulties in the aforementioned areas. The Total Difficulties Score can be compared to normative population ranges to provide an indication of the likelihood that the child will display mental health problems. Individuals with a score falling in the 'normal' range are unlikely to display mental health problems, those in the 'borderline' range have a slightly raised likelihood of experiencing problems, and those in the 'abnormal' range are most likely to experience problems. Children completed the self-report version of the SDQ, and non-imprisoned parents/carers completed the informant version to elicit their perceptions of the child(ren) they were caring for.

### **3.6 Implications of SDQ results**

For children aged 11 years and above, both the self report and parent/carer rating provide a reliable indication of their level of difficulties. In all four countries, the mean rating provided by parent/carers fell around the cut-off point for normal-borderline, thus indicating that on average there was a low-moderate likelihood that these children would experience mental health difficulties. Comparable reports by children presented a more positive picture; mean scores fell well within the normal range, suggesting that on average there was low likelihood that these children would experience mental health problems. Further exploration of the parent/carer ratings revealed that in the UK, Germany and Romania a similar proportion of children fell in the normal and borderline-abnormal ranges. In Sweden more children fell within the normal than the borderline-abnormal range (66.7% compared to 33.3%). This indicates that the target position was achieved in all countries except Sweden. Again scores produced by children present a slightly more positive picture; around two thirds to three quarters of children fell within the normal range. According to child-ratings the desired position was not achieved in any of the four countries. For children aged below 11 years, only the parent/carer rating provides a reliable measure. There was greater variation in the mean scores for children aged less than 11 years. According to parents/carers in Germany, on average their children were experiencing noticeably higher levels of difficulties (SDQ Total Difficulties mean score = 17.80) than all other children, including children from other countries within the same age range and children aged =11 years in all four countries. The mean score falls just within the abnormal range, indicating that on average these children were at an increased likelihood of experiencing mental health problems. In the remaining three countries, mean scores fell within or just at the cut-off point for normal-borderline, suggesting that on average there was a reasonably low likelihood of mental health problems. Further exploration of the parent/carer ratings revealed that in Germany noticeably more children fell within the borderline-abnormal than the normal range (70.0% compared to 30.0%).

In conclusion, for children aged =11, parents/carers presented a more negative picture than children themselves; suggesting greater levels of difficulties and a higher chance of mental health problems. Parent/carer ratings indicate that the target position was achieved in all countries except for Sweden where children falling in the normal range were oversampled. Child ratings indicate that, in all countries, children falling in the normal range were oversampled. For children aged less

than11, those in Germany appeared to be experiencing greater difficulties and to present a higher risk of mental health problems than children elsewhere. In the UK and Romania, children falling within the normal range were oversampled; this position was reversed in Germany. The target position was successfully achieved in Sweden.

In the UK and Romania more boys than girls participated in interviews. This pattern was reversed in Germany and Sweden, resulting in a similar number of boys and girls in the sample overall.

For the majority of children, their non-imprisoned parent or carer was their biological mother. The only other category of any noticeable proportion was the small number of children in the care of their grandmother (n=15). This is similar to the survey in which biological mothers (73.2%) and grandmothers (9.3%) were the two largest categories of non-imprisoned parents. For most children their biological father was in prison. Other categories of some note included sixteen children in the UK who had an imprisoned mother, and ten children in Germany who had an imprisoned step-father or an imprisoned male partner of their non-imprisoned parent/carers.

In all four countries, most imprisoned parents/carers had been sentenced. Parents in Romania received the longest sentences, on average (87.14 months), followed by Sweden (57.65 months), Germany (40.56 months) and the UK (31.18 months). In comparison to the survey sample, the average sentence length in Germany and the UK was longer (50.64 and 45.63 months respectively), but shorter in Romania and Sweden (80.93 and 37.73 months respectively). In the UK and Germany, drug related offences were the most common reason for the parent's/carers' imprisonment (n=23 and 11 respectively). In Romania this was murder or manslaughter (n=11). In the UK and Germany the pattern of offences was very similar to the survey sample. In Romania, murder or manslaughter was the highest category (N = 60), followed by theft/ handling stolen goods (N = 42) and then robbery (N = 34). Most children had experienced parental imprisonment between one and three times (accounting for 53 of 63 in the sample overall). Children in Sweden and Germany were most likely to have experienced separation from their parent/carers due to imprisonment on more than one occasion (67.9% and 60.0% respectively). Slightly fewer children in Romania and the UK had experienced parental imprisonment before (47.4% and 40.35% respectively).

Most children had some form of contact with their imprisoned parent/carers. Of those children that had some form of contact, the majority in the UK were accessing prison visits (92.9%), followed by slightly fewer in Romania and Germany (87.9% and 81.5% respectively), and noticeably fewer in Sweden (75.9%). (The lower figure for Sweden probably relates to children not visiting parents in prison once they start being granted furlough). In the UK and Sweden a similar number of children were in telephone contact with their imprisoned parent/carers (95.3% and 89.7% respectively), with approximately one third fewer in Romania (63.6%), and approximately two thirds fewer in Germany (33.3%). A similar proportion of children in the UK and Germany were communicating with their imprisoned parent via letter (87.5% and 81.5% respectively), with lower percentages in Sweden (67.9%) and Romania (54.5%). Around one quarter of children in the UK and Sweden had contact with their imprisoned parent during his/her temporary release from prison, compared to smaller numbers in Germany and Romania (11.1% and 6.2% respectively).

### **3.7 Family Relationships**

Across the four countries a key finding was the relationship between the caregiver and the child. Sweden found that poorer outcomes were associated with less stable families. Also, in all four countries, children's resilience was enhanced by close and supportive relationships with grandparents and siblings. Children with secure attachment to the imprisoned parent can experience severe disruption when the trusted parent is incarcerated (Christmann, Turliuc, and Mairean, 2012). Insecure attachments (ambivalent, avoidant or disorganized) can lead to deficiencies in social functioning in adulthood. Ambiguous loss can contribute to disruption of other secure attachment patterns. When a loved person is physically absent but psychologically present, as in situations of parental incarceration, divorce or immigration, it can be very confusing over a long time whether the imprisoned parent is in or out of the family. According to Boss (2007), ambiguous loss is the most stressful kind of loss: should a parent die, rituals of funeral and mourning allow normal grief and lead to acceptance and closure. With ambiguous loss, it is not possible to grieve over the absent parent, and with uncertainty and stigma, children of prisoners can turn to internalizing behaviour leading to depression, or externalizing, antisocial behaviour (Bocknek et al., 2009). Grandparents and the extended family had a particularly crucial role in Romania, including financial and material support. Continuing relationships and contact with the imprisoned parent were important for children's resilience. In Romania and Germany children tended to idealise their imprisoned parent, unless they had reason to be afraid of him. Family cohesion for the child depended largely on the quality of the emotional ties with the imprisoned parent, which the caregivers and wider family were able to promote. The UK report found that children missed imprisoned fathers equally as much as imprisoned mothers. In Sweden descriptions of the relationships with the imprisoned parents were overall positive, with the imprisonment described as the main problem, although two children reported that the relationship had improved as a consequence of the imprisonment, with more structured time with the parent. Family conflict, particularly associated with drug abuse for UK and Swedish families, and with alcohol abuse and domestic violence in Romania, impacted negatively on children. There was less evidence of drug or alcohol abuse in the German report.

### **3.8 Children's Resilience and Coping Strategies**

The concept of resilience can help to understand how children of prisoners deal with stigma, attachment issues and ambiguous loss. A basic definition of resilience is positive adaptation to life after being exposed to adverse events. Researchers often see resilience as a process that is affected by personality factors, biological factors, environmental systematic factors or an interaction between all three. Particularly important are environmental aspects termed protective and vulnerability factors (Herrman, Stewart, Diaz-Grandos, Berger, and Jackson, 2011). Boss (2007) has suggested that resiliency in the face of ambiguous loss involves finding meaning, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, revising attachment and discovering hope. Most children of prisoners in COPING, in all four countries, were faced with family and school needs and needs related to having an imprisoned parent. For these children, access to parent/carers, interventions or services that are aligned with their needs can considerably contribute to strengthening resiliency and reducing the risk for intergenerational criminality. In Sweden, talking to the care giving parent, to school, friends and NGOs was a main coping strategy. Children in Sweden seemed

particularly articulate in describing their feelings about their imprisoned parent. A high proportion of children experienced disturbed sleep and nightmares in the Swedish and UK samples. Children in the UK also talked about their absent parent, but tended to put more emphasis on adjusting to their situation, and things getting back to normal. There was a tendency for children to suppress painful feelings and to feel that they were expected to put a brave face on their situation. A significant number of UK children needed to access counselling or other kinds of support outside the family. The German report identified talking to others as a helpful strategy, but noted that other children tended to avoid talking about parental imprisonment. Behavioural or psychological problems were observed for two-thirds of the children in Germany. In Romania, children's resilience was very closely associated with the strength they were able to draw from support from their immediate and extended families. Children in Romania were more likely to experience stigma for having a parent in prison, and had to rely more on their own strength of character to survive.

### **3.9 Honesty, Communication and Sharing Information**

Children of prisoners are sometimes told nothing or false stories about what happened to the imprisoned parent. Non-disclosure may come from a desire to protect the child; parents may lie pre-trial, assuming they'll be found not guilty and return. However, imprisoned parents may be motivated to protect themselves rather than do what is best for the child or the family. Some prisoners (wrongly) thought that by keeping the imprisonment secret, they could return to the family and things would be the same as before the sentence. Sometimes one parent wants to tell the truth and the other doesn't, which adds difficulty. Children find it much harder to deal with the parent's absence if the truth is concealed: it can increase insecurity and erode trust between parents and children. Children may find out the truth from other sources. Disclosure of the imprisonment (in an age-appropriate way) was felt by many stakeholders to help the children adjust to the situation and reduce feelings of anxiety and guilt. Children can be more resilient and adaptable to adversity than adults often recognise. Honest disclosure can help children see the consequences of actions. Even young children were thought by some to benefit from knowing the sequences of events and what would happen when, particularly as children often subconsciously pick up on what is occurring. Parents may need assistance in how to tell their children, and in some situations, for example when the parent is a sex offender, it may be better to leave out some details or potentially not to tell the children at all. Most children included in the study had some knowledge about their parent being in prison (this may be because children were primarily recruited through agencies working with prisoner's families and had policies about openness) although this was often not the case for younger children in Romania who were often told that their father was working abroad. How much children were told varied considerably, depending partly on children's age and maturity. Children appreciated being given accurate information. Some parents in all four countries recognised the importance of being open with their children, and that this would help them deal with the situation. Most children and carers in the German sample talked openly about the imprisonment within the family. Some parents decided to hold back on providing full details about the offence, or about court processes. There were some differences in this regard between care giving and imprisoned parents. In Sweden and Germany, and to a rather lesser extent in the UK, care giving parents tended to favour being open with their children; they had to live with the consequences of their partner's crimes every day. More variation was

observed in the views of imprisoned parents; for many of them, shame and embarrassment were important factors, sometimes leading them to tell only part of the truth (as was also the case for some UK imprisoned parents).

In Romania, imprisoned parents were generally the most reluctant to share information with their children, partly for fear of repercussions. In the UK, sharing information with children seemed to work best where both parents shared this responsibility. Children could be left in a quandary if they had limited information. Sometimes the information would leak out, and sometimes children went to considerable lengths to find out the truth for themselves. Children were usually careful about sharing information too widely, and many decided to talk just to their best and most trusted friends. Talking to children with similar experiences to their own could be particularly helpful and supportive; there was evidence of this in the UK sample, and particularly amongst children supported by Bryggan in Sweden, where children of prisoners could meet and relax with other children who had a parent in prison. Having to answer detailed questions about imprisonment could be difficult. Equally, children found keeping information secret, or having to tell lies, particularly stressful.

### **3.10 Schools**

Schools in Germany, Sweden and the UK were mainly supportive when informed about parental imprisonment. Evidence from Romania was more mixed. In Germany, families participating decided not to inform schools in about half the cases. Although a low threshold school social work service is located in many German schools, evidence from the study was that children and carers mainly communicated their concerns with classroom teachers (not school social workers or counsellors), and that teachers have shown understanding and offered emotional, practical and counselling support. While most children interviewed in Germany kept up their school attendance, in the UK school attendance was adversely affected for a number of children, mainly boys; and there were reports in Sweden of older children frequently missing school, particularly at times close to the arrest of their parent, or when the parent was on home leave. Children's behaviour at school often deteriorated, and it was noted in the UK report that schools did not always have the understanding and skills required to help boys with aggressive behaviour caused by parental imprisonment. In Sweden, younger children were provided with emotional support by class teachers, and older children could receive more structured support from a school nurse or counsellor. Support for children in schools in the UK was less structured, but available (and appreciated) from a wide range of school staff. There was little evidence from Romania about parental imprisonment impacting adversely on children's behaviour. Rather less than a third of families in Germany had found evidence of children's performance at school deteriorating, although there was some uncertainty about how far this was caused by parental imprisonment. The majority of non-imprisoned parents in Sweden spoke about positive aspects of their children's school performance, while some imprisoned parents in Sweden felt some responsibility for their children struggling at school. In the UK the largest group of children performed well at school, linked to their own ability and determination, and to positive relationships with one or both parents. However, other children's (again mostly boys') education had suffered. Problems appeared to be related in these cases to the quality and openness of communication between parents and children; and to transition to secondary school, again for some of the boys.

### **3.11 Stigma and Bullying**

Stigma is, indeed, a phenomenon from which the children of prisoners in COPING suffered (Robertson et al., 2012; Steinhoff and Berman, 2012). Parental imprisonment can lead to children being labelled as different, as having an undesirable characteristic and being in a category of 'them' as opposed to 'us'. The stigma of having a parent in prison can cause children of prisoners to be labelled and rejected by peers, while children may feel they are different from others and withdraw from social contacts. They do not attract sympathy from others and can be stigmatised by prison staff, school staff and parents of their friends. Fear of stigma can stop children telling others about the situation, which can mean their problems are often hidden. Children want to be integrated and not stigmatised or ostracised: if families move to a new area, the parents may want a 'fresh start' and not to tell anyone about the imprisonment. The main emotion connected to stigma is shame and being stigmatised can have negative mental health effects, related to loss of status and discrimination. Reported instances of bullying were higher in the UK sample than for the other three countries and were infrequent in Sweden. In Romania there were references in several cases to children being verbally bullied by teachers. Children in Germany were particularly concerned that there might be repercussions if they shared information about their imprisoned parent with friends at school, although when they did so their fears were not realised. UK families were mainly pleased with positive responses from schools alerted to bullying taking place. There was potential for schools in all four countries to contribute to reducing stigma and bullying for children of prisoners. Most Romanian parents advised their children not to tell their peers at school about their situation because of fear of bullying and reprisals. About half the German families decided not to inform the school about the imprisonment because of feelings related to shame and stigma. Generally, families had greater concerns about stigmatisation where the parents' offences were more serious, particularly so for offences involving assaults on children. There was greater potential for adverse repercussions where offences were widely reported during court trials and resulting sentences, as in the UK. By contrast, Sweden operates a strict privacy policy which protects the identity of Swedish offenders from being revealed in media accounts of trials up to the point of conviction.

### **3.12 Experiences of Criminal Justice System**

More evidence was obtained about experience of the criminal justice system in the UK than in the other countries. Much of the evidence in the UK related to experience of police arrest, with examples of heavy-handed police practice and (rather fewer) instances of higher levels of sensitivity for children's welfare. There were some isolated instances in Germany and Romania of distress caused to participants at the point of arrest. Other concerns related to stress caused by extended periods of bail for children and families in the UK; children having no opportunity to say 'goodbye' to parents when they were remanded into custody (UK); and serious concerns about restrictions on contact with families for remand prisoners in Sweden. The study has stressed the importance of prompt contact between children and their parent immediately after imprisonment.

Many stakeholders felt that children's needs are not adequately considered or met by the different parts of the criminal justice system, both the different stages of the system (from arrest to release) and in different jurisdictions (such as the German Länder). Some feel that no branch of the criminal justice system adequately considers children when making decisions that might affect them, though there are a number of



stakeholders who feel that some parts do think about them. Often, police don't consider children or behave appropriately around them when arresting a parent; and various stakeholders recommend that suggestions to improve this include training for police on identifying if the person being arrested has children, having them wear civilian clothing and not use handcuffs or violence when children are present, ensure they don't witness the arrest or search and allow arrested parents time to say goodbye. Clear written guidelines could help police perform impact assessments of the children's needs and use subtler methods of arrest that maintain the parent's dignity in front of children, ensure that someone appropriate can speak to children at the time of arrest and ensure there is follow-up (by police, social services or others) if children are temporarily placed with neighbours or other alternative carers. Several stakeholders said that children need more information especially after arrest and during pre-trial detention to ease their anxieties regarding their parent's welfare – popular culture and language mean they can imagine parents are in dungeons, with a ball and chain on them, or similarly upsetting fantasies

Courts decide protection and placement measures for children of prisoners who have been harmed or abused, but also affect their lives when sentencing their parents. Any potential sentences should take into account the impact on any children: sentences that minimise the negative effects on family life should be preferred. Stakeholders consistently asserted that the court should ensure that prisoners are imprisoned as close as possible to the family in order to facilitate contact. When there is a gap between conviction and sentencing, this time 'in limbo' is felt to be especially fraught. Parents may not make arrangements for their children's care, fearing judgement and loss of custody of the children. They may try to conceal the children's existence from social services and prisons.

### **3.13 Contact with the Imprisoned Parent**

For most of the children involved, regular contact with their imprisoned parent was crucial for their well-being and resilience. A small number of children had either no or infrequent or haphazard contact with their imprisoned parent, and the prior relationships between these children and their parent had often been fraught. Most children (percentages were higher in the UK and Romania) visited their imprisoned parent, although visits were much less frequent in Romania. Long journeys were involved, particularly in Sweden and Romania. Visits could be costly, and often unaffordable in Romania. Most children adapted successfully to the experience of visiting prison, although for a much smaller number this proved upsetting. Saying 'goodbye' was difficult for many and the aftermath of visits painful for some. Children in the UK and Sweden mainly got used to the prison environment, particularly in less secure establishments. Children in Germany and Romania found the prison environment more hostile and drab, and lacking facilities for families. Search procedures caused most discomfort for Romanian children. Family days (UK and Sweden) and parent/child groups (Germany) were appreciated where available. Restrictions on physical contact during visits (Romania's were the strictest, and Sweden's the most liberal) were experienced as unhelpful, particularly by younger children. Opportunities to engage in meaningful activities with the imprisoned parent were limited, which was hard for children of all ages. Special family focused activities, where available, were more relaxed and widely appreciated. Telephone contact with the imprisoned parent was very frequent for children in the UK and Sweden, fairly frequent in Romania, and much more

restricted in Germany. Costs were high in the UK and often unaffordable in Romania. Where telephone contact was permitted and financially feasible, it was a positive experience for nearly all children, enabling more regular contact with the imprisoned parent. Restrictions on the timing of telephone calls were often described as frustrating for children. Letters also provided an important link with the imprisoned parent, and these were at a higher level in the UK and Germany, fairly high in Sweden, and moderate in Romania. Contact by letter was particularly important in Germany, as this was often the only means of communication between visits. In Sweden furlough leaves from prison were enjoyable for children (some of whom missed school to be with their parent); while in the UK benefits for children were reduced by their anguish at their parent having to return to prison.

Many stakeholders recommended placing parents as close to their families as possible since visiting prison takes time and money, both of which grow as the distance between the child's home and the prison increases. Public transport may be limited or expensive; some prisons have community transport that picks visitors up from the local town and takes them to the prison. Depending on the situation, children may miss one or more days of school to visit, or the family may be unable to travel at all (or as often as they want) because of the resource requirements. Financial support for travel to the prison is available in some countries (from NGOs or government), though this may not cover the full costs and may be paid retrospectively. Prison visits generally must be booked in advance and children may need help if they are doing this. Children generally need to be accompanied on visits by an adult; where their carer is unable or unwilling to do so (because of other demands or poor relations with the imprisoned parent), they could be escorted by a professional or volunteer. This may especially be the case with children in alternative care: authorities may have a duty to promote contact with their parents, though in reality there is generally little contact between looked after children and imprisoned parents.

Children often find prison unfamiliar and intimidating, and this can be exacerbated by strict visiting rules, such as those related to searches or waiting times. An extreme situation was a child who felt under so much pressure when going through the security process that they would hyperventilate. Bans on gifts from children to imprisoned parents, and on baby bottles or nappies can distress or inconvenience families. Visiting environments can be cold, noisy or crowded, without special areas for children - especially in closed prisons. Children may want to see their parent but hate the environment in which they do so, finding it hard to see parents but not touch them because of regulations or physical barriers. Allowing bodily contact, both sitting together and playing/moving about, can make for a more natural visiting experience and increase attachment and bonding. Where they exist, child-friendly visiting facilities are appreciated: features included looking like a home, toys and facilities to buy, prepare and/or eat and drink with imprisoned parents. It is important that child-friendly facilities are kept clean and up to date, and that they also cater to older children. Even where good facilities exist, staff attitudes can determine the quality of the visit. Security concerns were often prioritised by prison staff and families disliked the high levels of supervision and surveillance during visits: some complained of being treated 'rudely or roughly, with spouses treated in a stigmatising and condescending manner and children expected to behave like adults. Sometimes prison guidelines prevent staff from acting in a child-friendly manner. Prisoners' rights

related to indirect communication (letters and telephone calls) varies widely between countries and individual prisons. Generally, the parent must call the child, at fixed times, meaning the child cannot just pick up a phone when they have good news, problems or simply need to talk. This interrupts the normal parent-child communication and makes no allowances for special occasions such as birthdays. Despite these shortcomings, telephones did provide the most frequent and often valuable contact with home. One UK prison allowed prisoners to have telephones in their cells, which resulted in easier contact and was well received by the families and prisoners involved. All four COPING countries had opportunities for parents to record messages or bedtime stories onto CDs or DVDs for their children, which were well received. Children in institutional settings may need support to make, arrange or apply for telephone calls or write letters. Contact is more complicated in situations involving domestic violence or sex crimes: for example, sometimes only boys can visit the father in prison. Children, even if the visit is a good thing in general, can be distressed at the end of a visit. For many, seeing the parent is a relief and (particularly after the first visit) can counter fantasies they may have about the parent's situation. Visitor Forums, where visitors can give feedback and recommendations to the prison authorities about the prisons visiting procedures or even about prisoners' conditions, have been appreciated where they exist. They also allow families of prisoners to get to know each other.

### **3.14 Needs**

Within the survey (WP2), 737 children 7 to 17 years old were asked if they wanted help with life areas specified in 9 variables. The 9 variables loaded on three components following oblique rotation: physical/survival needs, family and school needs, as well as health/social service needs, explaining 54.7% of the variance.

Overall, 73.7% of the children answered yes when asked if they had ever received help because their parent was in prison, with significant differences between the countries. Also, 47.2% of the children in the COPING sample indicated that they still wanted help with at least one area, differing significantly between the countries (see WP1 report). Areas where significant differences between countries occurred are indicated by. Significant country-wise differences occurred for 'how much money my family has' and 'the home I live in', as well as 'how I am feeling' ('2- test, p less than 0.001). About twice as many Romanian and German children said the family needed money (57%; 50%), in comparison to Swedish and UK children (27% each). Needing help for the home they were living in was a significant need for Romanian children (51%) followed by Swedish (28%), UK (19%) and German children (7%). In contrast, needing help for how they were feeling was highest for Swedish children (72%), followed by German (56%), UK (44%) and Romanian children (19%).

It was conjectured that the children of prisoners' well-being, as expressed by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) would correlate with the existence of at least one of the 30 parent-assessed needs. A correlational analysis yielded the finding that, indeed the SDQ did correlate with having at least one need. The higher the SDQ score, the greater the child's difficulties. Here, country differences occurred such that a much larger proportion of Romanian children had at least one need compared to children in the other countries (as noted above, 97.2% of the Romanian children had at least one need, followed by 74.5% for Germany, 57.4% in the UK and 50% in Sweden ['2- test, p less than

0.001]). In addition, SDQ scores were higher for the Romanian children compared to the others (see WP1 report for detailed descriptive results).

Comparing the situation between the countries, physical quality of life (energy level, capacity for work, sleep satisfaction etc.) was generally higher in the UK, where parent/carers also indicated higher environmental quality of life (expressed in feelings of safety, sufficient money, satisfaction with living place, etc.). In contrast, Romanian parent/carers indicated low physical quality of life, despite a spread in the environmental quality of life in Romania.

### **3.15 Services and Interventions**

Only a minority of prisons provided specific interventions for children of prisoners and their families. Each prison should offer at least one intervention focused on the needs of children of prisoners, and particularly addressing the contact between the imprisoned parent and child. These measures should also be applied to promote and increase the number and quality of community-based services, as well as the information about available support. We found a lack of specialised services in the community in all four countries (which means in the familiar living environment of the children). Affected families only have access to specialised services in a selected few regions. Available services and interventions are normally unknown to parents and children. It has also to be considered, that the usage of non-specialised services as an important option given the low possibility of children being able to access specialised support. This in turn requires raising awareness of special needs and the situation of children of prisoners amongst these services and associated staff. Findings from WP4 show clearly the different nature and aims of interventions caused by different care systems (i.e. community vs. criminal justice system). Community-based interventions should include counselling and support for mental health problems. Prison-based specialised interventions should focus on interventions for the imprisoned parents and the children to enlarge and improve the quality of contacts between children and imprisoned parents. Another important focus for the prisons is for information and training courses for the imprisoned parents to increase the understanding and knowledge about the children's situation and to inform them about coping strategies.

Professionals reported a lack of cooperation between different providers of relevant interventions and between the different care systems. Building up a network to link all prisons and NGOs involved in the care and support of affected children and their families would provide an opportunity to introduce projects and interventions, discuss problems, collaborate on the financing of appropriate services, develop cooperation strategies and, creating a common platform to discuss related issues.

In each country, five (Romania) to nine (Germany) types of community-based non-specialised types of services were identified and examined to determine how they could cover the needs of children of prisoners. The usage of these services is indicated in cases of low to moderate mental health impact of parental imprisonment. We found different structures between the countries. Whereas in UK we have mostly services that focus on counselling and youth work, we find in Romania also residential care and day services for emergency and security services. Sweden has a specialty providing youth clinics; in Germany there is a broad spectrum of available interventions ranging from low level counselling services through hotlines to youth emergency services and youth welfare offices.

School associated services (e.g. counsellors, psychologists, pastoral care) are represented in all four countries. Accessibility of these non-specialised community-based services varies between the countries, in Germany there is mostly free access, the other countries have special access conditions depending on authorities and regulations. Children of prisoners could benefit especially from counselling and services providing support in stressful and emergency situations.

In each country five or six types of mental health care were identified and investigated to determine to what extent they could cover the needs of children of prisoners. The usage of the mental health care system is indicated in cases of moderate to severe mental health impact of parental imprisonment. As expected we found similar structures between the countries for psychiatric and psychotherapeutic facilities. These are suitable for diagnostic and acute and non-acute treatment of mental disorders and severe behavioural problems providing inpatient and outpatient care. Furthermore we found residential care for mentally ill children and adolescents in Romania and Sweden. With social paediatric centres and learning disability services we have institutions in Germany and UK respectively, which cover developmental disorders.

In our study the interventions of prisons in all countries were aimed primarily at the promotion and stabilisation of the parent-child relationship by improving visiting conditions and by organising further (beyond regular visiting hours) customised meetings between children and imprisoned parents in groups or family. As expected most interventions were targeted to children and to prisoners in relation to issues concerning children. Assessing the ability to meet the needs of prisoners' children, in all four countries this was reported as sufficient mostly for interventions addressing family relations and parental imprisonment; in Germany and UK for mental health care issues, and in UK for social contacts and resettlements.

Most of the interventions were conducted in the form of meetings or group sessions with meetings mostly for both children and prisoners and group sessions preferred for prisoners. Surprisingly we found the use of counselling sessions and one-to-one sessions were rare, even though we would consider these types of services to be helpful for prisoners having children with emotional problems due to the child/parent separation, relationship, care issues, school related issues, responsibilities. In UK, Germany and Sweden the majority of prison-based interventions were offered regularly (at least 70%). The situation is reversed in Romania where 2/3 of the interventions take place as and when required. This perhaps explains the finding that in Romania, 100% of participating prisons reported that they had interventions. The usual frequencies vary by country and intervention type. As expected, nearly all interventions were designed for early and mid-way stages of imprisonment. However many interventions were also designed for issues related to the stage prior to release. This is an important issue and is reported in the findings of WP1 and WP2, where parents stated that they did not feel well prepared for handling the arrest stage or post-release stage of imprisonment. (The effectiveness of existing prison-based interventions in Europe has not yet been tested and we are unable to report on this issue).

The data collected in COPING suggest that interventions and services that offer support to parent/carers or direct assistance to children of prisoners alleviate the acute sense of need. In countries where levels of intervention and services were higher, parent/carers tended to assess

lower need levels among their children, whereas the opposite was true in countries with lower levels of interventions and services. While children in all four countries shared needs in the family and school area, and needs related to having an imprisoned parent, the need for increased psychological services and interventions seemed particularly urgent in Germany. For children of prisoners and their families in Romania, the survival-level nature of the needs suggest that financial support is necessary for these families, in addition to general interventions and services in the shared areas of need. Very few services were available for children of prisoners and their families in Romania. There was more provision to support children and families in the other three countries, most of which was provided by NGOs, with more access to psychological support and a wider range of services generally, in Sweden and Germany. Statutory services prompted mixed reports in Sweden and the UK, with examples of very good practice combined with some scepticism about Social Services interventions. Recipients of support from NGOs were probably over-represented in Germany, Sweden and the UK, where established NGOs played a major part in recruiting research participants. Their support was generally well received. In the UK, POPS provided well established visiting support services for families, and prison based family support was also considered to be effective. Treffpunkt e.V in Germany and Bryggan and Solrosen in Sweden provided well established support for both children and families. Treffpunkt e.V's father-child groups, and group and individual support for children and parents provided by Bryggan were examples of high quality services which could be replicated in other countries. Less stigma was attached to services for children of prisoners and their families in Sweden, which seemed more relaxed about identifying and responding to a wider range of needs of these children and families, than the other countries. Several stakeholders felt there was a need for improvement in inter-institutional cooperation, including improved communication between the social services and the prison and probation services.

A network between the two could catch children in need of support as soon as the parent is imprisoned, for example with social workers being informed about parole dates for imprisoned parents, or conditions of release. Too often services would work with only one of the prisoner, child or carer, despite the needs being quite similar for the entire family and interventions with one having knock-on effects on the others. Support is often good but fragmented, depending on geographical location. The point of release is an important time for different services to work together with the whole family, including prior to release, and to respond to drug or alcohol problems the prisoner has. Some NGOs run training for a range of practitioners who had contact with children of prisoners or their families, to raise awareness and ask people to consider how to better support families of prisoners. It was suggested that families affected by sex offenders have access to specialised help.

There is insufficient funding and capacity for this vulnerable group. Early intervention can be very helpful (children resilience is enhanced when given the right support) but is often unavailable due to lack of funding and overstretched services. When services or funding streams (which can determine service availability) are tied to geographical regions, this can also limit the support that children are able to access. Whereas the imprisoned parent's care and costs are funded by the government, the family's are not, and social services excluded from Justice Ministry expenditure (even if it helps prevent future crime by

the children). Financial support for families directly, and for NGOs providing support to children, is often localised and lacking.

### **3.16 Summary of Main Conclusions**

Children of prisoners have additional needs compared to children without imprisoned parents. Ambiguous loss, disrupted attachment and stigmatization contribute to a shaken sense of ontological security, all of which together can partly explain the increased risk for intergenerational crime identified in prior research. Strengthening children's resilience in order to improve coping capacity is a key path to empowering these children and their families, and improving the chances of a healthy, productive adult life. Interventions and services, both prison- and community-based, exist in all four countries studied, to varying degrees. However, children of prisoners' needs are to a large extent still unmet, and numerous avenues to improving their situation are available. Stigma remains a barrier to accessing interventions and services and to functioning optimally in the school environment. Stakeholders suggest that negative attitudes about the needs of children of prisoners may have influenced the failure at the policy level, to identify these children as a vulnerable group, and the allocation of resources for their support (Robertson et al., 2012). Research suggests that legislative and policy reforms in the criminal justice system, and nationally available support systems to children of prisoners and their families could mitigate the pejorative effects of parental imprisonment (J. Murray, Farrington, and Sekol, 2012). Future research should explore specific effects of interventions and services for children of prisoners on their situation, in terms of their well-being, resilience and sense of empowerment. Research should also focus on support to parent/carers of children of prisoners, as well as investigating the role of the imprisoned parent him-/herself in relation to the child. Given that parenthood may contribute to lower levels of offending (Monsbakken, Lyngstad, & Skardhamar, 2013), the issue of strengthening the imprisoned parent's parental identity and awareness of children's needs via prison-based interventions could be an additional new vista for coming research.

Children of prisoners' needs as expressed by themselves and by their parents are clearly focused on the life event of having an imprisoned parent. This event has significant repercussions for children in all COPING countries in terms of needs related to having an imprisoned parent and to being in the school environment, as well as for mental health issues. Children of prisoners sense of ontological security is shaken when they experience the absence of a parent due to incarceration. Ontological security is a state of mind that rests on a sense of continuity regarding events in one's life, allowing one to have a positive view of the self, the world and the future (Giddens, 1991). A reduced sense of ontological security in children of prisoners can be said to have led to increased levels of help and support. Furthermore, the ambiguous loss that results from the incarceration, where the parent is emotionally part of the child's family but is physically absent (Boss, 2007), increases uncertainty and the level of posttraumatic stress for the child (Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner, 2009), increasing the level of need for help and support. Identifying these children as vulnerable should lead to allocation of increased resources to schools, criminal justice systems, mental health providers and social services, in order to strengthen resiliency and reduce the risk of intergenerational criminality. The main findings of COPING can be summarised as follows:

1. Children with imprisoned parents as a group are at a significantly greater risk of suffering mental health difficulties than children who do not have parents in prison.
2. COPING has identified key factors relating to children's resilience, including: children's innate qualities; the importance of stability provided by caregiving parents; and the importance of sustaining and maintaining relationships with the imprisoned parent. The importance of the quality of the parents' relationship with the child prior to imprisonment has also been underlined. Support from other extended family members can also be significant.
3. Evidence has shown that children missed their fathers in prison as much as their mothers (perhaps in different ways), particularly in the UK.
4. The data has confirmed that children's resilience is closely linked to open communication systems, and that children need opportunities to discuss their experiences throughout the period of imprisonment.
5. COPING has reinforced the potential for schools to contribute to the emotional well-being of children of prisoners.
6. Levels of stigma varied between the four countries, and seemed more ingrained and marked in Romania.
7. Maintaining contact with the imprisoned parent is in most instances beneficial to children's mental health and wellbeing. Positive environments are needed for children's visits to prisons, and the importance of telephone contact has been underlined.
8. While a range of services and interventions exist, these are not often targeted towards the needs of children of prisoners; services are patchy, uncoordinated and accessible by only a relatively small number of children. Nevertheless COPING found examples of good practice supporting children of prisoners and their families developed by NGOs across the four countries.

### **3.17 Translating Results into Policy and Practice Recommendations**

A systematic approach was developed to produce recommendations. This involved a three stage process that comprised: a) a Research Findings Workshops by each partner at different points in time during the final year of the project; b) the convening of Recommendation Workshops at COPING Consortium meetings and less formally, within each partner country, to distil potential recommendations from the research findings; and c) the completion of a common template, the 'Development of Recommendations Form' designed to inject consistency in the way in which recommendations were drafted, presented, discussed and categorised. Together, these activities provided a structured way in which learning from the COPING project could be articulated and thereafter, translated into a clearly stated agenda for policy development and reform.

Eight broad themes were identified from the study:

- Family Relationships
- Resilience
- Stigma and Bullying
- Honesty and Communication
- Schools



- Experience of the Criminal Justice System
- Contact with imprisoned parent
- Services and Interventions

For each theme, the research teams were asked to consider the following questions:

1. Is there any action that needs to be taken arising from this theme'
2. What needs to happen'
3. When, where and under what circumstances does this need to happen'
4. What is the evidence from COPING that leads to this conclusion'
5. Who can make this happen'
6. How can they make this happen'
7. Is this action dependent on other factors (e.g. training, raising awareness, obtaining sufficient funds)'
8. What are the risks that it will not happen'
9. How can these be minimised and overcome'
10. Are there any other questions concerning this'

As is apparent from these questions, thinking about possible recommendations means reflecting not on the research findings per se, but rather, on the their implications in terms of any action needed, the geographic scale on which it needs to happen (locally, regionally, nationally and pan EU level), the stakeholder/agency responsible for making it happen, the action plan for implementing the recommendation (i.e. how it is to be achieved, when and where'), if there are any preconditions that need to be met before the recommendation can be implemented, and finally, if there are any risks associated with the recommended action. The potential impact of COPING is inextricably linked to producing a robust set of recommendations and disseminating the knowledge produced by the study as widely as possible. These issues are discussed in the next section.

**Potential Impact:**

This section of the report highlights the potential impact of the COPING findings, raises some policy and practice considerations and presents recommendations for action. An awareness of the need to develop recommendations was embedded in COPING from the outset and emphasis was placed on identifying the 'action implications' stemming from the research findings. This required a careful judgment about how far the research had highlighted an unmet need, a practice that needs to change, a perception that needs to be addressed or anything else that needs to be remedied. These 'areas for improvement in policy and practice' emerged by comparing findings from different Work Packages paying particular attention to where needs, challenges and opportunities identified in one Work Package were corroborated and reinforced by the results from other Work Packages. An example of this would be where issues flagged up in interviews with children of prisoners and their carers (e.g. around impact of witnessing parental arrest on children, or, the quality of prison visits) were identified in the consultations with key stakeholders, practitioners and policy makers and were also evident from the research literature and through the mapping of services and interventions.

The potential impact of the findings are summarised below in relation to the main themes that emerged from the study. The recommendations that we present here are those for consideration at the Pan European level (for recommendations at the country level please see the overall report for Work Package 4). We have linked both impact and recommendations to the rights of the child (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - CRC) since introducing the requirement to consider the welfare and best interests of the child as well as children's perspective at all levels of policy making will allow for the development of initiatives that are more likely to provide children of prisoners with the support they need. Whilst all States are party to the CRC there is a need for this Convention to be more closely harmonised with all areas of national law so that children have a stronger legal protection of their rights. This may help to move the focus from one concerned only with the punishment of the prisoner to one which addresses the often forgotten existence of their rights-bearing children.

**4.1 Child-friendly Criminal Justice Systems**

Evidence from the study suggests that the welfare of the child is not given sufficient priority by the police and criminal justice agencies. For example, prior to a parent going to prison, the attitude, behaviour and language used by the police in searching a home and making an arrest, can have a profound impact on the psychological and physical well-being of a dependent child witnessing such events. Examples of practices that are distressing to a child include police wielding guns, doors being broken down in during forced entries, drawers being spilled, teddy bears being cut open to look for drugs. In all four COPING partner countries parental arrest was the start of a period of emotional upheaval for the families affected. This process can significantly disrupt a child's life affecting who cares for the child and where it lives. The CRC (Article 12) emphasises the right of every child to express their views in decisions affecting their lives, and to have their views taken seriously; crucially, this includes what takes place in judicial proceedings. Criminal justice systems across the EU provide few opportunities for children to contribute to a decision-making process, despite the fact that the judicial outcomes can have a profound effect upon their future.

This is particularly pertinent to children whose parent is at risk of a custodial sentence and whose residence and care arrangements may be significantly altered as a result. Whilst there will always be cases in which the only appropriate sentence is one of custody, in cases when there is a choice between a custodial sentence and an alternative to prison, the impact on the child should be taken into consideration, particularly where the parent at risk of custody is the child's only carer.

The move towards more child friendly criminal justice systems across the EU requires action be taken to ensure that:

- a) the child's perspective is introduced into all relevant police procedures when a parent is arrested and
- b) the welfare and best interests of the child are considered in court decisions, in line with the CRC.

**Recommendation 1 -EU Theme A Child Friendly Criminal Justice Systems** All governments and/or state bodies should review arrest and search policies and procedures in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child giving due consideration to manner of an arrest, the delivery of a timely, age-appropriate explanation to the child at the point of arrest and the means by which the child and their family access support during and subsequent to an arrest.

There are a number of steps that governments and relevant agencies could take. For example, they could identify if children are likely to be present before a home is searched and a parent arrested; where possible, plan to limit the use of force and the handcuffing of parents when making an arrest; explain to the child what is happening when the house is being searched and an arrest is being made and what will happen next (this could be done by a police officer, social worker or an appropriate adult). They could also ensure that they allow the child time to say goodbye to the parent, find out who will take care of the child immediately after the arrest and if necessary, make arrangements to sort this out and finally, tell the family where they can go for advice and support.

#### **4.2 Representing the Child's Interests in Judicial Decisions**

Considering the child's best interests before sentencing involves asking questions such as: is the parent about to be sentenced the only carer that the child has, what will happen after imprisonment, who is going to care for the child, where is the child going to be living, which prisons are at a reasonable distance from the child's home. Other considerations include exploring if there is an alternative to custody for the parent. The consideration of these and other issues amount to a 'Child Impact Assessment' of the consequences of judicial decisions.

#### **Recommendation 2 - A Child Friendly Criminal Justice Systems**

1. All EU Member States should legislate to ensure that courts take the child's best interest into account at the time of sentencing and in decisions on imprisonment. When it falls to the courts to decide the location of imprisonment, this decision should take into account the proximity of the child's place of residence to the prison.
2. Consideration should be given to the adoption of Child Impact Assessments prior to sentence. The assessment should consider the status of the offender in relation to the child i.e. sole or joint carer, the current location of the child and the likely residency arrangements for the child following a custodial sentence. Where possible impact

statements should consider Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which stipulates that 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child' and that the child should be given the opportunity to be heard in 'any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law'.

#### **4.3 Maintaining Contact with the Parent in Prison**

COPING's research suggests that for most children, regular contact with the imprisoned parent and maintaining the child-parent relationship was crucial for their emotional well-being and capacity for resilience. The right of a child to stay in contact with both parents is clearly stated in the CRC. There are two forms of contact, direct and indirect. Direct contact is where the child visits the prison in person and has face to face contact with their imprisoned parent. Indirect contact involves keeping in touch by various means including telephone calls, email and by post. Both forms of contact are valued, but the research undertaken by COPING highlights the importance of visits in providing face-to-face contact and direct interaction with the imprisoned parent.

This is supported by the evidence of previous research studies which suggest a direct correlation between increased contact with an imprisoned parent and enhanced coping skills on the part of the child (Murray 2005). COPING found restrictions on physical contact between the imprisoned parent and visitors was one of the main causes of dissatisfaction for children and families and was particularly difficult for younger children to understand. Restrictions varied between countries, between prisons and as a result of the imprisoned parent's offence and perceived risk level. In general, some degree of contact was allowed except in the most secure establishments and for offenders convicted of the most serious offences, although Romanian prisons did not permit any physical contact between visitors and prisoners. The ease with which prison visits can be made varies considerably between member states on account of the distances involved. Long, tiring, costly and stressful journeys to attend prison visits were commonplace. To enable a good relationship, it is also essential that the child's needs and other demands are not subordinated to the prison routine. In general, visits were less intimidating for children in lower security prisons which were more conducive to quality interaction between children and their imprisoned parent. Searches on entering prison can be daunting for children at first although the findings from COPING indicate that they become accustomed to the procedures over time.

COPING's research suggests that the first visit to prison is of crucial importance to children and families, particularly in terms of providing reassurance that the imprisoned parent is safe and well. Children can be very concerned about their parent in the immediate aftermath of imprisonment and often lack the information they need about what prison is like and how their parent is managing. This was evidenced in the relief expressed by several families following their first visit. Delays in arranging first visits because of prison bureaucracy can cause undue distress and anxiety to children and families. Introducing first-time families to different aspects of prison life, through a prison tour, is an excellent approach. It can dispel myths that children have about prisons countering images conjured up in children's minds through fiction and the media of mediaeval dungeons and places of great danger. The

quality and quantity of visits available to children is also important and can affect their attachment and relationship with their imprisoned parent. Visits can be enhanced by providing welcoming and comfortable visiting facilities, organising events such as family days such as those available in the UK, Germany and Sweden and keeping restrictions on physical interaction between imprisoned parent and child to a minimum. Results from COPING indicated that examples of good practice in these different areas were at best patchy and that these conditions were not generally being met at the pan-European level. A number of general principles need to be agreed at the EU level to ensure that children can maintain contact with their imprisoned parent where this is in their best interests. Recommendations need to be considered in five distinct areas, namely, eligibility for visits, entry to prisons (and other secure estates), timing of first visits, balancing security with parental access and familiarisation of prisons for first-time families. Eligibility for prison visits should be seen as a right of the child rather than a reward for an imprisoned parent's good behaviour and this right should apply to parents' pre-trial incarceration (Police custody suites and remand) as well as to those convicted and serving a sentence. A balance should also be struck between the need for security in prisons (a top priority) and a child's right to maintain contact with the parent when this is in the child's best interest. In some circumstances the child's best interests might be served by not visiting (e.g. where relationships between the child and parent were strained) or doing so less frequently or by using phone calls or letters to keep in touch as an alternative.

#### Recommendation 3 - Maintaining Contact with the Parent in Prison:

1. Visits should be seen as the right of the child rather than as a privilege for good behaviour on the part of the offender.
2. Children should have the same right to maintain contact with an imprisoned parent who is on remand as to a parent serving a prison sentence following conviction.
3. Visitors should be informed about the purpose of searches.
4. Search procedures for visitors to a prison should be carried out in a manner which causes minimum distress to children and families.
5. Governments should ensure that children can visit an imprisoned parent within the first week following incarceration. This applies to both imprisonment on remand and following sentencing.
6. All prison security and administrative measures should be made compatible with the child's well-being and the child's right to maintain contact with an imprisoned parent. Whilst recognising the need for heightened security in many cases, these measures must be reconciled with a child's right to maintain contact, when this is in their best interest.
7. Where feasible, children should be given the opportunity, on their first visit, to tour the prison, be provided with information about prison procedures and have the chance to ask questions.

#### 4.4 Promoting continuous quality contact with imprisoned parent

Once established, it is particularly important that quality contact is maintained between the imprisoned parent and the child both directly (face to face) and indirectly by different methods of communication. Direct contact should be of sufficient quality for the child to interact and engage with the imprisoned parent. This means having visiting facilities that are welcoming and comfortable rather than cold, noisy and crowded and ensuring that security restrictions on visits, including but not limited to those on physical interaction, are kept to a bare minimum. It also means organising age-appropriate activities for children, on the one hand to promote engagement and support attachment

and on the other, to prevent them from becoming increasingly bored or agitated throughout the duration of visits. Although prison guards are often friendly, the guidelines that they have to follow often prevent them from acting in a child-friendly manner. There were some accounts that emerged during the research of partners being treated in a stigmatising and condescending way and of children being expected to behave like adults. Education and training materials need to be developed, specifically for prison staff that introduce the child's perspective and provide guidance on how best to welcome and accompany children and families when visiting a parent in prison.

There is also a need to pay attention to indirect forms of contact with imprisoned parents. Telephone contact was held in very high regard by children and families because it facilitated an immediate response, unlike letters. Regular telephone contact provided the opportunity to maintain normal parent-child interactions as part of the daily routine, update on daily occurrences and significant events, and receive reassurance about the imprisoned parent's safety. However, this was not always affordable, convenient or in some cases even an option; the duration of telephone calls was often limited forcing conversations to be rushed and unsatisfactory, it was often only possible to make out-going calls, at awkward times for a family and without much privacy. The ideal would be to move away from communal phone systems to individual in-cell phones. Developments in modern communications, including video-based tools such as Skype, have brought about a change in the method and quality of personal communications. Such communication tools are increasingly utilised in the public realm but have yet to be embraced across the prison establishment despite low associated costs. These should be piloted with a view to being supported and promoted by prisons.

Home leave or furlough was also highly valued in many cases, especially where children, caregivers and prisoners had been supported to prepare for it and to debrief afterwards. The CRC stresses the right of children to family relationships and to stay in contact with both parents as long as this action does not harm them.

#### Recommendation 4 - Maintaining Contact with the Parent in Prison:

1. In order to promote quality interaction between children and their imprisoned parent, prisons should provide, at least to minimum standards, welcoming and comfortable visiting environments, and ensure that security restrictions on visits, including but not limited to those on physical interaction, are kept to a bare minimum.
2. All prisons in all EU Member States should provide age-appropriate activities that both occupy children during visits and foster interaction between children and their imprisoned parent. Child-friendly prison-based schemes should be offered to every child visiting an imprisoned parent.
3. The prison and probation services should ensure that they (or an NGO) provide visits groups or visitor centres at or near the prison. This should involve easy booking procedures, information to families prior to the visit (to ensure it is best for the child) and support to child and parent/caregiver prior to and after the visit.
4. Prison authorities in all EU Member States should ensure that all prison staff behave in a respectful, child-friendly manner when dealing with families. Education and training modules for prison staff should introduce the child's perspective and provide guidance on how best to welcome and accompany children and families.

5. Consideration of the journey time for families should be taken into account by prison authorities in housing prisoners, and financial aid provided for travelling offered where necessary (as in UK).
6. Prisoners should be able to both make affordable outgoing calls, and receive incoming calls from their family in their own language.
7. Modern forms of technology that permit two-way communication between prisoners and their families and facilitate quick response times should be piloted in prisons and adopted where possible.
8. Where it is in the child's best interests home leave should be considered and offered to prisoners

#### **4.5 Advice and Support to Parents, Care Givers and Children**

Away from the prison, how do children, carers and other family members get through it all' What advice and support do they need and what is available to them' COPING has found that children's resilience is closely related to sharing information with them openly and honestly about what has happened and the reasons for their parent's imprisonment, consistent with their age and maturity. On the whole, honesty is good for children and helps promote their positive mental health. Inevitably the information would leak out eventually whether or not children are informed. Findings have highlighted the need to talk to children throughout their experience of parental imprisonment, starting as early in the process as possible. Children in the study generally appreciated being given clear information about their imprisoned parent's situation. Most children found support from talking to close and trusted friends. COPING findings also identified the importance of sharing information about the parent's imprisonment with professionals, notably teachers. This is primarily because these professionals can help parents/carers gain insight into the child's behaviour, especially if it is problematic, and assist in supporting the child and tackling bullying behaviour to improve overall outcomes. Children of prisoners can be or feel very isolated because they do not want to tell others about their situation or having done so, lose friends, or face stigmatisation or bullying. There is real benefit in providing support and events specifically for children of prisoners to enable them to engage with peers in positive activities without having to hide their parent's imprisonment.

Levels of service provision varied across the four COPING countries but none had developed a comprehensive range of services available to children of prisoners and their families, from the early stages of involvement with the criminal justice system through to family reunification post imprisonment. Statutory and voluntary support services for children of prisoners were mainly absent in Romania. In the other countries, statutory services received mixed reports, whereas support from NGOs was generally considered to be more effective. COPING found examples of good practice supporting children of prisoners and their families developed by NGOs however, parents and care givers will not benefit from these and other services if they do not know what is available. COPING evidence clearly identifies stable and consistent support from a parent/caregiver as the key factor promoting children's resilience and well-being while their parent is in prison. Maintaining this relationship mitigates against the damage caused by parental imprisonment. Care giving parents are best placed to support children's continuing development, education and leisure activities during periods of parental imprisonment. There is equally clear evidence about the value of support provided by grandparents and siblings. The contributions they make, for example, looking after the child, acting as a

friend/confidante, supporting the non-imprisoned parent, can be substantial but often go unrecognised.

The COPING research has also identified the importance of children sustaining and maintaining relationships with imprisoned parents, both mothers and fathers, as a key factor relating to children's resilience. The findings confirm that children and young people greatly miss their imprisoned parent. Fathers may be missed as much as mothers. However, it is entirely understandable that the relationship between the child and imprisoned parent can be strained; parental imprisonment can cause shame for the imprisoned parent, embarrassment for the child and stigmatisation from the family. The more serious the crime the greater these impacts can be. On the other hand, it was also not unusual for children to idealise their imprisoned parent, perhaps as a way of dealing with their emotional ambivalence and feelings of loss and shame that they have about them. It is not always easy to carry out a parental role in prison, and imprisoned parents may need to be encouraged to play as full a role as possible as parents, subject to this being in the child's best interest. In some cases, children's welfare is best ensured where their contact with the imprisoned parent is restricted or subject to certain conditions, such as mandatory accompaniment by a trained volunteer or professional, although this is less common. One of the most challenging tasks is what to tell the children about why their parent is no longer around. Children need to know the truth but they need to be told in a way that takes into account their age and maturity. How to do this is not obvious especially in extreme cases where the parent has been convicted of a very serious crime such as a sexual offence or extreme violence. It is not simply a case of using one's common sense. Parents in the COPING study talked about their difficulties in telling children about imprisonment and the difficulties they themselves experience in coping with the imprisonment. Parents should be honest with their children but in extreme cases they may need to be given advice from professionals in mental health and social welfare, not only, on what to say but also, on how to say it. A qualification to sharing information with children is that what they are told should, first and foremost, be in the interests of the child and not just that of the parent.

#### **Recommendation 5 - Advice and Support to Parents, Care Givers and Children**

1. Parents and caregivers should be offered guidance from mental health and social welfare professionals, on what and how to tell the children in extreme cases, taking account of the child's age, individual personality and developmental stage.
2. The care-giving parent and the imprisoned parent should share responsibility for providing information from the start of the process to its eventual conclusion; decisions about how much children should be told should be reached in the best interests of the children (not those of parents).
3. Parents/caregivers and imprisoned parents should carefully consider sharing information about parental imprisonment with their children's school and wherever possible communicate this information so that schools can provide children with the support they need.

#### **4.6 Promote NGOs' role in supporting for children and families of prisoners**

There was evidence that some families of prisoners were unaware of organisations specifically designed to support them. These families reported that they would have welcomed the opportunity to receive



support, particularly regarding what to expect when visiting prison. Much more can be done by the police and the prisons to tell families where to find support but the NGOs need to ensure that criminal justice agencies are fully aware of their services so that they can refer families to them.

#### **Recommendation 6 - Advice and Support to Parents, Care Givers and Children**

1. The valued role of NGOs in providing services to children and families impacted by imprisonment should be recognised by national governments.
2. NGOs should ensure that their support services are effectively advertised to potential service users and other relevant personnel involved in the entire criminal justice system process- from arrest to resettlement- to increase awareness of and accessibility to these services.
3. Criminal justice agencies should be aware of the particular needs of children with imprisoned parents and commit to publicising information for them at all stages of the criminal justice process.
4. Protocols with the police service should be developed so that when a parent is arrested, the police inform the family (carer and child) about where to find support.
5. Prisons should ensure that standardised letters advertising the services provided for children and families of prisoners by NGOs are to families of prisoners.
6. NGOs and support agencies not currently working in this area should be encouraged to expand their role to include support for families of prisoners and run activities specifically for children of prisoners.

#### **4.7 Recognise and Support Care Givers in Building Children's Resilience**

The contribution of care giving parents is crucial for children's resilience. But grandparents also play a role, sometimes taking over children's full time care, sometimes sharing household duties, helping financially, counselling and offering support with prison visiting. Grandparents were well placed to nurture the child's relationship with the imprisoned parent. The supportive role played by siblings was also strongly evidenced across all four countries. Older siblings frequently helped to look after younger ones, and also provided them with support, making sense of their shared experience of parental imprisonment. In a few cases older siblings provided full time, or near full time, care for younger siblings during periods of parental imprisonment. Governments should recognise the value of the work that all carers do and help ensure they are given the support they need from statutory agencies.

#### **Recommendation 7 - Advice and Support to Parents, Care Givers and Children**

1. The crucial value of support provided by care-giving parents, grandparents and siblings to children of prisoners in underpinning the children's mental health and promoting and protecting their well-being should be formally recognised by all EU Member States.
2. Caregivers should be provided with the support they need to fulfill this role by statutory agencies throughout Europe

#### **4.8 Promote the Parenting Role of the Imprisoned Parent**

COPING recognises the potential role of the imprisoned parent as active agents in promoting children's welfare. Encouraging imprisoned parents to contribute to their children's daily lives can be problematic because they might not appreciate how hard it is for their children to deal with their imprisonment; they might not realise just how important they are in

promoting their child's welfare and they may fail to see how they can possibly carry out their role as a parent from prison. Imprisoned parents need to have their awareness raised about the importance of their role, the difficulties their children may face and the various positive coping strategies that the family can develop. Just as carers need support on the outside, the imprisoned parent should be offered advice and support on parenting from within the prison through the provision of and participation in parenting groups and classes. But it is not just a case of changing perceptions. Imprisoned parents cannot execute their parenting role without continuing quality contact with their child. The two go hand in hand. Under the right circumstances there is no reason why an imprisoned parent should not be given the opportunity to share responsibility for decisions impacting on their child's well-being, maintain an interest in their child's education and in other aspects of their daily lives.

The role and contribution of parents/caregivers, grandparents and siblings, crucial for children's resilience and well-being, is usually a 'taken for granted' commodity. COPING actively recognises and promotes the value of such support.

#### **Recommendation 8 - Advice and Support to Parents, Care Givers and Children**

1. Imprisoned parents should be offered opportunities to contribute to their children's daily lives, including being involved in their children's schooling, when feasible.
2. Parenting groups, workshops and other forums for sharing experience and receiving support as a parent should be widely available in prison to help them carry out their parenting role.

#### **4.9 The Role of the School**

Children of imprisoned parents are at a significantly greater risk of suffering mental health difficulties and may face particular issues as a result of their parents' imprisonment. Those working with children need to be aware that children of prisoners have both generic and individual support needs. For example, many children of prisoners take on additional responsibilities including acting as young carers while their parent is in prison. Where the fact of parental imprisonment becomes public knowledge, children can also be bullied and stigmatised. Schools are the one institution that almost all children regularly attend and are a significant influence on their socialisation. Where teachers or other trusted school staff (such as assistants or school nurses) do know about the situation, they can provide emotional and practical support to children of prisoners. Parental arrest and imprisonment can potentially make the transition from junior to secondary school more challenging and have an adverse effect on children's performance at school, at least in the short term. Teachers can help affected children academically, through homework clubs or extra tutoring. This can reduce significantly the burden on the non-imprisoned parent or carer especially when they were stressed, overworked and having to devote an increasing proportion of their time on running the household and managing family budgets. Schools can also encourage parents to be open with their children about parental imprisonment and they can reassure and encourage them to be honest about the impact of parental imprisonment on their child's school attendance (e.g. absences due to prison visits). They can also protect children from bullying and stigmatisation.

However, these potential contributions are not always realised because schools are often unaware of the existence of children of prisoners, their experiences, life changes and needs. School staff and other professionals need to be alert to these children's need for emotional support and counselling. The help that they need is mirrored by the support and counselling needs of other children suffering either significant loss or trauma, for example, children experiencing parental divorce, bereavement or domestic violence. Teachers and other staff also need guidance on how to engage children in conversation around parental imprisonment. Schools need to be sympathetic and show an awareness of the needs of children of prisoners but parents need to have the confidence and trust that if they share this information, the school will be supportive and treat the information confidentially. Teachers and other staff can tackle stigma surrounding parental imprisonment by raising awareness of this issue in schools and by promoting a positive, non-discriminatory school environment. Throughout the EU authorities responsible for overseeing schools should recognise children of prisoners as a core vulnerable group and include how to identify, engage with and support them in their strategic planning. Additional training for teachers and school counsellors about the emotional support and education needs of children of prisoners needs to be developed for staff to feel confident about their ability to provide the necessary kind of support. Schools should identify pupils who are particularly vulnerable, such as children of prisoners, in ways that are discrete and non-stigmatising, develop greater awareness of their needs and offer them appropriate support.

#### **Recommendation 9 - The Role of the School**

1. Across the EU, local, regional and national education authorities should include the children of prisoners as a vulnerable group in their strategic planning.
2. Training materials for teachers, school counsellors and others should be produced and used to raise their awareness of the emotional and educational support needs of children of prisoners (among other vulnerable groups) so that they are better able to identify and respond to them. This training could be done in partnership with individuals or NGOs.
3. Stigma surrounding parental imprisonment should be tackled by raising awareness of this issue in schools and promoting a positive, non-discriminatory school environment.
4. Schools should refer children of prisoners experiencing severe anxiety or trauma resulting from parental imprisonment to trained counselors.
5. Schools should make clear their open, non-judgmental approach towards children of prisoners and so encourage children and their caregivers to share information about a parents' imprisonment

#### **4.10 Public Awareness and Policy Recognition**

Working to safeguard the well-being of children is a common value throughout Europe, a value enshrined in the CRC and the Europe 2020 Strategy, which urges the promotion of policies that prioritise early childhood interventions in areas such as health and education. However, COPING has recognised from the start that children of prisoners have received less than adequate recognition for their needs from Government in the four partner countries – Germany, Romania, Sweden and the UK.

This is attributable to several factors, the most significant of which are:

- A lack of awareness by both the public and policy makers that children of prisoners are a vulnerable and marginalised group in need of support;
- The fact that children of prisoners are a difficult-to-reach group, which compounds the problem and prevents these "invisible" children from accessing the support they may require;
- A negative portrayal by the media of offenders, and potentially their families, which can be harmful and stigmatising to the child;
- The absence, across the EU, of consistent information about the number and needs of children of prisoners the capture of which, either through a national monitoring body or through the prison service, is necessary in all EU Member States.

Despite the significant numbers of children affected by parental imprisonment (estimated to be over 800,000 across the EU) support initiatives for children of prisoners in EU Member States is patchy, inadequate or lacking altogether. A major precondition to changing this is to raise the needs of children of prisoners higher up the policy agenda at both EU and national level through getting them recognised as a vulnerable group whose needs should be met regardless of the crimes committed by their parent. The media can have a major impact both on how children view prisons and on how offenders and their families are seen by the public. Stereotypical portrayals of offenders and their families in the media can have a negative influence on public perceptions and social attitudes. Where the media does highlight the needs of children of prisoners, it can also compromise their dignity and privacy. COPING has revealed that draconian representations of prisons by the media that do not reflect modern prison conditions may also give children misconceptions as to the realities of prison life and raise their anxiety. COPING found variations in the protection of privacy across the four countries. In the UK, many of the parents' court trials and resulting sentences had been reported by the local press and television, and for some, this has led to considerable media publicity. In Sweden, a strict privacy policy operates whereby the identity of offenders is prevented from being revealed in media accounts of trials until after conviction. This may lessen the social stigma associated with incarceration.

Raising the visibility of children of prisoners and securing greater prioritisation of their needs in areas of current and future policy that affect their well-being requires action at the pan EU level in the following areas:

- Recognition by government that the children of prisoners is a vulnerable group
- More sensitive and responsible coverage by the media of issues that can affect children of prisoners
- Consideration of the perspective of children with imprisoned parents for all relevant decision-makers

#### **Recommendation 10 - Public Awareness and Policy Recognition**

1. An EU Framework be established for national support initiatives for children of prisoners. This Framework should define common objectives, including improving the information base about the numbers and needs of children of prisoners and the development of cross-agency support initiatives to meet these needs, to be translated into national policies according to the principle of subsidiarity.
2. The Framework should establish common indicators against which to measure progress; require periodic monitoring; promote cooperation

between relevant agencies and foster the exchange of good practice and ideas on a national level and among EU Member States

#### **4.11 General Public Awareness-Raising and Media Coverage**

In all countries, COPING identified a need to raise the awareness of and 'sensitise' media personnel to the often challenging circumstances that children of prisoners face and the impact that stereotypical or other portrayals can have on their well-being, with a view to preventing stigmatisation. Campaigners and researchers also need to be aware of possible negative repercussions of their efforts to raise the public profile of children of prisoners and a careful balance is needed between highlighting their needs and preventing further stigmatisation.

#### **Recommendation 11 - Public Awareness and Policy Recognition**

1. General public awareness-raising should be an on-going process across the European Union, primarily through articles in magazines for different groups of professionals and other media channels and through educational materials and sessions in schools. Content should focus on raising awareness of the existence of children of prisoners alongside other issues which create vulnerability, marginalisation or stigmatisation for children, the potential impact of parental incarceration and the need to develop effective support schemes.
2. Media should be sensitised as to how their reporting impacts upon children, to how stigmatisation can arise as a result of media reports about parental incarceration, and to the need to protect the dignity and anonymity of these vulnerable children.

#### **4.12 Consideration of Children's Perspectives**

Within EU states, where national governments are implementing EU law, children are legally protected by Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. This states that:

- Children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being. They may express their views freely. Such views shall be taken into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity;
- In all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration;
- Every child shall have the right to maintain, on a regular basis, a personal relationship and direct contact with his or her parents, unless that is contrary to his or her interests.

#### **Recommendation 12 - Public Awareness and Policy Recognition**

1. Decision-makers should ensure that anyone whose work impacts (directly or indirectly) on children of prisoners considers their best interests, needs, rights and perspectives, allowing for the development of support initiatives in schools, statutory agencies, the criminal justice process, and other relevant areas.
2. In the longer term, all member states party should seek to ensure that national law, especially in criminal matters, is more closely aligned to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
3. EU legislation should be passed to ensure that Article 24 is enforceable across EU Member States in relation to the needs and rights of children of prisoners.

#### **4.13 Dissemination and Awareness-Raising**

A comprehensive and wide reaching dissemination and awareness strategy was developed at the beginning of the project (at both Pan-European and country levels) with multi-level events organized throughout in order to raise awareness of the needs of children of prisoners and to disseminate and discuss emerging findings. These events are detailed in the overview report for Work Package 7. The events include: conferences, seminars, workshops, public engagement events, media releases, videos, art exhibitions, project websites, published articles and media interviews. These activities will continue into the foreseeable future in order to maximize the impact of the project.

**List of Websites:**

<http://www.coping-project.eu>