

**Social Work Across Boundaries: findings from an evaluation of a service
supporting mothers in prison.
Evaluation of the Together a Chance pilot project 2021-23**

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ECSWR April 2024



CASCADE



Why is prison research important for social work?

- Last night, **100,247 children** had a parent in prison in England and Wales (Pact, 2024)
- For children, imprisonment of a household member is a risk factor for long term negative impact (Felitti *et al.*, 1998)
- Approximately **310,000 children in UK each year** are affected by the imprisonment of a parent (NICCO, 2023)



Background

- When a mother goes into prison only 5% of children remain living in the family home (Prison Reform Trust, 2015)
- Women serve short sentences for lesser offences (Rees et al.2022)
- When a mother is imprisoned, children move to live with extended family, friends of family, foster care, across local areas, move school. She often loses her accommodation.
- Children find it difficult to make contact with their mother, or travel to prison to see her (distance, rural location and finance) Visiting rooms inhospitable (mothers can't move around).
- No Social Work provision in prisons relating to access to children/children's services (Baldwin et al., 2022)
- In England a range of 'social work' tasks are often given to Prison Offender Managers (POMs) and other criminal justice staff.
- Farmer report (2019) recommended having a social worker based in prisons.

What is the Together a Chance pilot project?

- A pilot service for mothers in prison led by Pact, the prison charity in UK
- Prison-based social workers two women's prisons- HMP Send and HMP Eastwood Park
- Role of the prison-based social worker is to:
 - Liaise between the mother and her children's social worker (or welfare practitioner)
 - Support mothers to exercise parental rights, e.g. participate or be represented in key meetings
 - Work as part of the multi-disciplinary team within the prison
 - Enhance contact between mothers and children if appropriate



Data collected

Source of data	Method	(n)
Prison-based social worker	Cases tracked via 'case tracker' forms (n=258)	94
	Activity diaries	4
	Online interviews	4
Mothers	Self-report surveys completed in prison	39 (T1) + 24 (T2)
	Online interviews with mothers in prison	8
	Online interviews with mother post-release	6
Family members	Interviews with carers and children	4
Prison staff	Online survey	11
	Interviews	8
Community-based practitioners	Online survey	14
	Interviews	8
Researchers	Prison visit observation days	2
Key informants	Interviews with policy makers	2

Observation visits to understand the regime

Layout

Facilities

Proximity to
other staff



Regime
restrictions

Culture

Staffing levels

<https://twitter.com/HmpSend>

Let's start with Jade ... she was 11 years old

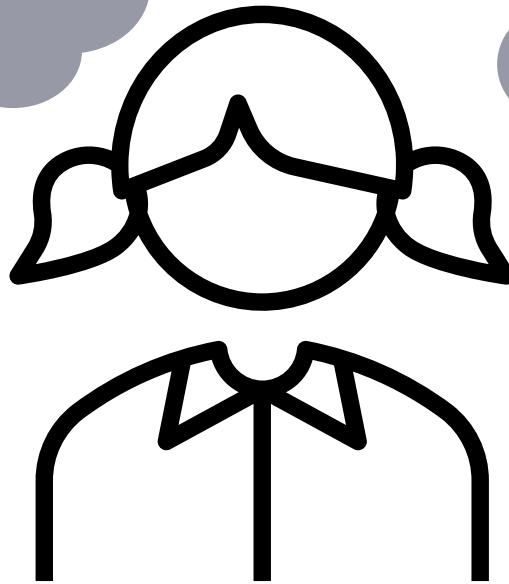
Mum had been in prison for 9 years

At home with Dad on a child protection plan (DV)

Poor school attendance

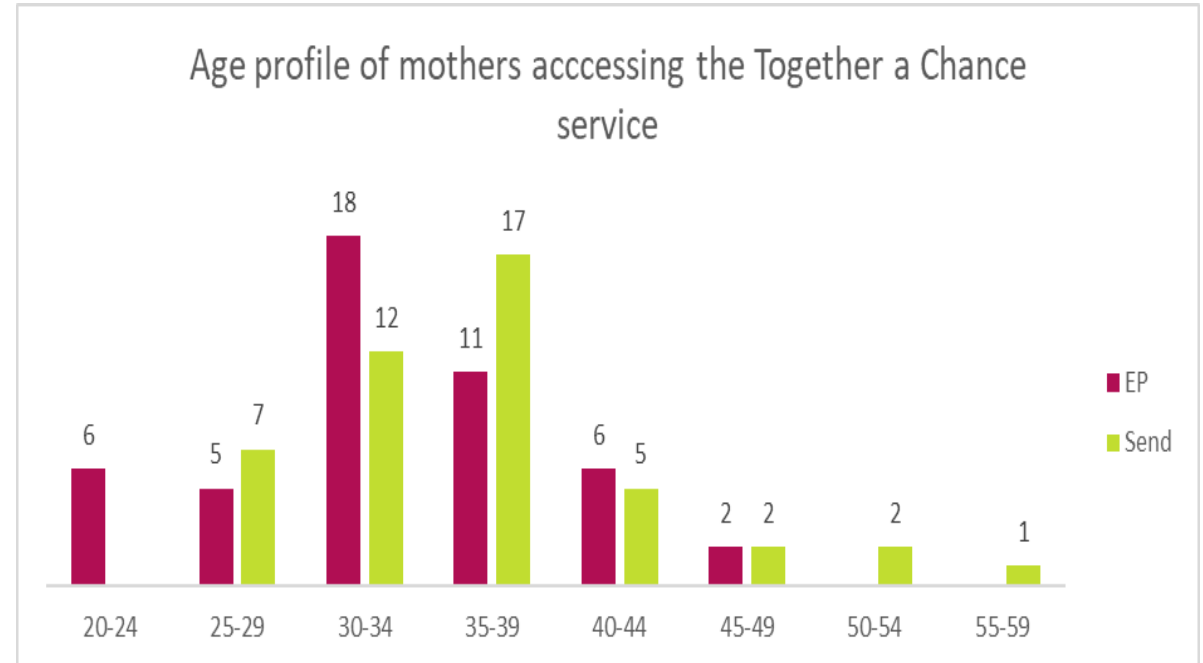
Father obstructive
Grandparents can no longer take her to prison visits

Uncle took her to visit Mum "just before Christmas"



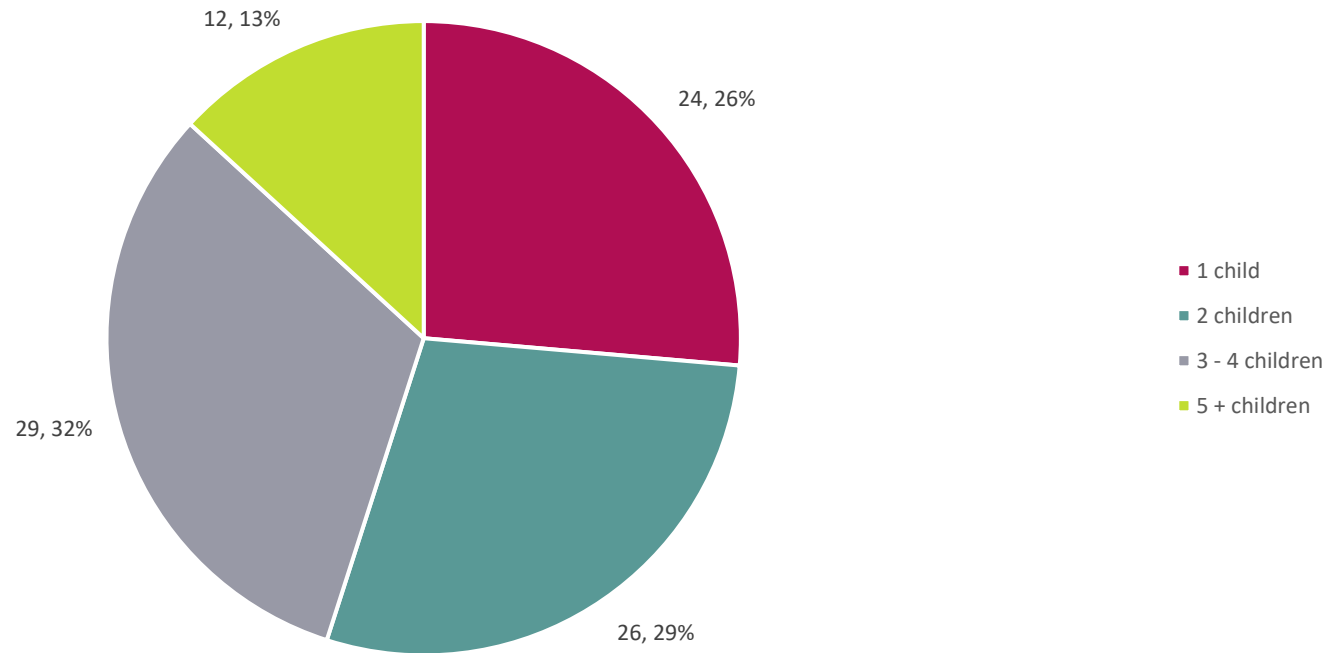
Who were the 94 mothers in prison?

- Most were white British (79%) but those identifying as black and gypsy or Irish traveller were over-represented.
- The majority were single (72%) – with implications for childcare arrangements.
- 29% reported being involved with social services as a child – this compares to 1.15% across the UK (Homes for Good, 2021) .
- 22% reported a history of domestic abuse.
- 35%) were subject to the Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) care planning process due to risk of self-harm.



Family profiles

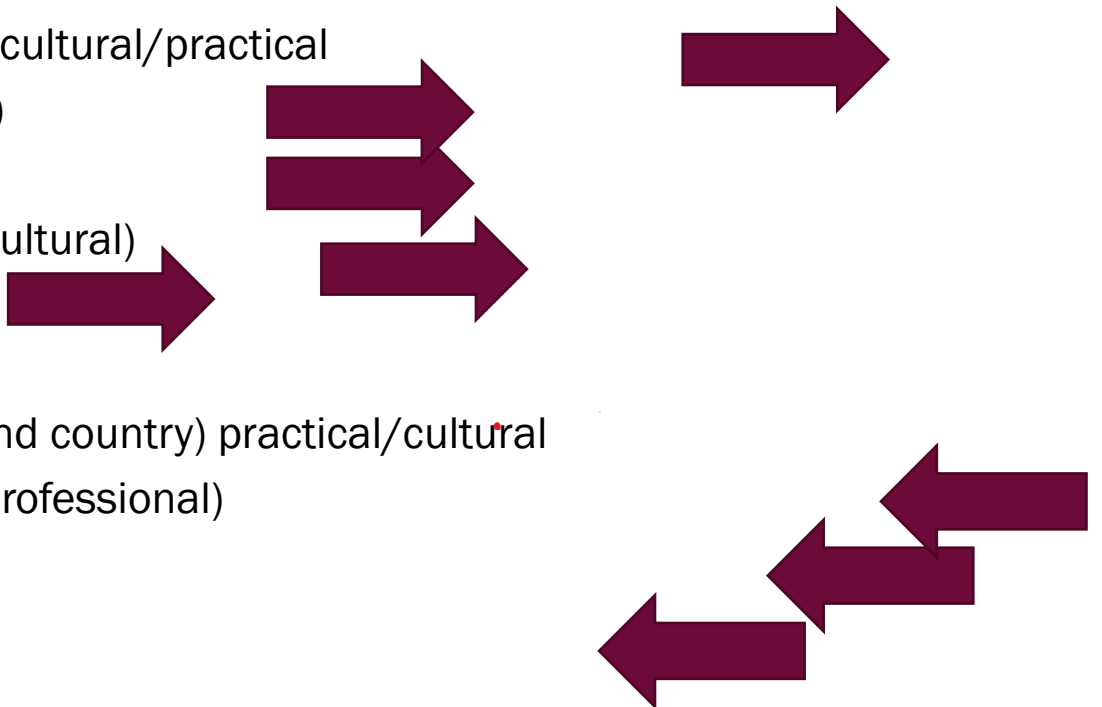

Number of children under 18 per mother (n=91)



Care arrangements were concerning

- Siblings were separated in 63% of cases where the mother has more than one child.
- This high percentage often involves multiple placements and, in 55% of families, at least one of the children was accommodated away from their birth family.
- At the time of referral, all children were living with their father or their mother's partner in only 16% of families.
- For 19% of mothers at least one child had been or was being placed for adoption, resulting in the loss of parental responsibility.
- 46% of mothers reported having no direct or indirect contact with their children at the start of the intervention.
- The Pact Social Workers supported 44 mothers (48%) who were either in legal proceedings relating to their children or needed assistance with legal access.

Crossing Boundaries

- Mother contacting her children (communicating from prison) cultural/practical
 - Mother accessing home Social Worker (cultural/professional)
 - Mother contacting carer
 - Mother contacting school/parents evening (technological & cultural)
 - Attending court hearings (technological/professional)
- 
- Child & family accessing prison (travelling across countries and country) practical/cultural
 - Social worker coming to do parenting assessment (cultural/professional)
 - Visit hall (cultural)
- Children spread across local authorities (separated) 

Our evaluation: Prison social workers are needed

- Pact Social Workers are acting as mediators for mothers helping to cross boundaries-cultural/technological/professional.
- Contact issues resolved for 88% of the 60 mothers where it was an aim:
 - 68% had a contact plan in place;
 - for 20% of mothers, direct contact was refused, either on public protection grounds or because contact was not in the child's best interests and mothers were supported with this outcome.
- The Pact Social Workers are helping mothers to improve how they engage and communicate with their children.
- The Pact Social Workers help ensure mothers' parental rights are recognised and operationalised.
- Pact Social Workers play a significant role in supporting women experiencing mental health difficulties including those that self-harm, most frequently related to concerns about their children.
- The Pact Social Workers also help to upskill prison staff in 'the legal landscape' (cultural boundary spanner).

Mothers

- *Like, I didn't even know I had parental rights anymore until she told me, and I was like, "Oh, oh right." So yeah, that was nice. ... Yeah, it was amazing, yeah. Like, being able to have an **input into the LAC reviews**, getting the reports, his school reports, everything like that. I didn't know I could do any of that until TaC worker told me. Jen*
- *{Pact Social Worker's} made that easier, she's took that stress away from me, because I... it, it, it makes me ill. I **have had mental breakdowns over court processes with my children**, I've tried to commit suicide over it. So that's, on a personal level that's how, how hard it is for a parent. Paula*
 - *We're viewed as parents, not prisoners, and that's the important thing in this project, is that we are still parents. ...she's really good and I, **I have a really mistrust of social workers**, it... I, I've, I've had a lot of them in my life and probably only like one in five I've managed to have positive relationships with. Paula*

Thanks for listening. Any questions?

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